

**March 31st a Day of Celebrating César Chávez,
the Champion of Farm Workers' Rights**

By

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On March 31, 2008, then Senator Barack Obama endorsed the idea of creating a national holiday to honor Cesar Chavez, a resolution reintroduced to House of Representatives by U.S. Representative Joe Baca. César Chávez was one of the most influential labor leaders and civil rights activists in American history. Born into a family of migrant farm workers, Chávez dedicated his life to fighting for better working conditions, fair wages, and dignity for agricultural laborers who were long overlooked and exploited. As co-founder of the United Farm Workers (UFW), he used nonviolent tactics like strikes, boycotts, and fasting to bring national attention to the suffering of farm workers. His story is not just one of labor reformist's, it is a story of resilience, sacrifice, and the power of grassroots activism to change history. On August 18, 2000, Senate Bill 984, authored by California State Senator Richard Polanco, was signed into law. In 2014, President Barack Obama declared that Cesar Chavez would be a commemorative holiday.

César Estrada Chávez was born on March 31, 1927, in Yuma, Arizona, to a Mexican American family with deep roots in the Southwest. His grandparents had settled in the United States in the late 1800s, and his family had once owned a small piece of land and operated a general store. His parents, Juana and Librado Chávez, were hardworking, humble people who instilled in their children a strong sense of dignity, faith, and responsibility. Though they were not wealthy, the family had stability and a sense of purpose until the Great Depression struck.

In the early 1930s, during a time of widespread economic collapse across the United States, the Chávez family lost their land and home due to a combination of drought, debt, unpaid taxes, and discriminatory practices by local officials. According to some accounts, the family was misled by an unethical lawyer who took advantage of their limited English and legal knowledge. This loss marked a turning point in young César's life. Stripped of their property and independence, the Chávez family was forced to join thousands of other displaced Mexican American families as migrant farm workers, traveling wherever labor was needed for seasonal work throughout California and the Southwest.

César was just a child, but he quickly became familiar with the harsh realities of life in the fields. The conditions were brutal: long hours under the scorching sun, exposure to

toxic pesticides, low wages, and unsanitary, overcrowded living quarters. Farm workers had no legal protection, no healthcare, and often no access to education. They were considered easily replaceable and were frequently exploited by labor contractors and growers who prioritized profit over human dignity.

Despite the grueling work, Chávez's mother, Juana, remained a pillar of strength and moral guidance in the family. A devout Catholic, she modeled the values of compassion, humility, and nonviolence, often helping others in need even when her own family struggled. These lessons deeply influenced César, who would later draw heavily on Catholic social teachings and spiritual symbolism in his organizing work.

Because his family constantly moved to follow the crops, César attended more than thirty different schools, often facing discrimination from both teachers and students. He recalled being punished for speaking Spanish, the language he spoke at home. At one school, he was forced to wear a sign that read "I am a clown. I speak Spanish." Experiences like these left lasting emotional scars and contributed to his early awareness of racial and class-based injustice. Nonetheless, Chávez developed a fierce sense of pride in his Mexican heritage and later emphasized cultural pride as a means of empowering farm workers.

At the age of fifteen, Chávez dropped out of formal schooling after eighth grade to work full-time and help support his family. Though his formal education ended early, he became a lifelong learner, reading widely and teaching himself about history, economics, philosophy, and political theory. He was especially inspired by the writings of St. Francis of Assisi, Mahatma Gandhi, and later Martin Luther King Jr. He read about labor movements, civil disobedience, and community organizing concepts he would later apply as the leader of a national movement for farm workers. Still, despite the bullying and constant upheaval, Chávez developed a strong sense of justice, inspired by his mother, Juana, who taught him through her example to meet injustice with compassion and nonviolence. A devout Catholic, she emphasized charity, empathy, and patience qualities that later became the moral foundation of Chávez's leadership style.

