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## Cesar Chavez's Legacy

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Many people thought Cesar Chavez was crazy to think he could build a union among migrant farmworkers. Since the early 1900s, unions had been trying and failing to organize California's unskilled agricultural workers. Whether the workers were Anglos, Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos or Mexican Americans, these efforts met the same fate. The organizing drives met fierce opposition and always flopped, vulnerable to growers' violent tactics and to competition from a seemingly endless supply of other migrant workers desperate for work. So when Chavez left his job as a community organizer in San Jose in 1962 and moved to rural Delano to try, once again, to bring a union to California's lettuce and grape fields, even his closest friends figured he was delusional.



Within a decade, however, the United Farm Workers (UFW) union had collective bargaining agreements with most of California's major growers. Pay, working conditions and housing for migrant workers improved significantly. Along with consumer groups, the UFW drew attention to, and helped reduce, the chemical pesticides that growers used in the fields that endangered the health of farmworkers and consumers alike. Millions of Americans boycotted lettuce and grapes to put economic pressure on the growers to sign a contract with the union. A young governor named Jerry Brown signed a bill giving California's farmworkers the right to unionize -- something they lacked (and still lack) under federal labor laws.

Chavez became a national hero, a symbol of courage and fortitude, for leading a nonviolent revolution to organize farmworkers. His work fomented enormous pride and solidarity among Latinos in California and

across the nation. To those who ever doubted that Chavez could build an effective union among America's poorest and most vulnerable workers, in the face of a large, powerful, and conservative agribusiness industry, he responded, "Si, se puede," "Yes, we can."

Since his death in 1993, Chavez has become an American icon. Many cities have named parks, schools and streets after him. In 1994, President Bill Clinton honored Chavez posthumously with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian award. His birthday, March 31, is now a state holiday -- Cesar Chavez Day -- in California, Texas and Colorado. President Barack Obama -- who adopted the UFW's slogan, "Yes, We Can," for his presidential campaign -- has proclaimed March 31, 2014 as national Cesar Chavez Day.

Chavez, who would have celebrated his 87th birthday this week, is now back in the news because of a new biography and a new film. There have been many books about Chavez, but Miriam Pawel's biography, *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez*, is important because it not only celebrates the inspirational UFW founder but also acknowledges his serious flaws as a movement leader. Diego Luna's film, *Cesar Chavez*, the first dramatic movie about him, takes a more reverential look at the UFW leader. Its signal achievement is to bring Chavez's story to the big screen and to educate a new generation of Americans about the importance of the labor and civil rights movements in improving the lives of the nation's most dispossessed and exploited people.

Paulina Gonzalez, a 40-year-old community organizer in the Bay Area, is one of tens of thousands of people who were inspired by Chavez and have devoted their lives to grassroots activism and movement-building. She described her "mixed feelings" after seeing the new film:

From flashing back to my own organizing in the fields with the UFW, to so many feelings for the man and the movement that led me to drop out of college and pack my bags to move to Delano, to being disappointed about the simplified way it told the story, but being grateful it was told.

When Chavez was growing up, his family owned a small farm in Arizona, but they lost it to foreclosure when he was 11 years old. The sight of the Anglo grower, who bought the land at auction, bulldozing the family's farmhouse, trees and crops left an indelible impression on the young Cesar. That early memory would later fuel a determination to help Mexican American farmworkers gain power and respect. "If I had stayed there," Chavez later said about his family's farm, "possibility I would have been a grower. God writes in exceedingly crooked lines."

Instead, the Chavez family joined the roughly 300,000 migrant workers who followed the crops to California every year. The family often slept by the side of the road, moving from farm to farm, from harvest to harvest, living in overcrowded migrant camps. Cesar attended 38 different schools until he finally gave up after finishing the eighth grade.

Chavez experienced the daily humiliations of being a brown-skinned migrant worker: physical punishment from an Anglo teacher when he unthinkingly began speaking Spanish in class, police harassment, segregated seating at the local movie theater, denial of service at restaurants. These compounded the abuse Chavez and other

migrants faced in the fields, where growers had dictatorial control and where workers toiled in the broiling sun for meager wages, living in shacks and lacking toilet facilities.

