

# Viva La Causa!

An NALC member recalls his time with Cesar Chavez



Newspaper clippings and pictures from Ryan's time with the UFW



**L**ike many letter carriers, Jerry Ryan has proven his commitment to working people and the labor movement. But he did it years before he joined the National Association of Letter Carriers, by confronting bitter cold, hunger strikes, angry mobs and unsympathetic judges as an activist for farm workers.

On his first day volunteering for the United Farm Workers (UFW), Ryan learned what he was getting himself into. "We were peacefully picketing, and this guy is about to put his boot in my groin," recalls Ryan. "The last thing I'm thinking about is jail or a fight."

It was 1971, and Ryan was on his first picket line. The Kansas college student had gone to Colorado during summer vacation to help UFW founder and leader Cesar Chavez win union representation for grape pickers and other seasonal farm workers in the state.

The local sheriff came to the scene—but instead of arresting his assailant, the sheriff handcuffed Ryan





Cesar Chavez

and other picketers and sped them off to jail.

"That's when I thought, 'there's something wrong with this picture,'" said Ryan, who is now president of NALC San Bernardino, CA Branch 411.

His arrest that summer was a personal shock to Ryan, a white "scrawny kid" from a middle-class background. In his world, "if you got a parking ticket, you were frowned upon. All of a sudden, I'm in jail."

As Ryan quickly learned, the system was stacked against the seasonal workers who picked grapes, lettuce and other fruits and vegetables. In a classic company town arrangement, the growers frequently owned and operated everything, from the houses or camps the workers lived in to the stores where they shopped. The local police, judges and politicians were often hostile to labor. For the workers, speaking out meant risking everything they had.

"The workers were always subject to eviction since the shacks they called home were owned by their bosses, the grape growers," Ryan said.

What started as a summer diversion ended up as a seven-year battle for the rights of agricultural workers. Instead of going back to college, Ryan stayed on and worked closely with Chavez, organizing strikes, boycotts and protests in Colorado and California. He earned the same "striker's wages" that workers on strike received from the UFW—room, board and five dollars a week. He would be arrested about 20 times, though the charges never stuck.

Like many young people at the time, Ryan felt a strong desire to get personally involved in a movement for justice. He had inherited a union activism streak from his father, a letter carrier who had once mailed a 4x8-foot plywood panel to Congress as a "letter" asking for better wages for postal workers. He was shocked by the way the process was stacked against farm workers, as he learned with his arrest that first day on the picket line. "It was not just about justice, but the re-action to trying to achieve justice," he said. "What's going on here?"

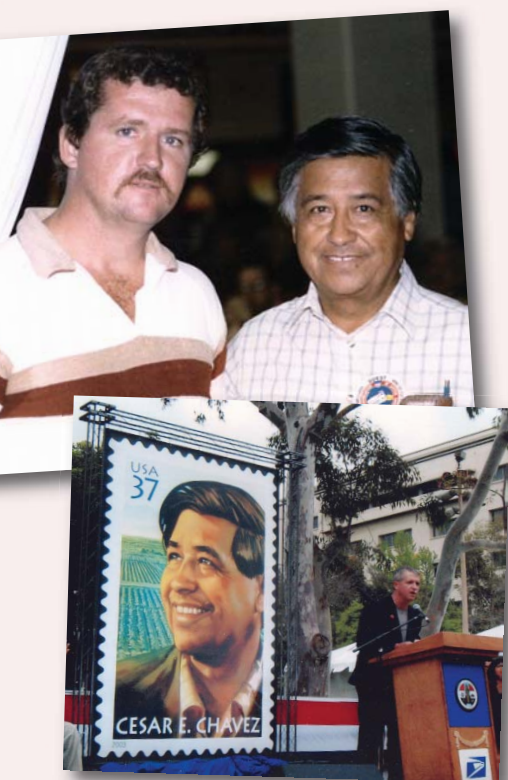
### **Sí, se puede**

Cesar Chavez, a migrant farm worker with an eighth grade education, founded in 1962 the National Farm Workers Association, which later became the UFW. His tireless efforts to win union representation for farm workers, who had been left out of Depression-era laws giving workers the right to organize, involved a new kind of "community organizing" that helped farm workers with every aspect of their lives so they could gather the power and courage to challenge the overwhelming odds. Chavez rallied them with his slogan "*sí, se puede*" ("yes, it can be done").

