

The Legacy of Cesar Chavez

And now in this month, April of 2003, the tenth anniversary of Chavez's death – and after 30 years of work in organizing a farmworker movement – what is his legacy? Why does the state celebrate a holiday in his honor? Why did the U.S. Post Office issue a special stamp? Why are there now parks, streets, and schools throughout California and the Southwest named after Cesar E. Chavez? Among many possible explanations, I choose but a few.

Chavez was an indigenous, self-educated Latino leader, born in Arizona and raised in California. He was a farmworker, a veteran, a community activist, an organizer, and the founder of the farmworker movement. He accomplished at great personal sacrifice – including the sacrifices made by his wife and eight children – what no other person had ever done before. In the face of undying opposition from California's largest industry, agribusiness, he built a farmworker union. And following in the tradition of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., he built this union through the use of militant nonviolence.

Chavez has been held up as a symbol – or an icon, if you will – marking a new era in the history of California and the Southwest, the beginning of the Latino century. This year, more than half of all children born in California will be Latino. The vast majority of California students now attending urban elementary schools are Latino. This ethnic sea change has been born out of nearly 100 years of poverty, discrimination, human suffering, and hard work. Chavez's life work represents this historical change. Timing *is* everything.

For more than a decade, Chavez's farmworker movement provided the grist for churches and synagogues to discuss the application of social justice principles when weighed against the farmworker union's call for an international consumer boycott of California grapes. We have to remember that most of the growers also attended church or a synagogue and were generous in their support. Mainline churches played a significant role in the development of the NFWA long before the grape strike in 1965. And once the picket lines were formed in Delano, they carried Chavez's message to urban congregations throughout the country. But Chavez, in turn, helped make the teachings of the church and the synagogue relevant to its religious members who tipped the scales of social justice in favor of the cause of the

nation's most impoverished workers. Whether canonized or not, Chavez has been enrolled as a modern-day saint and prophet.

In spite of himself, Chavez became the nation's most respected and revered labor leader in the past half-century. His humble lifestyle, his stubborn independence, and his vision of a union's role in the lives of its members made Chavez as much a scourge to labor leaders who operated in the rarefied atmosphere of the capitols of the state and the nation as he was a lightning rod of inspiration for those union leaders searching for relevance, renewal, and reform.

What is Chavez's legacy for the rest of us? He taught us how to organize, how to take something that does not exist and make it exist. Results guaranteed, but only if we are willing to make the personal sacrifice and the life commitment required to motivate and inspire others to join with us to overcome all obstacles – for as long as it takes.

And what is his legacy for those participants who gave themselves to the cause of the farmworkers? For those who lived and worked in the close-knit community of the movement, it was a life-changing experience. For the sake of *La Causa*, they were recruited, used for a time, then let go when they could not or would not give any more. After their years of farmworker movement service were over, they took their newfound maturity, discipline, and organizing experience and went on to create successful lives in the real world.

But even now, years after they withdrew, tensions persist. For many, there are nagging feelings of loss and disappointment and a vague sense of being unappreciated. For others, hurt feelings surround the circumstances of their leaving. And a few express sharp criticism, even anger, about what they now believe could have – or should have – been accomplished: a lost opportunity, they say. These emotional shards are best left to future academics to sift through and posit their what, why, and what-ifs.

Chavez, along with his beloved credit union, has now been buried ten years and waits only to be resurrected by yet another indigenous leader who will rise up, in the spirit of Gandhi, King, and Chavez, to free people from injustice and oppression. Chavez's life advanced the cause of human rights in his lifetime; that is legacy enough.

