

Cesar Chavez, 66, Organizer of Union For Migrants, Dies

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Cesar Chavez, the migrant worker who emerged from the poverty of an agricultural valley in Arizona to found America's first successful union of farm workers, was found dead yesterday in San Luis, Ariz. He was 66.

Mr. Chavez, who lived in Keene, Calif., and was in Arizona on union business, died in his sleep, the local police said. An autopsy is planned.

Blending the nonviolent resistance of Gandhi with the organizational skills of his mentor, the social activist Saul Alinsky, Mr. Chavez captured worldwide attention in the 1960's. Leading an initially lonely battle to unionize the fields and orchards of California, he issued a call to boycott grapes that soon became a cause celebre.

Mr. Chavez, who was described by Robert F. Kennedy in 1968 as "one of the heroic figures of our time," was widely acknowledged to have done more to improve the lot of the migrant farm worker than anyone else.

Fighting growers and shippers who for generations had defeated efforts to unionize field workers, and later fighting rival unionists, Mr. Chavez for the first time brought a degree of stability and security to the lives of some migrant workers.

Largely because of him, the California Legislature in 1975 passed the nation's first collective bargaining act outside Hawaii for farm workers, who are largely excluded from Federal labor law coverage. "For the first time," Mr. Chavez said when asked to describe the union's achievement, "the farm worker got some power."

Asked what had motivated his stubborn fight, he said, "For many years I was a farm worker, a migratory worker, and, well, personally -- and I'm being very frank -- maybe it's just a matter of trying to even the score."

But he ultimately failed to realize his dream of forging a nationwide organization. In most of America, farm workers continue to toil for low wages, without job security, vulnerable to exploitation. Even in California he found it difficult to translate the early triumphs of what he called La Causa into a viable labor organization.

In 1939 Mr. Chavez's family settled in San Jose. His father became active in a successful effort to organize workers at a dried-fruit packing plant, giving Mr. Chavez his first glimpse of workers taking collective action.

After World War II, in which he served two years in the Navy, Mr. Chavez resumed his life as a migrant. He married Helen Fabela in Delano, which he later made famous far beyond its dusty corner of the San Joaquin Valley.

Besides his wife he is survived by eight children, 27 grandchildren, a great-grandchild, three brothers and two sisters.

The pivotal role in Mr. Chavez's emergence as a labor leader was played by Mr. Alinsky, the Chicago-based organizer who described himself as a "professional radical." In the early 1950's he helped Mexican-Americans organize into a political bloc.

Mr. Alinsky sent an aide to recruit potential leaders, and among the first people he met was Mr. Chavez, then working in a San Jose apricot orchard.

Mr. Chavez joined Mr. Alinsky's Community Service Organization, registering Mexican-Americans to vote and helping them deal with government agencies. But he later criticized the organization as dominated by non-Hispanic liberals, and in 1958 he quit, went to Delano and formed the National Farm Workers Association. Five Years of La Huelga

By 1965 Mr. Chavez had organized 1,700 families and persuaded two growers to raise wages moderately. His fledging union was too weak for a major strike. But 800 workers in a virtually moribund A.F.L.-C.I.O. group, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, struck grape growers in Delano, and some of the members of his group demanded to join the strike.

That was the beginning of five years of La Huelga -- "the strike" -- in which the frail labor leader, who was 5 feet 6 inches tall, became familiar to people in much of the world as he battled the economic power of the farmers and corporations in the San Joaquin Valley.

With its charismatic leader, song-filled meetings and the fundamental appeal of its struggle, depicted as a downtrodden minority battling an exploitative oligopoly, Mr. Chavez's organization reminded many old-timers of the industrial battles that they had waged generations earlier.

He was shy and not an outstanding public speaker. But he showed a humility that, with his shyness and small stature, piercing dark eyes and facial features that hinted at Indian ancestors, gave him an image as a David taking on the Goliaths of agriculture.

Mr. Chavez's style was monastic, almost religious. He said his life was dedicated only to bettering the lives of the exploited farm workers. He was a vegetarian, and his weekly salary of \$5 was a virtual vow of poverty. Articles about him often spoke of his "saintly" and even "messianic" qualities.

Soon, priests and nuns, college students and unionists from around the country marched with Mr. Chavez. Supporters sent money for La Causa. Most of the farm workers who enlisted had meager resources and were asked to pay only the dues they could afford, often only a few cents a month.

Borrowing from Gandhi, Mr. Chavez sometimes went on fasts or invited arrest to call attention to his battle with the growers. But he ran the union along authoritarian lines.

