

# Cesar Chavez: Migrant Hero

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Word Count: 1,018

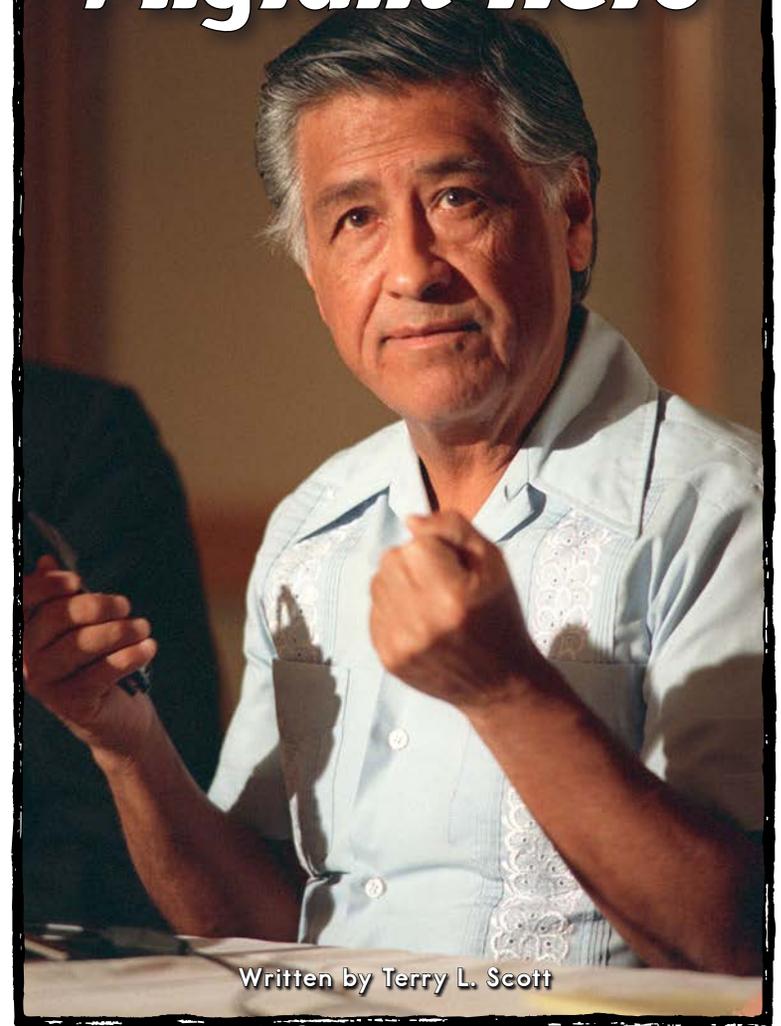


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Written by Terry L. Scott

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Level Q Leveled Book  
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### Harvested by Hand

You probably know that the fruits, nuts, and vegetables you eat were once crops that grew in fields. But did you ever stop to wonder how those crops are harvested? Some are harvested by machines, but many—fruits in particular—are too delicate. Research shows that nearly half of all U.S. fruit is still harvested by hand.

Most of those hands belong to **migrant** workers, who travel from farm to farm, picking fresh food so that we can eat it. It’s hard work that can pay little, and migrant workers aren’t always treated well by the farmers who hire them.

One man spent his life trying to help migrant workers. His name was Cesar Chavez.

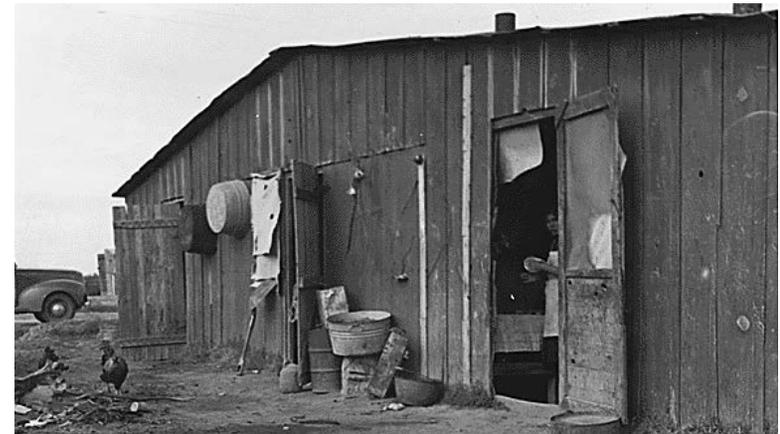


A migrant boy travels west during the Great Depression.

