

Fifty years since the Delano to Sacramento march: The myth of Cesar Chavez and the collapse of the United Farm Workers

Part one

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This is the first of a two-part article on Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers Union.

On April 10, 1966, a crowd of 8,000 farmworkers and their supporters crossed Tower Bridge in Sacramento, California to mark the last leg of a 340-mile march north from the Southern Central Valley town of Delano. The demonstration was launched by the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) at the behest of its leader, Cesar Chavez, to call attention to an ongoing strike of 2,000 workers against planters in the southern San Joaquin Valley. The marchers walked through 33 cities despite police harassment, and gathered strength and international attention as farmworkers and students joined the march along the way. When marchers reached the state capital, Democratic Governor Pat Brown refused to grant them an audience.

The “March to Sacramento” took place in the context of the emerging radicalization of the working class, students, and sections of the middle class in the United States and internationally. On March 25, as the marchers walked through the California spring, hundreds of thousands demonstrated in dozens of US cities in the largest protests to date against the US war in Vietnam, which President Lyndon Johnson pledged to intensify in his state of the union address earlier that year. In January, fire bombings organized by the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi killed civil rights leader Vernon Dahmer. Not a year had passed since Martin Luther King Jr.’s march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama and the first major urban riots of the 1960s in Watts, California.

Fifty years have passed since the march brought international attention to the plight of California’s farmworkers, the NFWA (reconstituted in 1972 as the United Farm Workers Union), and Chavez. In the United States, and particularly in its westernmost states, an official myth of Chavez has been cultivated in the years since his death in 1993. He was posthumously granted the Congressional Medal of Freedom by President Bill Clinton in 1994, and dozens of schools and public buildings today bear his name. Many western states recognize “Cesar Chavez Day” by closing schools and state offices on March 31, Chavez’ birthday. He is today celebrated by the ruling class as a model of Catholic asceticism, peaceful protest, and Latino racialism.

Chavez emerged amid a series of militant strikes in the mid-1960s by thousands of farmworkers in California’s San Joaquin, Salinas,

and Imperial valleys, as well as Arizona. Picketers defended themselves from sheriffs’ departments and thugs hired by the growers who beat strikers, sprayed their families with pesticides, and killed several workers in violent confrontations.

Workers repeatedly ignored court injunctions, and wildcat strikes against poverty wages and horrendous working conditions were common. Strikers were typically arrested for speaking in support of the strike movement. On one widely publicized occasion, police officers in Kern County arrested picketers for reading passages from socialist author Jack London and demanded the arrest of London. Much to their disappointment did the police learn that they could not arrest Jack London—he had been dead for 50 years!

Chavez was a ruthless negotiator and adept publicist who modeled himself on the politics of Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, the mysticism of Mexican mestizo Catholicism, and the legend of the Mexican revolutionary generals Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa. The Arizona-born child of Mexican immigrants, Chavez experienced foreclosure when his family lost their small adobe home in the aftermath of the Great Depression of 1929. After moving to California, Cesar Chavez dropped out of school in the seventh grade and began working under backbreaking conditions as a farmworker.

In 1952, while working in a San Jose lumberyard, the 25-year-old Chavez was introduced to Fred Ross, the founder of a Los Angeles-based nonprofit named the Community Service Organization. A close confidant of the anti-communist “community organizer” Saul Alinsky and his Industrial Areas Foundation, Ross became Chavez’ tutor, offering him a staff position primarily in charge of registering Mexican-Americans to vote for the Democratic Party.

After discussions with Alinsky and Ross, Chavez moved in 1962 to Delano, a mid-sized town at the southern end of the San Joaquin Valley, with the aim of establishing community organizations for farmworkers to provide loans, carry out voter registration, and expand access to social programs. As Chavez said at the time in a letter to Ross, Chavez sought to make clear “that this is not a union and that we are not involved in strikes.”

The agricultural strike wave of the 1960s

In 1965, a strike of Filipino farm workers in Delano forced Chavez to support calls by Mexican workers to honor picket lines and strike. Where previous strikes had been easily defeated by the growers, a considerable fear of unrest spread throughout the ruling class of California. A 1965 newsletter from the California Council of Growers expressed the worry that “the civil rights forces have taken over, although they continue to use Chavez and his Farm Workers Association as a front. The lesson to be learned from Delano is that this is not an isolated case; that it will be continued, and that other areas of the state can expect similar efforts as crops are ready.”

Edward R. Murrow’s famous 1960 documentary “Harvest of Shame” had exposed the backbreaking and deeply impoverished conditions under which 2 to 3 million farmworkers labored, and as the strike continued into 1966, broad sections of the working class began to sympathize with the farmworkers’ struggle. At the end of 1965, as Chavez emerged as the strike’s spokesman, he entered into a formal agreement with the AFL-CIO and UAW President Walter Reuther, who flew to Delano and worked with Chavez to ensure that the explosive struggle of the farmworkers remained within the acceptable framework of contract negotiation.

