

HEEDING THE LESSONS OF CESAR CHAVEZ (4/03)

The 10th anniversary of farm worker leader Cesar Chavez' death will be marked on April 22, a day to recall the profound lessons his extraordinary life provided us.

There's much to learn from the life of such a man, one who inspired millions of people to seek -- and to win -- basic human rights that had long been denied them and inspired millions of others to join the struggle.

Chavez showed, above all, that the poor and oppressed can prevail against even the most powerful opponents – if they can organize themselves and adopt non-violence as their principal tactic.

"We have our bodies and spirits and the justice of our cause as our weapons," he explained.

The cause, of course, was that of the highly exploited farm worker. As a farm worker himself, Chavez carefully put together a grass-roots organization that enabled the workers to form their own union, the United Farm Workers. Then they won the essential support of millions of outsiders who heeded the UFW's call to boycott the produce of growers who refused to grant them union contracts.

It took five years, but in 1970 the UFW finally won the first farm union contracts in history. Five years after that, the union won the California law that's still the only law anywhere requiring growers to bargain with farm workers who vote for unionization.

The struggle was extremely difficult for the impoverished farm workers, and 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 at 66 in 1993.

Thanks in part to extremely lax enforcement of the law, UFW membership and the number of union contracts had declined steeply by the time of Chavez' death. But his passing led to a resurgence of UFW activity that has resulted in significant gains.

Most recently, the UFW won the right to represent employees of the country's largest strawberry grower. That was a sure sign the union finally is winning the drive to unionize California's \$800 million-a-year strawberry industry that has preoccupied the UFW and its supporters for nearly seven years.

Few UFW drives have been more ambitious or more important. Victory could very well lead to a breakthrough comparable to the winning of union rights from California's grape growers that marked the UFW's first major success three decades ago.

Over the past few years the union also has won contracts covering, among others, more than half of California's rose growers; most of the state's mushroom growers; one of its largest lettuce growers; vineyard workers at Washington state's largest winery, and employees of Florida's largest mushroom farm.

What's more, the UFW has won passage of a law designed to force California growers to abandon stalling tactics that many have used to avoid reaching contract agreements with workers who vote for union representation.

But despite the UFW's successes, the vast majority of farm workers are still mired in poverty, their pay and working and living conditions a national disgrace.

They average less than \$10,000 a year and have few – if any – fringe benefits. They suffer chronic unemployment. Job security is virtually unknown. Most hiring and firing is done at the whim of employers, many of them wealthy corporate growers who unilaterally set pay and working conditions and otherwise act arbitrarily. Child labor is rampant. Although exposed to heavy doses of pesticides and other dangers, workers are not covered by the job safety laws. They are fortunate to even have drinking water and field toilets on the job. And they are almost invariably forced to live in overcrowded, seriously substandard housing.

In heeding the lessons of Cesar Chavez, we should also be mindful of that and of the continuing necessity to take forceful legal steps and other action to finally provide a decent life for all those who do the hard, dirty and dangerous work that puts food on our tables.

The need, in short, is to carry on what Cesar Chavez began, to do what he would want us to do.