

## OPINION • COMMENTARY

# 'Si Se Puede': the Legacy of Cesar Chavez

By DICK MEISTER

*San Francisco.*  
It was a hot summer night almost 30 years ago in the little San Joaquin Valley town of Delano, California. Cesar Chavez, shining black hair trailing across his forehead, in a green plaid shirt that had become almost a uniform, sat behind a makeshift desk topped with bright red Formica.

"*Si se puede*," he said repeatedly to me, a highly skeptical reporter, as we talked deep into the early morning hours there in the cluttered shack that served as headquarters for him and the others who were trying to create an effective farm-workers union.

"*Si se puede* — it can be done!"

But I would not be swayed. Too many others, over too many years, had tried and failed to win for farm workers the union rights they had to have if they were to escape the severe economic and social deprivation inflicted on them by their grower employers.

The Industrial Workers of the World who stormed across western fields early in the century, the Communists who followed, the socialists, the AFL and CIO organizers — all their efforts had collapsed under the relent-

less pressure of growers and their powerful political allies.

I was certain this effort would be no different. I was wrong. I had not accounted for the brilliance, creativity, courage and stubbornness of Cesar Chavez, a sad-eyed, disarmingly soft-spoken man who talked of militance in calm, measured tones, a gentle and incredibly patient man who hid great strategic talent behind shy smiles and an attitude of utter candor.

Mr. Chavez grasped the essential fact that farm workers had to organize themselves. Outside organizers, however well-intentioned, could not do it. Mr. Chavez, a farm worker himself, carefully put together a grass-roots organization that enabled the workers to form their own union, which

then sought out — and won — widespread support from influential outsiders.

The key weapon of his United Farm Workers Union was the boycott. It was so effective that between 1968 and 1975 fully 12 percent of the country's adult population — that's 17 million people — quit buying table grapes.

The grape boycott and others against wineries and lettuce growers won the first farm-union contracts ever. They led to enactment of the California law that required growers to bargain collectively with workers who voted for unionization and to substantial improvements in the pay and working conditions of the state's farm workers.

The struggle was extremely difficult for the impoverished farm workers, and Mr.

Chavez risked his health — if not his life — to provide them extreme examples of the sacrifices necessary for victory. Most notably, he engaged in lengthy, highly publicized fasts that helped rally the public to the farm workers' cause and that may very well have contributed to his untimely death April 22 in Arizona.

Fasts, boycotts. It's no coincidence that those were among the principal tools of Mohandas Gandhi, for Cesar Chavez drew much of his inspiration from the Indian leader. Like Gandhi and another of his models, Martin Luther King, Mr. Chavez believed fervently in the tactics of non-violence. Like them, he showed the world how profoundly effective they can be in seeking justice from even the most powerful of opponents.

It's true enough that the United Farm Workers and farm workers generally have fared very poorly in recent years. But what the UFW accomplished, and how the union accomplished it, will never be forgotten — not by the millions of social activists who have been inspired and energized by the farm workers' struggle, nor by the workers themselves.

The union won important legal rights which, though largely ignored in the absence of the militancy that marked the union's formative years, are still on the books waiting to be forcefully pursued by a new generation of militants.

But more than laws, the farm worker now has what Cesar Chavez insisted was needed above all else. That, he said, "is to have the worker truly believe and understand and know that he's free, that he's a free man, that he can stand up and say how he feels."

Freedom. No leader has ever left a greater legacy.

Dick Meister is a veteran labor reporter.