

# Cesar Chavez

Today on Good Friday 1969 we remember the life and the sacrifice of Martin Luther King, Jr., who gave himself totally to the nonviolent struggle for peace and justice. In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" Dr. King describes better than I could our hopes for the strike and boycott. "Injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured." For our part I admit that we have seized upon every tactic and strategy consistent with the morality of our cause to expose that injustice and thus to heighten the sensitivity of the American conscience, so that farm workers will have without bloodshed their own union and the dignity of bargaining with their agribusiness employers. By lying about the nature of our movement, you are working against nonviolent social change. Unwittingly perhaps, you may unleash that other force which our union by discipline and deed, censure and education has sought to avoid, that panacean shortcut: that senseless violence which honors no color, class or neighborhood. You must understand — I must make you understand — that our membership and the hopes and aspirations of the hundreds of thousands of poor and dispossessed that have been raised on our account are, above all, human beings, no better and no worse than any cross-section of human society; we are not saints because we are poor, but by the same measure neither are we immoral.

We are men and women who have suffered and endured much, and not only because of our abject poverty but because we have been kept poor. The colors of our skins, the languages of our cultural and native origins, the lack of formal education, the exclusion from the democratic process, the numbers of our slain in recent wars — all these burdens generation after generation have sought to demoralize us, to break our human spirit. But—

**God knows that we are not beasts of burden, agricultural implements or rented slaves; we are men. We are men locked in a death struggle against man's inhumanity to man in the industry that you represent. And this struggle itself gives meaning to our life and ennobles our dying.**

**As your industry has experienced, our strikers here in Delano and those who represent us throughout the world are well trained for this struggle. They have been under the gun, they have been kicked and beaten and herded by dogs, they have been cursed and ridiculed, they have been stripped and chained and jailed, they have been sprayed with the poisons used in the vineyards; but they have been taught not to lie down and die nor to flee in shame, but to resist with every ounce of human endurance and spirit. To resist not with retaliation in kind but to overcome with love and compassion, with ingenuity and creativity, with hard work and longer hours, with stamina and patient tenacity, with truth and public appeal, with friends and allies, with mobility and discipline, with politics and law, and with prayer and fasting. They were not trained in a month or even a year, after all, this new harvest season will mark our fourth full year of strike and even now we continue to plan and prepare for the years to come. Time accomplishes for the poor what money does for the rich.**

April, 1969

Struggle for Justice

# Cesar Chavez

This is not to pretend that we have everywhere been successful enough or that we have not made mistakes. And while we do not belittle or underestimate our adversaries — for they are the rich and the powerful and they possess the land — we are not afraid nor do we cringe from the confrontation. We welcome it! We have planned for it. We know that our cause is just, that history is a story of social revolution, and that the poor shall inherit the land.

Once again I appeal to you as the representative of your industry and as a man. I ask you to recognize and bargain with our union before the economic pressure of the boycott and strike takes an irrevocable toll; but if not, I ask you to at least sit down with us to discuss the safeguards necessary to keep our historical struggle free of violence. I make this appeal because as one of the leaders of our nonviolent movement, I know and accept my responsibility for preventing, if possible, the destruction of human life and property. For these reasons and knowing of Gandhi's admonition that fasting is the last resort in place of the sword, during a most critical time in our movement last February 1968, I undertook a 25-day fast. I repeat to you the principle enunciated to the membership at the start of the fast: if to build our union required the deliberate taking of life, either life of a grower or his child, or the life of a farm worker or his child, than I choose not to see the union built.

Let me be painfully honest with you. You must understand these things. We advocate militant nonviolence as our means for social revolution and to achieve justice for our people, but we are not blind or deaf to the desperate and moody winds of human frustration, impatience and rage that blow among us. Gandhi himself admitted that if his only choice were cowardice or violence, he would choose violence. Men are not angels, and time and tide wait for no man. Precisely because of these powerful human emotions, we have tried to involve masses of people in their own struggle. Participation and self-determination remain the best experience of freedom, and free men instinctively prefer democratic change and even protect the rights guaranteed to seek it. Only the enslaved in despair have need of violent overthrow.

