Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers Movement

Matt Garcia

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Summary and Keywords

In September 1962, the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) held its first convention in Fresno, California, initiating a multiracial movement that would result in the creation of United Farm Workers (UFW) and the first contracts for farm workers in the state of California. Led by Cesar Chavez, the union contributed a number of innovations to the art of social protest, including the most successful consumer boycott in the history of the United States. Chavez welcomed contributions from numerous ethnic and racial groups, men and women, young and old. For a time, the UFW was the realization of Martin Luther King Jr.’s beloved community—people from different backgrounds coming together to create a socially just world. During the 1970s, Chavez struggled to maintain the momentum created by the boycott as the state of California became more involved in adjudicating labor disputes under the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act (ALRA). Although Chavez and the UFW ultimately failed to establish a permanent, national union, their successes and strategies continue to influence movements for farm worker justice today.

Keywords: Cesar Chavez, union, agricultural, Teamsters, boycott, strike, labor relations, ALRA

The formation of the United Farm Workers (UFW) in 1965, under the leadership of Cesar Chavez, redefined farm labor activism and contributed to a new era of social justice movements in the United States. The union developed after years of struggle and failed attempts to create a permanent union for farm workers. In 1956, the National Farm Labor Union, renamed the National Agricultural Workers Union (NAWU), made an attempt to organize farm workers. Scholar and activist Ernesto Galarza worked on strikes in the Imperial and San Joaquin Valleys of California but struggled to overcome differences in strategy among organizers. In 1962, two organizations, The Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), composed mainly of Filipinos, and the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), composed mainly of Mexicans, formed in separate locations in rural California. The two organizations came together in 1965 for a strike of grape growers in Delano, California. They formed the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC), with Cesar Chavez as the president. In 1972, the union became affiliated with the
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AFL-CIO, created a national executive board, and changed their name to the United Farm Workers of America, simply known by their acronym, “UFW.”

Cesar Chavez was born in Yuma, Arizona in 1927. The son of sharecroppers, Chavez understood the difficulties of a life in farming. During the Great Depression, the government repossessed his family’s homestead, forcing him and his siblings into the migrant stream of farm laborers that travelled through California in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Chavez met his wife, Helen Favela Chavez, during these trips. She, too, knew rural poverty, having family scattered throughout the many worker colonias (Mexican villages) in the Palo Verde, Imperial, and San Joaquin Valleys. These difficult beginnings inspired Cesar and Helen Chavez to pursue farm worker justice for the rest of their lives.

As an adolescent, Cesar Chavez exhibited early signs of rebellion, wearing the zoot suit common among disaffected Mexican youth in the 1940s, before entering the U.S. Navy. Following his release from the military, Chavez settled, with Helen, in the urban barrio, Sal Si Puedes (“leave if you can”) in San Jose, California. It was there in 1952 that Fred Ross, an organizer for the Saul Alinsky-inspired Community Service Organization (CSO), discovered Cesar Chavez and recruited him. Ross had studied the problems of rural communities in Riverside and San Bernardino counties, and he learned that Mexican Americans and agricultural workers experienced the most entrenched forms of discrimination in California. He founded CSO with Mexican American activists and focused his attention on organizing the Mexican communities through house meetings in the barrios and colonias throughout the state. Ross recognized Chavez’s unique ability to reach potential members in these meetings and quickly made him his protégé. Together, they built a strong organization committed to solving the problems of Mexican Americans throughout the state.

Chavez recruited a number of skilled organizers into CSO, none more persuasive than Gilbert Padilla, a former onion picker from Hanford, California. Padilla embraced Chavez’s vision for a more organized and politically active Mexican American community. Chavez also discovered a fiery, young single mother from Stockton, California, Dolores Huerta. Huerta channeled her father’s United Mine Workers background and her experience working among Filipino field workers in her mother’s restaurant and hotel business to build an effective strategy for organizing agricultural communities across racial lines. Together, this team moved CSO towards greater advocacy for agricultural workers in rural California. In 1959, Chavez accepted a grant from the Packinghouse Workers of America to study the effects of the bracero program—the bilateral U.S.-Mexican guest worker program begun in 1942—in Oxnard, California. When Chavez became national director of CSO, he assigned Padilla to the CSO service center in Stockton. To Chavez’s delight, Padilla succeeded in securing a grant, in 1961, from the Bishops’ Committee on Migratory Labor in Chicago to study housing conditions for local farm workers.

