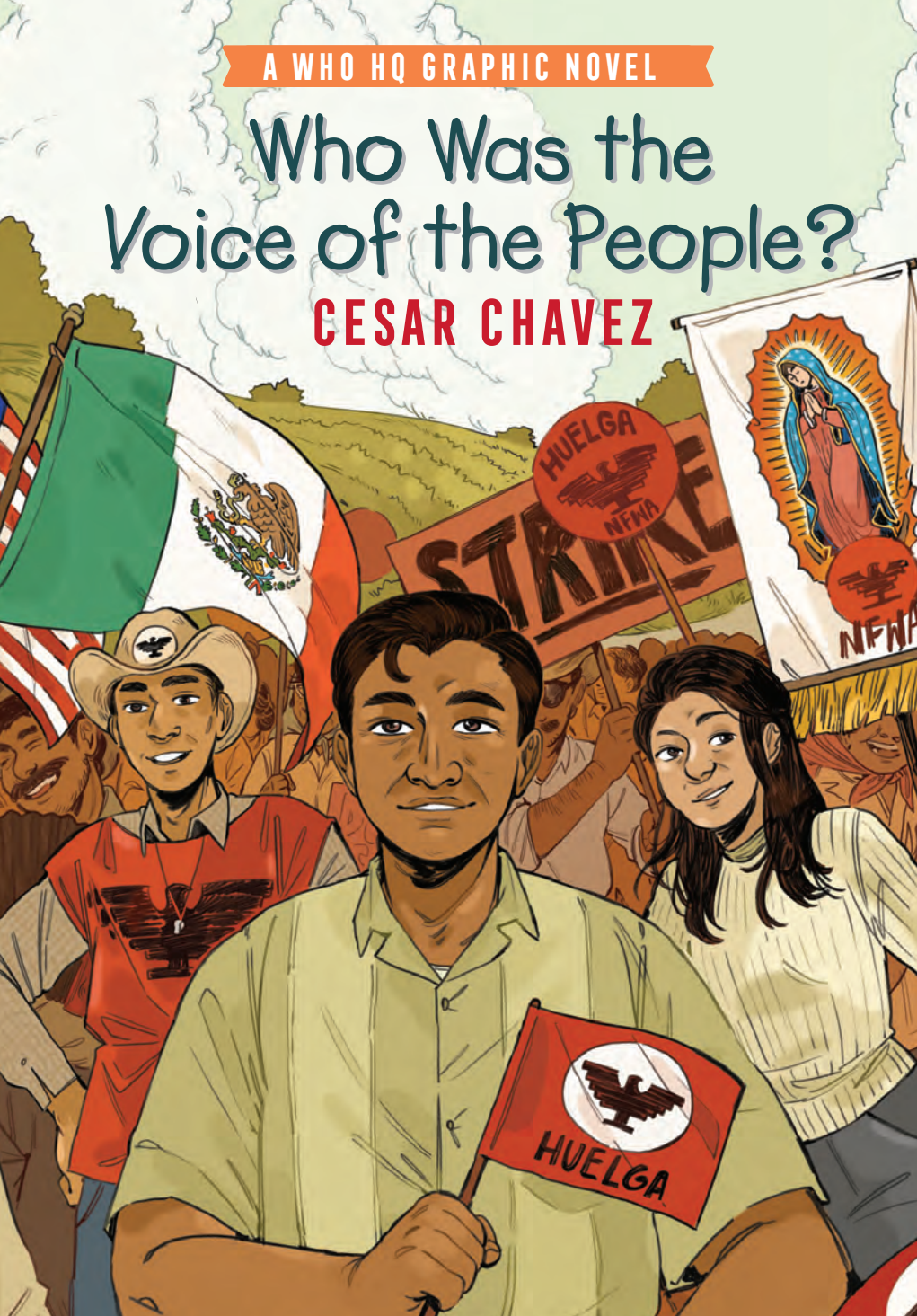
A WHO HQ GRAPHIC NOVEL

Who Was the Voice of the People?

CESAR CHAVEZ



For Raquel—I'm literally Mexican because of you—TB

For Diamela—te quiero abuelita—MJ

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This is a work of nonfiction. All of the events that unfold in the narrative are rooted in historical fact. Some dialogue and characters have been fictionalized in order to illustrate or teach a historical point.

For more information about your favorite historical figures, places, and events, please visit www.whohq.com.

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Who Was the Voice of the People?

