

At 50, Cesar Chavez's UFW Legacy

A half century after Cesar Chavez founded the United Farm Workers, the people who harvest America's crops remain under pressure from harsh working conditions and draconian immigration laws. In an interview with UFW President Arturo Rodriguez, Dennis J. Bernstein discusses Cesar Chavez's legacy and the battles ahead.

By Dennis J. Bernstein

The late Cesar Chavez, who founded the United Farm Workers 50 years ago, was an extraordinary human being. His commitment to gain recognition for farm workers of California and across the United States was unstoppable. He worked tirelessly to get them key worker protections.

With his various acts of civil disobedience, and long fasts, risking death, Chavez has often been compared to legendary figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.

The California State Assembly recently passed a resolution recognizing March 31 as Cesar Chavez Day and urging Californians to observe a day of public service. The resolution was authored by California State Assemblyman, Luis Aledo, of Watsonville, where the UFW farm worker struggle began 50 years ago.

"The injustices in the field are not merely a Latino experience," Alejo said "The struggles that farm workers faced and continue to face are shared with the African-American community, the Filipino and Asian community, members of the Arab community and countless others."

March 31, 1927 was Chavez's birthday, and this year marks the half-century anniversary of the founding of the UFW. In conjunction, with the 50th anniversary celebration, I spoke with current UFW President, Arturo Rodriguez, about Chavez, his work, and the continuing struggle of the farm workers for fair treatment and safer working conditions.

DB: We turn our attention back to the farm workers, who are currently fighting for legislation – really life and death legislation – to protect them from continuing to die in the fields from extreme heat. Joining us to talk about the battle in the California legislature is Arturo Rodriguez. He is the President of the United Farm Workers. .

And before we jump into the legislation let's just say a thing or two about Cesar Chavez and his crucial legacy. Remind people who he was. Remind us who he was and why it's important not only to remember Cesar Chavez but to carry on the

work.

AR: Well, Cesar Chavez founded the United Farm Workers back in 1962 along with 200 farm workers. They had a dream, they had a vision, knew that it just wasn't right for farm workers to continue to get abused, disrespected, paid low wages, and not given the dignity that they deserve as producing and harvesting our fruits and vegetables here in the nation.

DB: And what impact did he have on the whole labor movement? It was dramatic and was transformational, wasn't it?

AR: Cesar Chavez brought new life to the labor movement, brought to it new tactics, new strategies, new ways of doing things, and yet at the same time, he didn't have the opportunities like so many others in getting a formal education. He was only able to go to the eighth grade but he was determined, committed, very practical about his work.

He understood that the only way we could build a union for farm workers was to not only rely upon the sacrifices and the hard work of farm workers but at the same time depend heavily on consumers here, throughout the United States, Canada, and other part of the world to really bring about economic pressure on employers through the use of the boycotts.

Never before had boycotts been utilized throughout the labor movement. Now, today, it is very commonplace for millions to be able to utilize boycotts to be able to meet their goals and to meet their objectives in regards to getting contracts and improving wages for their work forces.

DB: And he also put his life on the line with life threatening hunger strikes that called the attention, the plight of the farm workers, to people in this country and around the world, and brought significant folks from everywhere.

AR: Exactly, Dennis. I mean, Cesar Chavez believed in non-violence much in the following of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. He felt that it was important to really engage people, and for one, to sacrifice, make sacrifices of their own to really get people to respond, and to listen and to demonstrate that this was such an important issue that he was willing to make penance for all the things that farm workers had to have done throughout the years in order to really bring about change and to bring about the determination necessary to be able to form a union, to be able to form an association.

Throughout his life he fasted numerous times, but the three major fasts, the first one was in 1968 where he fasted for 24 days. Robert Kennedy came and broke that fast with him at that particular time. And then he fasted in 1972 in Phoenix, Arizona. And that again was for 24 days and at that particular time

Robert's son, came and broke the fast there with Cesar at mass on that particular day.

And his third fast was his longest fast, that was in 1988, shortly before he passed away when he was 61 years old, took place in Delano, California, and that was finalized with a mass and Ethel [Kennedy] came to break bread with Cesar and mark the ending of that particular fast.

DB: You have said that it is still a life-and-death battle to have legislation passed in the California legislature that will prevent farm workers, at least help prevent farm workers from continuing to die horrible deaths in the sun, as they pick the fruits and vegetables that we all depend on. And this is, ... I say life and death no exaggeration. Farm workers continue to die, right?

AR: Exactly right Dennis. I mean we found over the last, since 2005, there have been at least 16 farm workers that have been documented, that died as a result of heat stroke just here in the state of California alone. And they're just horrible deaths, when folks are out there harvesting the fruits and vegetables with temperatures going beyond a hundred degrees, plus.

They are not given the water they need, they are not given the rest that they need. They are forced to work at an incredible pace in order to insure that the production quotas are met by the foremen, by the labor contractors, and by the growers where they work at. And sometimes it's just impossible.

