

Let Me Tell You About This Man



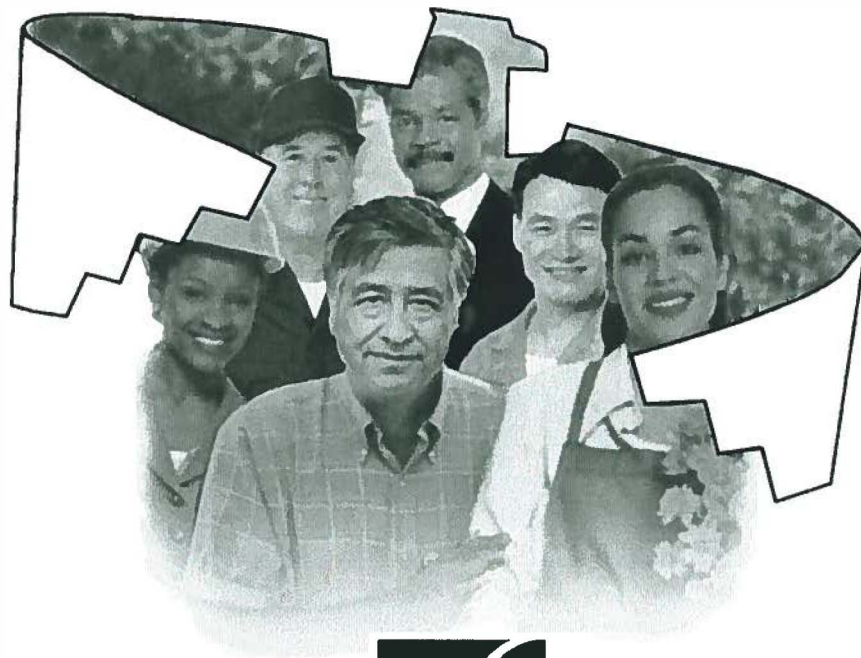
César Chavez, Union Organizer

California Federation of Teachers
American Federation of Teachers / AFL-CIO

by Bill Morgan and Sylvia R. Ramirez

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1.

“Because we have suffered, and we are not afraid to suffer to stay alive, we are ready to give up everything—even our lives—in the struggle for justice.”
—César Chavez

California is called “The Food Basket of the World.” People all over the United States and the world eat fruits and vegetables that are grown on California’s big farms.

The first big farms in California were the Mission farms. When the Missions lost their land in the early 1800s, most of the farms became the property of rich landowners and later, of big companies called corporations.

From one end of California to the other, all year long, foods are growing. When they ripen, they must be picked, right away: lettuce, grapes, soybeans, cotton, lima beans, corn, chiles, oranges, apricots, plums, tomatoes, onions, cantaloupes, pears, bananas, strawberries, garlic, and almost every kind of food plant you can think of. If they are not picked right away, they will spoil.

Who does the work of picking them, when they are ready? Farm workers, that’s who.

Indians working at the Missions were the first farm workers in California. Later, more and more land was used for farms. People from Mexico and the Eastern part of the United States, and people from all over Europe and Asia came to California and became farm workers.

Nowadays, many farm workers travel around the state working wherever the crops are ready. Whole families move from town to town, looking for places to live and schools for their children. When the work on one farm is done, they move to the next place where there are crops ready to pick.

This kind of work is called migrant labor. The food you eat comes from the work of migrant laborers and other farm workers.

Often, farm workers have been treated badly by the people and companies who own the big farms. They work long hours in the hot sun and often their pay is low and they don't have good places to live. Sometimes they are cheated out of the money they have earned. For a long time, they didn't have a union to make sure they were treated fairly.

In 1927, an American was born in Yuma, Arizona whose work would change forever the lives of farm workers in the United States. Let me tell you about this man. His name was César Chavez.



2.

“When we got pushed off that land, all we could take with us was what we could jam into our car, or pile on the roof...As we were getting into the car, my mother was crying.”