In 1944, at the age of seventeen, César Chávez enlisted in the United States Navy during World War II. Like many young men of his generation, he saw military service as a chance to escape the poverty of the fields, prove his patriotism, and access new opportunities through programs like the G.I. Bill after the war. For Chávez, joining the Navy was not just a career move; it was also a deeply personal decision. His family, like many Mexican American families, held a strong belief in service to the country, despite the discrimination they often faced at home.

However, Chávez's hopes for a transformative experience were soon dashed. He served for two years, from 1944 to 1946, and was stationed mostly in the Western Pacific, where he worked in a variety of support roles as a deckhand and manual laborer. Although he was trained in naval procedures, he was never given combat duties or opportunities for advancement. He later reflected that during his time in the Navy, he "never got to do anything that would help me advance or learn a trade."

More importantly, Chávez encountered systemic racism and segregation within the armed forces. Mexican American sailors, like African Americans and other minorities, were often assigned the most menial tasks and excluded from the kinds of technical training or leadership development offered to white servicemembers. Socially, they were treated as second-class citizens mocked for their accents, backgrounds, or appearance. Even while wearing the uniform of the United States military, Chávez remained a target of discrimination, which left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Chávez later described his time in the Navy as one of the most difficult and disheartening experiences of his life. In interviews and speeches, he spoke openly about how his service failed to live up to the ideals he had been promised. Unlike many veterans who returned home proud and empowered, Chávez returned to California in 1946 feeling disillusioned, ignored, and more convinced than ever that systemic injustice ran deep even in the institutions meant to symbolize unity and national pride.

Importantly, this disillusionment did not lead to despair but rather became part of Chávez's growing awareness of the need for social change. His time in the Navy served as a painful but eye-opening chapter, reinforcing what he had already witnessed in the fields: that people of color, the poor, and especially working-class Latinos were being denied basic human dignity and opportunities. Though he rarely spoke at length about his military years, they played a crucial role in hardening his resolve and shaping his vision for a more just society. It became clear to him that true freedom could not be won solely through war or military service; it had to be fought for on the ground, through organizing, community empowerment, and the slow, often painful work of building a movement.

After leaving the military, Chávez quietly returned to Delano, California, in 1946. Chávez quietly resumed life as a farm worker, now with a clearer understanding that inequality was systemic, and that neither hard work nor military service guaranteed fairness or dignity for people like him. The disillusionment he experienced in the Navy did not lead to bitterness; it fueled his growing belief that lasting change would only come from the bottom up, through collective action and grassroots organizing.

In 1948, Chávez married Helen Fabela, a fellow farm worker and committed activist, and together they raised eight children. Though he worked multiple jobs to support his family, Chávez never lost sight of the bigger picture. During this time, he became increasingly active in his local community.

In the early 1950s, Chávez became active in the Community Service Organization (CSO), a Latino civil rights group focused on voter registration, education, and fighting discrimination in California. Under the mentorship of activist Fred Ross, Chávez honed his skills in grassroots organizing and community empowerment.

Fred Ross recognized Chávez's natural leadership and communication skills and recruited him to be a full-time community organizer. Initially, Chávez was hesitant organizing meant unstable income and long hours, but he accepted the challenge. With CSO, he learned the fundamentals of door-to-door organizing, public speaking, campaign planning, and advocacy. His work involved everything from helping families secure legal aid to organizing citizenship classes for immigrants and lobbying for more equitable services from local governments.

Chávez quickly rose through the ranks of the CSO and, by the early 1950s, had become one of its most effective organizers. He was eventually named national director of the organization in 1958. However, as much as he valued the work of CSO, Chávez became increasingly frustrated that the organization refused to address the exploitation of farm workers, believing it was too risky and unpopular to take on the powerful agricultural industry. Chávez argued that farm laborers some of the most oppressed and voiceless people in America needed an organization of their own, one that would not shy away from confrontation with growers and political elites.

In 1962, after a decade of work with the CSO, Chávez made the bold decision to resign from his secure position and devote himself fully to organizing farm workers. It was a major personal sacrifice he had no funding, no office, and no institutional support. Nevertheless, with unwavering faith in his mission, Chávez moved his family to Delano, California, and laid the groundwork for what would soon become the United Farm Workers (UFW).

