

CESAR CHÁVEZ

b. 1927

Chronology

Born Cesar Estrada Chávez on March 31, 1927, in Yuma, Arizona, the son of migrant workers, Librado and Juana Chávez; attends more than thirty elementary schools, only completing eighth grade; until he enlists in the military, works as a migrant laborer; *1944-1945* serves in the United States Navy; *1948* marries Helen Fabela, with whom he has four daughters and four sons; *1952* joins the Community Service Organization (CSO) in San Jose, California, and leads voter registration drives; *1958* becomes general director of the CSO; *1962* resigns from the CSO after it refuses to create a farm workers union; begins organizing the National Farm Workers Association which later becomes known as the United Farm Workers (UFW); *1965* enrolls seventeen hundred families in the UFW; the UFW joins striking Filipino grape pickers in a strike; *1966-1978* spearheads nationwide boycotts of non-union farm produce, such as grapes, lettuce, and citrus fruits, and gains negotiating leverage with growers; *1972* UFW memberships grows to sixty thousand; *1972-1977* the Teamsters Union and UFW compete for autonomy and monopoly over jurisdictional unionization of farm workers; *1977* UFW and Teamsters settle dispute over recruitment of members—they agree that UFW will organize field workers and the Teamsters will work with truck drivers and cannery workers; *1982* UFW and Teamsters' truce is extended and UFW's membership climbs to one hundred thousand.

Activities of Historical Significance

Cesar Chávez's humble beginnings and first-hand experience with labor exploitation prepared him for a career as one of America's most remarkable labor leaders. Prior to assuming the role of union leader, he served in World War II; upon his return, he found it difficult as a high school dropout of Hispanic heritage to escape racial injustice and job discrimination. Thus upon becoming a migrant worker once again, he was a man with a mission. Growing up in a series of migrant labor camps in Arizona and California and attending more than thirty elementary schools, he suffered socio-economic exploitation and as a son of migrant laborers, he understood the related problems and hoped to do something about them.

In 1952 he began as a field representative for the CSO, thereby serving as a link between the organization and the Hispanic community. Within a few years he accepted an appointment as general director and guided the organization through some turbulent periods. Because of his achievements in registering voters and bridging the gap between the CSO and the community, Chávez quickly reached the top of the hierarchy. Nevertheless, he resigned as director in 1962 when the CSO refused to create a farm worker union and no compromise appeared possible. This dispute meant loss of pay and a return to the fields; his experience as CSO director, however, heightened his sensitivity to injustice and renewed his vow to assist his people.

What began as a small-scale effort to enforce the minimum wage law and to better working and living conditions mushroomed into a crusade for an organized labor union and the implementation of collective bargaining. Many Arizona and California growers ignored the state and federal minimum wage laws; they simply devised their own pay scales without any consideration of employees' cost of living or needs. Using the argument of diminished profits, they maintained that they could not afford the increase stipulated by law and remain in business.

Disagreeing with what he perceived to be a thoughtless and illogical business practice, Chávez contended that higher wages served as an incentive for workers to produce higher-yield quality crops. Such process, he argued, augmented profit and decreased overhead expenses due to work slowdowns and poorly picked crops. When the growers refused to negotiate, Chávez mobilized nationwide strikes and boycotts of grapes, wine, and lettuce in an attempt to pressure the growers into signing labor contracts which not only specified worker-employer relations but also recognized the UFW's power of collective bargaining.

The movement was initiated in 1962 when negotiations failed and Chávez decided to educate migrant and agricultural workers about their rights. In 1965, having earned their respect as CSO director, he managed to enroll over seventeen hundred families to join the Filipino grape-pickers strike. Other disadvantaged Asians and African Americans signed on as members and participated in what turned out to be one of the longest labor strikes in American history. The success of this strike and the ensuing consumer boycott thrust Chávez into the national

spotlight, and by 1972 his organization had increased to sixty thousand members. By 1982 the UFW's membership had climbed to over one hundred thousand.