Chavez’ doctrine of asceticism, boycott, and fasting developed in a conscious effort to limit the emergence of the class struggle and prevent a social explosion. Chavez’ proposal to launch a boycott of table grapes in 1965, and his call for a march to Sacramento, were conceived of as alternatives to the possibility of a valley-wide general strike of agricultural workers, a notion that had widespread support among militant workers.

“We begin to believe that this is the time for a real movement among farmworkers to begin,” Chavez wrote in 1965. “And people are beginning to talk about the Movement instead of a strike.” Moreover, Chavez saw the explosive character of the CIO movement of the 1930s as a dangerous warning: “We don’t want to model ourselves on industrial unions; that would be bad. We want to get involved in politics, in voter registration, not just contract negotiation.”

Chavez announced the call for a demonstration after a series of Senate hearings that took place in Delano regarding the strike and farmworkers’ unionization efforts. In attendance at the instigation of Walter Reuther was New York’s Democratic Senator Robert Kennedy, who subjected growers and local police to intensive questioning and became Chavez’s closest collaborator in the Democratic Party.

In part due to widespread support for the plight of farmworkers and in part due to growing militancy and strikes, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters was called in by agribusiness to pre-empt the strike movement. In June 1966, the Teamsters signed eight sellout contracts with growers up and down the San Joaquin valley. When Teamster truck drivers refused to ship scab products, union officials ordered their members off the job and brought scabs to ship the goods.

This campaign marked an initial stage in what became a universal phenomenon: the trade union bureaucracy actively serving as strikebreakers. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Teamsters officials brutally attacked organizers and farmworkers aligned with the United Farm Workers. At times, Teamsters resorted to violence, attacking farmworker pickets as police looked on.

Chavez launched his first fast in 1968 in an attempt to bring under control a wave of strike agitation against company, Teamster and police violence against farmworkers. As strikes spread, workers had solicited the help of plumbers to disable the refrigeration units on

freight trains, ensuring food picked by scab laborers would rot before reaching US and world markets. Longshoremen at California ports also refused to handle scab goods after receiving appeals from farmworkers.

After speaking to Chavez as he began fasting in February, one Chavez aide said: “The most important thing that he said, in my opinion, was that we as a union and as a movement have aroused the hopes and aspirations of poor people ... and we have a duty and responsibility to those people ... we cannot by resorting to violence crush their hopes and destroy what we have done.”

On March 10, 1968, Chavez heeded medical advice and ended his fast after having requested that Robert Kennedy fly to Delano to mark its conclusion. It was on the flight from Los Angeles that Kennedy told close staff members he would run for president. That same day, Kennedy addressed a rally of thousands of farmworkers and shared bread with Chavez to break the fast.

Two days later, President Johnson was nearly defeated in the New Hampshire Democratic primary as the Tet Offensive caused opposition to the Vietnam War to become a groundswell. On March 16, Kennedy publicly announced his candidacy and requested that Chavez serve as a delegate to the Democratic primary. Chavez agreed and rammed through an official endorsement by the UFW, which played a crucial role in turning out support for Kennedy’s California primary victory. Six weeks later, Kennedy was shot dead at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. Chavez served as a pallbearer at Kennedy’s funeral.

The strike against Delano growers came to an end in 1970 as the UFW secured a collective bargaining agreement. By the end of the 1970s, the UFW boasted over 50,000 members and exercised considerable control over industry standards for hiring, wages, and conditions. Certain significant gains had been made, like the replacement of short-handled hoes and raised wages. But as Hollis Roberts, one of California’s largest growers, said after signing a UFW contract: “I learned to like Chavez and I found that a lot of things we had been told about these people were not true. I had been told they were Communists, and I had been advised never to talk to them in person...Now, I don’t think we could have been any more wrong.”

Chavez sought the support of state government to prop up the union’s position. After the 1974 gubernatorial elections, when Democrat Jerry Brown succeeded Republican Ronald Reagan, Chavez formed a close relationship with the Democratic administration. This culminated in the passage in 1975 of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act, which established a legal framework guaranteeing a position for the UFW officialdom, even as most farmworkers continued to live and work under truly desperate conditions.

In return for this state sponsorship, Chavez and the UFW leadership poured hundreds of thousands of dollars in workers’ dues money into the California Democratic Party. In two years alone, the UFW contributed \$750,000 to campaign committees of Democratic powerbroker and San Francisco Assemblyman Willie Brown.

To be continued



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