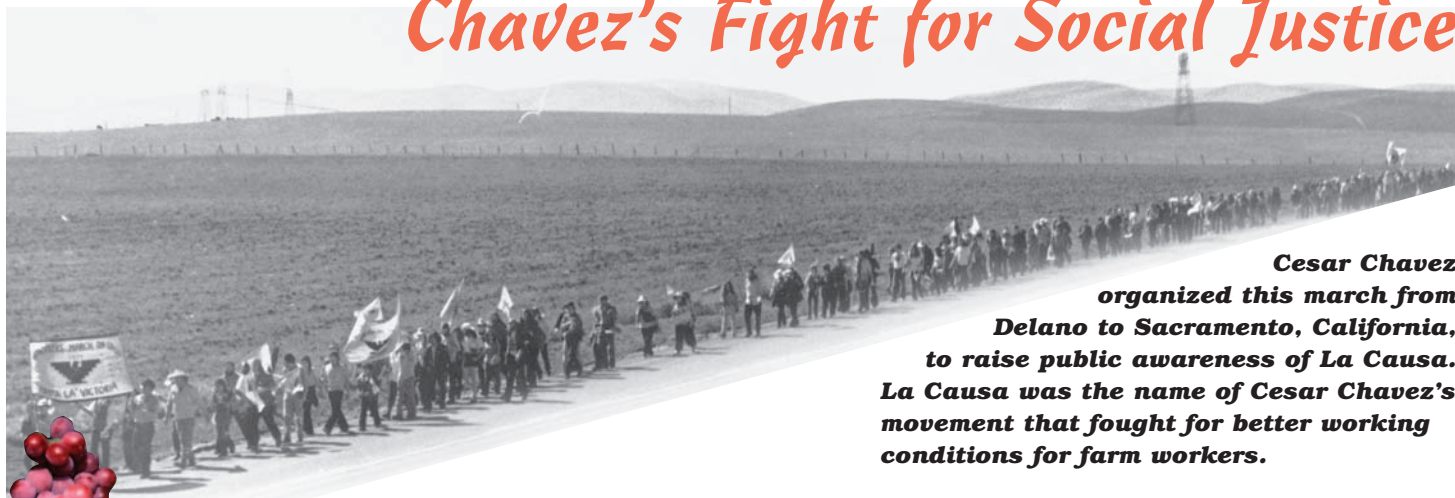



Viva La Causa

Chavez's Fight for Social Justice



Cesar Chavez organized this march from Delano to Sacramento, California, to raise public awareness of La Causa. La Causa was the name of Cesar Chavez's movement that fought for better working conditions for farm workers.



Imagine it is the 1930s, and you are a Mexican American child. Your migrant labor family travels from farm to farm harvesting whatever crop is in season—strawberries, lettuce, peas, string beans, grapes, apples. The roof over your head at night could be the old family car, a tent, or a one-room shack. You have no electricity or running water. After working a long day, your parents are tired and sore from bending and planting, weeding, or picking crops. You dread going to yet another school where you might be laughed at because your shoes are worn out, and you cannot speak English well.

In the 1930s and 1940s, agricultural workers toiled under tough conditions like those described here. Migrant laborers

were the most poorly paid, housed, fed, and educated workers in America. In addition, there often was no water to drink in the fields. Old and heavy tools made the farming jobs more backbreaking and exhausting. Pesticides used on the crops endangered the workers' health.

Unfortunately, much of that still is true today for migrant workers in America. But some changes have been made, mostly through the work of Cesar E. Chavez. In the 1950s, Chavez was a migrant worker in the fields around San Jose, California. He spent his evenings planning house meetings for the Community Service Organization (CSO), which was trying to unify and empower poor people through the strength of their votes.

Chavez helped migrant workers find housing, medical care, food, and legal aid, but he wanted more for them. He knew that the biggest problem they faced was the Bracero Program. Braceros—Mexicans with U.S. government permission to work as laborers in America—earned less money and were willing to live in worse conditions than the migrant Mexican American workers. The presence of braceros caused migrant laborers to lose jobs or forced them to work for even less pay.

