In celebrating author John Steinbeck's centennial this year, we should not forget that he was one of the greatest advocates America's perpetually oppressed farm workers have ever had. He played a vital role in the long history of attempts to bring a decent life to them that were begun by radical union organizers early in the 20th century and that the United Farm Workers and the successors of UFW founder Cesar Chavez have continued to this day.

Few writers, if any, have better described the miserable conditions endured by so many of those who grow and harvest our food. None have gained them greater public support, sympathy and understanding. Steinbeck stirred up the country to an extent unmatched until the coming of the UFW in the 1960s with its boycotts and other broadly supported actions.

"The Grapes of Wrath," Steinbeck's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel of 1939, had the greatest impact. The dramatic, plainly written, stunningly realistic epic of migrants who left their drought-stricken farms in Oklahoma and other southern and southwestern states to seek work on California's corporate-controlled farms was a run-away best seller. As successful, popular – and realistic – was the film starring Henry Fonda.

The response to the novel by growers and their allies in politics and law enforcement made clear that it was indeed an accurate depiction of the flagrant mistreatment of migrant farm workers. They denounced Steinbeck as a liar and worse, threatened him with physical harm and had the book banned and burned in several farm communities.

"The Communist Party wrote the outline and Steinbeck filled in the rest of the crap," thundered the wealthy grower who presided over a book burning in Bakersfield. A congressman from a nearby county declared it "the most damnable book that was ever permitted to be written."

The book's opponents feared, more than anything else, that it would inspire support for granting farm workers the right of unionization. That was essential if they were to improve their abominable working conditions and raise pay that was barely enough to buy a day's supply of food at grower-run company stores. It amounted to as little as $1 for a 10 hour day.
Much of Steinbeck's earlier work—short stories and journalism as well as novels—also effectively exposed the workers' plight. That included the violent suppression of the several strikes they waged in the early and mid-1930s to demand union rights.

Public concern over their treatment reached a peak after the San Joaquin Valley was hit by a disastrous flood in 1938. Steinbeck and others told the country of thousands of homeless and starving families and of local officials and growers who fought to keep federal agencies from bringing in food and medical supplies for them, lest it decrease their willingness to take jobs no matter how bad the pay and conditions.

In one of a series of widely circulated articles for The San Francisco News, Steinbeck reported that "the workers are herded about like animals. Every possible method is used to make them feel inferior and insecure. At the slightest possible suspicion that the men are organizing they are run from the ranch at the point of guns. The large ranch owners know that if organization is ever effected there will be the expense of toilets, showers, decent living conditions and a raise in wages."

The articles and others in The Nation magazine and elsewhere led screen actress (and later Congresswoman) Helen Gahagan Douglas to form The John Steinbeck Committee to Aid Agricultural Organization. But grower allies in the Republican-controlled State Legislature blocked the committee's attempts and those of liberal Democratic Gov. Culbert Olson and his Housing and Immigration Commissioner, Carey McWilliams, to grant farm workers collective bargaining rights.

There were hopes, however, that heightened public pressure would bring farm workers under the federal law that had granted union rights to industrial workers a few years earlier. A U.S. Senate chaired by Wisconsin Progressive Robert La Follette Jr. concluded, after a series of highly publicized hearings in California Inspired in large part by the writings of Steinbeck and McWilliams, that the federal act should be extended to agriculture.

But by the time the recommendation was formally issued in 1942, World War II was on. Most of the migrant farm workers were in military service or working in relatively high-paying war plants, and growers were demanding low-paid replacements as essential to the war effort. They got them through a federal program that provided an unlimited supply of temporary workers from Mexico who were at least as poorly treated as had been the U.S. migrants. Their
easy availability raised a barrier to farm unionization that was breached by the UFW only after the program was ended in 1964.

Steinbeck also went on to other concerns after the war broke out. But he had provided invaluable aid to a key group of Americans who desperately needed it and had inspired and helped lay down guidelines for those who followed him.