### A Migrant's Life

Cesar Estrada Chavez was born to a Mexican-American family in 1927 near Yuma, Arizona. As a child, he lived on a small farm. Cesar loved life on the farm, but dishonest men cheated the Chavez family. In 1937 they lost their land. The family joined the many other poor families who traveled west during the Great Depression, looking for jobs as migrant farm workers.

Life on the road was very different for the Chavez family from life on their farm in Arizona. Many farmers in California wanted people to work for little pay. Then the farmers could keep more money from the food they sold. As a result, life for migrant farm workers was often terrible. Workers toiled in the hot sun for hours but sometimes had to pay for any water they drank in the fields. The workers spent much of the little money they made on temporary housing, usually run-down shacks that were hot in summer, cold in winter. The shacks often came with holes and insects but no bathrooms or any way to cook. Sometimes instead of mattresses to sleep on, owners gave the workers straw.



Growers often provided migrants with poor housing.

For several years, the Chavez family moved around California, finding work wherever they could. By the time Cesar graduated from the eighth grade, he had gone to more than thirty schools. He was often teased because he didn't have decent clothes or shoes and because he spoke English with a Spanish accent.

Cesar and his siblings worked in the fields with their parents on weekends and during the summer. It was hard work, yet migrant workers were often cheated out of their already-low **wages**. One time, Cesar's whole family worked for seven weeks, seven days a week. At the end of the harvest, they found that their boss had left without paying them, and there was nothing they could do.

Even though they harvested tons of fruit and vegetables, they barely earned enough to feed themselves, let alone enough to save and get ahead.

## Too Many Dropouts

Instead of attending school, children like this one grew up working in the fields. Even today, young migrant workers drop out of school at four times the national average. U.S. child labor laws allow twelve-year-olds to work long hours on farms—and despite the law, thousands of children under twelve still work long hours, too.



The best hope for most migrants was—and is—the education of their children, but education for migrant children was hard to come by. Many migrant children grew up in the fields and started working as young as age eight. Cesar himself left school after the eighth grade to work in the fields full time to help support his family. Without a good education, the children often kept doing migrant work when they grew up, and the cycle continued.

## The Birth of a Union

When Chavez grew up, he decided to start a **labor union** for farm workers. A labor union is a group of workers who unite to demand certain rights and benefits. A union can go on **strike**, refusing to work and shutting down a factory or company until its demands are met. Almost every industry, from truck drivers to movie actors, has a union to protect its workers. Chavez knew a union could make big improvements in the lives of farm workers, too.

Yet many people considered **organizing** a labor union for farm workers to be impossible. Farm workers moved around to follow the crops, never staying in one place long enough to plan action. They were often recent immigrants who did not speak English well. Also, farm workers had no laws protecting them from being fired if they tried to form a union. Although other people before Chavez had tried and failed, he said, *Si se puede*—“Yes, it can be done.”

Chavez met with farm workers in their homes and talked with them about their problems. He was small and soft-spoken, but he was very **persuasive**. His union grew slowly, one worker at a time.



Chavez speaks to farm workers in California.

## The Grape Strike

In 1965, a group of Filipino farm workers went on strike against the grape growers in Delano, California. They were asking for a pay raise from \$.90 an hour to \$1.40 an hour.

Chavez knew he had to support the Filipino strikers. His organization voted to join the strike. Soon, more than 2,000 migrants stopped working. Strikers and their families went to cities all across North America, telling people about the working **conditions** of the grape pickers and asking them to **boycott** grapes. More than 14 million Americans did just that.



Chavez marches to support the *huelga*, or strike.



Chavez with Robert F. Kennedy, presidential candidate and brother of U.S. President John F. Kennedy, in March 1968, on the final day of his first hunger strike.