His time with the CSO had been a training ground, where he mastered the skills, built the networks, and developed the organizing philosophy that would later define his leadership of the farm workers' movement. It also taught him that change could only come through empowering people to fight for themselves, a lesson he carried with him into every strike, boycott, and fast he would lead in the years to come.

In 1962, Chávez, along with fellow activist Dolores Huerta, co-founded the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), which would later merge with the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) to form the United Farm Workers (UFW). Unlike other unions at the time, the UFW was built not only on labor organizing principles but also on cultural identity, spiritual values, and nonviolent resistance. Chávez understood the struggles of farm workers on a deeply personal level, and this gave him both credibility and trust among those he sought to organize.

One of UFW's most defining campaigns was the Delano Grape Strike, which began in 1965. Filipino farm workers, led by Larry Itliong, had initiated the strike to protest poor pay and working conditions. Chávez and the NFWA joined them, uniting Latino and Filipino workers for the first time in a major labor action. The strike soon evolved into a national movement, with Chávez calling for a nationwide boycott of table grapes to pressure growers into negotiating with the union. The strike lasted over five years, and after sustained national boycotts and immense public pressure, growers finally agreed to historic union contracts in 1970 that improved wages, benefits, and worker protections.

Following this success, Chávez and the UFW expanded their efforts to other crops and industries. One of the most significant of these was the Salad Bowl Strike of 1970, the largest farm worker strike in U.S. history. The strike was aimed at powerful lettuce growers who refused to recognize the UFW and attempted to sign "sweetheart contracts" with the rival Teamsters Union, which had little support among actual farm workers. Chávez responded with a bold strategy: not only did he call for strikes, but he also organized a nationwide lettuce boycott, appealing directly to consumers across the country to stop buying non-union lettuce. The boycott had widespread public support and forced several growers to return to the bargaining table with the UFW.

In the years that followed, Chávez led other important actions. These included:

- **The Lettuce Strike and Boycott (1970–1973):** After the Salad Bowl Strike, Chávez continued fighting for lettuce workers' rights as growers and Teamsters continued to clash with the UFW. This conflict escalated into physical confrontations and legal battles. Eventually, through persistent organizing and boycott campaigns, Chávez's efforts brought many companies back under union contracts.
- **The Strawberry Workers Campaign:** Though much of this came later in the 1990s under the UFW after Chávez's death, he laid the groundwork by helping organize early efforts in strawberry fields during the 1980s. He understood that the multi-billion-dollar strawberry industry was one of the most exploitative sectors and

began efforts to help those workers organize before the larger movement grew in the following decades.

- Gallo Wine Boycott (1973–1978): When Gallo, one of California’s largest wine producers, refused to renew contracts with the UFW, Chávez launched a highly publicized boycott of Gallo wines. This campaign included national marches and protests, drawing attention to the exploitation in the wine industry. After years of sustained pressure, UFW won new contracts.

César Chávez’s work with the United Farm Workers (UFW) was deeply rooted in California’s Central Valley and Central Coast agricultural regions, where many of the nation’s fruits, vegetables, and nuts are grown. The cities and towns of Gilroy, Watsonville, Salinas, San Jose, Santa Cruz, Los Banos, San Martin, Prunedale, and Hollister played critical roles as both hubs of agricultural production and battlegrounds in the fight for farm workers’ rights. Gilroy, known as the “Garlic Capital of the World,” was a major site for farm worker organizing, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. Garlic growers, like other crop producers in the region, were targeted by the UFW’s boycotts and strikes as workers demanded union contracts and improved labor conditions. Watsonville and Santa Cruz were central to the strawberry industry, one of the most labor-intensive and exploitative agricultural sectors. Chávez and the UFW organized workers in these areas to combat poor wages, pesticide exposure, and harsh working conditions. The Watsonville farm workers’ strikes and boycotts became emblematic of the broader struggle within the strawberry fields, a fight that continued well into the 1980s and beyond. Salinas, often called the “Salad Bowl of the World,” was home to vast lettuce and vegetable farms that employed thousands of farm workers. The Salad Bowl Strike (1970), the largest farm worker strike in U.S. history, began here and spread to nearby agricultural towns. The region was a focal point of UFW’s efforts to challenge grower domination and win collective bargaining rights.

