

CESAR CHAVEZ – A NATIONAL HERO (3/07)

March 31 will be a special day in nine states and dozens of cities – Cesar Chavez Day, honoring the late founder of the United Farm Workers union on the 80th anniversary of his birth. That's important, but it's way past time that a national holiday was declared in his honor.

Like Martin Luther King Jr., who's rightly honored with a national holiday, Chavez 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 himself was very much inspired by Dr. King. He adopted King's non-violent tactics, as he did those of another of his role models, Mohandas Gandhi.

A national Cesar Chavez Day would be a well-deserved tribute to Latinos and organized labor. But even more than that, it would be a special opportunity to remind Americans of the profound lessons Chavez' extraordinary life taught us.

He 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," Chavez 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 passage of 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.

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. Child labor is rampant. 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.

Many of the workers are desperately poor immigrants who must take whatever is offered or be replaced by other desperate workers from the endless stream of immigrants.

Although exposed to heavy doses of pesticides and other dangers that make theirs one of the country's most hazardous occupations, the 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.

A national Cesar Chavez Day would remind us of that, too, 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 forward what Cesar Chavez began, to do what he would want us to do.