

César Chávez

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From dawn to dusk
Picked in the fields
For a pittance an hour (1)
There was César (2)

Led migrant farm workers to organize (3)
Built the UFW (4)
Union solidarity (5)
Made the wages go up (6)

His strategy
Was nonviolence
Hunger strike for 25 days (7)
Followed Gandhi's nonviolent ways (8)

Born 1927
Died 1993 (9)
Farm worker labor leader
Civil rights activist
There was César

Notes

1) Pittance an Hour: Before Chávez's unionization campaign, the average farm worker earned \$1.62 per hour, a subsistence wage which had to carry migrant farm families beyond the harvest season, when there would be no work.

2) There was Cesar: Chávez's grandfather escaped slavery in Mexico and settled in Arizona, where César was born in 1927. In the late 1930s, Cesar's family moved to California where they joined thousands of other Mexican-American migrant farm workers. César Chávez was a tireless grassroots organizer, beloved by the farm workers for his humility, humor and success organizing workers and bargaining for improvements.

3) Organize: The grassroots approach formulated by labor activist Saul Alinsky was a primary influence on Chávez’s strategy and tactics. Essentially, he believed the union and decision making had to be the province of workers themselves, not paid union administrators. Chávez resisted the efforts of the more established Teamsters organization to swallow the UFW just as he resisted the efforts of leftist organizers to radicalize the union.

4) UFW: In 1962 Chávez and Dolores Huerta founded the National Farm Workers Association, later renamed the United Farm Workers (UFW). The union helped to establish work agreements through collective bargaining for over 70,000 workers.

5) Solidarity: Chávez worked hard to maintain unity among workers, even when there were serious disagreements over strategy and tactics. A great challenge was the historic distrust between Mexicans and Filipinos, the two largest ethnic groups among seasonal farm workers. Chávez was wary of the concept of “La Raza” (Hispanic pride) because he felt it implicitly put down Filipino-Americans and others. Speaking to biographer Peter Mathiesson, Chávez explained: “Some people don’t look at it as discrimination, but when you say La Raza you are saying an antigringo (white) thing, and our fear is it won’t stop there. Today it’s anti-gringo, tomorrow it will be anti-negro, and the day after it will be anti-Filipino, anti-Puerto Rican. And then it will be anti-poor Mexican, and anti-darker-skinned Mexican. . . . On discrimination, I don’t even give the (union) members the privilege of a vote, and I’m not ashamed of it” (*Sal Si Puede*, p. 143) Chávez also reached out to the general public, seeking support for the moral cause of the seasonal farm workers. One of his greatest successes was the 16-year “Wrath of Grapes” boycott. Started in 1984, this was the UFW’s third action against the table grape industry and a model of cooperation between unions and the general public. An estimated 14 million Americans stopped eating grapes, forcing California’s growers to the bargaining table.

6) Wages Up: The amount varied from contract to contract, but the UFW brought higher wages and improved work conditions to farm workers throughout the United States. In California, farm workers won the right to organize and receive unemployment insurance. They achieve work condition improvements such as toilets and cold drinking water in the fields.

7) Hunger Fast: In 1968 Chávez went on a 25-day fast to protest conditions for workers in the fields, but also as a form of penitence for growing elements within his own union which were turning away from Chávez’s commitment to nonviolence. Chávez took in only water and communion, arousing concern from his supporters and sympathetic political leaders such as Robert F. Kennedy, who met with Chávez on the final day of the fast. Chávez fasted for 24 days in 1972, and again for 36 days in 1988.

8) Nonviolence: Chávez believed in nonviolence as a matter of principle and also saw peaceful activism as an agent of change. He described his influences to a biographer: “I didn’t know much about it (nonviolence), so I read everything I could get my hands on, Gandhi, and I read some of the things he had read, and I read Thoreau, which I liked very much. But I couldn’t really understand Gandhi until I was actually in the (25 day water only) fast.” (*Sal Si Puede*, p.187) Gandhi summarized his own non-violent philosophy as follows: “Every enemy is a human being--even the worst of them. And he believes he is right and you are a beast. And if you beat him over the head you will only convince him. But you suffer, to show him that he is wrong, your sacrifice creates an atmosphere of understanding--if not with him, then in the hearts of the rest of the community on whom he depends.”

9) Born-Died: Chávez died in 1993 of natural causes. His birthday, March 31, was recognized as a federal commemorative holiday in 2014.