Because of the effectiveness of the 1965 boycott, wine producers capitulated early in the struggle, but table grape growers resisted all union efforts until the 1970s. Therefore, the union strategy changed.

The economic security of the growers very much depended upon selling their produce on the world market. Knowing this, Chávez stopped the flow of goods by instituting national and international dock strikes, thereby eroding the staying power of the growers and erecting barriers to trade. Eventually, the boycotts and strikes functioned at both the local and the international levels. Locally some laborers organized work slowdowns and stoppages while others formed human blockades to prevent the transport of produce to the docks and markets. At the international level, foreign laborers exercised even greater control over the mass movement of exported goods. They refused to unload produce considered contraband by the striking American workers. The effects upon the local and international markets were disastrous. Produce rotted at the docks and truckers refused to transport smuggled goods to distributors. The price of crops rose and consumers absorbed the added expense or simply abstained from eating or buying the products. To the detriment of the growers, profits plummeted, and eventually the growers capitulated.

The initial momentum and euphoria that resulted from the success of the strike turned to disillusionment among the workers as they realized their deplorable living conditions had not improved, and Chávez believed he was losing control of his members. The strike had given them a purpose and now they had none. In order to impress upon his members the humanitarian and spiritual importance of their mission, he decided to fast, which he believed would tie their cause to Catholic ritual.

Already his supporters idolized him as a legendary hero, who single-handedly conquered the growers and the Teamsters. Now sympathizers and workers embraced his fast, and he again garnered national attention. The news media reported his every move; religious groups canonized him; university professors and students volunteered to assist the union; Chávez and his cause became the topic of research papers, theses, and dissertations. Satisfied and encouraged by the support he received throughout the fast, he regained his momentum and his popularity increased as he captured the imagination and earned the respect of people other than his followers.

Based on the success of the wine growers boycott, Chávez and his compatriots tightened the boycotts against the table grape growers. In so doing, they ran afoul of the Teamsters Union and jurisdictional conflict divided the two unions. Steady confrontation over which union had the right to organize and represent workers' demands led to property destruction and murder. Pre-arranged by the growers with the Teamsters' support, these intimidation tactics temporarily impeded the progress of the UFW's non-violent struggle.

The ill-feelings and violence continued for years until a truce was arranged in March 1977. A union agreement between the warring factions stipulated that the Teamsters would recruit and organize truck drivers and cannery workers while the UFW would unionize field laborers. Both sides gained satisfactory negotiating leverage with growers and obtained the approval of agricultural workers. With this settlement Chávez and the UFW scored a major victory. Not only did they receive the recognition they sought, but the union joined the AFL-CIO as an affiliate.

In 1978 the growers agreed to a written contract that incorporated the workers' demands, thus ending one of the most controversial labor disputes in California history.

Overview of Biographical Sources

Many authors have attempted to capture the essence of Chávez and his contributions to organized labor. Several innovative techniques were employed to portray the life and achievements of the man of "La Causa." Ruth Franchere's *Cesar Chávez* (1970), written for young adults, consists of a forty-two page narrative with photographs. In *Chávez: Man of the Migrant* (1971), Jean Pitrone introduces his readers to the complexities of Chávez's personality and his unionizing of migrant farm workers. In *So Shall Ye Reap* (1970), Joan London and Henry H. Anderson provide a clear understanding of Chávez's virtues and vices, and his knowledge of trade unions, agricultural laborers, and California labor history.

Jacques E. Levy presents contemporary insight into the life and accomplishments of Chávez. His work, *Cesar*

Chávez: An Autobiography of La Causa (1975), updates speeches and the struggles of the United Farm Workers Union.

Hailed as the most objective and best written biography of Chávez is Ronald B. Taylor's *Chávez and the Farm Workers* (1975). This work, however, is by no means definitive.

In his acclaimed work, *Sal Si Puedes: Cesar Chávez and the New American Revolution* (1969), Peter Matthiessen outlines how Chávez led the 1965 boycott against California grape growers and how his determination led to state reforms.