In spite of his work and leadership in CSO, Chavez believed the organization lacked sufficient attention to the concerns of agricultural workers and rural communities. Against the advice of Saul Alinsky and Ernesto Galarza, Chavez resigned from CSO on April 12,
1962, moved to Delano, California, and began building a new farm worker organization. Ross supported him and offered counsel. Padilla continued to study labor camps, and Huerta remained on staff at CSO until further notice from Chavez. By September 1962, Chavez had organized enough local members to convene the first meeting of the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) in Fresno, California. Padilla joined as a board member, with Chavez as director general. In a short period of time, Chavez reorganized NFWA, making himself president, Padilla first vice president, and Dolores Huerta second vice president. Ross would serve as a special adviser to Chavez over the next three decades.

The activities of other nonaffiliated activists and organizations assured Chavez that he had chosen the right path. The California Migrant Ministry began work in the San Joaquin Valley during the early 1960s, in part as a response to the activism of religion-oriented groups, such as Southern Christian Leadership Conference, working to end Jim Crow discrimination in the American South during the 1950s. Led by Wayne “Chris” Hartmire, a Presbyterian minister, and Jim Drake, a Union Theological Seminary graduate, the California Migrant Ministry assisted local farm workers in the San Joaquin Valley with housing and transportation issues. Chavez counted the Migrant Ministry as an important early ally in his pursuit of farm worker justice.

Filipino leaders shared similar concerns about farm worker conditions and sought remedies through unions. Among Filipino activists, Larry Itliong stood out. Born in San Nicolas, Pangasina, the Philippines, Itliong arrived in the United States in 1929 and worked in various crops and industries up and down the West Coast—from harvesting lettuce in California to canning salmon in Alaska. He also served as a labor contractor who maintained constant communication with many of his fellow Filipino migrants. As an affiliate of the Communist Party and a believer in the union movement, Itliong embraced work with the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) and pursued justice through this organization. In 1956, he began organizing for AWOC among Filipinos, recruiting a number of exceptionally gifted organizers, including Peter Velasco and Philip Veracruz, who became critical to the success of the United Farm Workers.

The merging of these movements and the establishment of the UFW began in the rural farming town of Coachella, California in the spring of 1965, when Filipino workers under the banner of AWOC struck grape farms in an effort to increase their hourly wages and improve their living conditions. By September 1965, the movement spread to Delano, California in the San Joaquin Valley, where Padilla was working with Hartmire and Drake on farm worker housing issues and Chavez had been slowly building support for NFWA, one house meeting at a time. The decision of Itliong to call a strike of grape fields in Delano forced Chavez to make a decision whether to support the labor action and join forces with AWOC. Padilla played a crucial role in this process by speaking at the AWOC meeting in Filipino Hall in Delano and bringing Mexican farm worker interests to the table. On September 16, 1965, Mexican Independence Day, Chavez held a meeting of NFWA in a small church in Delano. Although the strike had not been the preferred plan of action for Chavez, the momentum of the moment, and the rallying cries from rank and file Mexican
workers, compelled him to join the fight. The following week, Chavez ordered his followers to picket grape growers alongside workers represented by AWOC, marking the beginning of what is known as the farm workers movement.

Differences in resources brought AWOC and NFWA closer together. The NFWA did not have a strike fund or permanent home, whereas AWOC had AFL-CIO support and Filipino Hall. The Filipinos relied on Chavez to persuade the majority of the workers who were Mexican to join the movement. The two groups forged a unique, if precarious, alliance that constituted the most serious challenge to the status quo in the San Joaquin Valley since the Cotton Strike of 1933. The audacity of the movement captured the attention of United Auto Worker’s union president, Walter Reuther, who chose to join Chavez, Itliong, and many other strikers in a march in Delano, and committed $10,000 per month to both AWOC and NFWA. Not to be outdone by Reuther, AFL-CIO president, George Meany, sent a representative, Bill Kircher, to fortify their support in the nascent movement. By August 19, 1966, Kircher guided a merger of AWOC and NFWA, and brokered an agreement for Chavez to be president and Itliong to be vice president of the union.

The UFW began with the usual strategies of strikes and marches, but had difficulty winning in the fields. In the early days of the strike, Chavez merged picket signs announcing “la huelga” (the strike) with Christian iconography, such as the Virgin de Guadalupe, that resonated with Mexican workers and inspired them to join the movement. Although controversial for many traditional union leaders, the strategy played well to a public who understood racial discrimination during the Civil Rights Movement underway in the South. This message was most strongly communicated in Chavez’s pilgrimage or peregrinación from Delano to Sacramento, in the spring of 1966. During the march, farm workers and their advocates carried religious symbols and sang Mexican protest songs in Spanish, while Chavez walked barefoot on highways that wound through farm worker communities. The pilgrimage gathered converts as it progressed and drew media attention to the farm worker struggle.

