

Introduction

Cesar Estrada Chavez was born to Mexican immigrant parents on their family farm near Yuma, Arizona, on March 31, 1927. During the Great Depression the family lost the farm and joined the thousands of other landless Americans as migrant farm workers wandering the southwestern United States. Despite a transient home life, the necessity of working in the fields to help support the family, and thirty different schools, Chavez did manage to finish the seventh grade. In 1938 his father found permanent work at a dried-fruit packing plant in San Jose, California, where Chavez was introduced to unions when his father organized the plant's workers. During World War II, Chavez served in the U.S. Navy for two years. After the war he married and settled in California, becoming a volunteer organizer for the Community Service Organizations (CSO) in 1950.

The CSO was organized by Saul Alinsky, a self-proclaimed "professional radical," to create a Mexican-American voting bloc. Chavez registered Mexican-Americans and helped them deal with government agencies. During this period he did much to fill out his limited formal education and to learn organizational and leadership skills. He idealized Alinsky's social activism and absorbed Ghandi's teachings on nonviolence. Singled out for his leadership ability, he rose quickly in the organization, becoming the California-Arizona regional director in 1958.

As a regional director, Chavez's attention was drawn to the plight of the migrant farm workers in the agriculturally rich area of California where he lived. Organizing these workers into a union seemed to offer the solution to many of their problems. When in 1962 the CSO board repeatedly refused to support Chavez's idea for a farm worker's union, he resigned. He moved to the Central Valley, and with a few others slowly built the National Farm Workers' Association, today known as the United Farm Workers of America.

Chavez successfully merged the struggle for better working conditions for the migrants with improving their lives and standing in society, dubbing the hybrid “La Cause.” Using traditional strikes and boycotts combined with nonviolent techniques, such as long marches and fasts, to generate publicity, Chavez successfully established a measure of stability and security for some of the migrants’ lives. The union’s struggles increased farm workers’ wages throughout the country and made many workers eligible for medical insurance, pensions, and unemployment insurance. Above all, the union gave the workers a mechanism to challenge their employers.

The work of Chavez on behalf of the migrants resulted in him being closely examined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. His desire to form a union was not necessarily a problem; however, a number of factors brought him and his followers to the attention of the authorities in Washington, DC. First and most obvious was the race and class of Chavez and the migrants. Organizing and empowering poor minorities inevitably led to radicalism and subversion in the view of the FBI dominated by Director Herbert Hoover, who saw Chavez’s actions as an epidemic of empowerment movements in the United States during the 1960s. Second, was Chavez’s close association with Alinsky, already a known radical. Third, the structure and appearance of the union made it suspect: Chavez *was* the union. It is clear today that its success depended on his great personal charisma, thereby reminding those on guard against Communist infiltration of the personality cults of the Soviet bloc. The union’s rallies, with their great number of poor people singing and hundreds of red and black banners fluttering in the air, completed an image of subversion in the minds of the Bureau. Finally, the potential threat that a farm workers’ union posed to the enormously powerful and Anglo-controlled agribusiness of California’s Central Valley ensured that Chavez would receive national attention.

In 1968, Chavez led a strike of grape pickers in the Central Valley. Marked by a nearly month-long fast by

Chavez, and culminating in a nationwide boycott of table grapes that spread to Europe, the strike became an international cause célèbre. One poll found that 17 million Americans had joined the boycott. The strike ended late in 1970 when the growers, under this tremendous economic pressure, agreed to a three-year contract with the union, thus marking the high point of the union. Its membership peaked early in the 1970s, with approximately 20 percent of California's 200,000 farm workers under its banner.

Chavez died in 1993 in Arizona; he was sixty-six. The union that he founded has struggled to continue without him. He lived to see many of his accomplishments slip away as his union faced numerous problems, not the least of which were the constant arrival of new workers willing to work for any amount, and a nation that has turned its back on union action.

The grape pickers walkout was not merely a labor dispute. Chavez viewed it, and the union, as part of the larger national drive for social justice that marked the 1960s. It was exactly this drive for social justice, or to overturn the status quo that frightened Hoover and led the FBI to begin a file on Chavez and his organization.

These microfilm rolls deal primarily with the 1960s, the period of the United Farm Workers greatest growth. They will be of interest to scholars and students in a number of areas, including twentieth-century U.S. history, labor history, the 1960s, social history, Mexican immigrants, and Chicano history. These rolls also provide one glimpse of the FBI's interest in supposedly subversive groups during the era, and whom the establishment found threatening.

The documents reproduced here were drawn from the Washington files of the FBI and have been released under the Freedom of Information Act; certain documents or portions of documents have been deleted by the FBI pursuant to provisions of that legislation. The material has been filmed in the exact order and condition in which it was released, and every effort has been made to publish the most legible copies available.

The file is in approximate chronological order, and the FBI did not index documents. The Roll Notes is not a complete inventory of the file; however, it gives an indication of the types of material or specific documents that may be particularly worthwhile for research.

Paul R. Beezley