

SOCIAL STUDIES ACTIVITY

THE LIFE AND WORK OF CÉSAR CHÁVEZ

César Chávez (1927–1993) grew up seeing migrant farm workers suffer from low pay and poor conditions. Consequently, he dedicated his adult life to improving the lives of oppressed farm workers. By working tirelessly and using nonviolence, he built the first successful union of farm workers.

In the 1920s, Chávez's parents toiled on their small farm near Yuma, Arizona. (His grandparents had migrated from Mexico in 1880). Then Chavez's father lost the farm in the Great Depression, and the family moved to California to pick crops. There, young Chávez watched his father join every agricultural union that came along, though none survived long. Through him, Chávez came to understand what was required to organize farm workers successfully: a long-term effort and close personal contact.

In the 1950s, Chávez met two people who changed his life. One was a Catholic priest who increased his knowledge of labor history and his devotion to the principles of nonviolence. The other was a social activist from a group called the Community Service Organization (CSO). Chávez learned from him how to organize. He started 22 chapters in California and became the CSO's general director. However, he felt that the CSO was not committed enough to the farm workers. He left the CSO in 1962 and used his small savings to launch a new union of farm workers. After two years, he had about 1,000 members in his National Farm Workers Association (NFWA). In 1965, the union won wage increases from two small growers. That year, the Department of Labor ordered that growers had to pay \$1.40 an hour to workers brought in from Mexico.

A group of Filipino workers led by Larry Itliong struck to demand an equal wage. Chávez did not want to break the strike, but he did not believe that his union was strong enough to strike yet. Still, he put the issue to a vote. NFWA members chose to join the strike.

Soon Chávez and Itliong agreed to merge their organizations to have a stronger force. Finally, the union won contracts with the companies that grew grapes for wine. It was a remarkable success—but only a partial one. Table grape growers still refused to recognize the union.

Chávez staged a national grape boycott. The strike dragged on for many months. Over that time, Chávez tried to ensure that his workers upheld the principles of nonviolent protest that he valued. When he felt that union members were becoming too angry, he staged a hunger strike. For 25 days, he refused to eat as he rededicated himself—and the union—to nonviolence. As the strike continued, support for the boycott grew. Finally, the growers agreed to recognize the union. It took almost five years, but NFWA won better wages and working conditions for its members.

Activity

What obstacles blocked migrant workers' efforts to organize? What sacrifices did Chávez make for the union cause? Write a short response.