

Chávez, César Estrada (31 Mar. 1927-23 Apr. 1993), labor leader and social activist, was born in North Gila Valley, near Yuma, Arizona, the son of Librado Chávez and Juana Estrada. In 1888 two-year-old Librado, his siblings, and his mother immigrated to the Arizona territory to join his father, who had fled the harshness of life at Hacienda del Carmen in Porfirian, Mexico. Juana Estrada, also a native of Chihuahua, married Librado in 1924, and soon after the couple purchased a small grocery/garage/pool hall not far from his parents' 160-acre ranch and raised six children. After losing their property during the depression, the family soon joined the migrant harvest circuit.

Dramatic changes in the family's social and economic position from his youth in predepression Arizona to the migrant worker experience in California of the late 1930s were seared into César Chávez's consciousness. Regular attendance at Laguna School outside Yuma, mixed with farm chores shared with siblings, was replaced by half-days and repeated absences in some thirty schools in California's fertile valleys. The rhythm of migrant life determined the family's residences and access to education.

Most winters were spent in the Imperial Valley just over the California-Arizona border, bunching carrots and picking mustard greens and peas. After that there was work in cabbage, lettuce, and broccoli, followed by cantaloupes and watermelons in spring. In late May the Chávez family traveled to Oxnard for beans, to Beaumont for cherries, or to Moorepark and San Jose for apricots. During early summer they turned their hands to picking lima beans, corn, and chili peppers or to topping sugar beets in the Sacramento Valley. In August, grapes, prunes, cucumbers, and tomatoes needed tending in the Fresno area. From October through Christmas the cotton harvest occupied them in the San Joaquin Valley. The annual routine began anew with their return to their Brawley base in the Imperial Valley. His mother's Mexican Catholicism sustained the family during difficult times of little or no work and impelled them to share with others in times of good harvest. Faced with his elderly parents' decline and his father's injury in an auto accident, Chávez ended his formal education with graduation from eighth grade at age fifteen in 1942. Not long after, he joined the U.S. Navy for a two-year stint, mustering out soon after the war ended.

Like many returning Mexican-American veterans, Chávez married. In 1948 he wed Brawley-born Helen Fabela, whose farm worker family had settled in Delano, California. Reflecting the high postwar birth rate, the couple had eight children between 1949 and 1959. With a growing family to support, Chávez returned to the migrant life, traveling up and down the state with his parents, his young bride, and their children. The Chávés might have continued with this annual migration had it not been for another postwar trend among the newly politicized ethnic and racial communities during the 1950s: founding and joining organizations dedicated to challenging injustice and prejudice exacerbated by wartime social tensions. Groups sprang up throughout the southwestern and midwestern cities with high concentrations of Mexican-heritage populations.

In California one of the many associations that responded to the renewed interest in neighborhood activism and political and civil rights was the Community Service Organization (CSO). Established in Los Angeles in 1947 with the combined financial support and backing of the Chicago-based Industrial Areas Foundation, a project of social activist [Saul Alinsky](#), and the Civic Unity League, founded by Ignacio Lopez, outspoken editor of the southern California

weekly *El Espectador*, the CSO backed the candidacy of Edward Roybal for the Los Angeles city council. The group devoted its efforts to voter registration campaigns, citizenship drives, educational improvements, better municipal services, and curbing police brutality.

With its successes in Los Angeles, the CSO looked to other parts of California and Arizona to establish new chapters and build membership. Organizing campaigns were launched in urban centers and agricultural towns such as San Jose and Stockton. In San Jose, CSO organizer Fred Ross recruited an initially reluctant César Chávez, who was living with his family in the Mexican-American barrio Sal Si Puedes ("Get out if you can"). Beginning as a volunteer and then as a paid organizer, Chávez eventually rose to director of the group in 1958. Helen Chávez frequently moved her family to central valley towns he targeted for membership drives and sent out postcard reminders of meetings. From these experiences Chávez learned organizing skills and established networks with other Mexican-American community activists, such as Dolores Huerta and Gilbert Padilla.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s Chávez turned his attention from voter registration campaigns and urban issues to the plight of the men, women, and children who labored in the fields. When the CSO policy board rejected his proposal for organizing agricultural workers, he resigned from the organization in 1962.

With Dolores Huerta and other CSO contacts, Chávez formed the Farm Workers Association the same year. For several years the two recruited members. Huerta based her operation in Stockton, where she received valuable help from her mother and relatives. Chávez centered his efforts in Delano, aided by his brother Richard and supported by his wife, Helen, who worked in the fields and raised their family.

In 1965 the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), a largely Filipino union led by Larry Itliong and financed by the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations, approached Chávez and Huerta to honor their strike against Delano grape growers. The membership of the renamed National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) voted to respect the walkout, thus inaugurating "la huelga," the well-known Delano grape strike.

From 1965 to 1970 the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, or UFWOC (as the merged AWOC and NFWA became known in 1966), battled the California wine grape and, later, table grape producers. Frustrated with the futility of picketing miles of fields and facing the local power of corporate agriculture, the UFWOC resorted to civil rights era tactics of massive protest marches, civil disobedience, boycotts, and hunger strikes by Chávez, sustained by a philosophy of nonviolence borrowed from [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), and Mahatma Gandhi. Fitting this civil rights activism with appeals to unity based on Mexican Catholicism, liberation theology, and a sense of cultural pride, Chávez won contracts with wine growers vulnerable because of highly visible labels. The UFWOC then trained its resources against table grape growers.

