

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF CESAR CHAVEZ

Cesar Chavez, President of the United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO, founded and leads the first successful farm workers union in U.S. history.

Chavez was born March 31, 1927 on his grandfather's small farm near Yuma, Arizona. At ten he began his life as a migrant farm workers when his father lost his land during the Depression. These were bitterly poor years for Cesar, his parents and brothers and sisters. Together with thousands of other displaced families, the Chavezes migrated throughout the Southwest, laboring in row crops, grapes and tree fruit. Cesar left school after the eighth grade to help support his family.

In 1945, Chavez joined the U.S. Navy and served in the Western Pacific. After the war, he married Helen Fabela who he had met while working in Delano vineyards. The young Chavez family settled in the San Jose barrio of Sal Si Puedes ("Get Out If You Can").

In 1952, Cesar was working in apricot orchards outside San Jose when he met Fred Ross, an organizer for the Community Service Organization (CSO), a barrio-based self-help group forming among California's Mexican Americans. Within several months Chavez was a full time organizer with the CSO, coordinating voter registration, battling racial and economic discrimination against Chicano residents and organizing new CSO chapters across California and Arizona.

Chavez served as the CSO's national director in the late 1950's. But his dream was to create an organization that could help the farm workers whose suffering he had shared. In 1962, after failing to convince CSO to commit itself to farm worker organizing, he resigned his paid CSO position, moved his wife and eight small children to Delano, California and founded the National Farm Workers Association.

These were difficult years for Cesar and Helen Chavez. Helen worked in the fields during weekdays and on weekends with Cesar to support the family. Often babysitting his youngest children as he drove, Cesar traveled to dozens of California farm communities, slowly building a nucleus of dedicated farm worker members. "If you're outraged at conditions, then you can't possibly be free or happy until you devote all your time to changing them and do nothing but that," Cesar said. "But you can't change anything if you want to hold on to a good job, a good way of life, and avoid sacrifice."

In September, 1965, Chavez's NFWA, with 1200 member families, joined the AFL-CIO Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee in a strike against Delano area table and wine grape growers. Against seemingly insurmountable odds, Cesar led a successful five year strike-boycott that rallied millions of supporters to the United Farm Workers and forged a national support coalition of unions, church groups, students, minorities and consumers. The NFWA and AWOC merged in 1966 to form the UFW and the union affiliated with the AFL-CIO.

From the beginning, the farm workers union was dedicated to the principals of non-violent struggle practiced by Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King. The 1965 strikers took a pledge of non-violence and Cesar conducted a 25-day fast in 1968 to reaffirm the UFW's non-violent philosophy. Robert Kennedy called Chavez "one of the heroic figures of our time," and flew to Delano to be with him when he ended the fast. "For us," Cesar stated, "non-violence is more than academic theory; it is the very lifeblood of our movement."

Cesar Chavez  
Page Two

To limit the UFW's success to the grape fields, growers in the vegetable industry signed sweetheart pacts with the Teamsters Union. Ten thousand farm workers in California's coastal valleys walked out of the fields in 1970 to protest the grower-Teamster contracts. In 1973, when the farm workers' table grape agreements came up for renegotiation, the growers signed with the Teamsters, sparking the largest and most successful farm labor strike in U.S. history. Throughout the Coachella and San Joaquin Valleys, farm workers struck to demand representation by their union. Thousands of workers were arrested for violating unconstitutional anti-strike injunctions, hundreds more were brutally beaten by rural deputy sheriffs and imported Teamster goons, and two strikers were murdered.

Cesar called for a worldwide boycott of non-UFW grapes, head lettuce and Gallo wines, and by October, 1975 a Louis Harris poll showed 17 million American adults honored the farm workers' grape boycott. The boycott convinced growers to support Governor Brown's secret ballot election law for farm workers. Despite massive grower-Teamster violations of the law, the UFW made a decisive showing in elections, winning the right to represent 68.8% of the workers at ranches where voting took place.

Cesar Chavez lives with his family at La Paz, the union's Keene, California headquarters in Kern County's Tehachapi Mountains. Like all UFW staff, he receives a \$5 weekly stipend plus modest food and living benefits. Cesar is determined to fulfill his dream of a national farm workers union: "We have nothing else to do with our lives except to build our union. We will continue whether it takes one year or 20. We will never give up. We do not underestimate our adversaries because they are rich and powerful and they own the land. But we know we will win in the end; we learned many years ago that the rich may have money, but the poor have time."

In September, 1965, Chavez's NFMA, with 1200 member families, joined the AFL-CIO Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee in a strike against Delano area table and wine grape growers. Against seemingly insurmountable odds, Cesar led a successful five year strike-boycott that rallied millions of supporters to the United Farm Workers and forged a national support coalition of unions, church groups, students, minorities and consumers. The NFMA and AMOC merged in 1966 to form the UFW and the union affiliated with the AFL-CIO.

From the beginning, the farm workers union was dedicated to the principles of non-violent struggle practiced by Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King. The 1965 strikers took a pledge of non-violence and Cesar conducted a 25-day fast in 1968. Robert Kennedy called Chavez "one of the great moral leaders of our time" and flew to Delano to be with him when he ended the fast. "For us," Cesar stated, "non-violence is more than academic theory; it is the very lifeblood of our movement."

UNITED FARM WORKERS OF AMERICA, AFL-CIO  
La Paz, Keene, California 93531

mg  
3/76