

# Labor History: Cesar Chavez and the Grape Boycott

*By Ed Leavy*

One of the most difficult tasks for a labor leader is to ensure that any action taken is not just a spontaneous burst of anger that quickly flames out, but is thoughtful and has the buy in from the members. Imagine how difficult it would be to build that consensus among people separated by language and culture, spread out over hundreds of square miles. This challenge and others faced Cesar Chavez in 1965 when Filipino and Mexican agricultural workers challenged the California grape industry over their dismal wages and sub-human working conditions.

Chavez had moved to Delano, California in the 1950's and began working as a community organizer, especially concentrating on voter registration. By 1962, he had decided that truly changing the lives of the people in the community could only occur through labor organization; almost everyone in the community worked in the agriculture fields. He and his colleague Lola Huerta formed the National Farm Workers' Association. Chavez recognized that decades of mistreatment by management could not be undone overnight, and he looked to move slowly by first emphasizing the dignity of the workers. "We demand to be treated like the men we are! We are not slaves and we are not animals," he declared.

Any hopes he had of methodically building the movement evaporated in September of 1965, when the largely Filipino Agriculture Workers Organizing Committee went out on strike demanding a \$0.25 per hour raise. Recognizing that they could never win the strike alone, AWOC's leadership reached out Chavez, and they agreed to work together in the effort; the two groups merged as the United Farm Workers of America two years later. Chavez brought two guiding principles to the strike. One, Chavez insisted on nonviolence. Two, he recognized that the workers would never be strong enough to defeat the grape industry on its own, so they would need wide community support.

Chavez was deeply influenced by the nonviolence strategies of Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr., which had proven so effective the preceding decade. The labor movement had never been known for its nonviolent tenets; the miners' strikes were often closer to armed rebellions than traditional strikes. Certainly the grape industry owners did not agree to the nonviolent approach; they often fired weapons above the workers' heads and would occasionally send crop dusters to spray pesticides on the strikers. Local police would intimidate workers, taking pictures of strikers. The local sheriff even demanded that anyone using the word *huelga* – Spanish for "strike" – be arrested for disturbing the peace (unsurprisingly, these arrests were later found to be unconstitutional, but the damage had been done). Yet the workers stood behind Chavez and remained nonviolent. A 300-mile march from Delano to the Capitol in Sacramento drew tremendous publicity to the cause, and thousands joined the march as it progressed. Chavez held "pray-ins" at the Delano farm entrance, and the overwhelmingly Catholic workers joined in droves. Clergy and politicians such as Robert Kennedy joined them. Chavez and the workers won the public relations war.

The strikers also had an advantage because harvesting season is short and well-timed strikes could cripple the industry. Chavez though always had to worry about strike-breakers being bused in from Mexico; his policy of nonviolence prevented the usual manner of preventing scab labor. Instead, Chavez utilized Students for a Democratic Society volunteers, who spread throughout the country urging people to boycott grapes. The strike had by this time achieved enough publicity that the boycott was largely successful; many Connecticut residents today remember their families refusing to buy grapes. Faced with financial ruin, smaller grape companies reached deals with the strikers. With their union-approved grapes having a nearly exclusive share of the market, they could charge higher prices, and their profits soared. Finally,

in 1970 the large grape growers agreed to meet the union's demands. They raised wages by over 60%, improved working conditions by limiting pesticides, and granted union recognition. It took nearly five years, but the workers were finally treated with the dignity Chavez had demanded for them when forming the union.

*Information for this article comes from Philip Dray's There is Power in a Union, and various internet articles. "Fighting for Farm Workers' Rights" at Tavaana.org was especially informative.*