Chavez spent two years in the navy from 1946 to 1948. Returning home, he married, moved to San Jose's Mexican barrio and took whatever jobs he could find in the nearby fields or in a lumberyard. His life changed when he met Father Donald McDonnell, a local priest who introduced him to the writings of Francis of Assisi and Mohandas Gandhi and discussed nonviolence as a strategy for change, and [Fred Ross](#), a community organizer and colleague of Saul Alinsky.

Ross was the lead organizer of Community Service Organization (CSO), which helped Mexican Americans in urban barrios deal with immigration and tax problems, taught them how to organize against police brutality and discrimination, and ran voter registration drives. In 1952, while Ross was building the CSO chapter in San Jose, a public health nurse told him about Chavez, who lived with his wife in a barrio called Sal Si Puedes ("Get Out If You Can"). Chavez at first avoided Ross, thinking he was just another white social worker or sociologist curious about barrio residents' exotic habits. But he finally agreed to meet with Ross, who quickly sized up Chavez as having the qualities of a community leader. Chavez recalled that "as time went on, Fred became sort of my hero. I saw him organize and I wanted to learn."

Ross trained Chavez, first as a CSO leader, then as one of CSO's organizers, and eventually as its statewide director. Ross also trained a young teacher named Dolores Huerta, and Gilbert Padilla, a spotter in a dry cleaning establishment, as CSO activists. Chavez, Huerta and Padilla eventually joined forces to build the United Farm Workers union.

In 1962 after the CSO turned down his request to organize farmworkers, he resigned and returned to Delano. For the next three years, he crisscrossed the state, talking to farmworkers under the auspices of his new organization, the National Farmworkers Association. Many of them dismissed Chavez's ideas, saying that the growers were too powerful and that anyone caught talking about a union would immediately be fired. But drawing on his CSO experience, Chavez recruited workers by helping them with their legal, housing, and other problems.

A crucial turning point occurred in 1965. A small group of Filipino farmworkers, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor's struggling Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, went on strike when the Delano grape growers cut pay rates during the harvest. Chavez persuaded his own union's members to support the strike. Soon the two groups merged into what became the United Farm Workers union.

The plight of America's migrant farmworkers had entered public consciousness right after Thanksgiving in 1960, when TV journalist Edward R. Murrow broadcast a documentary, "Harvest of Shame," on CBS. For the next decade, Chavez used a two-pronged approach to build the UFW. Because food is perishable and needs to be harvested quickly, the union used strikes to disrupt the harvest and put pressure on the growers. But Chavez recognized that growers could rely on an almost limitless supply of migrant workers -- including new arrivals

from Mexico under the Bracero Program -- who were recruited as strikebreakers. So the second strategy was to win the support of the general public, asking them to boycott grapes, wine, and lettuce until specific growers agreed to a contract.

Chavez called on allies in the labor movement, among religious congregations, and on college campuses to help with the national boycotts by picketing outside grocery stores and educating consumers. At its height, over 13 million Americans supported the grape boycott.

In the fields, on picket lines, and in meetings, UFW members faced violence from growers and their hired thugs. Another threat came from the Teamsters union, which had signed friendly "sweetheart" contracts with growers to represent the workers without the consent of the workers themselves -- a maneuver that enriched Teamsters officials.

To keep their plight in the public eye and to raise the farmworkers' morale during these difficult times, Chavez used marches, civil disobedience, and prayer vigils to transform each strike into a protest movement. The grape strike became a cause célèbre among liberals and gained enormous media attention.

Chavez attracted a loyal cadre of organizers, lawyers, and others, who were paid less-than-poverty wages, as was Chavez and his most important colleague, Dolores Huerta. Humble and self-effacing, Chavez became the UFW's public face and the country's most famous Mexican American. In 1969 *TIME* magazine put him on its cover.

One of Chavez's key insights was that the union had to stake out the moral high ground -- as the African-American civil rights movement had done -- in order to win public support. The backing of key clergy, including Catholic bishops and priests, was critical to its image. At one point, when a court prevented the union from picketing during a strike, the union held a religious vigil instead.