The march to Sacramento built support for the movement, but it did not break down the traditional advantage of growers in rural California. Agricultural work moved with the seasons and so did the work site, making it nearly impossible to anchor the movement in any one place. Additionally, whereas most union movements happened in urban, populated areas, the farm worker movement occurred in the countryside, away from the vast majority of citizens and fellow unionized workers who might also serve time on the picket lines. Chavez and the UFW learned how to overcome this problem by taking the fight to the cities in the form of the boycott. In 1966, the union began boycotting the products of growers—most notably wine and spirits—upon the recommendation of Jim Drake. In time, the boycott expanded to table grapes and eventually became the key to the union’s success.

The appeal to consumers not to buy grapes at North American markets was a major turning point in the movement for farm worker rights. Domestics and farm workers were among a group of U.S. employees denied access to collective bargaining rights under the
National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) of 1935, known as the “Wagner Act,” a major piece of legislation during the New Deal. Although the exclusion hurt the ability of farm workers to build unions, it freed them from some of the restrictions in the legislation, namely the ability to boycott. In 1947, the Taft-Hartley Labor Act amended the NLRA to restrict labor unions from running campaigns against companies that were not abusing workers but were selling products of companies that were. In 1959, the Labor Management Reporting and Disclosure Act strengthened the restriction against this practice, which was known as a secondary boycott. The secondary boycott remained a viable tool to the excluded farm workers but prevented them from working closely with other unions on such a campaign. These restrictions necessitated shifts in the strategy by UFW organizers on the ground.

Chavez and the UFW maneuvered skillfully around these challenges to build a national, and eventually, an international boycott. During the spring of 1968, Dolores Huerta appealed to the Central Labor Council, the Meatcutter’s Union, and the Seafarer’s Union to establish a total blockade of California grapes. The unions agreed to cooperate in time to interrupt the first grapes of the season from making their annual trip across the Hudson River by barge. As the grapes rotted in New Jersey, grape growers filed an injunction against the New York/New Jersey unions for violating federal regulations against secondary boycotts and demanded $25 million in compensation for lost sales. Although the Taft-Hartley Act did not apply to farm workers, it did restrict the Seafarer’s Union from participating in such actions. The Seafarer’s Union eventually released the grapes, but the pause in shipments had reduced the overall number of car lots for 1968 to a record low of 91, down from the industry norm of 418.

By mid-July, Huerta and the efficient New York City boycott house shifted to consumer action, or the “secondary boycott,” picketing stores throughout the city. Huerta organized against the larger supermarkets in the hopes that an agreement with them would lead to their competitors following suit. In the New York area, the A&P chain dominated the market, which made it the first target for the boycott. Huerta described her strategy in a letter to Delano headquarters: “In each of the five boroughs, we organized neighborhood coalitions of church, labor, liberal, and student groups. Then we began picketing A&P, the biggest chain in the city. For several months, we had picket lines on about 25 to 30 stores and turned thousands of shoppers away. A lot of the managers had come up through the unions and were very sympathetic to us. In response to consumer pressure, the store managers began to complain to their division heads, and soon they took the grapes out of all of their stores, 430 of them.” By knocking off A&P, the richest market chain in the United States, Huerta softened up their competitors—Bohack, Walbaum’s, Hills, and Finast—for the kill. One by one, the stores became the exclusive target of the New York boycott house until all except one—Gristedes, an expensive delivery service market for wealthy clients—stopped selling grapes in the city.

Boycott co-coordinator Jerry Brown, later described this maneuver as the “tactic of the hostage stores” and ordered boycott houses to implement it in cities across North America. According to Brown, Huerta had built strong boycott committees in neighborhoods
where union membership was high and volunteers were plentiful, enthusiastic, and committed to stopping the sale of grapes in nearby stores. “Once [these individual A&P markets] started to capitulate,” Brown explained, “[Dolores] wouldn’t call off the picket lines until they agreed to take [grapes] off the entire division [of A&P markets].”

Brown demonstrated his prowess as a major tactician and organizer of the boycott. He arrived in Delano in 1966 from Cornell University with the intent of writing a dissertation on the farm worker communities. Instead, Chavez re-directed his energy in the service of the union. Within a short period of time, he applied his love of data analysis to the refinement of the boycott.