CESAR CHAVEZ

by Terry Blas
illustrated by Mar Julia

Penguin Workshop

Introduction

Cesar Chavez was born on March 31, 1927, just outside Yuma, Arizona. His family lived in the Sonoran Desert on a ranch, which was bought by his grandparents, Mama Tella and Papa Chayo. They emigrated from Mexico to the United States in 1898. Papa Chayo died before Cesar was born, and Cesar spent his early childhood living with Mama Tella, his parents, Librado and Juana, and his siblings, Richard, Librado, Vicki, and Rita. Cesar's grandmother lived in the main adobe house, while Cesar's family lived in a small cottage on the main ranch. Together, the family worked on tending the land: feeding the animals, collecting eggs, and hauling water to the house.

Cesar didn't like school because the other kids made fun of the color of his skin. The teacher would punish him for speaking Spanish by hitting him on the knuckles with a ruler. He wanted to go outside and kick off his shoes. In class, he wanted to sit with his sister, but the teacher wouldn't allow it because boys were supposed to sit together, separate from the girls.

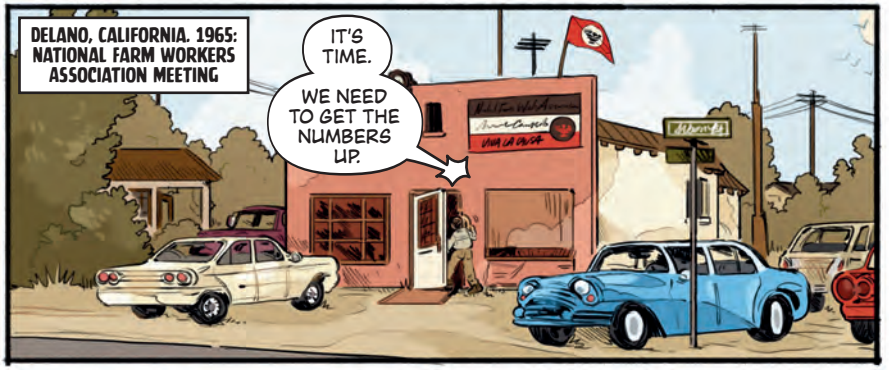
When Cesar was twelve, his family lost their ranch because of the Great Depression. They had to relocate to California, where there was more work in the fields of the farms. Cesar began working in the fields with his father and noticed what horrible conditions many had to suffer through. A lot of farmworkers worked long

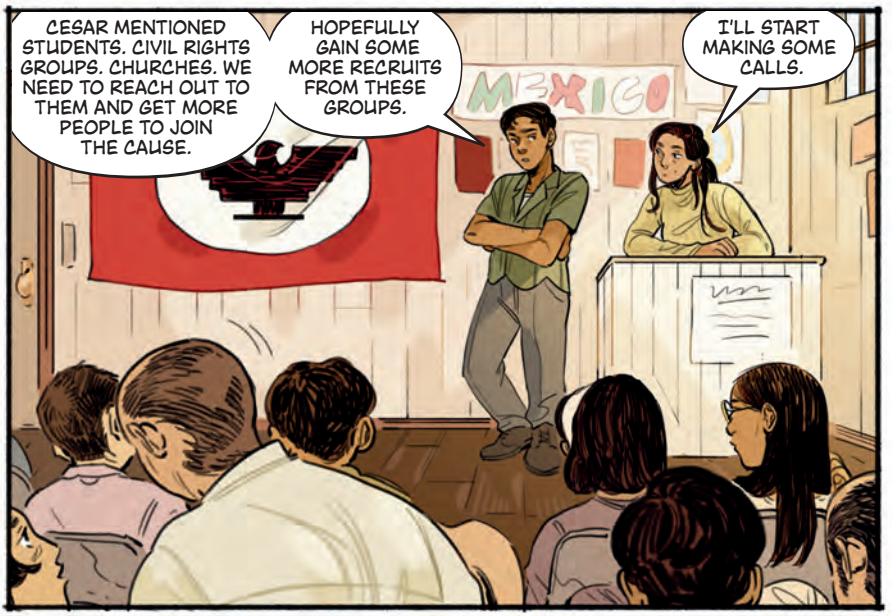
hours in the sun with very little pay, no bathrooms, and no meal breaks.