—César Chavez

César was born on a little farm near Yuma, Arizona, on March 31, 1927. It was a hard life. Sometimes it was very hot, and sometimes it rained for days and days. The family didn't have much money. There were also good times, when he played with his brothers, and big parties with all his cousins and aunts and uncles. But suddenly, it was all gone.

In 1936, when César Chavez was nine years old, a rich man who owned the farm next to theirs wanted their land so he could have a bigger farm. He fixed it so the Chavez family couldn't get money to pay their taxes. César had to watch while tractors came and tore down his family's house. The tractors flattened the yard where he had played with his brothers and sisters. All of a sudden, the Chavez family had to find a new place to live and work.

They got in their old car with everything they could take and went to California, looking for farm work. They came to the great Central Valley of California, which is formed by the Sacramento River in the North and the San Joaquin River in the South. They went to work picking cotton, fruits and vegetables. César and his brother Richard also worked in lumber mills. Maybe you have heard of some of the places where the Chavez family lived and worked: Brawley and Bakersfield; Arvin, Pixley, Corcoran, and Atascadero; King City, Gonzales, Salinas, San José, Half Moon Bay; Fresno and Visalia, Oxnard, and Delano. Lots of other places, too.



They lived wherever they could, in shacks made of wood, metal, or cardboard with no toilets or water. Sometimes they slept in their old car, or out in the open. César and his brother lived one whole winter in a leaky tent while it rained and rained.

3.

“Sometimes, the growers provided camps—without plumbing—and workers bathed and drank from irrigation ditches. Many families lived on riverbanks or under bridges, in shacks made of...cardboard, or tents made out of gunny sacks.”

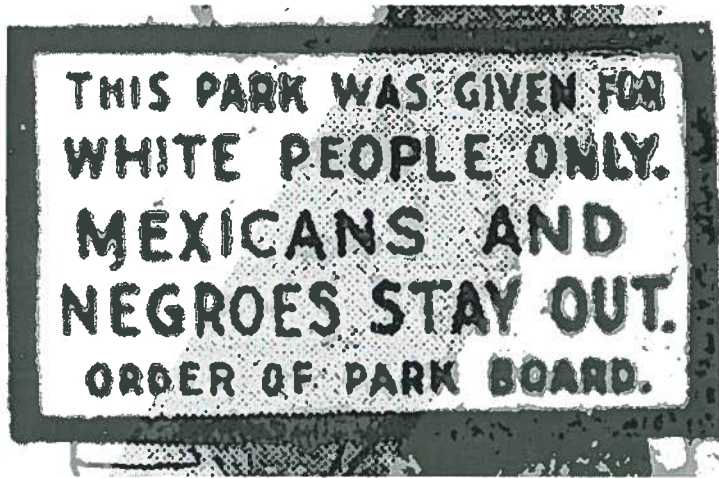
—César Chavez

At this time, in the 1930s, thousands of other people were coming to California to look for farm work. Many of them had lost their land like the Chavez family. There were so many people and hungry families looking for work that the owners of the farms, called “growers,” could pay them very low wages. Often, the growers didn’t care how or where the farm workers lived as long as the crops got picked. Farm workers and their families were often badly treated. Sometimes, bosses cheated them out of their pay, or made promises and then didn’t keep them.

If the workers complained, the growers could just tell them to leave. There were plenty of other people waiting to work. And the growers were very powerful men. They had the help of the police, the judges, and the lawmakers. Over and over again in California history, the growers forced farm workers to work very hard for very little pay.

Some working men traveled around alone and lived in camps provided by the growers. But after they paid for their food, water, rent, and transportation, they had hardly any money to send back to their families.

In Stockton, California, a girl named Dolores Huerta worked at her mother’s hotel. She saw many farm workers. One of them told her, “It’s not fair. We work all day, for twelve or fourteen hours, but when we



are finished, we have nothing.” The young girl never forgot that.

Families who traveled and worked together often had to live in tents or barns. They didn’t have enough money to rent a house or apartment. The workers had no union to protect them or help them make their lives better. One writer called farm workers “The Forgotten People.”