Working closely with his wife, Juanita, and a former Catholic priest, LeRoy Chatfield, Jerry Brown made changes that brought the growers to the bargaining table. In 1968, they appealed to Chavez and the leadership for a much more systematic approach to the campaign. First, they argued for an approach that concentrated on building strong boycott houses in ten of the top forty-one cities, where more than 50 percent of California table grapes were sold. Those cities included: New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Boston, Toronto, Detroit, Montréal, and Cleveland. They replaced the anecdotal reports for judging the success of the boycott with a clear and measurable goal of reducing shipments in every city by 10 percent or more over 1966 totals. Although growers had begun to show signs of redirecting shipments elsewhere to soften the blow of the boycott, Brown and Chatfield calculated that such a shift could not make up for the substantial losses in growers’ traditional markets. As growers sent grapes to other ports, Jerry and Juanita Brown responded by working with volunteers in those cities to open up new boycott houses.

The game plan prepared by Jerry Brown and LeRoy Chatfield produced results as boycotters returned to houses across the country for the remainder of the 1968 season and through the 1969 harvest. In Toronto, the mayor declared November 23, 1968 as “Grape Day” and announced the city government’s decision not to buy grapes in recognition of the farmworkers’ struggle. In Chicago, Eliseo Medina organized a boycott campaign that persuaded the leading supermarket chain, Jewel, to stop carrying table grapes at every one of its 254 store locations. Similarly, in Cleveland, Mayor Carl Burton Stokes, the first African American to be elected mayor of a major U.S. city, ordered all government facilities to cease serving table grapes. Mack Lyons, the only African American on the National Executive Board of the UFW, made the appeal to Stokes and organized one of the strongest boycott houses in the network. In San Francisco, five major agribusiness organizations cancelled their annual meetings in the city in response to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors’ endorsement of the boycott.

In a final, desperate attempt to outrun the boycott, growers redirected their shipments to Europe. There, Brown drew on the creativity of Elaine Elinson, a veteran of the New York City boycott house, who had moved to England to study Chinese history but was unhappy with her decision. When she wrote Brown in Delano to see if she could come back to the United States to work for the union, Brown instructed her to remain in England. “If nec-
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essayary you could come back right away," Brown responded to Elinson, but added, “in as much as you are in London and we are trying to internationalize the boycott, Cesar asked if you couldn’t hold on to your means of existence and do some ground work for us there.”

Like Huerta before her, Elinson adapted to the environment around her. Elinson quickly figured out that social justice for farm workers could flow more easily through the collective action of unionized laborers. Unlike in North America, where labor laws restricted allied unions from helping the UFW execute a blockade of shipments, unions in the United Kingdom had greater freedom to assist other workers. British labor leaders and union officials were particularly scandalized by the denial of collective bargaining rights to farm workers. Rather than pursue a consumer boycott, Elinson shifted to working with a powerful British union, the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), to block (or “black”) California table grapes. She described how it unfolded on the River Thames: “With the bill lading in hand, I went down to the London docks with Brian [Nicholson]. We would approach the team of dockworkers working on that particular ship and that particular hold. The workers would put down their ominous looking dockers’ hooks (a pointed piece of iron attached to a strong wooden grip, used to pull cargo off ships before containerization) and gather round this odd pair. Brian, a third-generation dockworker, 6’3,” in a thick sheepskin coat and cloth cap, orange sideburns, and a booming Cockney voice, would introduce me. I came up to his shoulder, had a ponytail and big mod glasses. They could hardly understand my American accent. We both wore red-and-black UFW buttons on our jackets.”

This same scene played out in Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands. Unable to unload the “blackened” grapes anywhere in Europe, they were finally left to rot on a dock in Hamburg, Germany in late January 1970. By July 1970, the growers conceded defeat. The boycott drove twenty-six of them to the bargaining table, where they finally signed collective bargaining contracts with the UFW that ended the five-year-long Delano grape strike.

The first few years after the historic contracts in 1970 were difficult ones, marred by competition from the International Brotherhood of Teamsters union to represent farm workers. The Teamsters set their sights on representing lettuce workers in Salinas, California by negotiating “sweetheart contracts” with growers without consulting workers. Although the UFW fought off the threat initially, the Teamsters continued to pursue the matter, including with grape workers in 1973, when the initial contracts came up for renewal in the San Joaquin and Coachella Valleys. Through outright physical intimidation, the Teamsters declared war on the United Farm Workers, attempting to beat UFW representatives out of the fields. The extreme violence exhibited by the Teamsters precipitated retaliation from UFW supporters. In an attempt to quell the conflict and claim the moral higher ground, Chavez engaged in a hunger strike, converting his followers’ ire for the Teamsters into concern for his health.

