

César Chávez

Fighting for the rights of farm workers

¡Sí, se puede!
Yes, we can!

With this slogan, César Chávez inspired millions of farm workers to stand up for their rights when it seemed everyone else had forgotten these laborers.

Born outside Yuma, AZ, in 1927 on his family's farm, Chávez experienced the heartbreak of the Great Depression as a child, when his family lost their farm and were forced to become migrant workers on farms in southern California. Chávez began working in the fields after completing eighth grade.

Experiencing the backbreaking work, harsh conditions and low pay of transient farm work, Chávez yearned to make things better for his fellow workers. Farm workers had been left out of many laws—including the National Labor Relations Act that protected collective-bargaining rights for most other workers—even though farm laborers faced some of the toughest work conditions in the country.

He often spoke of the disconnect between America's abundant food supply and the workers who made it happen: "It's ironic that those who till the soil, cultivate and harvest the fruits, vegetables and other foods that fill your tables with abundance have nothing left for themselves."

Chávez began his activism working for the Community Service Organization (CSO), a prominent Latino civil rights organization in California. There, he helped organize voter registration drives and anti-discrimination campaigns. The CSO often worked in tandem with groups advocating for the

many Filipino farm workers who toiled on California farms alongside Latinos. Chávez was inspired by activists in the civil rights movement, including the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and learned from their tactics.

Shifting his attention solely to farm workers, Chávez left the CSO and founded the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) in 1962, which later became the United Farm Workers of America union (UFW). He named the campaign "*La Causa*" (The Cause) and rallied supporters with the slogan "*¡Sí, se puede!*" (Yes, we can!).

Joining forces with other prominent activists, including Dolores Huerta and Larry Itliong, Chávez organized marches and demonstrations in California and nearby states to enlighten others about the cause. But he knew that wouldn't be enough, so NFWA turned to strikes and boycotts of California-grown produce to put pressure on farmers to meet the union's demands. Inspired by Indian independence leader Mahatma Gandhi, Chávez also used hunger strikes to further the cause.

In 1965, NFWA joined a Filipino-led strike against grape growers centered in Delano, CA. The Delano effort included a boycott of grapes, a successful effort to convince union longshoremens to refuse to load grapes on ships for export, as well as a march by striking workers from Delano to the



Chavez in front of a strike sign

state capitol in Sacramento, a 280-mile journey on foot.

Chávez knew that the key to victory was persistence, and the campaign stretched on for five years. A few years into the strike, some desperate striking workers began talking about turning to violence, but Chávez knew that would backfire. As Gandhi had done, Chávez fasted to prevent violence. He began a hunger strike in February 1968 as a way to rededicate the movement to nonviolence. His fast was part penitence for those who considered engaging in violence, part sacrifice as leader of the movement willing to give his life for it, and part example that there were better ways to win than with violence. He went without food for 25 days, only drinking water. The fast was effective; talk of violence subsided.

By 1970, the struggle over the Delano grape fields was a success, and workers gained union contracts that increased their pay and bettered their working conditions.

While farm workers formed the heart of the movement, some activists

came from elsewhere to help, including a young **Jerry Ryan**, who would later serve as president of NALC's San Bernadino, CA Branch 411. At the time, Ryan dropped out of college and participated in UFW marches, demonstrations and hunger strikes—being arrested or attacked numerous times—for seven years before joining the Postal Service.

Ryan recalled the spirit of strength that Chávez brought to farm workers who weren't used to having power over their own destiny. At the start of a union organizing drive, he said, "As we pulled into the dusty farm labor camp before dawn, there were hundreds of farm workers in a car caravan already there waiting for us. As César jumped on top of the car hood to greet the workers, they shouted in unison, '*Viva César Chávez! Viva la union!*' and the rally was on."

To read Ryan's story, see the January 2011 issue of *The Postal Record*, available at nalc.org/news/the-postal-record/2011/january-2011/document/0111-chavez.pdf.

The NFWA, which later merged with another group to become the UFW in 1966, took its campaigns to many other states, helping to organize farm workers across the country. Though they often faced threats and even physical attacks, the activists stuck to the principle of non-violence.

Though the UFW's struggle to win union contracts for farm workers in California succeeded at many farms, Chávez wasn't finished. He led a struggle to convince California's legislature to legally recognize collective-bargaining rights for the state's farm workers. The effort led to the passage of the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act of 1975. Since federal labor law

had left farm workers out in the cold, this law became the first in the nation to grant collective-bargaining rights for farm workers.

Chávez died in 1993, not far from the family farm where he was born. He was buried next to the headquarters of his movement near Keene, CA, now part of the National Chávez Center and the César E. Chávez National Monument.

In 2002, the Postal Service issued a commemorative stamp with his image. His birthday, March 31, is a holiday in California and seven other states.

Reflecting on his legacy in 1984, Chávez said:

All my life, I have been driven by one dream, one goal, one vision: To overthrow a farm labor system in this nation which treats farm workers as if they were not important human beings. Farm workers are not agricultural implements. They are not beasts of burden—to be used and discarded. That dream was born in my youth. It was nurtured in my early days of organizing. It has flourished. It has been attacked. I'm not very different from anyone else who has ever tried to accomplish something with his life. My motivation comes from my personal life—from watching what my mother and father went through when I was growing up; from what we experienced as migrant farm workers in California. That dream, that vision, grew from my own experience with racism, with hope, with the desire to be treated fairly and to see my people treated as human beings and not as chattel. **PR**



Chavez later in life