This letter does not express all that is in my heart. But if it says nothing else its says that

**we do not hate you or rejoice to see your industry destroyed; we hate the agribusiness system that seeks to keep us enslaved, and we shall overcome and change it not by retaliation and bloodshed but by a determined nonviolent struggle carried on by those masses of farm workers who intend to be free and human.**

April, 1969

Struggle for Justice

# Cesar Chavez

1927-1993

Cesar Estrada Chavez devoted his life to improving the working and living conditions for American farm workers. As a leader in labor reform for migrant farm workers, Chavez advocated a policy of protest through nonviolence. He was seen as the Mexican American counterpart to the Black civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr.

Chavez was the son of migrant farm workers of Mexican descent. He was born on March 31, 1927, and spent the first 10 years of his life on a family-owned farm near Yuma, Arizona. During the Great Depression, his family was unable to pay their taxes and had to give up their land. At age 10, Chavez traveled with his parents and five siblings to various farms in California to harvest crops. His family lived in tents or labor camps, one room shacks with no plumbing or electricity. Chavez attended over three dozen elementary schools and never completed high school.

Chavez knew firsthand the deplorable working and living conditions of the migrant farm workers. He was determined to improve these working conditions and wages. In 1965, Chavez founded the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), which later became a recognized union, the United Farm Workers of America. The plight of the migrant farm workers gained national attention when Chavez led grape pickers on a historic 25-day, 300-mile march from Delano, California, to the state capital at Sacramento. Thousands of grape pickers joined the movement, called LaCausa. By using strikes, fasts, and marches, Chavez showed them that together they could bargain with owners and growers for better wages. Chavez organized a nationwide boycott of California table grapes, which was widely supported by American consumers. By the early 1970's, the United Farm Workers of America was a recognized union that helped fruit and vegetable farm workers double their wages, as well as receive medical benefits.

In his early days of organizing, Chavez worked for the Community Service Organization (CSO) and was active in encouraging Mexican Americans to register to vote. He also was involved in helping Mexican immigrants to enroll in English classes and to become U.S. citizens. When Chavez began organizing the NFWA, his wife worked in the fields to feed their eight children. Chavez went from farm to farm working beside the people and listening to their concerns. A soft-spoken man and a devout Roman Catholic, he combined his culture and his religion to unite his followers. His cause was supported by thousands of civil rights leaders, clergymen, college students and labor officials.

Cesar Chavez died in his sleep on April 23, 1993. Up until his death, he served as the president of the United Farm Workers and fought to maintain farm workers' rights. Chavez did more than improve the working conditions of migrant farm workers, he helped Mexican Americans take pride in their heritage and recognize the power of political action.

# Cesar Chavez

1927-1993

Cesar Estrada Chavez devoted his life to improving the working and living conditions for American farm workers. He wanted to help Mexican American migrant farm workers receive better wages. Chavez believed that workers should protest without using violence. He was often compared with Martin Luther King, Jr. King believed in fighting discrimination against Black Americans in a peaceful manner. Chavez fought against the discrimination of Mexican American workers.

Chavez was the son of Mexican American migrant farm workers. He was born on March 31 1927. He spent the first ten years of his life on a family-owned farm in Yuma, Arizona. During the Great Depression, his family was unable to pay their taxes. They had to give up their land to the government and become migrant farm workers. Chavez's family traveled to various farms in California to harvest crops. His family lived in tents or one-room shacks with no plumbing or electricity. Chavez attended over 36 different elementary schools. He never completed high school.

Chavez learned from his own experiences about the terrible working and living conditions of migrant farm workers. He was determined to make things better for migrant farm workers. In 1965, Chavez started the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA). The NFWA later became a national union called the United Farm Workers of America (UFW). Many Americans learned about the problems of the farm workers when Chavez led the grape pickers on a 25-day march. They marched 300 miles from Delano, California, to the state capital at Sacramento. Thousands of grape pickers joined the movement, called La Causa. Chavez taught the grape pickers to use strikes, marches, and fasts to bargain with growers for better wages. Chavez organized a nationwide boycott of grapes. Many Americans stopped buying grapes in support of the migrant farm workers. The UFW helped fruit and vegetable farm workers receive double their hourly pay and receive medical insurance.