4.

“In schools where we were the only Mexicans, we were like monkeys in a cage. There were lots of racist remarks that still hurt my ears when I think about them. And we couldn’t do anything but sit there and take it.”

—César Chavez

When his family traveled around California to different jobs, César Chavez and his brothers and sisters went to school near where they were working. César went to 30 different elementary schools, and he didn’t like school at all. Because all the classes were in English, César often didn’t understand what the teacher was saying. He was afraid to say anything because some kids laughed at the way he spoke English. Sometimes teachers and principals made rude remarks right in front of César and his brothers and sisters just because they were farm workers.

In lots of schools, you could get in trouble just for speaking Spanish. The teacher might hit you on the hands with a ruler to make you stop. One teacher made César wear a sign that said, “I am a clown. I speak Spanish.” Sometimes, kids who spoke Spanish would get punished in other ways.

There were many towns in California where Mexican and Mexican-American people were not welcome. One day, César and his sister Rita went into a town to buy ice cream. The woman at the store told them that they couldn’t come in the store. Mexicans had to wait outside to be served. Other places would not serve them at all, because their family was Mexican, and because they were farm workers. César Chavez never forgot it. Years later, when he was an adult, he still got a little worried whenever he went into a restaurant.

In 1942, when César was fifteen, his father was in a car accident, and could not work. César left school and worked full time in the fields to help his family. But the work was very hard, and he was tired of it. All his life, he had been a farmworker. He wanted a change. In 1944, the United States was fighting in World War II. Even though he was just seventeen, César joined the Navy. His job was to paint ships, but he didn’t like his time there.

“Someone has the right to move you around like a piece of equipment. It was worse than being in prison, and there was lots of discrimination.”

Discrimination was something he knew about. One time, when he was still in the Navy, he came home and went to a movie. In those days, the theater in Delano was segregated—the best seats in the theater were kept for white people. Mexicans, African-Americans, and Filipinos had to sit somewhere else. But Cesar went and sat in the white section of the theater, and refused to move. He was arrested and taken to the police station. After a few hours, the police let him go. César Chavez had started to think about the way his people were treated and what he could do to make their lives better.



5.

"I remember my dad was very impressed with the union, and that impressed me. He was impressed by the ten-minute break. He was saying, "It's fantastic. You get to rest ten minutes twice a day!"

—César Chavez

After he got out of the Navy, César rejoined the Chavez family. He started working again in the fields, following "la corrida," all over California. In 1948, he married a woman named Helen Fabela. Soon, he was a father with two young children. When they were living in Delano, and not picking crops, he worked getting people to vote. He traveled around the state and saw workers on strike, demanding better pay and better working conditions. He learned about strikes in the past, like the Great Cotton Strike.

Farm workers had always gotten together to resist bad conditions on California's farms, beginning with Indians who worked at the Missions. By the 1930s, workers had started organizing *unions* to help themselves. A union is a group of workers who make decisions and act together so they have more power.

In 1933, farm workers in the cotton fields had organized and demanded higher wages from the growers. When the growers would not talk to them, cotton workers all over the San Joaquín Valley—18,000 of them—went on strike. They walked off their jobs and refused to work.

The growers hired gunmen to force the strikers back to work. A gang of forty men with rifles attacked a peaceful group of strikers who were having a meeting in the town of Pixley. They killed two striking farm workers and wounded eight more. The sheriff's deputies and police stood by and watched while they did it. Then, they arrested two of the strikers! Finally the farm workers went back to their jobs. The strike had won them a little more money. But some of the strike leaders were jailed or sent to other countries. As you can see, the growers were very powerful and had lots of help.

In 1947, farm workers in the National Farm Labor Union went on strike again. The DiGiorgio Corporation, at Arvin, California was one of the biggest farm corporations in the world. But they paid their workers very little. The strike went on and on, for weeks and months.

César was working at a farm nearby. He joined the union. This time, one of the union leaders was shot in his own house. No one was ever arrested for shooting him. Then, a judge said the strike was unfair to the DiGiorgio Company! The workers had to return to their jobs, and give up the strike.