Other critical biographies on the life of Chávez and the United Farm Workers Union include: Florence M. White, *Cesar Chávez: Man of Courage* (1973); Jan Young, *The Migrant Workers and Cesar Chávez* (1972); Beverly Foddel, *Cesar Chávez and the UFW* (1974); Winthrop Yinger, *Cesar Chávez* (1975); Jean Marie Muller, *Cesar Chávez* (1977); Naurice Roberts, *Cesar Chávez and la Causa* (1986); and Conseulo Roderiguez, *Cesar Chávez* (1991).

Evaluation of Principal Biographical Sources

Franchere, Ruth. *Cesar Chávez*. New York: Crowell, 1970. (Y) This biography uses photographs to explore Chávez and the Hispanic farm laborers. Highly recommended for young adults.

London, Joan, and Henry H. Anderson. *So Shall Ye Reap*. New York: Crowell, 1970. (G) Includes maps and photographs. The authors' scenario of struggling migrants engaged in a hard-won battle for workers' rights earns the sympathy of the audience.

Levy, Jacques E. *Cesar Chávez: An Autobiography of La Causa*. New York: Norton, 1975. (A, G) The author, a labor reporter, re-creates the hardships of Hispanic families, especially Chávez's own family, who are prevented from earning a decent living because of economic exploitation and racism. Levy presents the pains of the outcasts in their own words, including tales of impossible tasks, and unyielding faith in Chávez. Following the chronology of events, he combines the testament of Chávez's family, friends, and enemies to reveal the magnitude of Chávez's life. Because of this stance, critics label the work as biased and one-sided; yet, it will stand as a significant study that details the polarization of unions, employees, and employers.

Matthiessen, Peter. *Sal Si Puedes: Cesar Chávez and the New American Revolution*. New York: Random House, 1969, (A, G) Shows how non-violence and fasting combined with an economic boycott brought about a peaceful revolution. According to Matthiessen, this revolution has resulted in access to clinics, schools, and an increase of wages from two dollars to eight dollars an hour.

Pitrone, Jean. *Chávez: Man of the Migrants*. Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1971. (G) Illustrates the interdependence of Chávez and his fellow Hispanic farm workers. Pitrone portrays Chávez as the leader who seized the reins of power and unionized migrant farm workers despite overwhelming odds and obstacles. According to the author, the laborers looked to Chávez for guidance as African Americans had turned to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for direction during the 1960s civil rights movement.

Taylor, Ronald B. *Chávez and the Farm Workers*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1975. (G) Helps the reader comprehend why farm workers struggled for so long and continued to fight in face of circumvention of the law, physical and psychological violence, and threats of loss of life and property. Taylor discusses the setbacks and dissension in the union that nearly destroyed the strikers, boycotts, and Chávez.

Overview and Evaluation of Primary Sources

For an overview of the issues of race and exploitation, Chávez in his article, "The California Farm Workers' Struggle" (*Black Scholar* 7 [June 1976]: 16-19; G), and his analytical work, "Harvest of Power" (*Reason* 15 [September 1983]: 19-26; G) explains the effects of power, racism, and non-unionization upon minorities, especially African Americans and Hispanics. He reiterates

the importance of non-violence and the utilization of civil disobedience as a weapon for socio-economic change. Chávez also stresses the psychological and tangible benefits derived from various forms of empowerment.

Delores Huerta offers another critical explanation from the feminist perspective as well as the Hispanic viewpoint. In her article, "Reflections on the UFW Experience" (*Center Magazine* 18 [July-August 1985]: 2-8; **G**), she explores and documents crucial events and their impact upon Chávez, the workers, and the growers. In a similar vein, Jennie V. Chávez, in "An Opinion: Women of the Mexican-American Movement" (*Mademoiselle* 74 [April 1972]: 82+; **G**), argues the importance of women's roles in the liberation struggle. She chastises Hispanic men for ignoring and not respecting the women's sacrifices and contributions to the movement.

