

ZNET - 2008

AN HONOR LONG DUE CESAR CHAVEZ

By Dick Meister

It's been 15 years since the death of the United Farm Workers' Cesar Chavez -- way past time to make his birthdate of March 31 a national holiday. Petitions urging Congress to do just that are now being circulated, appropriately on the 40th anniversary of the 25-day fast that was one of the most extreme and most effective of his many truly heroic acts.

Like Martin Luther King Jr., who's rightly honored with a national holiday, Chavez inspired and energized millions of people worldwide to seek – and to win – basic human rights that had long been denied them and inspired millions of others to join the struggle.

A national holiday would be a well-deserved tribute to Latinos and organized labor. Even more than that, it would be a special opportunity to remind Americans everywhere of the profound lessons of Chavez' extraordinary life.

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 grapes, lettuce and other produce of growers who refused to grant them union rights.

Many others before him had tried and failed to form an effective farm workers' union and few – if any – of those who claimed expertise in such matters thought Chavez would be any different. But they failed to account for the tactical brilliance, creativity and just plain stubbornness of Chavez, a sad-eyed, disarmingly soft-spoken man who talked of militancy in calm, measured tones, a gentle and incredibly patient man who hid great strategic talent behind shy smiles and an appearance of utter candor.

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 pioneering California law that requires growers to bargain with farm workers who vote for unionization. That has led to improvements in the pay, benefits and working conditions of many of the state's highly exploited farm workers, and given them all the weapon needed to better their conditions.

The struggle for those first union contracts was extremely difficult for the impoverished farm workers, and Chavez risked his health – perhaps his life – to provide them extreme examples of the sacrifices necessary for victory. Most notably, he engaged in lengthy, highly

publicized fasts, such as the 25-day ordeal in February and March of 1968 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.

Chavez had another urgent purpose. He dedicated the fast to reaffirming the principles of non-violence that had guided his union 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 toward violence. Fearing that "someone would hurt someone" if picketing continued at the vineyards the union had struck and well aware that victory would come from peaceful urban boycott activities rather than picketing, Chavez called off the picketing.

Then he retired to a small, white-walled storeroom at the UFW's headquarters in Delano, California, to fast, pray and read the Bible and the writings of Mohandas Gandhi.

Chavez broke the fast before 4,000 supporters at an ecumenical mass in Delano's city park. Sen. 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."

Despite the UFW's successes since then, many farm workers are still mired in poverty, their pay and working and living conditions a national disgrace.

A national Cesar Chavez Day should remind us 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.

We need, in short, to carry on what Cesar Chavez began.