Chavez framed the movement as much more than a struggle for better wages and working conditions on the job. He made it into a battle for justice







Top: Ryan with Chavez at the 1986 NALC Convention in St. Paul.

Above: Ryan talks at the stamp dedication to honor Chavez held by the Postal Service in 2002.

Below and opposite page: More of Ryan's photos and newspaper clippings from his time working with the UFW.



and dignity and teamed with civil rights leaders to transform the movement's message and tactics. Chavez named his campaign for farm workers "*La Causa*" ("The Cause") and turned a regional labor-management struggle into a national movement that appealed to the nation's conscience.

Like many civil rights leaders of the time, Chavez adopted non-violence as a guiding principle.

"Cesar Chavez was an incredible human being with limitless personal strengths and skills," Ryan said. "He became renowned for his commitment to achieve justice through non-violence, which takes a lot more effort and perseverance than violence."

During his years with Chavez, the anti-union forces often tested this commitment to non-violence. "We were cursed at, spit upon, physically beaten, jailed and finally five of us were killed—one run over by a scab truck driver, one clubbed over the head, one shot in the head, another shot in the heart and finally, one shot right in the face. All without a single conviction," Ryan said. "It's pretty hard to remain non-violent in times like that."

But Chavez stuck to his convictions. "He knew the rich land barons and their powerful allies would prevail in a violent battle," Ryan said. "Violent victories are temporary victories. Non-violent struggles live on as long as the injustice exists."

Along with non-violence, Chavez adopted the hunger strike from the civil rights movement, going on several fasts throughout his life. Ryan also staged a hunger strike, and it became one of his most challenging moments.

### Days of hunger

In the bitter cold Colorado winter of 1975, the UFW had organized a

boycott of Gallo Wine after the company refused to allow workers to elect a union of their choice. One Gallo wine outlet in Denver eagerly bucked the boycott, placing full-page newspaper ads encouraging sales of Gallo products, while the Gallo company ran ads full of distortions about the struggle for workers' rights.

"We didn't have the money to put an ad in the paper to counter all the lies they were telling," Ryan said. "We had to be creative." Ryan, who by that time was the UFW's Colorado coordinator, fasted for 15 days in front of the store. He walked the picket lines through the snow by day and slept in a freezing trailer parked in front of the store at night.

Though he said he wasn't the best choice for a hunger striker—"I'm a guy who likes to eat"—Ryan prevailed. He lost 20 pounds; the store went out of business.