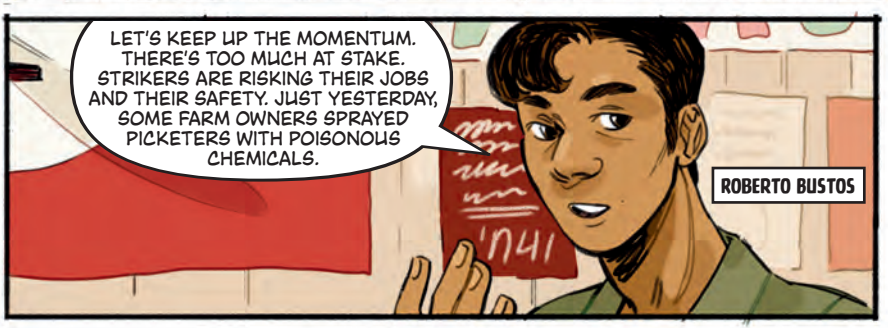
Cesar was heavily influenced by his mother, who ran the household and didn't condone any fighting among her children. But at a young age, Cesar became interested in the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, a political leader who used nonviolent protest to lead India to independence from Britain. Gandhi's teachings greatly inspired Cesar—he also wanted to create change for farmworkers and his community in a peaceful way.

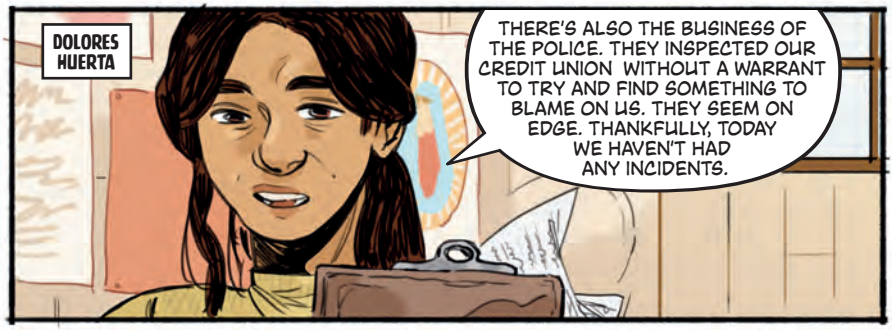
As he continued to witness the injustices done to farmworkers of many different races and ages, he decided to create a union—a group organized to protect workers' rights. The group called itself the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA). This angered many farm owners and companies who sold fruit and vegetables, especially grapes. One such company was Schenley Industries, which owned a few wineries and vineyards in California. Many migrant farmworkers labored at these vineyards under very poor conditions, struggling in the heat and unable to be part of a union.

In September 1965, the members of Cesar's union began to strike and started picketing at vineyards. They began to make signs and refused to work. But Cesar knew this wasn't enough. Something more had to be done.

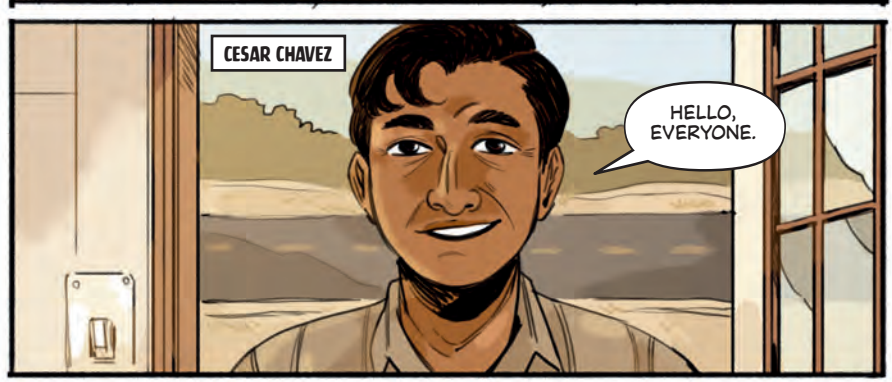

DELANO, CALIFORNIA. 1965: NATIONAL FARM WORKERS ASSOCIATION MEETING
IT'S TIME.
WE NEED TO GET THE NUMBERS UP.
VIVA LA CAUSA


CESAR MENTIONED STUDENTS. CIVIL RIGHTS GROUPS. CHURCHES. WE NEED TO REACH OUT TO THEM AND GET MORE PEOPLE TO JOIN THE CAUSE.
HOPEFULLY GAIN SOME MORE RECRUITS FROM THESE GROUPS.
I'LL START MAKING SOME CALLS.
MEXICO


