

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

Part Two

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This is the second of a two-part article on Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers Union. Part one was posted on April 11.

Anti-communist, anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic

The Gandhi-like image that Chavez sought to cultivate was a pacifist mask to disguise—as it had for the Indian leader himself—a reactionary political program. Gandhi sought to pressure British imperialism into a settlement with the Indian bourgeoisie that would forestall a revolutionary upheaval of the Indian masses. Chavez sought to appeal to sections of the American bourgeoisie to make concessions that would prevent a mass radicalization among the farmworkers.

Chavez launched his political career on the basis of anti-communism. In 1967, he opened the first “purge” of the farmworker movement expelling and shaming “disloyal” members. In particular, farmworkers and organizers who raised opposition to Chavez’s orientation toward the Democratic Party and his alliance with Reuther and the AFL-CIO were kicked out of the union on trumped-up charges of sympathy for communism.

Chavez’s anti-communism was bound-up with a fierce American nationalism. Contrary to popular belief, Chavez was a strong opponent of unifying Mexican and American workers. To the contrary, he possessed a deep personal and political hatred of immigrant workers.

In the early 1970s, Chavez and the UFW set up a little-known operation titled the “Wet Line.” Under this sordid practice, UFW leadership sent teams of thugs to attack, beat, and rob migrant workers attempting to cross into the United States from Mexico. The title for the operation came from the derogatory term “wetback” used for migrant workers, because so many of them waded or swam across the Rio Grande.

The UFW spent \$80,000 a week on the “Wet Line” operation. According to official protests lodged by Mexican trade unionists, hundreds of workers were attacked and tortured by UFW gangs. Houses of migrants were firebombed, cars were set alight, and workers were whipped, disrobed, cut, and left for dead in the cold desert night. Two men were castrated by UFW thugs while others were drowned. Tapes of UFW executive board meetings proved that

Chavez conspired with his cousin, Manuel Chavez, to bribe Mexican officials to attack Mexican workers so the UFW could cut expenses for their terroristic campaign against immigrants.

Also in the 1970s, Chavez developed the “Illegals Campaign” by which he sought to scapegoat migrant workers for a series of defeats suffered by the UFW as workers grew disillusioned with UFW-negotiated sellout contracts. Chavez attacked the Nixon administration and US Border Patrol for their ostensibly lax immigration policy and set out to compile lists of undocumented workers that the UFW wanted to expose to the government for deportation. In one impoverished neighborhood of Fresno, Chavez claimed he had a list of 2,200 undocumented workers who he was prepared to denounce for deportation.

Chavez’s militant xenophobia undercuts his well-advertised image of non-violence and pacifism. “They’re wets, you know,” he once told his sidekick, Dolores Huerta. “They’re wets, and let’s go after them.”

Chavez’s nationalism and anti-communism paved the way for the emergence of more openly anti-democratic and corrupt currents in the UFW. Further purges were organized against farmworkers and organizers who Chavez vilified because they opposed his authoritarianism from the left. When nine farmworkers sued Chavez for expelling them from elected positions, Chavez filed a spurious libel lawsuit alleging \$25 million in damages, far beyond what the farmworkers possessed. He later acknowledged this was an effort to intimidate the workers’ lawyer.

In 1981, during a factional fight for control of the union, Chavez also distributed a leaflet denouncing two Jewish members of the opposing faction as “the two Jews.” The leaflet said there was a Jewish conspiracy to take over the union and Chavez’s wife, Helen, shouted death threats from the convention floor. The targets of the threats were supporters of UFW lawyers Marshall Ganz and Jerry Cohen.

The UFW collapses

During the 1980s, the UFW lost the vast majority of its contracts as

thousands of workers left the union or voted for decertification. The political climate had shifted against the union, in the wake of the 1981 destruction of the PATCO strike by the Reagan administration, the isolation and defeat of militant struggles at Phelps Dodge Copper, Greyhound, Eastern Airlines, Hormel and dozens of other locations.

In California, Republican George Deukmejian won the governorship in 1982, and the state government passed to Republican Party control for the next 16 years, undermining the principal prop for the UFW, the corporatist structure established under the Agriculture Labor Relations Act. When disputes arose, the state automatically sided with the growers, and the union consistently capitulated.

