

Cesar Chavez, 1927- 1993: He Organized the First Successful Farm Workers Union in America

Chavez used hunger strikes and other non-violent methods to improve working and living conditions for farm workers. *Transcript of radio broadcast:*
02 September 2009

VOICE ONE:

I'm Nicole Nichols.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Steve Ember with the VOA Special English program PEOPLE IN AMERICA. Today we tell about one of the great labor activists, Cesar Chavez. He organized the first successful farm workers union in American history.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Cesar Chavez was born on a small farm near Yuma, Arizona in nineteen twenty-seven. In the late nineteenth century, Cesario Chavez, Cesar's grandfather, had started the Chavez family farm after escaping slavery on a Mexican farm. Cesar Chavez spent his earliest years on this farm. When he was ten years old, however, the economic conditions of the Great Depression forced his parents to give up the family farm. He then became a migrant farm worker along with the rest of his family.



Cesar Chavez

The Chavez family joined thousands of other farm workers who traveled around the state of California to harvest crops for farm owners. They traveled from place to place to harvest grapes, lettuce, beets and many other crops. They worked very hard and received little pay. These migrant workers had no permanent homes. They lived in dirty, crowded camps. They had no bathrooms, electricity or running water. Like the Chavez family, most of them came from Mexico.

VOICE TWO:

Because his family traveled from place to place, Cesar Chavez attended more than thirty schools as a child. He learned to read and write from his grandmother.

Mama Tella also taught him about the Catholic religion. Religion later became an important tool for Mister Chavez. He used religion to organize Mexican farm workers who were Catholic.

Cesar's mother, Juana, taught him much about the importance of leading a non-violent life. His mother was one of the greatest influences on his use of non-violent methods to organize farm workers. His other influences were the Indian activist Mahatma Gandhi and American civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Junior.

Mister Chavez said his real education began when he met the Catholic leader Father Donald McDonnell. Cesar Chavez learned about the economics of farm workers from the priest. He also learned about Gandhi's nonviolent political actions as well as those of other great nonviolent leaders throughout history.

VOICE ONE:

In nineteen forty-eight, Mister Chavez married Helena Fabela whom he met while working in the grape fields in central California. They settled in Sal Si Puedes. Later, while Mister Chavez worked for little or no money to organize farm workers, his wife harvested crops. In order to support their eight children, she worked under the same bad conditions that Mister Chavez was fighting against.

There were other important influences in his life. In nineteen fifty-two, Mister Chavez met Fred Ross, an organizer with a workers' rights group called the Community Service Organization. Mister Chavez called Mister Ross the best organizer he ever met. Mister Ross explained how poor people could build power. Mister Chavez agreed to work for the Community Service Organization.

VOICE TWO:

Mister Chavez worked for the organization for about ten years. During that time, he helped more than five hundred thousand Latino citizens to vote. He also gained old-age retirement money for fifty thousand Mexican immigrants. He served as the organization's national director.



However, in nineteen sixty-two, he left the organization. He wanted to do more to help farm workers receive higher pay and better working conditions. He left his well paid job to start organizing farm workers into a union.

Mister Chavez's work affected many people. For example, the father of Mexican-American musician Zack de la Rocha spent time working as an art director for Mister Chavez. Much of the political music of de la Rocha's group, Rage Against the Machine, was about workers' rights, like this song, "Bomb Track."

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

It took Mister Chavez and Delores Huerta, another former CSO organizer, three years of hard work to build the National Farm Workers Association. Mister Chavez traveled from town to town to bring in new members. He held small meetings at workers' houses to build support. The California-based organization held its first strike in nineteen sixty-five. The National Farm Workers Association became nationally known when it supported a strike against grape growers. The group joined a strike organized by Filipino workers of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee.

Mister Chavez knew that those who acted non-violently against violent action would gain popular support. Mister Chavez asked that the strikers remain non-violent even though the farm owners and their supporters sometimes used violence.

VOICE TWO:

One month after the strike began, the group began to boycott grapes. They decided to direct their action against one company, the Schenley Corporation. The union followed grape trucks and demonstrated wherever the grapes were taken. Later, union members and Filipino workers began a twenty-five day march from Delano to Sacramento, California, to gain support for the boycott.

Schenley later signed a labor agreement with the National Farm Workers Association. It was the first such agreement between farm workers and growers in the United States.

VOICE ONE:

The union then began demonstrating against the Di Giorgio Corporation. It was one of the largest grape growers in California. Di Giorgio held a vote and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters was chosen to represent the farm workers. But an investigation proved that the company and the Teamsters had cheated in the election.



Another vote was held. Cesar Chavez agreed to combine his union with another and the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee was formed. The farm workers elected Mister Chavez's union to represent them. Di Giorgio soon signed a labor agreement with the union.

VOICE TWO:

Mister Chavez often went for long periods without food to protest the conditions under which the farm workers were forced to do their jobs. Mister Chavez went on his first hunger strike, or fast, in nineteen sixty-eight. He did not eat for

twenty-five days. He was called a hero for taking this kind of personal action to support the farm workers.

The union then took action against Giumarra Vineyards Corporation, the largest producer of table grapes in the United States. It organized a boycott against the company's products. The boycott extended to all California table grapes. By nineteen seventy, the company agreed to sign contracts. A number of other growers did as well. By this time the grape strike had lasted for five years. It was the longest strike and boycott in United States labor history. Cesar Chavez had built a nationwide coalition of support among unions, church groups, students, minorities and other Americans.

VOICE ONE:

By nineteen seventy-three, the union had changed its name to the United Farm Workers of America. It called for another national boycott against grape growers as relations again became tense. By nineteen seventy-five, a reported seventeen million Americans were refusing to buy non-union grapes. The union's hard work helped in getting the Agricultural Labor Relations Act passed in California, under Governor Jerry Brown. It was the first law in the nation that protected the rights of farm workers.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

By the nineteen eighties, the UFW had helped tens of thousands of farm workers gain higher pay, medical care, retirement benefits and better working and living conditions. But relations between workers and growers in California worsened under a new state government. Boycotts were again organized against the grape industry. In nineteen eighty-eight, at the age of sixty-one, Mister Chavez began another hunger strike. That fast lasted for thirty-six days and almost killed him. The fast was to protest the poisoning of grape workers and their children by the dangerous chemicals growers used to kill insects.



In nineteen eighty-four Cesar Chavez made this speech, predicting the future success of his efforts for Latinos.

CESAR CHAVEZ: "Like the other immigrant groups, the day will come when we win the economic and political rewards which are in keeping with our numbers in society. The day will come when the politicians will do the right thing for our people out of political necessity and not out of charity or idealism."

VOICE ONE:

Cesar Chavez died in nineteen ninety-three at the age of sixty-six. More than forty thousand people attended his funeral.

A year later, President Clinton awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the United States.

The United Farm Workers Union still fights for the rights of farm workers throughout the United States. Many schools, streets, parks, libraries and other public buildings have been named after Cesar Chavez. The great labor leader always believed in the words "Si se puede": It can be done.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

This Special English Program was written and produced by Robert Brumfield. I'm Steve Ember.

VOICE ONE:

And I'm Nicole Nichols. Join us again next week for another PEOPLE IN AMERICA program on the Voice of America.