March 31st is a special day in eleven states, including California, and in dozens of cities and counties nationwide – and should be. It's Cesar Chavez Day, honoring the late founder of the United Farm Workers union on the 83rd anniversary of his birth.

Certainly there are few people in any field more deserving of such an honor, certainly no one I've met in more than 50 years of labor reporting.

I first met Cesar Chavez when I was reporting on labor for the San Francisco Chronicle. It was a hot summer night in 1965 in the little San Joaquin Valley town of Delano, California. Chavez, shining black hair trailing across his smooth brown forehead, wearing a red plaid shirt that had become almost a uniform, sat behind a makeshift desk topped with bright red Formica, deadly serious but quick to smile.

"Si se puede," he said repeatedly to me, a highly skeptical reporter, as we talked deep into the early morning hours there in the cluttered shack that served as headquarters for him and the others who were trying to create an effective farm workers union. "Si se puede – it can be done!"

But I would not be swayed. Too many others, over too many years, had tried and had failed to win for farm workers the union rights they had to have if they were to escape the severe economic and social deprivation inflicted on them by their grower employers.

Although they did the indispensable work of harvesting the food that sustains us all, farm workers typically were paid at or below the poverty level, had few fringe benefits and very little legal protection from employer mistreatment. Most lacked even such on-the-job amenities as toilets and fresh drinking water, and were regularly exposed to pesticide poisoning and other hazards. Their living conditions were generally as abominable.

The futile attempts to arm the workers with the essential weapon of unionization began with the Industrial Workers of the World, who stormed across western fields early in the last century. Next came Communists, socialists, AFL and CIO organizers. All their efforts had collapsed under the relentless pressure of growers and their powerful political and corporate allies.
I was certain Chavez’ effort would be no different. I was wrong. I had not accounted for the tactical brilliance, creativity, courage and just plain stubbornness of Cesar 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 attitude of utter candor.

Chavez grasped the essential fact that farm workers had to organize themselves. Outside organizers, however well intentioned, could not do it. Chavez, a farm worker himself, carefully put together a grass-roots organization that enabled the workers to form their own union, which then sought out – and won – widespread support from influential outsiders.

The key weapon of this United Farm Workers union was the boycott. The UFW's boycotts against grape and lettuce growers and wineries in the late 1960s won the first farm union contracts in history. That in turn led to enactment in 1975 of the California law – also a first – that requires growers to bargain collectively with workers who vote for unionization. That has brought substantial improvements in the pay, benefits, working conditions and general status of the state's farm workers.

The struggle was extremely difficult for the impoverished 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 in 1993 at age 66.

Fasts, boycotts. It's no coincidence that those were among the principal tools of Mohandas Gandhi, for Chavez drew much of his inspiration from the Indian leader. Like Gandhi and another of his models, Martin Luther King Jr., Chavez believed fervently in the tactics of non-violence. Like them, he showed the world how profoundly effective they can be in seeking justice from even the most powerful of opponents.

As Chavez explained, “We have our bodies and spirits and the justice of our cause as our weapons.”

What the UFW accomplished, and how the union accomplished it, will never be forgotten – not by the millions of social activists who have been inspired and energized by the farm workers' struggle, nor by the workers themselves.
The struggle continues, for despite the UFW's successes, most farm workers are still mired in poverty. But because of the union, they have a genuine hope of bettering their condition.

The UFW won important legal rights for them. But more than union contracts, and more than laws, farm workers now have what Cesar Chavez insisted was needed above all else. That, as he told me so many years ago, "is to have the workers truly believe and understand and know that they are free, that they are free men and women, that they can stand up and say how they feel."

Freedom. No leader has ever left a greater legacy.