

César Chávez

César Chávez devoted his life to improving the lives of migrant farm workers in the United States. Born on March 31, 1927, Chavez established the United Farm Workers in 1962, which became the most prominent voice for migrant farm workers' rights and working conditions across the nation.

At the time, farm workers, especially migrants, had few rights and faced many challenges, such as unsafe and unhealthy conditions, long hours, and low wages that ensured that migrant families had to rely on the collective effort of men, women, and children in order to survive. With only limited resources to protect their rights, fear of losing their jobs and meager income, and little time beyond work, there was little they could do to improve their lives.

Just organizing the UFW proved to be a challenging task due to the nature of the workers' lives and working conditions. In 1965, the UFW and a group of Filipino farm workers joined forces to boycott against grape growers in Delano, California. This grew into numerous other boycotts against grape growers, with one result being the negotiation of the first union contract in 1966. By the end of the 1960s, the grape boycott gained international recognition and support, as people around the world refused to purchase grapes in support of the UFW.

Employing the same nonviolent strategies as his contemporary Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., including picketing, boycotts, and peaceful demonstrations, the UFW under Chavez' leadership achieved several significant reforms, including the establishment of minimum wage standards, wage contracts, safer working conditions, reforms against child labor, and advancements in civil rights for Chicanos and other farm workers.

Chavez also employed fasting to inspire farm workers' commitment to nonviolence, beginning his first fast in 1968 which only ended after 25 days when Senator (and brother of the former president) Robert F. Kennedy traveled to California to visit Chávez and bring attention to their efforts.

Chávez remained tirelessly devoted to the pursuit of equal rights, dignity, and justice for migrant workers for the rest of his life. A complete list of the boycotts, strikes, and demonstrations led by Chavez and the UFW can be found on the UFW website, www.ufw.org. When Chavez passed away on April 23, 1993, 40,000 mourners marched behind his casket, and in 1994 President Bill Clinton posthumously awarded Chavez the highest civilian award in the United States, the Presidential Medal of Freedom.