As a young man, Chavez had worked for the Community Service Organization (CSO). This group helped Mexican Americans register to vote. They also showed Mexican immigrants how to enroll in English classes and become U.S. citizens. When Chavez first started to organize the union, his wife worked in the fields to make money to feed their eight children. Chavez traveled from farm to farm, working beside the people and listening to their concerns. Chavez was a soft-spoken man, and he was very religious. Chavez and many of the farm workers were Mexican Americans and Roman Catholics. Their shared culture and religion helped to unite them. Also, thousands of civil rights leaders, clergymen, college students, and labor officials supported Chavez's cause.

Cesar Chavez died on April 23, 1993. He served as the president of the United Farm Workers until his death. While improving the working conditions for migrant farm workers, Chavez helped Mexican Americans to feel proud of their heritage. He also showed Mexican Americans how to organize for political power.

# Cesar Chavez

Cesar Chavez used a policy of protest through nonviolence to improve the working and living conditions of migrant farm workers. His philosophy and tactics were heavily influenced by Mahatma Gandhi, as well as the civil rights movement. Chavez helped to raise the nation's consciousness to the social injustices of Mexican American farm workers. In 1965, The National Farm Workers Association, led by Chavez, joined a strike against grape growers and owners in Delano, California. On Good Friday of 1969, Chavez issued an open letter to the California Grape and Fruit Tree League. Chavez was responding to accusations that strikers were resorting to tactics of violence and terror. In his letter, Chavez, a staunch supporter of change through nonviolent civil disobedience, dispels these accusations in straightforward, powerful language. Statements from this letter are typical of statements Chavez made at numerous rallies during this fourth year of the strike.

Farm workers struggled to feed their families on extremely low wages, doing back-breaking work all day in the hot sun and living in crowded, unsanitary labor camps at night. Throughout the years, the Chavez family, like other migrant farm worker families, participated in small strikes to try to obtain higher wages. The workers learned that their only weapon was their ability to quit, to withhold labor. When their request was rejected, they would move on to find work at another farm.

In the initial organizing of the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), Chavez recruited former co-workers, such as Dolores Huerta and Gil Padilla, from the Community Service Organization (CSO). They spread out through the valley towns, establishing house meetings. Chavez, a shy, soft-spoken man, had a way of blending in with the people, listening to their concerns without trying to overpower them.

The NFWA joined the Delano grape strike on September 20, 1965. In order to harvest the crops, the farm growers brought in strikebreaking workers (scabs), many of whom were illegal aliens from Mexico. The picketers had to tolerate verbal abuse and physical threats. Convincing the strikers to maintain a nonviolent approach required constant work. Volunteers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Congress of Racial Equality, organizations associated with the civil rights movement in the South, conducted classes in nonviolent tactics.

Both the Catholic Church and the civil rights movement heavily influenced Chavez. This was especially evident in March of 1966, when Chavez led a Lenten pilgrimage from Delano, 300 miles north to Sacramento, California—a journey which was inspired by the civil rights march in Selma, Alabama. Chavez's astute use of nightly rallies and daily masses, as well as requesting food and shelter from the local farm workers, was instrumental in getting people involved in La Causa (as the movement was known). By the time marchers reached the state capital on Easter Sunday, the original group of 75 had swelled to 4,000. Using the appeals of Chicano culture and Catholicism, Chavez pulled the workers together.

In 1968, Chavez launched the consumer boycotts. Chavez's union used

# Cesar Chavez

both primary boycotts— informational picketing urging customers to avoid certain products and secondary boycotts— urging customers to avoid a whole store because it carried the offensive product. During this time, the striking workers were becoming frustrated, and incidents of violence were being reported. Chavez decided to fast in an act of penance because the union was moving towards violence. He fasted in a small storage room in a gas station at the union's headquarters. Hundreds of farm workers came to spend a day or two with Chavez and to express their solidarity. The fast became a symbol of the workers' suffering and a powerful organizing tool. The 25-day fast came to an end on March 11, 1968, in the public park in Delano. Senator Robert Kennedy was there to express his support. The fast drew significant media attention, which highlighted the union's struggle.

