
Cesar Chavez and the Grape Strike

With the Mexican Revolution in 1910, many Mexicans fled north of the United States to escape the bloodshed in search of a new life. The American demand for agricultural workers increased so much that a work visa program was established in 1920 for Mexicans. The majority suffered gross abuse of their labor rights, such as low wage, poor working conditions, bad housing and racial discrimination.

Farm Workers were often unpaid and were denied the right to unionize, which was something the rest of American workers were able to do. Farm workers were forced to pay two dollars or more a day to live in metal shacks with no electricity or plumbing, had no toilets in the fields, and worked in inhumane conditions. According to the article "Fighting for Farm Workers' Rights.." they state that, grape pickers were paid an average of 90 cents per hour placing their families below the poverty line. Their homes consisted of tents and some even lived out of their cars. The housing arrangements usually were segregated by race, the working conditions were very similar as the housing conditions. None of the ranches contained portable toilets and some of the growers made the workers drink from the same cup and others were charged for it. Child labor was prevalent and whole families worked in the fields. There were laws that prevented the mistreatment of farm workers, but even so, the laws were often ignored by the owners.

Many obstacles were presented such as the Bracero program which was one of the many problems that destroyed the organizing efforts that were made. This was an agreement between the United States and Mexico, which recruited temporary workers to help depress wages in agricultural labor. It became Public Law in 1951 and it began during World War II, when growers were facing a severe shortage of workers, and it continued after the war ended. The law stated that no bracero could replace a domestic worker but it was rarely enforced because the main reason was to replace the domestic worker. The bracero workers made it difficult to strike because often times they could be used as strikebreakers. In 1964, Cesar Chavez was able to get together with other unions, community groups and churches to help put pressure on politicians to end the Bracero program.

Cesar Chavez was born to a Mexican-American family in Arizona in 1927. Chavez ultimate goal was "to overthrow a farm labor system in this nation which treats farm workers as if they were not important human beings". His leadership was based on non-violence, personal sacrifice, and a strict work ethic. In 1962 he founded the National Farmworkers Association which formed the backbone of his labor campaigns. In September 1965 the Delano Agricultural staff Organization Committee largely created from Filipino grape pickers United Nations agency, went on strike exacting pay of \$1.40 an hour plus 25 cents. AWOC's leader reached out to

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Chavez and the NFWA who gave him the support and expanded the strikes goals to include union contracts signed by the growers and laws allowing farm workers to unionize and engage in collective bargaining. In the article, "The Story of Cesar Chavez" they state that; in 1967, Chavez shifted to a boycott of California grapes and pressured supermarket chains to not buy grapes to bring attention to the farm workers, pressuring the growers to sign contracts with their employees. Delano growers were powerful with many connections to politicians, judges and the police; they hired armed security guards to intimidate the strikers and picketers were threatened with dogs, verbally assaulted, physically attacked and sprayed with pesticides.

There were other ways for the organizations to show their opinions. The NFWA launched a newsletter in December of 1964 which was titled; El Malcriado. El malcriado used cartoons of characters so that workers who were illiterate could identify with the newsletter, and they publicized stories of the struggle against the grower's oppressions. It was also used to publicize the 1965 Delano strike which helped spread from 20 labor camps to 48. El Teatro Campesino also staged clever humorous skits to entertain the strikers and attract others to join.

Cesar Chavez launched a boycott of Schenley Industries and DiGiorgio Fruit Corporation. After the strikes Schenley agreed to sign a contract giving the workers a raise of 35 cents an hour but DiGiorgio was still refusing to give in. In May, Cesar Chavez launched a pray in and while the boycott spread, DiGiorgio was worn down and offered to hold union elections; they rigged the elections so strikers could not vote. The article, "The Story of Cesar Chavez" states that, in response Chavez pulled the NFWA off the ballots and called for a boycott of the elections. To become stronger the NFWA and AWOC became the United Farm Workers of America.

Chavez recognized he could not win the fields alone so he changed his focus to the supermarkets; he sought to shut down the consumer market for grapes. In February 1968, people started to call for less peaceful approaches so Chavez decided to a "fast for nonviolence and a call to sacrifice". This reflected with other religious workers who went to Delano in support of Chavez. Finally in 1970, smaller grape growers signed contracts with the union, which ended a long economic boycott. Thousands of workers were now given formal union representation, a higher wage and a health insurance plan.

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