LET'S KEEP UP THE MOMENTUM. THERE'S TOO MUCH AT STAKE. STRIKERS ARE RISKING THEIR JOBS AND THEIR SAFETY. JUST YESTERDAY, SOME FARM OWNERS SPRAYED PICKETERS WITH POISONOUS CHEMICALS.
ROBERTO BUSTOS


DOLORES HUERTA
THERE'S ALSO THE BUSINESS OF THE POLICE. THEY INSPECTED OUR CREDIT UNION WITHOUT A WARRANT TO TRY AND FIND SOMETHING TO BLAME ON US. THEY SEEM ON EDGE. THANKFULLY, TODAY WE HAVEN'T HAD ANY INCIDENTS.

WE'LL SEE HOW LONG THAT LASTS.
NO KIDDING. THEY DID NOTHING ABOUT THE MAN WHO DROVE A CAR INTO THE STRIKERS, AND THE ATTACKS WE'VE EXPERIENCED AT THE VINEYARDS OWNED BY SCHENLEY INDUSTRIES HAVE GONE UNINVESTIGATED.


CESAR CHAVEZ
HELLO, EVERYONE.

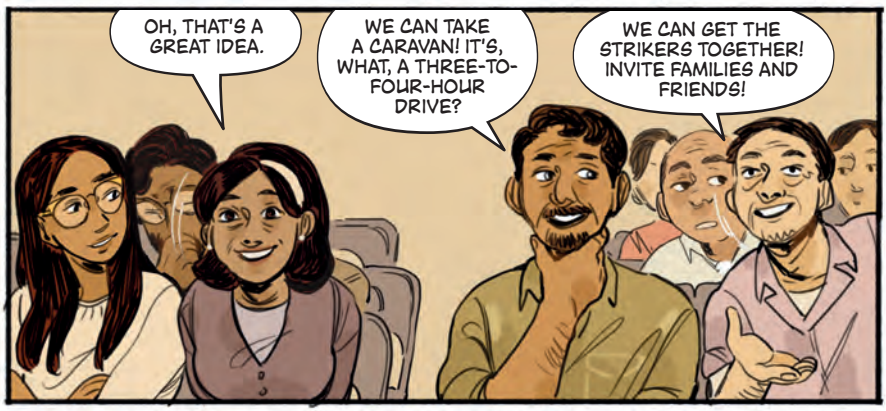
HELLO, CESAR.

WHEN YOU FINISH THE MEETING, I WANT TO SAY SOMETHING.
BUT FINISH YOUR MEETING FIRST.

NO, IT'S OKAY. WE WERE DONE. THANKS.
IF YOU'RE SURE.