As the UFW lost its dues base, it transformed itself from a union into a business under the banner of “Latino empowerment.” In the 1980s, the UFW opened a print shop and contracted with the Democratic Party to print mailers and newsletters for its candidates. Chavez made a secret agreement with millionaire real estate developer Celestino Aguilar to purchase foreclosed houses and flip them for profit. Aguilar and the UFW established American Liberty Investments to develop apartments in the Central Valley and set up the Ideal Minimart Corporation to construct strip malls and a check-cashing store. The UFW had become a housing vulture and central valley slumlord.

Millions of dollars in the UFW’s “Martin Luther King” pension plan were invested in Aguilar’s real estate developing projects, with Chavez’s younger brother Richard receiving millions in construction contracts. As Miriam Pawel writes in her book, *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez*, “By 1989, the Martin Luther King Jr. fund [MLK] was a private foundation with \$8 million in principal, effectively accountable to no one but Cesar Chavez. Each year, MLK doled out between \$600,000 and \$700,000 to other UFW-related enterprises. Money earned by a generation of farmworkers, who had been told their sacrifice would provide services for all farmworkers, had become a subsidy for a growing bureaucracy increasingly removed from the fields.”

As his organization collapsed and lost legitimacy in the eyes of hundreds of thousands of farmworkers, Chavez spent the last years of his life charging almost \$4,000 per event to speak at dozens of college campuses across the world. His speeches included calls for students to register to vote for the Democratic Party.

Today, conditions for the 2 to 3 million farmworkers are little changed from before the UFW emerged on the scene. Over half of all farmworkers are undocumented and the median income for all farmworkers is just \$7,500 per year. Child labor is legal in agriculture, with 12-year-olds forced to work long days. Because most farmworkers are undocumented, they are not eligible for US social programs. Only 2 percent of farmworkers use Social Security, and less than 15 percent receive Medicaid.

Piece rate payment is legal under US labor law for agricultural workers, with orange pickers in Florida paid just 85 cents for each 90-pound box of oranges they fill. Federal minimum wage laws do not apply to one-third of farmworkers on smaller farms, and wage theft by foremen and growers is regular. Today, there are thousands of agricultural workers who are not paid for their work and are essentially modern slaves. Sexual harassment of female farmworkers is widespread.

Poor conditions are not just for farmworkers. Poverty in agricultural areas of the country has skyrocketed in recent years for all sections of the working class. According to the 2010 US Census, California’s Central Valley is one of the poorest regions of the US. Fresno is the

second poorest metropolitan region of the US, while Bakersfield-Delano and Modesto are the fourth and fifth poorest. Each area was once a center of UFW activity. Meanwhile, profits for the California agricultural industry are reaching new records. In 2013, revenue reached \$34 billion—the highest figure ever.

Conclusion

The development of a mass movement of agricultural workers independent of the corporatist unions and the two parties of big business today requires a critical appraisal of the myth of the UFW and Cesar Chavez. Farmworkers are entitled to feel proud of their past victories in struggles against California growers, the police, and the courts, but they should not confuse this with illusions in the legacy of the UFW or Cesar Chavez. What failed was not this or that tactical method, but the essentially pro-capitalist character of his program.

Farmworkers hold the key to an agricultural industry without which the economy of the world’s most powerful capitalist country cannot function. But the fight against inequality and poverty requires the building of a political movement that places central emphasis on the unity of migrant workers with not only their permanent resident and naturalized coworkers but with the American working class as a whole.

Today, the UFW is marking the fiftieth anniversary of the march on Sacramento with a series of radio advertisements encouraging workers to register to vote to elect Democratic Party candidates from “our race.”

The racialism of “La Raza” and Latino nationalism, of which Chavez and the UFW are icons, only serves to divide the working class and keep it tied to a bankrupt political establishment controlled by the banks and corporations. Farmworkers have nothing in common with the wealthy and satisfied layers who preach of “racial unity” while supporting the Democrats and President Obama, who has deported over 2 million undocumented workers to the violence and poverty of Central and South America.

Obama’s anti-immigrant policies have created fertile conditions for the emergence of the fascistic campaign of Republican Donald Trump, whose proposal to deport all 11 million undocumented workers would require placing entire sections of the US under martial law. The increasingly prominent position played by anti-immigrant proposals during the primary elections of both parties underscores the very real danger facing immigrants if left defenseless and tied to the two parties of Wall Street.

The struggle to end the brutal exploitation and poverty of farmworkers requires the adoption of a socialist program, including the nationalization of the banks and major agribusiness corporations under workers control. This requires a conscious struggle for the international unity of the working class and the independence of the workers’ movement from the parties of the bourgeoisie.



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