

Cesar Chavez and the Organized Labor Movement

The labor movement of earlier generations was reignited in part by the **United Farm Workers** (UFW), led by a labor union activist **Cesar Chavez**. He was committed to non-violent change and justice, inspired by **Martin Luther King Jr.** and **Mahatma Gandhi**. Chavez worked to organize Mexican American farm workers in California, 1965, advocating for better wages, safer working conditions, and less exposure to pesticides.

An impediment to their cause was the **National Labor Relations Act of 1935**, a federal law which did not protect farm workers. This meant that it was up to the farm owners to recognize the UFW union as a bargaining agent. Chavez and his supporters implemented work stoppages and national boycotts against lettuce, table grapes, and wine to promote their message and gain support for the protection of farm workers.

Chavez was born to Mexican immigrants in 1927. His family moved from Arizona to California in search of migrant laborer jobs. After serving in the U.S. Navy during World War II, Chavez returned home to California where he first experienced working with striking agricultural workers at the **Community Service Organization**. He went on to form the **National Farm Workers Association** (NFWA) in 1962.

In 1965, the NFWA received national attention because of the Delano grape strike. The strike involved workers from the **Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee** (AWOC) who walked off their jobs at grape farms, demanding that their wages be equal to the federal minimum wage. When the NFWA joined the strike, Chavez expressed the workers' goals in a document called the **Plan of Delano** consisting of six main propositions.

1. Chavez begins by defining the movement as a "social movement," one in which the workers seek their "God-given rights as human beings."
2. The workers seek the support of the federal government and political groups. Chavez writes that legislators could have helped the workers, but instead chose to support farm owners. Chavez lists starvation wages, forced migration, sickness, illiteracy, and sub-human living conditions as just some of the effects of a system unfairly skewed against the workers.
3. Chavez would like the support of the Catholic Church, reminding the church that the workers carry images of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico. He also quotes nineteenth century Pope Leo XIII, "Everyone's first duty is to protect the workers from the greed of speculators who use human beings as instruments to provide themselves with money. It is neither just nor human to oppress men with excessive work to the point where their minds become enfeebled and their bodies worn out."

4. Chavez describes the suffering, poverty, and misery of agricultural workers, pointing out that the government protects the wealthy at the expense of the poor.
5. Unity of all farm workers is crucial, no matter what their ethnic background may be. Chavez mentions the tactic some employers have used to divide the farm workers – offering them non-union contracts. Chavez stresses the need for union-negotiated contracts, as only through collective bargaining would real change happen.
6. Finally, Chavez reiterates the workers' intent to strike and not give up the fight. He terms the movement a revolution, referring to the **Mexican Revolution** of 1910-1920 where poor people also sought basic human rights.

With the release of the Plan of Delano, Chavez quickly became a popular public speaker, inspiring under-represented and oppressed farm workers, both Latino and non-Latino alike. His next move was to lead protesters in an historic 340 mile-march from Delano, California to the state capital of Sacramento. The national attention received by the strikers ultimately pressured the farm into owners conceding to the strikers demands.

Chavez also used hunger strikes and fasting as tools for protest. For three years, the UFW had been engaged with grape growers to sign contracts with the union. The strike gradually turned violent, with sheriffs and teamsters beating farm workers during strikes. Frustrated and impatient, many farm workers began to tire of Chavez's insistence on non-violence. In an effort to diffuse the situation on both sides, Chavez engaged in a twenty five day hunger strike in 1968 to emphasize the importance of non-violence in order to achieve real, lasting change. Of his fast, Chavez wrote: "There was demoralization in the ranks, people becoming desperate, more and more talk about violence. People meant it, even when they talked to me. [The farm workers] would say, "Hey, we've got to burn those sons of bitches down. We've got to kill a few of them." . . . I thought I had to bring the Movement to a halt, do something that would force them and me to deal with the whole question of violence and ourselves. We had to stop long enough to take account of what we were doing. So I stopped eating." On the day that he broke his fast,



Robert F. Kennedy (left) and Cesar Chavez (right), Getty Images

Chavez was joined by thousands of supporters, including Senator **Robert F. Kennedy**, to celebrate Catholic mass and break bread. He would later write:

On the day I broke my fast, I was pretty much out of it, I was so weak. We had a mass at the county park. . . . At the park I was so much out of it, all I felt was a lot of people pushing and trying to get closer to the altar. It was hot. I remember arriving, a lot of people trying to say hello, trying to hug me while I was being held up because my legs were so weak. The mass was said by many priests, and many nuns came to distribute the bread. I couldn't see the crowd because I was sitting down. . . . Because I was too weak, I couldn't even speak my thanks, but Jim Drake [Chavez's union aide] expressed my thoughts which I had put down earlier. "Our struggle is not easy. Those who oppose our cause are rich and powerful, and they have many allies in high places. We are poor. Our allies are few. But we have something the rich do not own. We have our own bodies and spirits and the justice of our cause as our weapons.