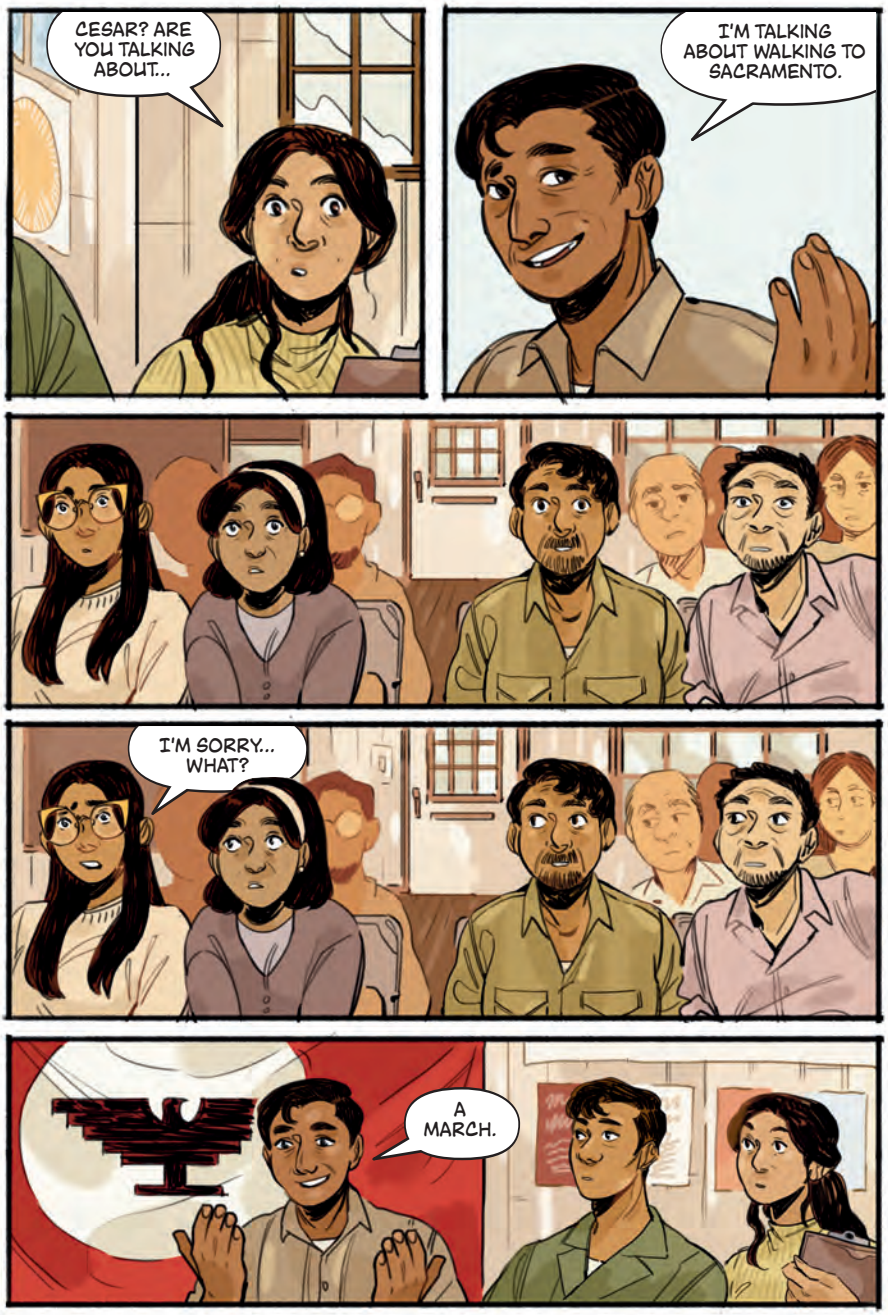
WHAT IS IT, CESAR?

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF GOING UP TO SACRAMENTO TO SEE THE GOVERNOR? I THINK WE SHOULD PROTEST AND TELL HIM ABOUT HOW THE STRIKERS AND FARMWORKERS ARE BEING ABUSED BY THE GROWERS AND THE POLICE.

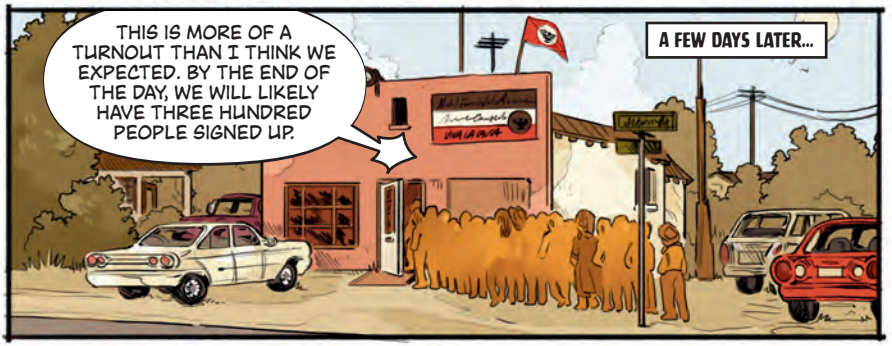

OH, THAT'S A GREAT IDEA.
WE CAN TAKE A CARAVAN! IT'S, WHAT, A THREE-TO-FOUR-HOUR DRIVE?
WE CAN GET THE STRIKERS TOGETHER! INVITE FAMILIES AND FRIENDS!

WE COULD LEAVE AT NINE OR TEN, CARAVAN, GET THERE BY ONE, SEE THE GOVERNOR, AND BE BACK BY THE EVENING.

NO. I'M NOT TALKING ABOUT DRIVING TO SACRAMENTO.


CESAR? ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT...
I'M TALKING ABOUT WALKING TO SACRAMENTO.
I'M SORRY... WHAT?
A MARCH.

