

# Diego Luna's *Cesar Chavez*: An uninspired film on farm workers' leader

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*Directed by Diego Luna, written by Keir Pearson*

The recent biographical fiction film, *Cesar Chavez*, about the life of the founder of the United Farm Workers (UFW), from the Mexican-born actor-director Diego Luna, is not a very memorable or insightful experience. Apparently, this is the first screen treatment of the story of a man once hailed as the greatest Mexican-American leader. It fails to adequately tell the history of the UFW, or for that matter to provide a genuinely dramatic reenactment of events.

The film concerns the efforts of Chavez (Michael Pena) to unionize farm workers in California's Central Valley during the 1960s and early 1970s. The workers, mostly immigrants from Mexico and Central America, are super-exploited on industrial farms where entire families, including children, are forced to pick grapes and other crops for wealthy landowners. Thugs for the agribusiness bosses routinely terrorize the farm workers if they speak out against the terrible conditions or attempt to unionize, while the local police look the other way.

Chavez moves from Los Angeles with his wife Helen (America Ferrera) and eight children in tow to Delano, a farming town. Assisting him is Dolores Huerta (Rosario Dawson) and other labor organizers. John Malkovich plays a landowner in a typically villainous and clichéd manner. Chavez and the UFW assure the local authorities that they are not "communists," but Catholics as they reach out to the workers.

Luna's film mostly concerns the Delano grape strike and Chavez's hunger strike and commitment to non-violence. The strike was initially started by Filipino-American farm workers in 1965 and became the cause célèbre of the UFW. A nationwide boycott of table grapes became popular as a show of solidarity with farm workers. It must be said however, that the entire campaign was oriented toward pressuring the Democratic Party and appealing to the "consumer," not mobilizing the working

class.

The film includes a scene where Robert Kennedy (Jack Holmes) chairs a meeting of the US Senate on the strike and expresses his support for the workers. Kennedy and Chavez became political allies, and the film implies uncritically that the Democrats are the party of working people.

Moreover, by limiting the scope of the film to the initial years of the UFW, ending with the launching of the grape boycott, Luna avoids confronting the far more complex problems the farmworkers confronted from the 1970s onward.

In that period, after the collapse of the radical protest movement against the Vietnam War, which provided fertile soil for Chavez's pacifist appeals, the farm workers' efforts were increasingly frustrated. When the UFW sought to expand into the lettuce fields of the Salinas Valley, the Teamsters union organized goon-squad attacks and signed sweetheart contracts with growers.

In response to these difficulties, Chavez turned decisively to the state, embracing the Agriculture Labor Relations Board established under Democratic Governor Jerry Brown during his first terms in office (1973-1981). This state agency supervised elections in the fields and insured the union received dues payments. When a Republican governor succeeded Brown and shut down the ALRB, the union effectively collapsed.

The problem with Luna's film is not simply its politics, a timid brand of pro-union populism, if it even rises to that, but also its bland aesthetics. The characters are never fleshed out, and many scenes, which should have been given a more serious treatment, only last a few seconds.

By way of example, Robert Kennedy is present in a few scenes, but his assassination in 1968 is depicted in a rushed manner, before the film moves on to the next sequence of documentary footage of Richard Nixon's

inauguration. It would have been worth elaborating on this transition for an audience consisting largely of people born long after the events took place.

This brisk pace is perhaps inevitable in a historical film, but here the audience is left needing far more explanation and context. Instead, we have the by now familiar storyline of a father neglecting his family for the job to which he has devoted his life, but these domestic scenes are the least convincing.

Pena's Chavez is unremarkable, but that is probably more due to a weak script than anything else. At one point he laments the injustice of a worker producing food yet unable to feed his family, before adding, "I thought the enemy was the landowners, but it is ourselves." Yes, we're back to Original Sin, and the evil within each of us, which explains nothing at all!

Luna's film is typical of the Hollywood "bio-pic," which inflates the main protagonist to heroic levels and pushes every other historical character (and event) to the sidelines. It promotes identity politics, here in the form of Chicano power, and accepts the "spiritual" and bourgeois politics of Chavez as good coin.

Many commentators have pointed out the historical inaccuracies in the movie, including Matt Garcia, a historian writing for "The Smithsonian," who noted: "Luna's omissions and alterations are really historical subversions and go well beyond the poetic license we should permit filmmakers. His interpretation, I suspect, is a product of his unsophisticated handling of US identity politics. He rejects the multiethnic community that made up the farm workers movement in favor of a simplistic notion that Mexicans did all the work. Creating a hero comes at the expense of depicting an entire social movement."

There are a number of talented performers in *Cesar Chavez*, but the end result is a hackneyed treatment of the subject, one that would not offend any of the powers that be today. Luna takes the easy way out, focusing on the racism of the white landowners, singling out Ronald Reagan and Nixon for breaking the grape strike, making the more militant strikers who disagree with non-violence to be "macho" and "chickenshit" and offering no criticism of the Democrats.

And what of the film's tagline: history is made one step at a time? This could be a reference of the UFW's pilgrimage to Sacramento (California's capital) or the idea that social change is gradual and incremental. Indeed the film ends with the conclusion of the grape strike, where Chavez urged a nation-wide boycott on grapes, as

if it were some lasting victory for farm workers. Yet what is the situation in 2014? Child labor, toxic pesticides, super-exploitation, workers dying from heat exhaustion, none of these things have gone away since 1971. On the contrary ...

As for the UFW, even by the corrupt standards of American trade unionism, this "labor" organization is exceptional. Today Chavez' heirs fight over dwindling union dues and which Hollywood production team will tell the family story.

The UFW's membership peaked at 100,000 and has shrunk to 5,000 members in recent decades. In 2006, the *Los Angeles Times* published a series that revealed the union resembled more a feudal kingdom than a workers' organization. It detailed how Chavez's heirs capitalized on the founder's "image" to set up family businesses that are tax-exempt and do business with one another with an annual payroll of \$12 million for a dozen Chavez relatives, in-laws and cronies.

The impact of globalization has rendered organizations like the UFW, which once claimed to speak for oppressed sections of the working class, obsolete and wholly reactionary. This would not only explain their corruption, but also their past and present hostility to immigrant workers. In 1969, Chavez protested against the use of undocumented laborers as strikebreakers in the Imperial and Coachella Valleys and even reported some to the INS for deportation. The UFW also tried physically to prevent Mexican workers from crossing the US-Mexico border in 1973 out of fear that they would harm the union's recruitment efforts.

Luna's film does little or nothing to expand our understanding of Cesar Chavez as a historical figure and even less in terms of coming to grips with the movement he was so closely identified with.



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