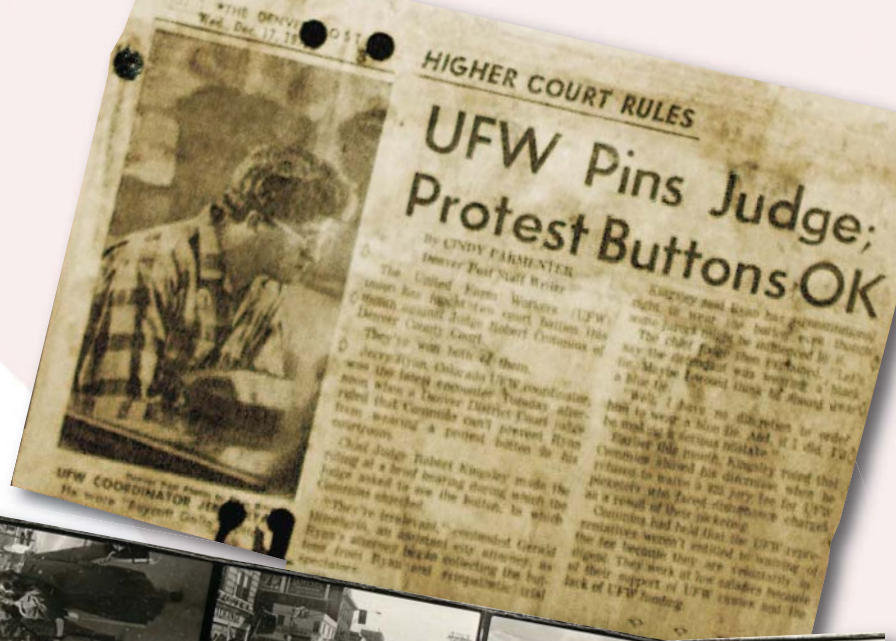
Ryan's defiant streak helped get him through times like his hunger strike. On another picket line, the police arrested him, though the event was peaceful. When he came before a judge, he refused an order to remove a "Boycott Gallo" button he was wearing in the courtroom.

"I didn't know much about hell freezing over," said Ryan, "but I damn well knew the union button was staying." The judge slammed down his gavel, and off to jail Ryan went for contempt of court.

A superior judge soon released him, chastising the first judge for the contempt charge. The incident generated a flurry of local news stories, spreading awareness of the boycott. When Ryan went back to court on the original charges, he greeted the judge wearing a UFW button again—along with dozens of supporters showing their solidarity by wearing the button in the courtroom.

In 1975, Ryan shifted his work to the Coachella Valley in California, where some grape growers had tried to avoid the UFW by signing "sweetheart" deals with the Teamsters, a union the workers had not elected to represent them. In response, the California legislature adopted the Agricultural Workers Relations Act, which finally gave farm workers the right to elect their own





unions—though landowners still resisted and the violence continued.

He recalls Chavez's ability to rally workers despite the overwhelming odds.

"I remember driving him to a 3 a.m. rally that I had organized in Coachella Valley's grape fields during a critical union election certification drive. I really didn't know how many farm workers, if any at all, would even show up that early before another long, hot, work day. But Cesar never doubted it," Ryan said.

"As we pulled into the dusty farm labor camp before dawn, there were hundreds of farm workers in car caravan already there waiting for us. As Cesar jumped on top of the car hood to greet the workers, they shouted in unison, '*Viva Cesar Chavez! Viva la union!*' and the rally was on."

As some California growers and their allies continued to meet the workers with resistance and violence, sympathy for the workers grew. A 1975 nationwide poll revealed that about 17 million Americans were boycotting grapes. Chavez was succeeding in making *La Causa* a nationwide struggle.

## A new direction

By 1977, Ryan was ready to leave the UFW. He had done more than his share for the workers. He had also found a new interest—a pretty young grape worker named Guillermina. To

get closer to her and save money for his plan to propose marriage, Ryan gave up the union activism and went to work in the fields for two growing seasons with the workers he had fought for. To save money on rent, he lived in a farm labor camp. He slept on the cots and used the dirty showers to wash off the sweat and dust.

After he married Guillermina, Ryan found that he needed more money and a steady job to raise a family, so he followed in his father's footsteps, becoming a carrier in 1979. His experience with the UFW carried over to the NALC.

"It's the same principle," said Ryan. "It's just the conditions were much, much worse than we've ever faced as letter carriers, even back in the '70s. But a lot of the techniques that were used out there are the same. You come together for all, for the collective good."

Among his responsibilities as president of Branch 411, a job he has held since 1996, is explaining to new hires the importance of joining the union. "That's a piece of cake for me."

And Ryan's plans for retirement? He wants to go back to work for the UFW.

Chavez died in 1993. The Postal Service issued a commemorative stamp with his image in 2002. His birthday, March 31, is a holiday in California and seven other states. ☒