César saw what happened in Arvin, and remembered. It seemed that the farm workers had no chance. It wasn't fair. Again and again, the growers had used violence, the power of the police and the power of the courts against the workers. Again and again, the workers had to go back to their jobs with the same low pay and the same bad conditions.



6.

“I can’t remember all the things César said, but he impressed me very much because of the gentle way he had about him. It was kind of like a lamb in the middle of some lions.”

—Dolores Huerta

At this time, César was reading about people in history who had worked for justice. He talked to people who had worked in the earlier strikes. He learned how a man named Mohandas K. Gandhi had organized millions of people and had forced the English rulers to leave India. Gandhi and the Indian people had done this without a war. “Could you do that in California?” César asked himself. “Could you really fight for justice and change things peacefully?”

César began looking around for a way to make the lives of farm workers better. In 1952, he met a man named Fred Ross. Ross hired César to work as an organizer for the CSO, the Community Services Organization. An organizer is someone who helps people get together to change bad laws or make their lives better in some way. The CSO helped people become citizens and sign up to vote.



Dolores Huerta had grown up and become a teacher in Stockton. She saw farmworker children coming to school barefoot because their families didn't have enough money for shoes. She thought she could help them more by working as an organizer. So Dolores quit teaching to work for the CSO. That was how she and César Chavez met.

César went to work in Oakland, California, near San Francisco, getting people to sign up to vote. Then he worked in Oxnard, where growers used braceros instead of California workers to pick their crops. Braceros were workers brought from Mexico to do farm work in California. When the work was over, they were sent back home. They could not bring their families with them. They could not choose where they lived or worked. Braceros could only work if the growers hired California workers first. But because the growers could pay braceros very little money, they broke the law. They hired braceros instead of California farm workers.

César and the CSO tried get the growers to hire California workers and follow the law. But the sheriffs and police helped the growers. César decided that California farm workers needed a union. He had been a farmworker himself, and still, after all this time, people worked from sunrise to sunset, year after year, and their families didn't have enough food to eat or decent places to live. He asked the CSO to help organize a farm workers' union. But the CSO refused. So César quit.

7.

“The power of the growers was supported by the power of the police, the courts, the laws, and the financial power of the corporations and the big banks.”

—César Chavez

In 1962, César Chavez quit the CSO. He had four children and very little money. But he had to try. Together with Dolores Huerta and others, he started the National Farm Workers' Association, or NFWA. The NFWA was formed to get the workers together and use their power for better pay, better working conditions, and better homes for farm workers. They wanted laws passed so farm workers could get justice in court if anyone cheated them.

Those first days were hard for César and the other NFWA organizers. César went all around California, from one end to the other, trying to get workers to join the union. He wasn't getting paid at all. His wife Helen worked in the fields to support their family. She also took care of the children. Later Helen Chavez said, “The beginning of the union was the hardest time we ever had.”

César and the other organizers had to talk to workers one by one. They had meetings in people's houses, in churches, or in parks— wherever they could. They met people from the big cotton strike, the DiGiorgio strike, and other strikes. Many workers were afraid to join the union because they would lose their jobs if their bosses found out. But the NFWA organizers didn't give up. They made a flag for their union, with an eagle like the one on the flag of Mexico. The flag had a white circle, a red background, and a black eagle. Slowly, the union grew.

8.

“The first time I ever saw César, he walked right up to me and said, ‘Hi, brother!’ I never had a Mexican guy say that to me before!”

—Philip Vera Cruz, one of the leaders of the Filipino workers



**It was on the eighth of September
In the fields of Delano
That the Filipinos
went out on strike
After two weeks,
to join them in the battle
The Mexicans
also took a hike.**

***The General Strike,
a song by Teatro Campesino***

The words at the beginning of the chapter come from a song written by two members of a theater group, Teatro Campesino. Larry Itliong, the president of another farmworker union, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) had come to California from the Philippines in 1929. He had been in many strikes over the years. In 1965, the growers around the Coachella Valley lowered the pay of grape workers. Itliong and his union of mostly Filipino workers went out on strike. In September, following the grape harvest to Delano, he found the growers had lowered workers’ pay again. Again he and his union members went on strike.

