

Letter from Cesar Chavez to Farm Workers and Supporters May 15, 1972

*On Thursday, May 11, 1972 Cesar Chavez Began A Fast  
For the Spirit of Justice. Following Is A Letter  
From Cesar To Farm Workers And To The Supporters  
OF The Farm Workers' Cause*

May 15, 1972  
Phoenix, Arizona  
Santa Rita Center  
1017 E. Hadley

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

Our people have been poor for more years than we can remember. We have made only a small amount of progress these past ten years of work and struggle. Our women and children still die too often and too young. There is too much hunger and disease among us. Not even 5% of America's migrant farm workers are protected by union contracts. Yet there is a great fear of our union — a fear that I do not fully understand, but that I know is present with most growers and especially among the lettuce growers in their current resistance to the rights of their workers. Growers through the Farm Bureau are seeking to bring the whole machinery of government against us. Why are they so afraid of a union for migrant farm workers? Is it so much to ask that the poorest people of the land have a measure of justice?

In Arizona — one of two major lettuce-producing states — the growers and the politicians have just passed a law that destroys the right of farm workers to have a union. Farm workers under this law cannot engage in consumer boycotts. Supporters of our union could be arrested for telling their friends not to buy lettuce. Farm workers are put in the humiliating position of having to go to a special Agricultural Labor Relations Board (appointed by Republican Governor Jack Williams) for a government-conducted election to determine their right to strike. The law provides for union representation elections but establishes so many steps and procedures that seasonal and migrant workers would never have a chance to vote. Growers cannot only frustrate an election for 2-3 months; they can actually avoid elections by a minor change in hiring practices. Even if workers should vote for the union, an employer can seek a de-certification election after only a 3-month waiting period. The bill is discriminatory. It is aimed only at farm workers who are mostly Black, Brown and Indian. No other labor force is asked to live with these repressive measures.

This is what the Farm Bureau means when they advocate “free elections” and “responsible legislation.”

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Farm workers in Arizona tried to tell their legislators about the unfairness of this law. They collected letters and petitions and brought them to their representatives. They were met with cold indifference. They were patient but could not get appointments. In many cases, their letters were thrown into trashcans in front of their eyes. After the bill passed, it was brought to the Governor by the Highway Patrol. He signed it immediately. The next day the Governor was asked by a reporter to comment on the farm workers who wanted to meet with him. He responded: “As far as I’m concerned, these people do not exist.”

What is it that causes sane men to act so hastily and so cruelly? It cannot be that we are so powerful. In the context of the great corporation, we are like a mosquito on an elephant’s back.

This attack on our union in Arizona and in every major state is also an attack on the spirit of justice in America. Why shouldn’t farm workers finally have a chance to hold their heads high in their own organization? Why shouldn’t there be food on the tables of the families who work so hard to harvest that food? Why shouldn’t poor people be allowed to struggle non-violently for justice? The answers seem so obvious but the Farm Bureau, the lettuce growers, and the politicians are deaf to our pleas.

My major concern is not this particular Arizona law and the fast is not out of anger against the growers. My concern is the spirit of fear that lies behind such laws in the hearts of growers and legislators across the country. Somehow these powerful men and women must be helped to realize that there is nothing to fear from treating their workers as fellow human beings. We do not seek to destroy the growers. We only wish an opportunity to organize our union and to work non-violently to bring a new day of hope and justice to the farm workers of our country. It is long overdue and surely it is not too much to ask. Justice for farm workers is our only goal; it is the goal of our non-violent lettuce boycott. Will you help us by making a commitment not to eat or buy lettuce? This is a small sacrifice that can bring a great change for migrant farm workers. I ask for your prayers and your continued help in our struggle.

Your brother,

Cesar E. Chavez

Dup. 5/16/72  
NFWM