Chavez’s strategy of nonviolence, borrowed directly from Mahatma Gandhi, worked to calm the passions of his followers but failed to stem the loss of members and the shift of momentum away from UFW. At the peak of employment in 1973, the UFW boasted 60,000...
members; however, loss of contracts to the Teamsters dropped membership down to 12,000 by the end of the harvest. By the winter of 1973, the Teamsters cut UFW membership in half, to 6,000. The loss of members reduced dues, thereby cutting into the economic viability of the union. These struggles, and pressure from AFL-CIO president, George Meany, forced Chavez to sue for peace under a new state law—the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act—that promised to curb violence in the fields by holding elections and resolving unfair labor practices through the Agricultural Labor Relations Board (ALRB).

The United Farm Workers won the right to bargain collectively through the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act (ALRA) in 1975, a law that Governor Jerry Brown called “the greatest accomplishment of my administration.” ALRA mirrored the NRLA and was implemented, in part, by members of the NLRB who came to California to see farm worker justice take off. Holding free and fair elections for representation in the fields and adjudicating unfair labor practice charges were two of the primary duties of the ALRB.

ALRA transformed the movement and Chavez. During its implementation, UFW’s threats to boycott the ALRB and pressure from UFW’s chief legal counsel, Jerry Cohen, helped the union win far more elections than it lost. By the end of 1975, ALRB had held 354 elections; of these, the UFW scored victories in 189 of them, representing 26,956 workers, or 50.2 percent of voters. The Teamsters, by comparison, won 101 elections representing 12,284 workers, or 23 percent. While the union did not like to lose any workers, the UFW took solace in the fact that, in elections on fifty-eight ranches, 8,228 workers switched allegiances from the Teamsters to the UFW. Only 4 percent of workers voted for no representation.

Jerry Cohen used these numbers to persuade the Teamsters to reach a settlement. After years of mayhem in the fields and numerous courtroom battles, the UFW and Teamsters met on December 1, 1976, to agree to a moratorium on filing suits against one another. On March 10, 1977, Cohen facilitated a meeting of Cesar Chavez and Teamster President Frank Fitzsimmons to sign a jurisdictional pact that recognized the right of the Teamsters to organize truck drivers, cannery workers, and other non-field workers, while UFW had exclusive rights to organize farm workers. The pact ended a six-year war between the unions and opened up the possibility for the UFW to take advantage of future union elections under ALRA.

In spite of this success, the UFW struggled to work within the law. Problems existed from the start. After the first six months of its existence, the ALRB exhausted its budget and had to close down operations. In an attempt to protect funding for the future, Chavez pursued a risky strategy of appealing to voters to pass Proposition 14, an initiative that would have insured funding for all the work ALRB needed to do within a year. Chavez added the demand for greater union access to workers on farms, a provision that went against attitudes towards private property in California and the West. Proposition 14 went down in defeat by a 3:2 margin, costing the union $1.3 million and significant politi-
Chavez’s lack of faith in the strategy of state-sponsored collective bargaining further hindered progress under ALRA. He was not entirely alone among union leaders in his skepticism about the law. Eliseo Medina, a member of the Executive Board and one of the most skilled organizers, quipped in 1977, “We ought to go to the Legislature and get’em to repeal the ALRA and go back to the boycott!”13 Crosby Milne, a management consultant for the union, shared, “we’re being managed by the law.” These sentiments supported Chavez’s own notion that “the law had changed us completely,” by which he meant, ALRA “has become the center of power” within the movement.14 For Medina, Milne, Chavez and others, the law made the labor of the movement more legal-bound and incumbent upon UFW attorneys to work out settlements with Teamster and grower lawyers or state officials. Under the law, the union’s success became less a function of the “missionary work” of appealing to consumers and workers to support *la causa*.15

Although many union members lamented the change in strategy, no one resisted it more than Chavez. Eliseo Medina, for example, threw himself into organizing citrus workers and winning elections, striving to reach 100,000 members by the end of 1977. Similarly, Marshall Ganz, a successful leader of the Toronto boycott, had worked with lettuce workers in the Imperial and Salinas Valleys and was committed to growing the union’s ranks in these industries. Chavez, on the other hand, questioned the value of a union, and articulated a preference for organizing the poor and building a commune at the union headquarters, La Paz. Chavez envisioned the community looking much like those present at Synanon, a drug rehabilitation center that had become a religion under Chavez’s friend, Chuck Dederich. In 1977, he told the Executive Board, “No sooner than we will have it built than we’re going to be faced with other forms of poverty ... with mechanization and things coming up, it’s going to be a small percentage of workers working, very well paid, a large majority of people in the rural areas still poor, you know, former farm workers, the rural poor. The way for me to go is to have a community like Synanon or close to that and start truly cooperative ventures. In other words, we start taking over the land.”16

