

# Activist and Labor Organizer: Cesar Chavez

By Cesar Chavez Foundation, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.09.16

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Farm labor leader Cesar Chavez pickets outside the San Diego headquarters of Safeway markets in protest over the arrest of 29 persons at a Delano, California, Safeway. Bettmann/Contributor

**Synopsis:** Born near Yuma, Arizona, in 1927, Cesar Chavez employed nonviolent means to bring attention to the plight of farmworkers. Along with Dolores Huerta, he co-founded the National Farm Workers Association, which later became United Farm Workers. As a labor leader, Chavez led marches and protests and went on several hunger strikes. He passed away in 1993, in San Luis, Arizona. Senator Robert Kennedy described Cesar Chavez as "one of the heroic figures of our time."

## Life As A Migrant Farmworker

A first-generation American, Cesar Chavez was born on March 31, 1927, outside Yuma, Arizona. At age 11, his family lost their farm during the Great Depression and became migrant farmworkers. Chavez traveled throughout California laboring in the fields, where he was exposed to the hardships and injustices of farmworker life.

Chavez finished his formal education after the eighth grade and worked the fields full-time to help support his family.

Chavez joined the U.S. Navy in 1946 and served in the Pacific. He returned from the service in 1948 and married Helen Fabela, whom he met while working in the fields and vineyards in California. Together, they settled in the East San Jose neighborhood of Sal Si Puedes ("Get Out if You Can"), and had eight children, later enjoying 31 grandchildren.

### **Establishing The UFW**

Chavez's community organizing career began in 1952 at the Community Service Organization (CSO), the most prominent Latino civil rights group of its time. Chavez spent 10 years with CSO, coordinating voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives and leading campaigns against racial and economic discrimination. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, he served as CSO's staff director.



Yet Chavez's dream was to organize a union that would protect and serve the farmworkers whose poverty and powerlessness he had experienced. He also realized that the only thing holding him back from trying to organize farmworkers was his financial security. In 1962, at the age of 35, he had his first steady job.

But he also understood the cycle of poverty that had trapped farmworkers for generations.

So in 1962, Chavez resigned from CSO, leaving the first decent-paying job he had ever had. With \$1,200 in life savings he founded the National Farm Workers Association with 10 members — himself, his wife Helen, and their eight young children. The group later became the United Farm Workers of America (UFW).

The Chavez family moved to Delano, California, a dusty little farm town in California's Central Valley.

Chavez traveled to other farm towns, trying to recruit workers into his infant union. It was a tough sell at first, and he would often talk to 100 workers before finding one or two who weren't afraid to join.

### **Nonviolent Protests On Behalf Of Farmworkers**

When Cesar Chavez began building the farmworker movement 50 years ago, he simply wanted to build a strong union. He soon realized it would require a larger movement to overcome the burdens of poverty, discrimination and powerlessness. Chavez began a burial program, the first credit union for farmworkers, health clinics, daycare centers and job-training programs. With the help of the movement, he also built affordable housing.

From Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Chavez adopted historic methods and tactics that were new to organized labor. He demanded farmworkers stick to a pledge of nonviolence. This different vision of organizing people sparked opposition from within the UFW. Some strikers and staff left the union during Chavez's 25-day fast for nonviolence, but he prevailed. Senator Robert Kennedy came to Delano as the fast ended and called Chavez "one of the heroic figures of our time."

Chavez used nonviolence to win disputes with management. Millions of people across North America rallied to the farmworkers' cause, boycotting grapes and other products. By refusing to buy grapes, they forced growers to bargain union contracts and agree to California's pioneering farm labor law in 1975.

### **UFW's Most Important Accomplishments**

Under Chavez, the UFW achieved huge gains for farmworkers, establishing it as the first successful farmworkers union in American history.

The group helped win the first union contracts requiring rest periods, toilets in the fields and clean drinking water. Other contracts banned sexual harassment of women workers and prohibited pesticide spraying while workers were in the fields. The UFW also won the first comprehensive union medical benefits for farmworkers and their families.

Because of Chavez and millions of Americans who supported farmworkers by boycotting grapes and other products, California passed the historic Agricultural Labor Relations Act of 1975. It was the nation's first and only law guaranteeing farmworkers the right to organize.

### **Death And Legacy**

Chavez died in his sleep on April 23, 1993, in the small farmworker town of San Luis, Arizona. More than 50,000 people attended his funeral.

Chavez's motto, "Si se puede!" ("Yes, it can be done!"), coined during his 1972 fast in Arizona, embodies the uncommon legacy he left for people around the world. His birthday, March 31, is an official holiday in 10 states. In 1994, President Bill Clinton posthumously awarded Chavez the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, at the White House.

Chavez liked to say that his job as an organizer was helping ordinary people do extraordinary things. He gave people the faith to believe in themselves, even if they were poor and unable to receive the best education. Chavez succeeded where many others failed for 100 years to organize farmworkers.