CESAR CHAVEZ

Mexican-American Cesar Chavez (1927-1993) was a prominent union leader and labor organizer. Hardened by his early experience as a migrant worker, Chavez founded the National Farm Workers Association in 1962. His union joined with the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee in its first strike against grape growers in California, and the two organizations later merged to become the United Farm Workers. Stressing nonviolent methods, Chavez drew attention for his causes via boycotts, marches and hunger strikes. Despite conflicts with the Teamsters union and legal barriers, he was able to secure raises and improve conditions for farm workers in California, Texas, Arizona and Florida.

Born in Yuma, [Arizona](http://www.history.com/topics/us-states/arizona), to immigrant parents, Chavez moved to [California](http://www.history.com/topics/us-states/california) with his family in 1939. For the next ten years, they moved up and down the state working in the fields. During this period Chavez encountered the conditions that he would dedicate his life to changing: wretched migrant camps, corrupt labor contractors, meager wages for backbreaking work, bitter racism.

His introduction to labor organizing began in 1952 when he met Father Donald McDonnell, an activist Catholic priest, and Fred Ross, an organizer with the Community Service Organization, who recruited Chavez to join his group. Within a few years Chavez had become national director, but in 1962 resigned to devote his energies to organizing a union for farm workers.

A major turning point came in September 1965 when the fledgling Farm Workers Association voted to join a strike that had been initiated by Filipino farm workers in Delano’s grape fields. Within months Chavez and his union became nationally known. Chavez’s drawing on the imagery of the civil rights movement, his insistence on nonviolence, his reliance on volunteers from urban universities and religious organizations, his alliance with organized labor, and his use of mass mobilizing techniques such as a famous march on Sacramento in 1966 brought the grape strike and consumer boycott into the national consciousness. The boycott in particular was responsible for pressuring the growers to recognize the United Farm Workers (*ufw*; renamed after the union joined the *afl-cio*). The first contracts were signed in 1966, but were followed by more years of strife. In 1968 Chavez went on a fast for twenty-five days to protest the increasing advocacy of violence within the union. Victory came finally on July 29, 1970, when twenty-six Delano growers formally signed contracts recognizing the *ufw* and bringing peace to the vineyards.

That same year the Teamsters’ union challenged the *ufw* in the Salinas valley by signing sweetheart contracts with the growers there. Thus, began a bloody four-year struggle. Finally, in 1973, the Teamsters signed a jurisdictional agreement that temporarily ended the strife.

Believing that the only permanent solution to the problems of farm workers lay in legislation, Chavez supported the passage of California’s Agricultural Labor Relations Act (the first of its kind in the nation), which promised to end the cycle of misery and exploitation and ensure justice for the workers. These promises, however, proved to be short-lived as grower opposition and a series of hostile governors undercut the effectiveness of the law.

After 1976 Chavez led the union through a major reorganization, intended to improve efficiency and outreach to the public. In 1984 in response to the grape industry’s refusal to control the use of pesticides on its crops, Chavez inaugurated an international boycott of table grapes.

For thirty years Chavez tenaciously devoted himself to the problems of some of the poorest workers in America. The movement he inspired succeeded in raising salaries and improving working conditions for farm workers in California, [Texas](http://www.history.com/topics/us-states/texas), Arizona, and [Florida](http://www.history.com/topics/us-states/florida).