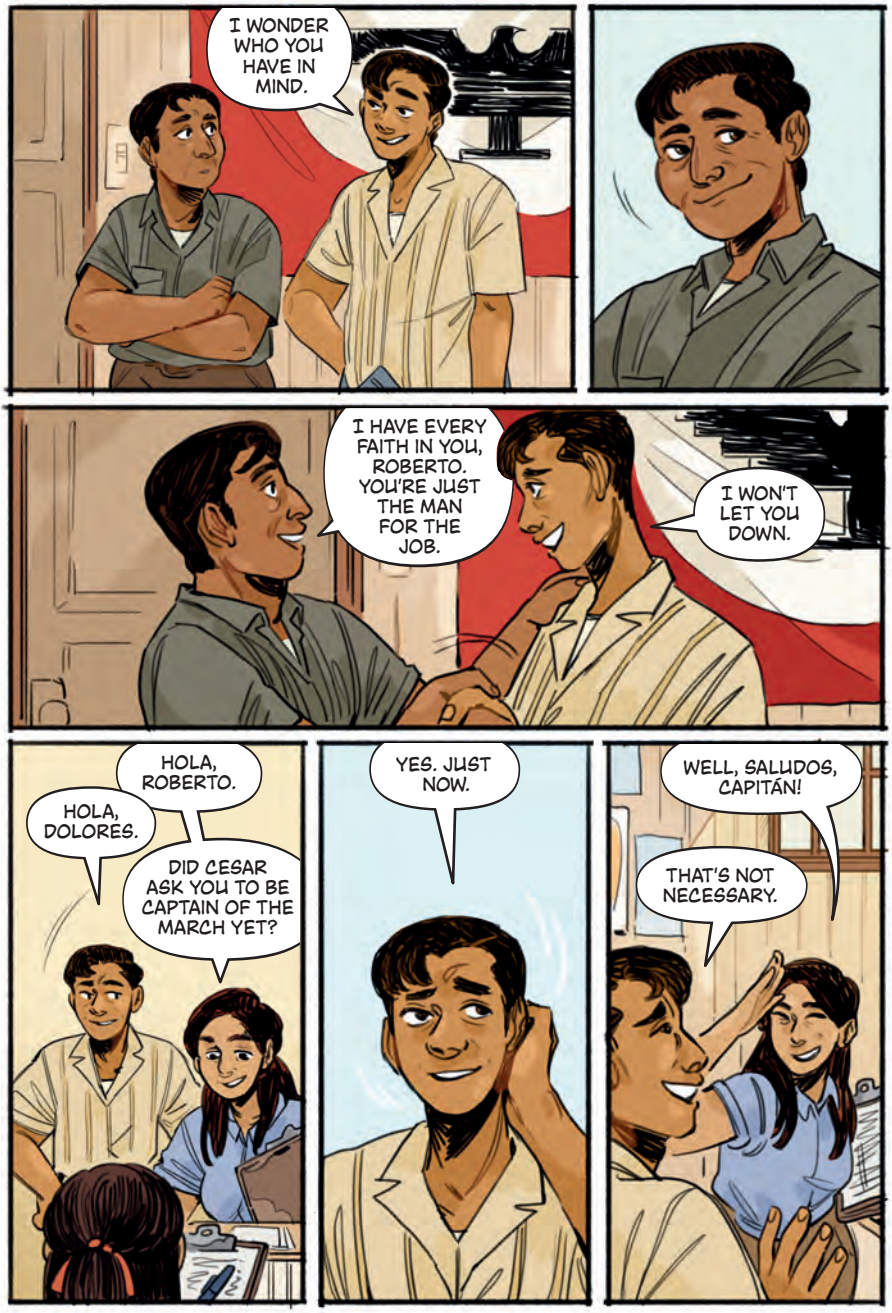
CESAR, DELANO TO SACRAMENTO... THAT'S 245 MILES.
I THINK ALL THE PESTICIDES FROM THE GRAPES ARE AFFECTING YOUR BRAIN.
WHAT WE ARE DOING IS GOOD, BUT THE MORE ATTENTION WE CAN BRING TO THE CAUSE, THE BETTER. THE MORE PEOPLE WHO KNOW ABOUT US, THE MORE SUPPORT WE ARE LIKELY TO GET. THIS COULD DO THAT FOR US. IT'S GOOD TO WORK HARD, BUT IT'S BETTER TO WORK SMART.
JUST THINK ABOUT IT.
YOU KNOW THIS IS HAPPENING, RIGHT? HE'S MADE UP HIS MIND.
OF COURSE I DO. IT'S JUST CRAZY ENOUGH THAT IT MIGHT WORK.
MEXICO


THIS IS MORE OF A TURNOUT THAN I THINK WE EXPECTED. BY THE END OF THE DAY, WE WILL LIKELY HAVE THREE HUNDRED PEOPLE SIGNED UP.
A FEW DAYS LATER...