With music and singing and hundreds of fluttering flags bearing the union's symbol of a black eagle on a field of red, union rallies had the quality of ritual. Typically, Mr. Chavez arrived late at the rallies, appearing to a roar of approval after a musical group had played and other speakers warmed up the audience.

In 1968 he began his most visible campaign, urging Americans not to buy table grapes produced in the San Joaquin Valley until growers agreed to union contracts. The boycott proved a huge success. A public opinion poll found that 17 million Americans had stopped buying grapes because of the boycott.

On July 30, 1970, after losing millions of dollars, growers agreed to sign. It was probably the high point in the union's history.

More successful boycotts and organizing successes followed, but soon many of the largest growers, in an effort to stave off Mr. Chavez's union, invited the International Brotherhood of Teamsters to organize their workers. Mr. Chavez complained that the teamsters were signing "sweetheart contracts," and before long his hard-won gains in Delano seemed to be slipping away.

The union that Mr. Chavez founded, the United Farm Workers of America, became troubled by dissent and other problems and was unable to organize more than 20 percent of California's 200,000 farm workers.

The tactics that he used so effectively in the 1960's and early 70's -- strikes and boycotts, fasting and the long march -- eventually lost their magic. And, as the United Farm Workers were no longer seen as a social cause but as a conventional labor union, he was disappointed by the disaffection of politicians and other supporters.

Gains From Unionization

In 1965, when he formed the union, farm workers in California averaged less than \$1.50 an hour. They had no fringe benefits, no seniority rights and no standing to challenge abuses by employers or exploitative labor contractors.

Unionization brought sharp pay increases. For the first time, migrant workers were eligible for medical insurance, employer-paid pensions, unemployment insurance and other benefits, and they had a mechanism to challenge employer abuses.

And the union's impact extended far beyond its membership. The threat of unionization by Mr. Chavez raised agricultural wages throughout California. Born On Arizona Farm

Cesar Estrada Chavez was born on March 31, 1927, near Yuma, Ariz., the second of five children of Juana and Librado Chavez. His father's parents migrated from Mexico in 1880.

His early years were spent on the family's 160-acre farm. But in the seventh year of the Depression, when he was 10, the family fell behind on mortgage payments and lost its farm.

Along with thousands of other families in the Southwest, they sought a new life in California. They found it picking carrots, cotton and other crops in arid valleys, following the sun in search of the next harvest and the next migrants' camp.

Mr. Chavez never graduated from high school, and once counted 65 elementary schools he had attended "for a day, a week or a few months."

Beginning with the Industrial Workers of the World at the turn of the century, unions tried for decades to organize immigrant unskilled workers, first Chinese, then Japanese and later Filipinos and Mexican-Americans, on whom California growers depended. But the field hands, their organizing drives vulnerable to the competition of other poor migrants seeking work, found themselves fighting not only powerful growers, but also the police and government officials.

More growers, many charging that the United Farm Workers was poorly run and undependable, signed with the teamsters. But two things kept his dream alive: First, the teamsters' leaders, smarting from charges of corruption, made a truce.

Second, Edmund G. Brown Jr., a Democrat who had marched with the farm workers before his election as Governor in 1974, won adoption of the state Agricultural Labor Relations Act, a landmark bill establishing collective bargaining for farm workers and granting the union concessions. Among these concessions was a "good standing clause," which in effect permitted union leaders to deny work in the fields to any worker who challenged their decisions.

The teamsters virtually abandoned the fight against Mr. Chavez in 1977. In the years that followed, the United Farm Workers signed occasional contracts with growers but never attained the dominance that Mr. Chavez envisioned. A decade after the Delano strike, fewer than 10 percent of the grapes in that community were harvested by his union's members.

In the mid-1970's Mr. Chavez, who had built a commune-style union headquarters called La Paz in a former sanitarium in Keene, near Bakersfield, began to complain that "spies" were trying to undermine the union.

This occurred after Mr. Chavez befriended Charles Dederich, the founder of Synanon, a drug rehabilitation organization. Some Chavez associates said Mr. Dederich advised him to be autocratic. Soon, Mr. Chavez purged the union of non-Hispanic officials.

After Mr. Brown's departure from the governorship in 1983, Mr. Chavez battled with the successor Republican administration of George Deukmejian, whose campaign was backed by the growers. In 1983, Mr. Chavez, expressing determination to recapture the union's momentum, revived the use of the boycott, directed at nonunion table grapes and Salinas Valley lettuce.

By the end of 1985 growers said the high-tech boycott was having little effect on sales.