

"¡Sí, Se Puede!"
(Spanish: "Yes, it
can be done!")
—slogan of the United
Farm Workers



Pre-Reading Questions

1. Read the words below the title. When do you think that a leader might use these words?
2. What are the working conditions for farm workers? Name some things that farm workers need to be concerned about.

Reading Preview

César Chávez was a labor organizer. He brought national attention to working conditions for farm workers in the United States. These conditions were difficult and sometimes dangerous. Chávez successfully led the first national farm workers' union. His commitment to workers' rights added spirit to the growing Chicano movement.

César Chávez

César Chávez was born in 1927 near Yuma, Arizona. As a child, he heard his grandfather's stories about the Mexican Revolution. He also heard about problems between the rich and the poor. Chávez saw his mother feed hungry people who came to their door. Before bed, his mother told the children *cuentos*, or stories. These stories contained moral lessons. His grandmother taught him about religion. He went to mass with her every week. Chávez's life was shaped by his family's spirituality and commitment to the poor.

In the 1930s, Chávez's family suffered in the Great Depression. They lost their farm in Yuma. The entire family became migrant workers. They traveled through Arizona and California looking for farm work. Chávez saw that farm workers faced injustices every day. Growers often paid very low wages and made workers pay high rents for housing.

When Chávez was in eighth grade, his father was injured and couldn't work anymore. Chávez became a full-time farm worker.

Chávez spent two years in the Navy and then returned to California. He married Helen Fabela. He had known her since he was 15 years old. They moved to San José, where Chávez worked as a laborer. Chávez also became involved with the Community Service Organization. This group fought discrimination against Mexican Americans. It supported workers in labor disputes. At the Community Service Organization, Chávez learned about labor relations. He also learned about the beliefs and leadership style of Mahatma Gandhi in India. Later, Chávez used Gandhi's strategy of fasting to bring attention to his cause.

Chávez wanted the Community Service Organization to organize farm workers. When the group refused, Chávez quit. He decided to build a labor union for farm workers. Chávez moved his family to Delano, California. He went from farm to farm, talking to the workers. He told them about a new union called the United Farm Workers, or UFW. He explained why they needed labor contracts.

Chávez opened his home to farm workers who needed help. He became famous for his optimism and persistence. Soon, more than 1,000 workers had joined the UFW. The union's slogan was "*¡Sí, Se Puede!*" It means "Yes, it can be done!" It says that the union can overcome any obstacle.

In 1965, Chávez gained national attention and sympathy for the farm workers. There was a conflict between the laborers who picked grapes and the large wine makers that owned the farms. The companies often brought in workers just for the grape harvest. On some farms, these "imported" workers got higher wages than the workers who worked there every day.

“A symbol is an important thing. That is why we chose an Aztec eagle. It gives pride. . . . When people see it, they know it means dignity.”

—César Chávez¹

Chávez and the UFW decided to protest these unfair wages. They wanted permanent contracts for the grape pickers. The union voted to go on strike against the grape growers in the Delano area of California. Chávez called for Americans to boycott grapes and wine, and people stopped buying them. The national media showed the strikers on picket lines.

In the 1960s, many people were working to make the United States a fairer society. Other workers traveled to California to help the strikers. Chávez’s struggle became part of a social and political trend of the time.

The grape strike lasted five years. Sometimes strikers faced violence. But the UFW had a commitment to nonviolence. In February 1968, Chávez began fasting. On the 25th day, he ended his fasting in a county park. Thousands of union supporters held a Catholic mass there. Senator Robert Kennedy spoke emotionally about Chávez and the farm workers.

In 1970, Chávez and the UFW saw results. The public was putting pressure on the growers. Many growers wanted to settle the dispute. They signed contracts with almost 85 percent of the grape pickers. These contracts provided better working conditions. At that time, the Chicano, or Mexican American, movement was growing. Publicity for the farm workers gave momentum to that movement too.

The 1980s, however, were more conservative. The UFW lost many labor disputes. Yet Chávez worked tirelessly. He gained more contracts for grape pickers. He also helped lettuce and vegetable workers get contracts and better working conditions.

In the early 1990s, the UFW had financial and legal problems. Growers who lost money during the grape strike sued the union. On April 23, 1993, Chávez was in Arizona. He was going to testify there in a lawsuit. He had just finished fasting. He was exhausted when he went to sleep. The next day the world was shocked to learn that Chávez had died in his sleep.

Chávez is remembered for his courage and for his belief in the value of every human being. In 1994, President Bill Clinton recognized Chávez with a major posthumous award. It was the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the United States.

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César Chávez Notes and References

Notes

1. "The Story of César Chávez."
2. "The Story of César Chávez."

References

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