In the months following this meeting, Chavez appealed to the Executive Board to support the implementation of a controversial group encounter exercise, The Game, practiced at Synanon. The Game subjected members to harsh interrogations from peers, and sometimes Chavez, to achieve greater conformity to the leader. The practice began with a small group of younger members, including Chavez’s son, Paul “Babo” Chavez and Dolores Huerta’s daughter, Lori Huerta. The group met and played the Game at Synanon’s headquarters, Home Place, in Badger, California, before moving to La Paz. Chavez eventually demanded that everyone at La Paz play The Game, though several members resisted. Outside of La Paz, staff members and volunteers working in boycott houses around the country questioned the practice and wrote letters of opposition to Chavez. When Chuck Dederich fell into trouble with the law after plotting to kill a lawyer who sued him for the mistreatment of children at Synanon, Chavez defend him. Ultimately, his association with Dederich and his experimentation with The Game damaged the *esprit de corps*
within the movement and produced questions about his vision for the union. He responded to his critics by cancelling the boycott and purging members from the union.

Other factors contributed to the weakened state of the union in the 1970s. The actions of the Teamsters created the perception that the fight for labor rights was between two unions rather than against the practices of farm owners. The confusion made it difficult for consumers to choose sides and follow the various boycotts. Some critics of the union also believed that the move of union headquarters in 1972, from Delano to La Paz in the foothills of the Tehachapi Mountains, contributed to Chavez’s alienation from the rank and file. During the mid- to late 1970s, Chavez travelled to the field offices less frequently and focused a greater portion of his attention to building a community. When Chavez accepted an invitation from President Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines, several current and former members argued that he had lost touch with those who had supported him, especially Filipino members. He ignored the counsel of Gilbert Padilla, who advised him not to go. When Filipinos and Catholic supporters of the union faulted him for supporting Marcos, who opposed labor unions and practiced martial law in his country, Chavez refused to admit his mistake and pushed harder against his critics. The action upset many Filipinos within the union who challenged him from the floor of the 1977 UFW convention. Many left the union altogether. The controversy earned Chavez condemnation from the National Council of Churches and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, as well as criticism within the Filipino, radical, and popular press.¹⁷

Chavez’s opposition to the creation of local chapters within UFW did not sit well with some members who had created “ranch committees.” The ranch committees elected representatives and possessed their own ideas about strategy for pursuing justice on the farms they worked. This conflict came to a head in Salinas, when vegetable workers defied Chavez’s wishes to pursue a boycott and declared a strike. The workers won the battle in 1979, and Jerry Cohen negotiated the contracts with the growers, but Chavez refused to celebrate the victory with the workers.¹⁸ When these same workers tried to elect members to the UFW Executive Board at the 1981 union convention, Chavez expelled them from the floor and changed the rules unilaterally to block their election. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Chavez accused many of his most loyal members of treason, for their willingness to criticize him or express new ideas. These people included Gilbert Padilla, Chris Hartmire, Eliseo Medina, and Marshall Ganz, all key members who played a critical role in building the United Farm Workers.

Ultimately, Chavez and the UFW struggled with the transitions from being a social movement in the 1960s to a union responsible to members in the 1970s. Once it succeeded in drawing growers to the bargaining table, the union was forced into a process of professionalization by competing unions (The Teamsters) and grower expectations. Whereas other unions paid organizers to recruit workers, win elections, manage the hiring process, and negotiate contracts, the United Farm Workers depended on a volunteer system and a compensation structure that paid even the best organizers only $10 per week plus room and board.
In 1977, the UFW lawyers—who received $600 per month—requested more for their services. Chavez refused to budge, demanding instead that they remain “volunteers,” with a compensation structure far below the market rate. He also insisted that they play the Game. The lawyers accepted neither, leading to a break up between Cohen and Chavez, and a housecleaning of the legal department that compromised the union’s ability to work within the ALRA. The dismantling of the organizing and management team also occurred elsewhere in the union, due in part to some of the same issues of poor compensation and Chavez’s coercion.