NEVER UNDERESTIMATE LATINOS WITH A CAUSE, RIGHT?

THIS IS GREAT.
BUT I THINK WE ARE GOING TO NEED SOMEONE TO BE IN CHARGE OF THE MARCH.
SOMEONE TO SEND PEOPLE AHEAD WITH SUPPLIES. TO NOTIFY TOWNS THAT WE'RE COMING.

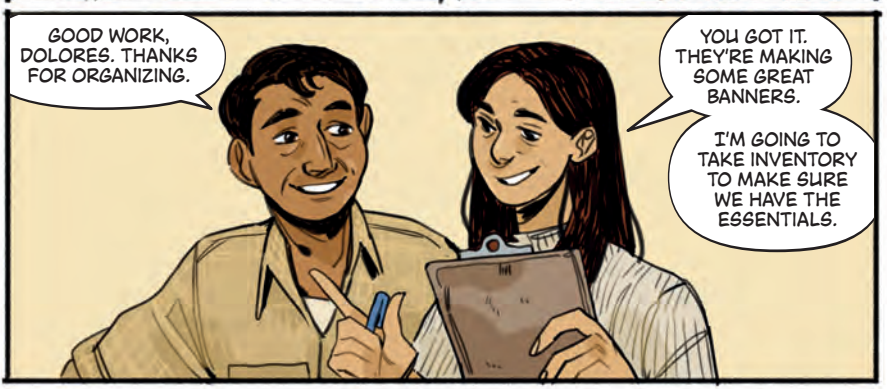
NOT ALL OF THESE PEOPLE WILL BE ABLE TO MARCH.
SOME OF THE ELDERLY, FOR HEALTH REASONS, AND WE STILL NEED TO HAVE PEOPLE MAN THE PICKET LINES.
SOMEONE WILL NEED TO SELECT THE GROUP OF MARCHERS FROM THOSE WHO SIGNED UP.


I WONDER WHO YOU HAVE IN MIND.
I HAVE EVERY FAITH IN YOU, ROBERTO. YOU'RE JUST THE MAN FOR THE JOB.
I WON'T LET YOU DOWN.
HOLA, ROBERTO.
HOLA, DOLORES.
DID CESAR ASK YOU TO BE CAPTAIN OF THE MARCH YET?
YES. JUST NOW.
WELL, SALUDOS, CAPITÁN!
THAT'S NOT NECESSARY.

A FEW WEEKS LATER
EVERYONE'S SO MOTIVATED. WE'RE DOING WHAT WE CAN WITH WHAT WE'VE GOT.
IT'S TERRIFIC. THIS IS WHAT THE MOVEMENT IS ABOUT.

THE PEOPLE. COMING TOGETHER.

CREATING SOMETHING NEW WITH THEIR BARE HANDS, THEIR SPIRITS.


GOOD WORK, DOLORES. THANKS FOR ORGANIZING.
YOU GOT IT. THEY'RE MAKING SOME GREAT BANNERS.
I'M GOING TO TAKE INVENTORY TO MAKE SURE WE HAVE THE ESSENTIALS.

¿LA VIRGEN DE LA GUADALUPE?
NFWA
CHECK!
¿BANDERAS?
CHECK!
STRIKE SIGN?
CHECK!
HUELGA
NFWA
HUELGA
NFWA
LAST BUT NOT LEAST...
OUR FLAG.
NFWA
CHECK!

NFWA Flag

In a theater in Fresno, California, at the first convention of the National Farm Workers Association, union members revealed their new flag. They displayed a red banner with a black eagle, its wings spread, over a white circle. Each color has a specific meaning. Black was meant to represent the hard life the farmworkers had to endure. Red was for the many sacrifices they would have to make, and white was for hope.

Cesar asked his brother Richard Chavez and his cousin Manuel Chavez to come up with a symbol that would be easy to recreate. Something anyone could make. They went with the eagle because of its importance to the Mexican flag and Mexican culture. The eagle was a bold, graphic shape—its wings mimicking the shape of Mesoamerican temples and pyramids.

"A symbol is an important thing," Cesar said. "That is why we chose an Aztec eagle. It gives pride. When people see it, they know it means dignity. To me, it looks like a strong, beautiful sign of hope."