Fiction and Adaptations

Because of Chávez's eminence, organizations, institutions, and the media have interviewed him or invited him to lecture, and numerous recordings and taped interviews exist. "National Farm Workers Convention, California, 1973" is a twenty-six-minute interview with Senator Edward Kennedy and Chávez, with remarks by Sam Kushnor, editor of the labor newspaper *People's World*, and Jose Ramirez with comments by labor journalists. This interview provides an examination of the movement and the farm worker's plight.

In "Creative Non-Violence," a twenty-minute speech taped in 1975 at the Center for Cassette Studies in North Hollywood, Chávez speaks informally about organizing California farm workers using non-violence as a potent weapon.

Chávez reveals his goals for the future—after the grape strike is settled—and his position on Mexican-Americans in politics in a speech given in Santa Barbara, California, in 1971. It is titled, "Strikes and Lockouts," and is available through Santa Barbara's Office of Publisher's Catalog (1971).

Similarly, Chávez speaks of the vital issues in labor history in a seventeen-minute interview with W. Gaylin, "The Farm Workers Fight On."

Other Sources

Dunne, John Gregory. *Delano*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971. An updated version of Dunne's *Delano: The Story of the California Grape Strike* discusses Chávez's role in the successful Delano, California, strike.

———. "To Die Standing: Cesar Chávez and the Chicanos." *Atlantic Monthly* 227 (June 1971): 39-45. Argues that although the boycott against Bud Antle landed Chávez in jail for the first time, it also launched him into national prominence. Presents Chávez's incarceration as a galvanizing event for emotionally depressed and penniless strikers who made Chávez their champion.

Espinosa, Michael. "Cesar Chávez and La Causa." *School Library Journal* 33 (October 1986): 182. Attributes the farm workers' victories to the stubbornness, faith, and determination of Chávez.

Flynn, Julie. "A Lawsuit Could Ruin the Farmworkers' Union: United Farm Workers Face \$1.7 Million Suit." *Business Week* (March 23, 1987): 42. Flynn points out that like many other protesters and dissidents, the farm workers faced the possibility of complete economic ruin, but did not allow such adversity to deter their efforts for economic parity and decent wages.

"A Good Day's Pay for Labor Leaders." *Newsweek* 104 (July 2, 1984): 60. Relates the success of Chávez and the farm workers as a triumph for the labor movement in general.

"Grapes of Wrath." *Economist* 308 (August 20, 1988): 25. Shows how years of strikes and boycotts led to the growth, development, and success of non-unionized farm hands.

Hoffman, Pat. "Cesar Chávez's Fast for Life." *The Christian Century* 105 (October 12, 1988): 895-898. Relates

the role of Chávez's fasting in the non-violent struggle of the UFW for decent wages and housing.

Kushner, Sam. *Long Road to Delano*. New York: International Publishing, 1971. Helpful in understanding the major forces behind a century of failed migrants' strikes until the success at Delano, California.

McCarthy, Tim. "UFW Grape Boycott May be Battle for Survival." *National Catholic Reporter* 25, 2 (October 28, 1988): 18. Focuses on the work done in the vineyards around Delano and illustrates how the fires of resistance brought cooperation among migrant workers and fellow employees around the nation and globe.

O'Connell, Mary, et al. "Cause the Bible Tells Me So." *U.S. Catholic* 50 (October 1985): 36-41. Explores the biblical precedent for fasting.

Sly, Julie. "Fast Leaves Cesar Chávez 'Spiritually Strong': Celebrities Vow to Continue Fight." *National Catholic Reporter* 24 (August 26, 1988): 7. Documents fasting as an effective instrument for justice.

Street, Richard S. "It's Boycott Time: Attacks on the California Agricultural Labor Relations Board and the Agricultural Labor Relations Act—In and Out of Court." *The Nation* 240 (March 23, 1985): 330-334. Analyzes in great detail the historical and constitutional precedence of boycotts as non-violent mechanisms for social change.

Thomas, Morgan B. "The Latinization of America." *Esquire* (May 1983): 47-55. Cites ethnicity as a unifying force that Chávez used to mobilize workers into action. He quotes Chávez as saying, "when I was a kid, our identity was strong within our group. We hid our tacos and our tortillas. Today we promote them."

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