Indian political and spiritual leader **Mahatma Gandhi** was one of his role models, Gandhi's autobiography *The Story of My Experiments With Truth* opened Chavez's mind to the possibilities of non-violent resistance, including hunger strikes. Of Gandhi, Chavez wrote, "The message for me is that of his non-violence and the fact that he was a doer. He made things happen . . . I lose faith in someone who doesn't continue a project, who starts something and then leaves it. The world is full of us quitters. Even if Gandhi had not liberated India, he stayed with the project all his life. And that is my great attraction. He just didn't give up." After Chavez undertook his twenty-five day fast, he explained the need for his fast and the movement's non-violent philosophies: "Knowing of Gandhi's admonition that fasting is the last resort in the place of the sword, during a most critical time in our movement last February, I undertook a 25-day fast. I repeat to you the principle enunciated to the membership at the start of the fast: "If to build our union required the deliberate taking of life, either the life of a grower or his child or the life of a farm worker or his child then I would choose not to see the union built." Gandhi's peaceful ways provided Chavez with inspiration and motivation to work toward non-violent social change throughout his life.

Another important role model for Chavez was civil rights leader **Martin Luther King Jr.** King also advocated for non-violent social change, explaining why in his famous 1963 "[Letter from Birmingham Jail](#)": "You may well ask, why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, etc.? Isn't negotiation a better path? You are exactly right in your call for negotiation. Indeed, this is the purpose of direct action. Non-violent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored."

In fact, during his twenty five day fast in 1968, Chavez received a telegram from King that read: ““I am deeply moved by your courage in fasting as your personal sacrifice for justice through non-violence. Your past and present commitment is eloquent testimony to the constructive power of non-violent action and the destructive impotence of violent reprisal. Your stand is a living example of the Gandhian tradition with its great force for social progress and its healing spiritual powers.” The telegram was received just one month before King’s assassination.

Glossary

Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee: (AWOC) a primarily Filipino workers’ rights organization, AWOC merged with the NFWA in 1966 to form the United Farm Workers.

Cesar Chavez: (1927-1993) union leader and labor organizer. Founder of the NFWA (later the UFW), Chavez advocated for farm workers’ rights and employed Gandhi’s tradition of peaceful, non-violent social change.

Community Service Organization: a California-based Latino civil rights organization. Most well-known for providing Cesar Chavez his first foray into civil rights.

La Causa: Spanish for “The Cause.” A term associated with the Chicano civil rights movement.

Letter from Birmingham Jail: (1963) authored by Martin Luther King Jr., the letter was written during King’s stint in a Birmingham, Alabama jail. It defends the civil rights movement’s use of non-violent resistance to racism.

Mahatma Gandhi: (1869-1948) Indian political and spiritual leader during India’s struggle for independence from Great Britain. Known for his peaceful, passive, non-violent forms of protest.

Martin Luther King Jr.: (1929-1968) African American civil rights leader and Baptist minister, who rose to prominence fighting the segregation of public transportation. He was an active supporter of Gandhi’s method of peaceful, non-violent social change.

Mexican Revolution: (1910-1920) an armed struggle that began in 1910, ended dictatorship in Mexico and established a constitutional republic. Groups led by revolutionaries Francisco Madero, Pascual Orozco, Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, participated in the long and costly conflict.

National Farm Workers Association: (NFWA) led by Cesar Chavez, the NFWA merged with its primarily Filipino counterpart, AWOC, to form the United Farm Workers.

National Labor Relations Act of 1935: (also known as the Wagner Act) a U.S. labor law which established legal rights for most workers, excluding farm workers and domestic workers.

Plan of Delano: The title alludes to the early twentieth century Mexican revolutionary hero Emiliano Zapata. His statement of goals was called "*Plan de Ayala.*"

Robert F. Kennedy: (1925-1968) United States Senator, advocate for civil rights. Kennedy joined Chavez at the end of his 1968 fast in support of the movement.

United Farm Workers: (UFW) a labor union of farm workers in the United States. As a result of the commonality of goals between the AWOC and the NFWA, and after a series of strikes in 1965, the groups united to form the UFW in 1966.