

### **Background Information on Cesar Chavez**

The slogan of Cesar Chavez, “Si, se puede” (Spanish for “Yes, it is possible”) sums up his lifelong work as a civil rights activist and founder of the United Farm Workers. He was born in 1927 near Yuma, Arizona, son of Mexican-American migrant farm laborers. His parents were forced to give up their family ranch that was homesteaded by his grandfather, as they could not pay the taxes during the Great Depression. His early childhood was spent bouncing about in various migrant camps, therefore his formal education was sporadic at best. He attended school until the eighth grade when he quit to work in the fields fulltime. A few years later, he enlisted in the Navy and served for two years in the Pacific. After his discharge, he returned to the fields as a farm worker. He traveled throughout the farmlands of California for the next ten years.

Chavez was introduced to the methods of organizing labor by Father Donald McDonnell in 1952. Soon, Cesar became the national director of the Community Service Organization but resigned to found the National Farm Workers Association, which later became the United Farm Workers of America. He is celebrated for his non-violent boycott of California grape growers, raising public awareness for poor working and living conditions for farm workers, pesticide use, and fair wages for all regardless of ethnic background. He was instrumental in the creation of a collective organization (union) so that the farm workers would be able to receive health care benefits, better working conditions, citizen classes, voter registration, justice for the laborers and grievance procedures. Because of his background as a laborer, his understanding of the problems faced by migrant farm workers was real. Believing in non-violence, Chavez organized boycotts, strikes, fasts and marches to encourage and oftentimes force California growers to come to the bargaining table.

Even until the last day of his life, Cesar Chavez campaigned for the rights of the workers. After Cesar died, Lane Kirkland, president of the AFL-CIO described Chavez as an optimist, hopeful and determined to better the lives of farm workers and their families. Kirkland summed it up stating, “The improved lives of millions of farm workers and their families will endure as a testimonial to Cesar and his life’s work.” After his death, President Clinton awarded Chavez the U.S. Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor. He will be best remembered for his sense of justice, equity and his philosophy of non-violence for social change.

## Curriculum Outline for High School History Class

**Part I**- Students visit and work on a local farm for a day to experience the nature of this type of work. They write a journal entry about their experience, guided by the following questions:

- What was most challenging about your work on the farm?
- What did you find most rewarding about the experience?
- If you were to do this work every day what would you expect your hourly wage to be?
- Is this a job you could see yourself doing every day? Why or why not?

**Part II** - Students research Chavez on their own for homework, using resources provided. In class, they break into groups and share what they have found. Then we join together and have a discussion about his legacy. Some questions/quotes to consider:

***“When I went to work with Cesar, I didn’t know what a union was...But that was all right, because he told me, it’s not going to be a union. It’s going to be more than a union.” – LeRoy Chatfield***

- What is a union? What are the benefits of a union? Where else do we see unions exist?
- How did Chavez use a non-violent approach in his work? Why and how do you think that was effective?

### Resources

Cesar Chavez Foundation, [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rfk/peopleevents/p\\_chavez.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rfk/peopleevents/p_chavez.html), “The Fight in the Fields” film (<http://www.paradigmproductions.org/paradigm.html>)

Activity: “The Life of a Tomato”: Students take on roles of the farmer, the migrant workers, transporters, grocery store owners, grocery store clerks, consumers, etc., and we walk through the process of the tomato from the field to the table. We focus on the work of the migrant worker compared to the others, versus the percent of the dollar he/she earns off the tomato compared to the others. (See attached sheet)

**Part III** - Students are broken into two groups for a debate, guided by the question:

*Is Chavez’s legacy being upheld today in our current agricultural system?*

### a) Cesar Chavez group resources

Cesar Chavez Foundation website: <http://www.cesarchavezfoundation.org/>

Dallas Observer article:

[http://blogs.dallasobserver.com/unfairpark/2010/04/new\\_cesar\\_chavez\\_street\\_signs.php](http://blogs.dallasobserver.com/unfairpark/2010/04/new_cesar_chavez_street_signs.php)

KATU, Portland OR: <http://www.katu.com/news/local/50242262.html>

America's Union Movement articles: <http://www.aflcio.org/mediacenter/prspmtm/pr07012010.cfm>

## b) Farm workers today

United Farm Workers website: <http://action.ufw.org/>

UFW article: [http://action.ufw.org/page/speakout/maldonado\\_alert?source=web](http://action.ufw.org/page/speakout/maldonado_alert?source=web)

NY Times article on migrant farmworkers lawsuit

[http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2010/10/23/us/AP-US-Migrant-Housing-Shortage.html?\\_r=1&ref=us](http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2010/10/23/us/AP-US-Migrant-Housing-Shortage.html?_r=1&ref=us)

Pesticide Action Network North America: [www.panna.org](http://www.panna.org)

10 minute film on cosmetic workers (This might be a little too much...): <http://16deathspaday.com/>

## Questions:

- Are the wages commensurate with the job done?
- Are the families of the workers provided a decent place to live?
- Are their children given opportunity for education?
- Evaluate the working conditions.
- What about pesticides?
- Does the UFW continue to speak for farm workers?
- Are the legal Mexican immigrants given opportunity for citizenship?
- What about healthcare for the workers and their families?

## **Part IV - Debate**

a) One part of the class argues that our country has improved dramatically due to Chavez's legacy.

b) The other part of the class argues that much of the same problems exist, and are not being addressed, using case studies of farms in California.

For both groups, points to focus on are:

- Wages
- Union support and recognition
- Working conditions, treatment of workers
- Use of pesticides, chemical fertilizers
- Lawsuits for migrants workers
- Migrant farm workers' current movement

**Part V- Celebrate Chavez!**

Students prepare a lettuce and grape salad “ala Chavez” together, first determining and explaining where the ingredients came from and who was involved in getting them from the fields to our table. Then students share the dish with other classes and community members. The discussion during eating guided by the questions:

How can we sustain Chavez’s legacy? How can we keep his movement alive?