He asked César and the NFWA to join the strike. The new union didn’t have a lot of members, and they had very little money for a strike. But César agreed to ask the NFWA members if they wanted to join the strike or not.

There was a big meeting for all the members of the NFWA so the workers could decide what they wanted to do. One man stood up at the meeting and said, “We have to help our brothers, the Filipinos. We are all people. This is a just cause! Let’s go out on strike!”

Everyone voted to strike with Itliong’s union. That was the beginning of the Great Grape Strike. The next day, workers formed lines around the big grape farms in the area to stop work until the strike was settled. The strikers yelled, “Viva la huelga!” and “We want a contract!”

Itliong’s union and the NFWA joined together to make a new, bigger union. Later, it was called the United Farm Workers of America, or the UFW.



Again, growers used the power of the police. They hired thugs to scare and beat up the strikers. They brought vicious dogs to attack the farm workers who were on strike. Gunmen shot at the strikers, and police arrested them. Their signs were taken from them and burned. But they didn't give up.

UFW members went around California, trying to get the help of other unions. César got the Longshore Workers union in San Francisco to stop loading grapes on ships. The United Automobile Workers union sent money to help the strike. César gave speeches and went to meetings at colleges all around California, asking students to give money and food to help the workers while they were striking.

From the very beginning, women were a big part of the union. One of the rules of the UFW was that women had to be leaders as well as men. Women worked on the picket lines and faced the same dangers as men. One angry grower tried to run Dolores Huerta down in his truck. Helen Chavez and other workers were arrested and thrown in jail.

Religious people joined César Chavez in his work as well. There were priests, rabbis and other clergy members who believed that it was part of their work to help powerless workers against rich and powerful growers. One Catholic priest, Father Jim McEntee, said, "If Jesus were alive today, he would be on the side of the workers."

9.

"The time has come for the liberation of the poor farmworker. History is on our side. Long live our cause!"

— from the Plan of Delano

César Chavez and the UFW found other ways to get people to help them. One was the Great Grape Boycott.

"We make it easy for you," César told people. "We just ask you not to buy grapes."

Farm workers went in cars all over North America and Europe, asking people not to buy grapes until the growers made a fair deal with the union. They stood in front of big stores like Safeway and asked people not to shop there because the stores sold grapes that had been picked by non-union workers. Everywhere they went, shoppers found out about the struggle in California. Many helped by not shopping at those stores. Grape sales all over the country went down. But the growers still would not talk to the union. The strike went on and on.

In the spring of 1966, César Chavez and 70 farm workers started a march from Delano to the state capital in Sacramento. At the front of their march, they carried their flag along with pictures of the great leader Emiliano Zapata and the Virgen de Guadalupe, the religious symbol of many Mexican people. They passed through little towns like Richgrove and Ducor, Lindsay, Farmerville and Porterville, and through bigger cities like Fresno, Modesto, and Stockton. In Fresno, 1000 people greeted them. In every town, the marchers held meetings and read the Plan of Delano, which told what the farm workers wanted. All along the way, people greeted them as heroes. They gave food to the marchers. They invited the marchers to sleep in their houses, and many joined the march themselves.



By the time they reached Sacramento on Easter Day, 1966, there were 10,000 people marching. They had walked almost 300 miles, and there was good news waiting for them. Gilbert Padilla, one of the union's best organizers, told César that the giant Schenley Corporation had agreed to sign a contract with the UFW and to hire union workers! At first, César thought it was a joke, but it was true. The boycott had started to work.

Then, in September of 1966, came another victory. The DiGiorgio Corporation had won a battle against a union in 1950, but now the workers at DiGiorgio voted to join the UFW. But other growers still would not let their workers join. Those workers who did join the UFW got fired. Because these growers would not hire union workers, the grape strike went on.