Problems in the organization notwithstanding, Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers delivered a degree of justice to farm workers and their families never before seen in California or the United States. Prior to the farm worker movement, unions used the boycott to create class solidarity by asking fellow laborers not to purchase a particular product linked to the unfair treatment of workers. Chavez and the UFW expanded the use of the boycott by appealing to an international public to participate on the grounds of achieving social justice rather than just labor solidarity. He attracted attention to the injustices of a farm labor system that employed mostly Mexican and Filipino laborers in hopes of capitalizing on a heightened civil rights consciousness in the nation. Indeed, at the height of the movement, Chavez counted Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert Kennedy, and numerous civil rights leaders as allies and advocates for his cause. His long marches in the San Joaquin Valley, fasts for calm in California and Arizona, and his speeches in urban California built a connection between the conditions of farm laborers in the fields and the buying habits of consumers in the city. To the surprise of his critics, his tactics mostly succeeded in winning over the public. The success of the boycott paved the way for contracts and legislation that, prior to the 1960s, no one thought possible. The boycott continues to shape the labor actions of current farm worker groups such as the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, who have appealed to consumers to call for an additional “penny-per-pound” of tomatoes sold in supermarkets and used in restaurants, so that workers can monitor labor conditions on Florida farms.

Chavez and the UFW contributed to a more general movement, known as the Chicano movement, for civil rights among Mexican Americans, during the 1960s and 1970s. In addition to the land grant movement led by Reies López Tijerina in New Mexico to reclaim property lost by Hispanos after the U.S.-Mexican War, the UFW inspired a new generation of urban Mexican American youths to organize their communities and peers. Chavez was a role model for this generation of Mexican Americans, although his opposition to illegal immigration occasionally landed him on the wrong side of college-educated Mexican Americans who began to question this policy. Chavez eventually withdrew his public opposition to undocumented immigrants but never embraced the idea that organizing them would benefit farm worker justice.

Cesar Chavez died on April 23, 1993, in Arizona. He continues to be an icon of the civil right movement, with his image gracing a U.S. postage stamp, his name can be found on streets and buildings through the country, and movies and books are dedicated to telling his story. President Barack Obama used the UFW rallying cry—Si, Se Puede/Yes, We Can
Discussion of the Literature

The history of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers has been dominated by celebratory narratives that explore the creation of the union. Books written during the movement, particularly Jacques Levy’s *Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa* and Peter Mathiessen’s *Sal Si Puedes: Cesar Chavez and the New American Revolution*, focused attention on the visionary leadership of Chavez. These works should be regarded as first-hand accounts of the farm worker movement more than histories. Subsequent works by historians continued to view Chavez as a man who overcame tremendous obstacles to achieve meaningful gains, none more significant than the grape contracts in 1970, after five years of strikes, marches, and boycotts. These works include Richard Griswold del Castillo and Richard García’s *César Chávez: A Triumph of Spirit* and Susan Ferriss and Ricardo Sandoval’s *The Fight in the Fields: Cesar Chavez and the Farmworkers Movement*. The latter is a companion book to a documentary film and alludes to some of the internal conflicts within the union, but mostly focuses on the ability of Chavez to overcome threats from the Teamsters and growers to derail the union. More recently, two authors have focused on the religious aspects of Chavez’s leadership, notably Mario T. Garcia’s *The Gospel of César Chávez* and Luis León’s *The Political Spirituality of Cesar Chavez*. The former is a study of Chavez’s own words on spirituality; the latter considers how Chavez drew upon, and contributed to, religiosity within the movement and in his times.

Recent discoveries of new archives and interviews with veterans of the movement have produced narratives that break with the mostly hagiographical treatments published over the last four decades. Miriam Pawel’s *The Union of Their Dreams: Power, Hope, and Struggle in Cesar Chavez’s Farm Worker Movement*, Frank Bardacke’s *Trampling Out the Vintage: Cesar Chavez and The Two Souls of the United Farm Workers*, and my own *From the Jaws of Victory: The Triumph and Tragedy of Cesar Chavez and the Farm Worker Movement* led a movement to add to, and in some cases revise, what we know about Chavez and the United Farm Workers. Pawel’s book focuses on eight figures, other than Cesar Chavez, who built the movement. Her study also includes a discussion of purges of key members by Chavez, and an evaluation of the union’s tactics throughout the 1970s. Bardacke’s book examines the view from the rank and file, he having been one of them. The book is particularly enlightening about the struggles of the lettuce workers in Salinas, who sought a strike against Chavez’s orders and won. My book is the first study of the boycott and how it contributed to the contracts in 1970. I explore how the union lost much of its momentum in the 1970s, due in large part to conflicts over strategy and objectives between Chavez and his Executive Board. Each one of these authors covers the formation of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act and why the union struggled to succeed within it. In varying degrees, the authors cover Chavez’s decision to oppose illegal immigration and how it hindered the union’s ability to organize undocumented workers. These
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topics and Chavez’s personal triumphs and struggles are given much closer treatment in Miriam Pawel’s award-winning *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez: A Biography*.