Consumers supported the boycott, and grape sales fell by 15 percent. In the summer of 1970, after a five-year struggle, the grape pickers union signed contracts with 85 percent of the state's table grape growers. The Bishops Farm Labor Committee, organized by the Catholic Church, served as the arbitrators for all the contracts signed between the union and the grape growers.

By 1972, the NFWA had merged with another group and joined the AFL-CIO. The United Farm Workers of America (UFW) became the new name for Chavez's union. During that year, the UFW was at the height of its power. It had 147 contracts covering 50,000 to 60,000 jobs on farms in California, Arizona, and Florida. The union had a stable membership of 30,000, with increases each spring as migrants moved into the fruit and vegetable harvests. After the assassinations of Senator Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, UFW staff retained bodyguards for Chavez and purchased attack dogs. Chavez, the UFW executive board members, and the 600 volunteers were all paid \$5.00 a week plus expenses for their work. Farm workers' wages had doubled, and they were covered by a health and welfare benefits plan.

By 1973, the UFW contracts with the grape growers were expiring. The growers, who had come to fear the strength of the UFW, began to sign contracts with the Teamsters Union. The UFW used its own money and support from the AFL-CIO to try to maintain its contracts. However, violence erupted with the Teamsters. The losses for the union were staggering— two UFW members were dead, 3,500 jailed, and dozens were injured. The UFW was left with 14 contracts, and the majority of the growers switched to the Teamsters.

Despite these losses, the United Farm Workers of America is still in existence today. Chavez remained its director until his death on April 23, 1993. During the 1980's, he employed boycotts, strikes, and fasts to call attention to the dangerous pesticides farm workers were exposed to. The passionate words of Chavez continue to ring true today, as the struggles of the migrant farm worker continue into the twenty-first century.



# Cesar Chavez

## Glossary

**migrant farm workers** - workers that travel to different areas to harvest crops at various farms; seasonal labor.

**boycott** - to refuse to buy a certain product, deal with a business or use a service to show disapproval or to force change.

**union** - an organization of workers; its leaders represent the workers' interests in bargaining with employers.

**La Causa** - literal meaning "the cause"; the name given to the farm workers' struggle

**United Farm Workers of America (UFW)** - a union for farm workers organized by Chavez; officially became the UFW in 1972 when it joined the AFL-CIO. Previously known as the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA).

## Comprehension Questions

1. What action(s) helped the migrant farm workers' problems to gain national attention? (recall)
2. Describe the character traits of Cesar Chavez. (attributes)
3. Why do you think that Chavez attended so many different elementary schools? (inference)
4. Do you think that Chavez's cause would have received as much support if the strikers had become violent? (prediction)
5. What was Chavez's main goal? What was he hoping to accomplish? (main ideas)
6. Do you think Chavez changed the lives of Mexican American farm workers? How? (evaluation)



# Cesar Chavez

## Quotes

*But they have been taught not to lie down and die nor to flee in shame, but to resist with every ounce of human endurance and spirit.*

*Time accomplishes for the poor what money does for the rich.*

*God knows that we are not beasts of burden, agricultural implements, or rent-ed slaves; we are men.*

*We are men locked in a death struggle against man's inhumanity to man.*

*This struggle itself gives meaning to our life and ennobles our dying.*

## Group Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the strategies that Chavez and his organization used to obtain support for their cause.
2. How did Chavez's religion, Catholicism, influence his work for migrant farm workers?
3. The CSO registered half a million Mexican American voters and guided 35,000 into citizenship classes and naturalization. How did these efforts by Chavez and others impact on the political power of Mexican Americans today?
4. Compare Cesar Estrada Chavez and Martin Luther King, Jr.
5. Chavez's speech says, "And this struggle itself gives meaning to our life and ennobles our dying." Discuss other times in history when people were willing to die for their cause.

## Additional Readings

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