



## Honoring César E. Chávez

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The man who founded the United Farm Workers Union, who fought for the rights of some of the most powerless members of American society, and inspired thousands of people to better their own lives and the lives of those around them was not marked for greatness when he was born in Yuma, Arizona in 1927 on his family's farm. The Chávez family eked out a living on their small farm, but as the Great Depression wore on through the 1930s they could no longer make ends meet and eventually lost their farm and were forced to become migrant farm workers, following the harvest through California and Arizona. Chávez attended over 30 different schools before his formal education ended after the seventh grade. His education in the ways of being a migrant worker would continue, however.

The Chávez family, like all migrant farm workers at that time, worked very hard picking fruits and vegetables for a pittance. Living conditions were harsh; many farm workers couldn't afford to rent a place in the miserable shacks near the fields and were forced to sleep in their cars.

Farm owners would sometimes refuse to pay the workers what they were owed for their work or would charge them for expenses as petty as the water they drank while they worked in the field. César escaped this life temporarily in 1944, when at age 17 he joined the U.S. Navy to fight in World War II. Returning to California in 1946, Chávez married Helen Fabela and they made their home in Delano, a small town in the Central Valley. He resumed his life as a farm worker, picking grapes and cotton and as he worked he realized that nothing had changed for those in the fields since the war had ended, and nothing would change unless farm workers won for themselves the rights other workers enjoyed. He resolved to work to better the conditions of farm workers like himself.

In 1952, Chávez joined the Community Service Organization (CSO) and became a community organizer, sometimes helping fellow farm workers with their everyday problems, encouraging them to register to vote or to become U.S. citizens. He tried to convince the CSO leadership that farm workers needed a union devoted to their interests. When the leadership refused, he resigned from the CSO, took his life savings of \$1,200 and formed the National Farm Workers Association, the precursor of the United Farm Workers union (UFW). The first years of the union's existence were a struggle to survive. Chávez traveled to migrant labor camps all over California and Arizona, discussing with farm workers the need for a union and recruiting organizers to help him do what many labor leaders thought was impossible. Past attempts to form a labor union of farm workers had been defeated by violent reprisals by farm owners and law enforcement against organizers and union members. The migrant workforce was scared, divided, and easily manipulated by farm owners and labor contractors, and a lack of connection between well meaning labor organizers and the migrant workers had also doomed previous organizing efforts.

One of Chávez's great insights was that a successful union of farm workers had to be one they formed themselves. Much of his time was spent recruiting, training, and inspiring farm workers to take on the monumental task of forming a union, negotiating contracts with hostile growers and withstanding the sometimes violent reactions of the communities that hated the idea of a farm workers union and hated the man who led them. "Si se pueda!" ("Yes We Can!") was a rallying cry of the UFW, and in part it meant that the people in the union, whom no one thought were capable of doing anything more than picking fruit and

vegetables, could indeed fight for their rights as workers and human beings and succeed. Again and again one reads testimonials by former farm workers whose potential was recognized by Chávez (often even before these people saw it in themselves) and whose work for the UFW opened new vistas in their lives, changing how they thought of themselves and what they were capable of.

In 1965 the UFW reached a turning point. Migrant grape pickers had gone out on strike, demanding a raise from the dollar an hour they were paid. More and more workers joined the Huelga (Spanish for "strike"), even in the face of threats from farm owners and labor contractors. Chávez worked tirelessly in support of the strike. In March, 1966 he led a group of strikers on a 250 mile march from Delano to Sacramento, to take the union's demands to the state government and to bring national attention to the cause of the UFW. By the time the group arrived in Sacramento, one of the large Delano grape growers had settled with the union, signing a contract guaranteeing better pay and working conditions for migrant workers. The battle for the rights of the workers would continue. In 1968, to draw more attention to the strike, Chávez began a 25-day hunger strike, organized more rallies and demonstrations and called for a national boycott of grapes. By 1970, the grape growers had agreed to a contract with the UFW that gave the workers health care benefits and a raise in pay. A similar call for a boycott of lettuce was less successful, but in 1975 Governor Jerry Brown signed the Agricultural Labor Relations Act-the first bill of rights for farm workers ever passed in the United States. It gave workers the right to vote on which union would represent them for the first time. The UFW easily defeated the Teamsters in an election to represent the lettuce pickers.

César E. Chávez continued to fight for the rights of farm workers as head of the UFW until his death in 1993. Over 50,000 mourners came to pay their respects to the humble man from Delano whose simple, humble manner belied a man of iron principles whose commitment to social justice was absolute and whose efforts to better the lives of his fellow men made him, in the words of Robert F. Kennedy, "One of the heroic figures of our time." President Clinton in 1994 awarded him posthumously the nation's highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

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