### Hunger Strike Strategy

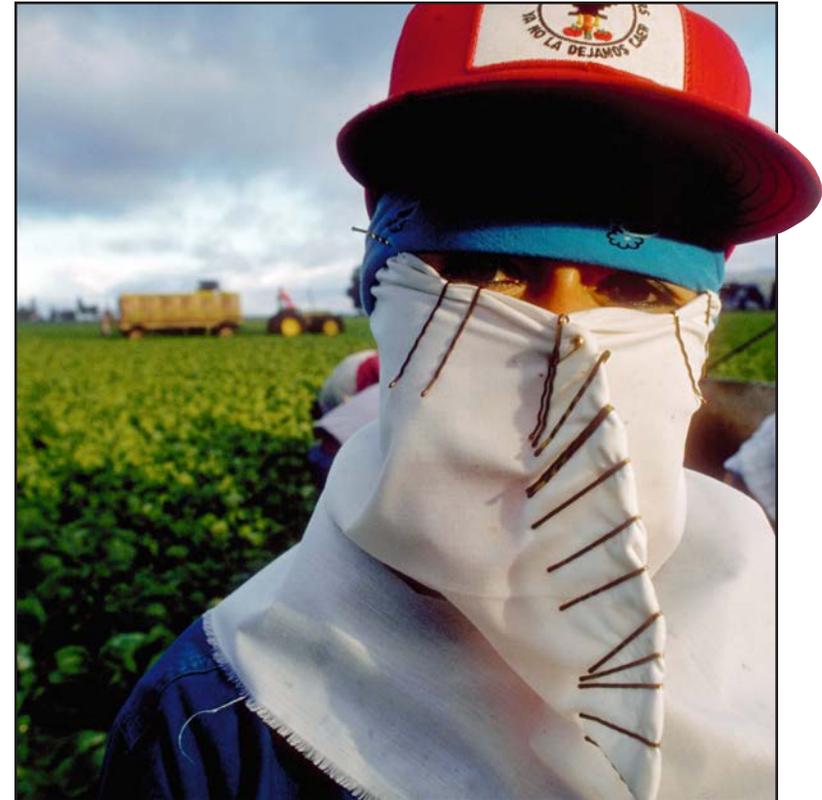
One way people protest injustice is by going on a hunger strike. They refuse to eat in order to bring about change. Chavez went on three hunger strikes in his lifetime. The first one was during the grape strike in 1968. At one point, some of the farm workers became discouraged and wanted to resort to violence. Chavez went on a water-only hunger strike that lasted twenty-five days. His fast put an end to the talk of violence, and that helped their strike succeed.

Angry grape growers made threats on Chavez's life. Support for the boycott continued, though, and after five long years, the grape growers agreed to the union's demands.



Cesar Chavez (right) and Fred Ross (center) march in San Francisco as part of a boycott in 1982. Ross often advised Chavez. Both men dedicated their lives to helping people in need.

Other strikes and boycotts followed, not just in California but also in Texas. New unions formed in the Midwest. In 1975, California finally passed a law that protected farm workers from being fired when they tried to unite. Against all odds, Chavez's efforts had succeeded. At its height, his organization, the United Farm Workers, included 50,000 farm workers. "We shall be heard," Chavez said, and they were.



## Pesticide Problems

Many migrant workers are exposed to pesticides—chemicals that kill bugs. In fact, workers are sometimes accidentally sprayed with them. Pesticides can cause nausea, skin rashes, cancer, even death. According to health experts, on average, migrant workers don't live nearly as long as other people. Studies show that pesticide exposure may be hardest on migrant children.

In August 1988, Chavez went on a hunger strike to call attention to the harm that pesticides can cause farm workers and their children. He ended the strike after thirty-six days.



### A Fond Farewell

Cesar Chavez died in his sleep on April 23, 1993. He was 66 years old. Thousands of farm workers and supporters came to his funeral. It was the largest funeral for any labor leader in the history of the United States.

He was a humble and courageous man who spent his life helping others. For all his work to improve wages and working conditions for farm workers, Chavez himself never earned more than \$6,000 per year. Still, as he said, “The rich may have money, but the poor have time.” His fight for the dignity of all people inspired millions of Americans to work for **social justice** around the world.

### Glossary

- boycott** (*v.*) to refuse to buy or take part in something in order to make a point or force a change (p. 11)
- conditions** (*n.*) the state in which someone or something exists (p. 11)
- labor union** (*n.*) a group of workers who act together to protect and expand their rights in the workplace (p. 9)
- migrant** (*n.*) a person who moves from one place to another, usually to find work (p. 4)
- organizing** (*v.*) grouping and managing people or an organization (p. 9)
- persuasive** (*adj.*) able to cause people to believe or do something (p. 10)
- social justice** (*n.*) the state or principle of equal economic, political, and social rights and opportunities for every human being (p. 15)
- strike** (*n.*) a form of protest in which workers stop working to show dissatisfaction with their employer or working conditions (p. 9)
- wages** (*n.*) regular payments earned by a worker that are based on the amount of time worked (p. 7)