Under the charismatic leadership of Chávez, striking farm worker families united with diverse groups of community activists, labor unions, Mexican-American organizations, student demonstrators, religious supporters, consumer groups, average housewives, antiwar protesters, sympathetic politicians, and African-American allies to build an international boycott to force

concessions from agribusiness. After five years Chávez's farm workers union finally negotiated the historic grape contracts with a majority of California grape producers in Delano in 1970.

The years from 1970 to 1975 were difficult for Chávez and the United Farm Workers (UFW), as the union was renamed in 1973. In the same year of its triumphs in the grape vineyards, it confronted a lettuce strike in the Salinas area and rival Teamster contracts with vegetable producers. In addition, complicated three-year contract renewals with grape growers loomed on the horizon. Faced with immense resistance from corporate agriculture, Chávez reinforced the boycott, undertook national speaking tours, and organized major protests and picketing across the country. In California, violence broke out. Kern County jails were filled because of massive arrests in 1973. In addition to labor troubles with Gallo wines, the union became involved with another protracted boycott of lettuce, grapes, wines, and other products.

Buoyed by the election in 1974 of union supporter Governor Jerry Brown, Chávez and his political allies in the Democratic party turned to Sacramento, seeking a solution to the constant turmoil in the fields. This coalition devised a legislative compromise between corporate agriculture and the union: the Agricultural Labor Relations Act established the Agricultural Labor Relations Board (ALRB). For the first time in California's history, farm workers engaged in government-supervised collective bargaining.

With the ALRB in place in 1975, Chávez's farm workers seemed on the verge of embarking on a new era of agricultural labor relations. The UFW did, in fact, win the majority of elections. But strife in the fields was not over, as Teamster organizers mounted campaigns and growers mobilized their political power in Sacramento to end funding for the ALRB. Proposition 14, backed by Chávez and the UFW, to make the ALRB a permanent part of the California constitution, failed in 1976. The 1980 victory of pro-agribusiness former California governor [Ronald Reagan](#) over presidential incumbent Democrat Jimmy Carter indicated a national shift toward the right and away from labor issues. The election of Republican governor George Deukmejian, an ally of agribusiness, confirmed a change in political direction in California. In addition, the UFW encountered internal dissent against the authoritarian leadership of Chávez. Disagreements resulted in the departure of key longtime members of the leadership team. Union membership, which had peaked in the 1970s at 100,000, began to drift downward.

Chávez and the farm workers fought back in the 1980s with new tactics. Experimenting with technological approaches to political organizing, the UFW invested in direct mail and computer-generated mailing lists. Criticism that Chávez was departing from his earlier vision and abandoning field organizing mounted. The decline in UFW activity, which also characterized the labor movement in general during the Reagan era, caused observers to conclude that the farm workers' cause had lost its power and that its leader had lost his moral authority.

César Chávez died in his sleep in San Luis, Arizona, not far from his birthplace, where he had gone to testify in a legal suit against growers. Malnutrition as a youngster, years of debilitating fasts, and the heavy burden of leadership had exacted their toll on the modest and dignified Chávez. After years of decline, the influence of the leader seemed to rise again as a great outpouring of grief over his unexpected passing overtook farm workers and the many middle-class supporters who had participated in or honored union boycotts. A funeral mass attended by

mourners estimated at 50,000 and witnessed by millions more on major national and international broadcasting networks seemed to breathe new life into the farm workers' cause.

In his sixty-six years César Chávez succeeded on many levels. His greatest concern was improving the conditions of men, women, and children who worked in the fields--a life he had shared. Whether or not one agreed with his views, as a result of his commitment a nation became aware of the plight of Mexican-heritage field workers. Not only were wages raised but work conditions improved, including the provision of water and toilets in the fields, the regulation of pesticides, and the institution of grievance procedures. Workers under union contract received health and pension benefits. Chávez also inspired the Chicano civil rights movement of the 1960s. Politicized by *la causa*, the farm workers' cause, *el movimiento* mobilized farm worker families, middle-class Latino organizations, Mexican-American high school and college students, and activist Chicanas to demand their rights and embrace a new sense of cultural pride. Through his message of nonviolence, fairness, and respect, Chávez also reached beyond the Mexican-American community, the second largest minority in the United States, to involve middle-class Anglos and other races in a cross-class and cross-race alliance for social justice. Recognizing the significance of Chávez as a leader of the Mexican-American community and as a national advocate for peaceful social change, President William Clinton presented the nation's highest civilian honor, the Medal of Freedom, posthumously to his widow, Helen Chávez, in 1994.

Bibliography

Chávez's papers are deposited at the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Mich. Chávez did not publish a memoir; however, an oral history with him and other union activists forms the basis of Jacques Levy, *César Chávez: Autobiography of La Causa* (1975). Other contemporary works on Chávez during the years his movement was getting started include John Gregory Dunne, *Delano: The Story of the California Grape Strike* (1966); Peter Matthiessen, *Sal Si Puedes: César Chávez and the New American Revolution* (1969); Ronald B. Taylor, *Chávez and the Farm Workers* (1975); and Joan London and Henry Anderson, *So Shall Ye Reap* (1970). Academic literature on Chávez and the farm workers did not appear until the 1980s. Linda C. Majka and Theo J. Majka, *Farm Workers, Agribusiness, and the State* (1982), is an important early effort. See also J. Craig Jenkins, *The Politics of Insurgency: The Farm Worker Movement in the 1960s* (1985). With the opening of the UFW archives to the public in the mid-1980s, more scholarly works are in the offing. See Margaret Eleanor Rose, "Women in the United Farm Workers: A Study of Chicana and Mexicana Participation in a Labor Union, 1950 to 1980" (Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 1988) and "Gender and Civic Activism in Mexican American Barrios in California: The Community Service Organization, 1947-1962," in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (1994). Obituaries are in the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, 24 Apr. 1993.

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