A few other authors of recent books offer unique perspectives on particular aspects of the movement. Marshall Ganz’s *Why David Sometimes Wins: Leadership, Organization, and Strategy in the California Farm Worker Movement* is a valuable, first-hand account of how and why the UFW won its early battles, as told by one of its key organizers and a member of the UFW Executive Board. Lauren Araiza’s *To March for Others: The Black Freedom Struggle and the United Farm Workers* explores the contributions made to the movement by black civil rights groups, especially the Black Panther Party. Finally, Bruce Neuburger’s *Lettuce Wars: Ten Years of Work and Struggle in the Lettuce Fields of California* is a valuable, first-hand account from Salinas that complements Bardacke’s more comprehensive treatment of the union.

Two articles are particularly insightful on the challenges related to maintaining the movement under the Agricultural Labor Relations Act: Miriam Wells and Don Villarejo’s “State Structures and Social Movement Strategies: The Shaping of Farm Labor Protections in California,” in *Politics & Society*, and Jennifer Gordon’s “A Movement in the Wake of a New Law: The United Farm Workers and the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act,” in *Cause Lawyers and Social Movements*. Wells and Villarejo offer a detailed account of the UFW’s performance under the ALRA, showing that, despite difficulties, the union was winning many more elections than it was losing when it decided to decrease its organizing efforts in the late 1970s. Gordon explores how the UFW benefitted from a small but dedicated cadre of young lawyers motivated by the goal of achieving social justice rather than by profit. Her study highlights what was lost when Chavez dismissed the team over compensation and governance issues.

**Primary Sources**

The Collections of the United Farm Workers of America reside at the Walter Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University. This is the most extensive collection of materials related to the United Farm Workers union contained by any library. The Reuther Library has been the main repository for the official papers of the union since the 1970s, and many Reuther librarians have spent years in California and Detroit organizing these papers. Gale/Cengage Company has digitized some of the archive and made it available for purchase by libraries around the country, although there is still a good portion of the collection that is only available at the Reuther Library. Other libraries and individuals maintain collections that complement the UFW collection at the Reuther. The Beineke Library at Yale University contains the papers of Jacques Levy, a journalist and writer who worked with the union and wrote one of the first histories of Chavez and the UFW. Additionally, former UFW organizer, Leroy Chatfield, created an online collection, entitled the Farmworker Movement Documentation Project, that contains testimonials of organizers and community activists who have participated in the farmworkers movement, photographs, speeches, and other ephemera. The collection is now main-
tained by the University of California, San Diego Library. Jerry Cohen submitted legal records collected during his fourteen years as General Counsel of the United Farm Workers of America to Amherst College. Collections related to specific organizations or individuals that communicated with or influenced the UFW include the Synanon papers at the University of California, Los Angeles Special Collections, and the Mexican American Collections and the Fred Ross Papers at Stanford University Library.

Further Reading


**Notes:**


(3.) Dolores Huerta, quoted in Jerald Barry Brown (PhD Diss., Cornell University, 1972), 205.
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(4.) Ibid.

(5.) Brown (PhD Diss.), 218-219. The year 1966 became the benchmark because a poor crop in 1967 had reduced total shipments well below the norm for the table grape industry. Therefore, 1966 shipment totals represented a much truer condition of the market.

(6.) Ibid., 211.

(7.) Brown to Elinson, October 8, 1968, UFW Administration Files Collection, Box 26-33, ALUA.


(9.) Matt Garcia, From the Jaws of Victory: The Triumph and Tragedy of Cesar Chavez and the Farm Worker Movement (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 110.


(11.) Election Analysis, January 1976, Jacques E. Levy Research Collection on Cesar Chavez, Box 29, Folder 561. See also, Garcia, From the Jaws of Victory, 161.

(12.) Garcia, From The Jaws of Victory, 181.

(13.) UFW 6 of 8 side 1, February 25, 1977, audio recording, UFW Collections, ALUA.

(14.) National Executive Board meeting, February 25, 1977, UFW 1 of 8 side 1, audio recording, UFW Collections, ALUA.

(15.) Nick Jones interview, 19, 21, William Taylor, Box 1, Folder 1, ALUA; see Garcia, From the Jaws of Victory, 68, for a definition of “missionary work.”

(16.) UFW 2 of 8 side 1, audio recording, UFW Collections, ALUA; see Garcia, From the Jaws of Victory, 202.

(17.) Garcia, From the Jaws of Victory, 270–271.


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(20.) Coalition of Immokalee Workers Online. This is a worker-based human rights organization, built on a foundation of farmworker community organizing starting in 1993.


Matt García
Department of History, Arizona State University