10.



***"I wish continuing success to you and your members.
The fight for equality must be fought on many fronts."***

—Martin Luther King, Jr.'s letter to César Chavez

"Non-violence is the weapon of the strong."

—Mohandas K. Gandhi



These first victories helped the union grow. More and more people heard about the UFW, and more and more workers joined. There was a health plan for union members who got sick or hurt. The union had its own hospital, and a place for farm workers to live when they retired. The union had its own credit union, which is a kind of bank.

Union members had their own newspaper, *El Malcriado*, and their own theater and music group, El Teatro Campesino. Politicians like Jerry Brown, the governor of California, and Robert Kennedy, the senator from New York, believed in their cause. Progressive leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., Coretta Scott King, and Walter Reuther, president of the United Automobile Workers' union, supported them.

The UFW was part of a larger movement in the 1960s and 70s, when people got together to change their lives and unfair laws. All different kinds of working people joined to give everyone the chance to vote and to stop the United States war in Vietnam. Many soldiers felt the war was wrong and refused to fight it. Native American people, union people, women, African-Americans, Chicanos, and many others protested against their treatment by the government. They demanded to be equal before the law, like the Constitution of the United States promised.

Some people used violence in this struggle. But César Chavez insisted that his followers remain nonviolent. In their struggle against the police and the thugs hired by the growers, UFW members and organizers were wounded and even killed. Some union members wanted to fight back with guns. César insisted that they should not fight back, even if they were attacked and beaten.



This seems strange, but he knew that this was the way to get people to support the strike. It made the police and the growers look bad to hurt someone who wasn't even fighting back. César felt it was the way to make a country where people settled their problems by talking and not by fighting. He went on a fast. He didn't eat anything, and just drank water, for 25 days! He wanted to remind himself and all the members of his union that they were nonviolent because it made them stronger than their enemies. Everyone who joined the union had to promise not to use violence.

11.

"We are not beasts of burden, we are not tools or rented slaves; we are men and women."

—César Chavez

There were more struggles. Just when it seemed like the United Farm Workers union was going to win, another union, the Teamsters, tried to get farm workers to join their union. But they asked for less money for the workers, and left the growers with more power. So now the UFW had to fight not only the growers, but another union as well! As the fight went on, more people were hurt, even killed.

In 1976, the UFW won a major victory. A California law was passed creating the Agricultural Labor Relations Board. Because of this law, government workers made sure that farm workers had a fair chance to join a union. The ALRB also made sure the growers respected the contracts.

By 1979, over 75,000 workers belonged to the UFW. Forty-six of California's biggest farms had union workers. Even some non-union farms paid higher wages and offered medical benefits to their workers. The union had made life better for farm workers who were not even union members!

And in 1979, the UFW went on strike against lettuce growers in a wide area of California, from Salinas in the north to El Centro in the south, and into Arizona in the east. When the strikers won many months later, lettuce workers went back to work making \$5.00 an hour, instead of \$3.50, which they had been making before the strike.

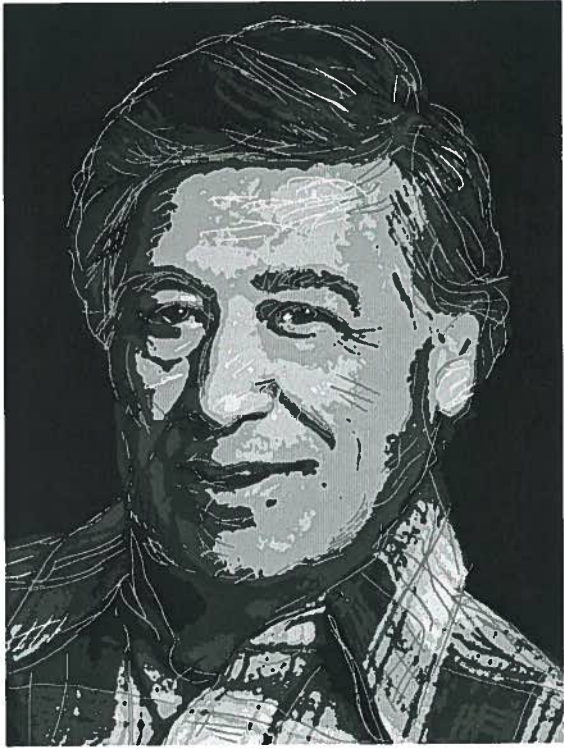
In the 1980s, led by UFW organizer Jessica Govea, the union worked against another enemy. Pesticides were meant to kill insects, but they killed farm workers, too. Workers who lived around places where pesticides were used got cancer and blood diseases six times as much as other people. Sometimes planes dropped the clouds of poison on fields or on workers' homes while the workers there!

