

WHAT CESAR CHAVEZ TAUGHT US (3/06)

This year marks the 38th anniversary of one of the most extreme and effective acts of sacrifice in U.S. labor history – a truly heroic act by farm worker leader Cesar Chavez.

For 25 days he fasted, in February and March of 1968, surviving on nothing but occasional sips of water. The fast was crucial in winning support for the nationwide grape boycott that forced growers to grant California's vineyard workers the first union contracts ever won by any farm workers – contracts that were essential if they were to finally escape abject poverty.

Waging the boycott was extremely difficult for the farm workers. With little money and experience, they traveled to unfamiliar cities far from their rural communities to seek support. Chavez' act inspired them as well as their potential supporters and made their own considerable sacrifices seem much less onerous.

Chavez had another urgent purpose. He dedicated the fast to reaffirming the principles of nonviolence that had guided his union, later to become the United Farm Workers, from its founding four years earlier.

Chavez was concerned that the frustrations of the grape pickers, who had been on strike for three years, were turning them toward violence.

“Some of our people accused us of cowardice,” he said. “They told me: ‘If you go out and kill a couple of growers and blow up some cold storage plants and trains, the growers will come to terms. This is the history of labor; this is how things are done.’”

Fearing that “someone would hurt someone” if picketing continued at the struck vineyards, and well aware that victory would come from peaceful urban boycott activities rather than picketing, Chavez called off the pickets. Then he retired to a small, white-walled storeroom at his union's headquarters in Delano, California, to fast, pray and read the Bible and the writings of Gandhi.

“No union movement,” Chavez declared, “is worth the death of one farm worker or his child or one grower or his child . . . Social justice for the dignity of man cannot be won at the price of human life.”

Tents were erected outside the storeroom to shelter union members and supporters who came in pilgrimage from all over the state. They celebrated

daily masses, held prayer vigils and stood in line for hours to speak briefly to Chavez as he lay on a cot, barely able to answer them.

Chavez broke the fast before 4,000 supporters at an ecumenical mass in Delano's city park. Senator Robert Kennedy was at his side as he slumped in a chair and nibbled feebly at a tiny bit of bread handed him by a priest. Kennedy took a portion from the same home-baked loaf, then hailed Chavez as "one of the heroic figures of our time."

Chavez reminded his followers, in a message read by an aide, that "we have our bodies and spirits and the justice of our cause as our weapons."

Within two years, those weapons brought victory to the vineyard workers. It was an extraordinary demonstration of the effectiveness of nonviolent activism. What the vineyard workers accomplished, and how they accomplished it, would never be forgotten – not by the millions of social activists worldwide who were inspired and energized by the workers' struggle, nor by the workers themselves.

The victory and the vital lesson it taught would not have been possible except for Cesar Chavez and his great sacrifice. The ordeal sent him to a hospital for three weeks, and for much of the next eight months he directed the union from a hospital bed at home. The effects of the fast, combined with those of other fasts in later years, undoubtedly contributed to his untimely death at age 66 in 1993.