San Jose and the surrounding Santa Clara Valley, while more urbanized, also had significant agricultural areas and migrant worker populations. Chávez’s organizing extended into these communities, where farm workers lived and formed networks of solidarity. Los Banos and Hollister are in the northern San Joaquin Valley and served as important staging grounds for farm worker protests and UFW organizing. These towns were key points in the network of agricultural labor communities where Chávez and his fellow organizers built local support. San Martin and Prunedale, smaller agricultural towns, were part of the broader UFW outreach, representing the rural communities where farm workers and their families lived under difficult conditions. Chávez’s approach emphasized organizing not just in the fields but in these residential communities, helping build a strong sense of identity and empowerment among workers.

Throughout these regions, Chávez's tactics of nonviolent strikes, consumer boycotts, and community education resonated deeply. His ability to connect farm workers across diverse crops, ethnicities, and geographies was crucial in sustaining the movement's momentum. The UFW's success in these areas laid the foundation for broader labor reforms in agriculture and helped transform the social and political landscape of California.

Chávez was deeply influenced by nonviolent leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. He believed that change could be achieved through peaceful resistance, community organizing, and moral appeal. Chávez often fasted as a form of protest, using his personal sacrifice to bring attention to the suffering of workers. His longest fast lasted 25 days in 1968.

Chávez also used religious symbolism, cultural pride, and grassroots activism to unite workers and gain public support. His motto, "Sí se puede" ("Yes, it can be done"), became a rallying cry not just for farm workers, but for many other social justice movements in the United States.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, Chávez suffered multiple strokes and health complications, which limited his ability to remain active. Despite his declining physical condition, he continued to offer guidance and moral support until his death on April 23, 1993, at his home in San Luis, Arizona. His death was due to natural causes related to his strokes and declining health. The farm worker movement mourned the loss of its iconic leader, but his legacy only grew stronger.

Since his death, Chavez has been honored in many ways. In 1994, President Bill Clinton awarded Chávez the Presidential Medal of Freedom, recognizing his lifelong commitment to social justice. The United Farm Workers headquarters in Delano, California, stands as a historic site preserving the history and legacy of Chávez and the labor movement. The César E. Chávez National Monument was established in 2012 by President Barack Obama in Keene, California, preserving Chávez's home and UFW headquarters. César Chávez Day, celebrated on March 31, is a state holiday in California, Colorado, and Texas, and observed in other states with events that educate and inspire. Numerous schools, streets, parks, and community centers across the country bear Chávez's name, ensuring his legacy remains visible. Modern labor and immigrant rights movements often draw direct inspiration from Chávez's organizing model. Groups like the Fight for \$15, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, and many immigrant worker organizations cite Chávez as a foundational influence. His life has been portrayed in books, documentaries, plays, and the 2014 biopic "César Chávez," which introduced his story to new generations.

Civil rights organizations, including the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) and the National Council of La Raza (now UnidosUS), recognize Chávez as a pivotal figure in Latino civil rights history, celebrating his efforts to empower Mexican American and other Latino communities. Chávez was honored with various awards from labor unions, civil rights organizations, and religious groups, emphasizing his role as a bridge-builder between different communities. Religious groups also celebrated Chávez's work, especially given his strong Catholic faith and commitment to social justice. The Catholic Church has recognized Chávez as a moral leader, and in some places, his birthday is marked with special Masses and religious observances.

César Chávez's life was a testament to the power of ordinary people united by a vision of justice and dignity. From his early experiences as a migrant worker to becoming a national leader, he showed that perseverance, nonviolence, and community solidarity could transform society. His legacy remains a beacon for social movements worldwide, inspiring future generations to fight for equality and human rights.