Chavez was aware of the peaceful teachings of India's Mohandas "Mahatma" Gandhi and America's Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He believed that change could be achieved through nonviolence. So in 1959, with ten thousand marchers, he staged a **sit-in** at a ranch that hired braceros. The negative publicity from the television coverage forced the farmer to stop employing braceros. Chavez then decided to commit all of his time to organizing a **union** of farm



Chavez marches in a picket line to support a boycott of grapes.

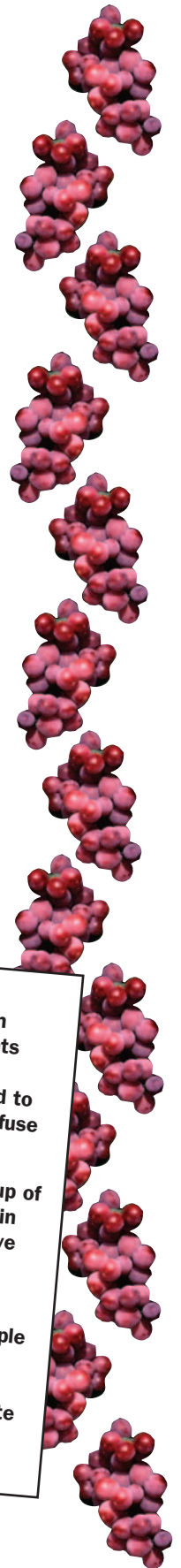
workers, despite the fact that others before him had tried to do the same and failed.

Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and other **activists** who believed in La Causa ("The Cause"), as his movement was called, traveled from farm to farm. They talked to workers about health and safety issues, wages, and the need to form a

A sit-in is a demonstration in which participants seat themselves in a place related to the cause and refuse to move.

A union is a group of employees who join together to improve their working conditions.

Activists are people of action, such as demonstrations or strikes, who promote or oppose people or ideas.





A mural in San Francisco, California, reminds Mexican immigrants to demand fair treatment for hard work.

union. It was difficult because the laborers often moved from job to job. But Chavez was patient: "When you organize, you must dig it bit by bit, very deliberately and carefully. It's like digging a ditch. You take one shovelful at a time," he said.

On September 30, 1962, the first convention of Chavez's National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) was held in Fresno, California. Three years later, the still-young, but growing, union voted to join Filipino farm workers in a **strike** against local Delano (a city in south-central

California) grape growers. Union members agreed not to pick any grapes until the Filipino workers got better pay and working conditions.

When the **vineyards** hired other workers to pick the grapes, NFWA members marched near the grape fields carrying signs that said "Huelga!"—Spanish for "strike." Chavez convinced the

A **strike** occurs when employees refuse to work, and the business owner is left without a labor force.

Vineyards are areas of ground planted with grapevines.

Fasts are acts of abstaining from eating food.

A **boycott** is an expression of protest by refraining from buying or using an item.

new workers to stop picking. Soon, grapes were rotting on the vines. But the owners still refused to agree to the workers' requests.

In an attempt to bring more attention to the strike and La Causa, Chavez organized a three-hundred-mile march from Delano to Sacramento, California, in the spring of 1966. Television cameras were there once again, broadcasting the event on the news. During the march, Chavez received word that one of the vineyards was ready to negotiate with the NFWA.

In addition to sit-ins, strikes, and marches, Chavez used other nonviolent methods to bring about change. He spoke to religious leaders and university students about social justice, gained their support, and raised money for La Causa. He went on several **fasts**. And Chavez announced a nationwide **boycott** of California grapes as a way to get other vineyard owners to change their conditions and pay



scales, too. It ultimately became the most effective strategy and gained nationwide attention and support.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Chavez peacefully, but forcefully, tried to keep the migrant workers organized and united and demanding change. His efforts made a huge impact on farm workers throughout the United States. But his hard work and fasting took its toll on his health. When Chavez died in 1993, thousands of people came to pay their respects to this hero of migrant farm workers and Mexican Americans.

**Adapted from an article
by Diane L. Brooks**