Maintaining a nonviolent approach was also central to winning public support. As local police and Teamster thugs resorted to physical violence against union members, some of them understandably wanted to strike back. Chavez was deeply influenced by Gandhian thought. When it appeared that union members might respond to violence with violence, Chavez sought to restore calm and discipline by engaging in a hunger strike, risking his health in the process. Chavez's fasts drew media attention that helped strengthen public sympathy for the strike and for the boycott.

Chavez and the UFW also gained attention was by attracting the support of high-profile politicians. The UFW's most important political ally was Senator Robert F. Kennedy of New York. In 1966 United Auto Workers president Walter Reuther, who had joined Chavez on picket lines and donated money to the UFW, asked Kennedy to visit Chavez. After meeting Chavez, observing the conditions in which farmworkers toiled, and recognizing the spirit of the organizing effort, Kennedy became a close ally of Chavez and the UFW. He arranged to hold a Senate hearing about farmworkers' conditions in Delano. When the local sheriff told Kennedy that his deputies arrested strikers who looked "ready to violate the law," Kennedy shot back, "May I suggest that during the luncheon, the sheriff and the district attorney read the Constitution of the United States?"

Kennedy made several other pilgrimages to visit Chavez -- each time bolstering the union's image. The UFW repaid the favor. In 1968, when Kennedy announced he was running for president as an antiwar candidate against the incumbent, Lyndon B. Johnson, the union endorsed him, registered Mexican American voters, and helped secure a Kennedy victory in the California Democratic primary. UFW cofounder Dolores Huerta was at Kennedy's side when he was assassinated the night of his California victory.

Another key political ally was California's governor, Jerry Brown. As a young Catholic seminarian, Brown had supported the UFW boycott. Once in office, Brown engineered passage of the nation's first law giving farmworkers collective bargaining rights and protection from unfair labor practices. The California Agricultural Labor Relations Act (1975) led to an overwhelming series of UFW election victories and contracts with growers.

By the late 1970s the UFW had close to 50,000 members (about one-quarter of the state's farmworkers) and contracts with most of the major table grape and many of the lettuce growers. Pay and working conditions had significantly improved. Growers were required to stop spraying the fields with toxic pesticides that endangered workers' health. The Teamsters, under pressure from public opinion and other unions, withdrew from competing with the UFW. Migrant workers became eligible for medical insurance, employer-paid pensions, unemployment insurance, and other benefits. They had a grievance procedure to challenge employer abuses. Moreover, the threat of unionization led growers to improve agricultural wages for nonunion workers.

But within a few years the UFW had spiraled into chaos. This was partly due to California's election in 1982 of a Republican governor who had close ties to growers and who failed to implement the new labor law. That failure made it harder for the UFW to win new elections and made it easier for growers to decertify the union.

Equally important was Chavez's own weaknesses as a leader. He was not a good administrator and failed to delegate authority. Chavez encouraged his followers to develop a cult of personality around him. He was suspicious of people who disagreed with him. Key staffers left. The union put fewer resources into organizing workers in the fields. Growers did not renew contracts. In the 1980s wages and conditions worsened. By the time of Chavez's death in 1993, membership in the UFW had declined to just a few thousand.

Despite several attempts to revitalize the union, it has never recovered from its collapse during Chavez's final decade. Today, conditions for farmworkers are better than they were in the 1960s, but worse than they were at the height of the UFW's influence.

So what is Chavez's legacy?

One important legacy is the long list of activists and organizers who were inspired by Chavez, Huerta, and the farmworker movement. The UFW served as an incubator of movements. It trained thousands of organizers and activists -- boycott volunteers as well as paid staff. Many became key activists and leaders in the labor, immigrant rights, feminist, antiwar, consumer, and environmental movements. There is no progressive movement in the country today that has not been influenced by people whose activism began with the UFW.

Another legacy is the nationwide upsurge of cultural pride and political action by Latinos, most of whom were not farmworkers, that was inspired by Chavez and the UFW. The fruits of Latino activism can be seen in the

growing voting power of Latinos in American politics, the thousand of Latino and Latina elected officials at all levels of government, and the growing immigrant rights movement, especially among young people.

Many Americans who may know little about Cesar Chavez have nevertheless been inspired by the UFW's motto that change is possible if people organize: Si, se puede. Yes, we can.

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