The struggle that had begun in the 60s went on into the 90s. Growers did everything they could to defeat the union. They were able to change the ALRB so it no longer helped farm workers. In 1993, growers in Arizona sued the union, and César Chavez went to court to testify against the growers. The judge later ruled in favor of the UFW.

But one night, while the trial was going on, César Chavez died in his sleep, close to the little farm where he was born.

His funeral was held the following week, in Delano, California. 40,000 people came to honor him, and all over the world, millions more remembered the peaceful fighter who had done so much for working people.

An old man at the funeral that day passed by with his grandson and they looked down at César's coffin. "Look and remember, boy," he said. "Someday I will tell you about this man."



12.

"César was poor like us, dark like us, talking quietly, getting people to talk about their problems. We didn't know it when we met him, but he was the leader we had been waiting for."

—Luis Valdez, Teatro Campesino

Cesar Chavez was an ordinary man. He had problems like everyone else and sometimes he felt like giving up. But he had family and friends to help him.

His son said, "There were times when my dad got depressed and almost gave up hope. Then he would talk to my mom about it, and she would say, 'We've got to go on. We started this, and we've got to finish it.'"

He did amazing things because he learned how to organize people. He helped people believe in themselves. Together, these people did things that others thought were impossible. With the power of many people together, leaders like Chavez and Dolores Huerta and all the others changed the world. Most important, they built a union that has lasted.

New leaders have come to take César's place. His son-in-law, Arturo Rodriguez, has become President of the UFW. Other unions have been started to help farm workers. Some victories have been won. But the growers are more powerful than ever, and the work goes on.

When you drive around California, notice the workers in the fields. Someday when you grow up, you too will work so you can live and help feed your family. Remember about César Chavez and the UFW. Their work helped the lives of all working people, like you and your family.

Remember how strong working people are when they join with each other. Together, we can really change the world.

Word Bank

Do you know what these words mean?

AWOC

boycott

Braceros

Chicanos

contract

corporations

discrimination

farm workers

fast

growers

Great Cotton Strike

Great Grape Strike

harvest

justice

migrant labor

Missions

NFWA

non-violence

organizer

racism

segregation

strike

UFW

union



Your Turn To Answer

1. How many schools have you been to? What would it be like to go to thirty schools by the time you get to the 8th grade?
2. The years 1947-48 were two years that were very important in the life of César Chavez. In those years, two things happened that would affect him for the rest of his life. What were those two things?
3. Why was it so hard to start a union for farm workers?
4. Why do you think the sheriff and the police in Pixley just watched while the gang of farmers shot strikers during the Great Cotton Strike? Then, instead of arresting the shooters, they arrested the leaders of the strike. Why do you think they did that?
5. When César died in 1993, a friend of his said, “César died with a smile on his face.” Many of the big farms in California were not hiring union workers. César’s work was not finished. So why did the friend say César was smiling?
6. What did Mohandas K. Gandhi mean when he said, “Non-violence is the weapon of the strong?” Doesn’t it seem strange to say that?
7. The boycott was a way for the workers of the UFW to put pressure on the growers to sign a contract with them. Who else used the boycott to get justice? Have you heard of the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama?
8. The American writer Henry David Thoreau wrote, “In order to live a good life, you must have a great cause.” What was the great cause in the life of César Chavez?