I know one of the deaths that we made sure that people were aware of was a young Oaxacan woman, Maria Isabel Vasquez Jimenez, who died at the age of 17 when she was pregnant. And it was impossible for her to maintain the pace that growers forced her to do while she was harvesting the wine grapes up there in northern San Joaquin Valley, up there near Stockton.

And so it's been situations like that that has really, not only inspired us, but motivated us to go after legislation that really puts pressure on the state of California, on Cal-OSHA, on Governor Jerry Brown to insure that the laws that are passed by the legislature and signed by the governor are really enforced. So that farm workers don't have to needlessly die as a result of just trying to do their job out there, Dennis.

DB: Now we are very specifically talking about AB 2346, we're talking about the California legislature. How will this bill help, if it passes?

AR: Well, first of all, Dennis, I mean this is our way of celebrating the legacy of Cesar Chavez. We want to continue doing the work. You know, it is nice that we have streets, and we have buildings and schools and libraries and all those kinds of things recognizing the work that Cesar Chavez did but truth be told the

way we really represent and remember his legacy is through continuing to make improvements for the lives of farm workers.

And what AB 2346 will do is force the growers to allow farm workers, to give them the authority that if the grower is not abiding by the regulations that exist to give farm workers more drinking water, to provide them rest when they ask for it, to insure that there is shade in the fields while they are working out there in the extreme heat, that they can in turn make a citizen's arrest.

And that secondly, that the growers will be responsible for the actions of the farm labor contractors, or their foremen, or their supervisors at their particular company. They won't be allowed to just wash their hands. These violations that take place constantly and saying "Look, we didn't know, we weren't aware..." you know "how can we keep track of ..."

Well, of course, they can keep track of what's going on in their fields. Just like they do the production of the product that's being harvested there. They know exactly how much is being produced. By the same token they can know what the conditions are like. They can insure that the farm labor contractors, or foremen, or supervisors they are hiring, Dennis, are abiding by the laws that we fight so hard to get here in this particular state.

DB: Governor Jerry Brown, bills himself as a liberal Democrat. On the last round for this bill, Brown opposed it. Want to give us a little history on his support, or lack thereof?

AR: Well, Governor Jerry Brown in the 1970's, he signed historic legislation for farm workers. The California Agriculture Labor Relations Act allowing farm workers for the first time the opportunity to be able to organize and to be able to form a union, just like any other worker here in the United States. Now, we find in his second round of being governor here in the state that, you know, we need to go and call attention to the various issues that are important to farm workers.

Often times the interest of growers or the interest of people with money far outpace the needs of farm workers, of poor people, of minorities here in the state, especially when they are undocumented workers. And as a result, Dennis, we find ourselves doing marches, and doing protests, and doing fasting and letter-writing campaigns and e-mail campaigns.

Anything that we can possibly do to get the attention of the governor to insure that he does not forget about what the right thing to do is, and does not forget about the sacrifices that farm workers make every single day to make sure that he has food on his table as well as everybody else in this nation.

DB: Have you spoken to the governor?

AR: Oh definitely. I mean, last year, before we marched to Sacramento in pursuit of ensuring that farm workers had better organizing rights and opportunities than what was passed and what was existing right now. And to ensure that that law was enforced the Agriculture Labor Relations Act, we marched 200 miles, Dennis, from Madera, California, in the San Joaquin Valley, to Sacramento.

And it was done during the month of August, it was extremely hot out there, for the workers that accompanied me. And as a result, you know, prior to that march we sat down for several hours with Governor Jerry Brown and made it very clear to him why we were marching, why we felt it was necessary to expand the organizing rights of farm workers. They are not just like any other worker in this country.

And that we're up against tremendous opposition, tremendous power on the part of the growers. And so that we were looking for his leadership, and looking for him to do what was the right thing to do on behalf of farm workers in this country. And that he had a legacy, in terms of helping poor people, and he should be thinking about that legacy, as much as he is in terms of thinking about increasing the revenue of this state, and everything else.

So, yes, we have spoken with him, we've made it very clear in terms of what our thoughts are in this situation. And we're going to continue to push for the type of enforcement necessary and to push for the types of laws that would really give farm workers the same opportunities as other workers in this country; to have a better life, to be able to have a decent wage, a living wage, be able to have a medical plan for their families, and to take care of their basic needs.

DB: Well, I hope the governor is listening. He used to do the show right before this one on KPFA, Pacifica radio. And he used to talk a lot about how important these kinds of issues were and he seemed to be very supportive.

AR: And, you know, it always is important and critical to just take a moment to let farm workers know that we appreciate the sacrifices that they make every day to make sure that we've got fruit, vegetables, that we've got the wine that we consume, that all of that, that we appreciate the fact that they take the time to do it.

Because, Dennis, the reality is if these farm workers weren't here doing that work there wouldn't be anybody else to harvest the crops. No line of people waiting, despite the unemployment that exists in this state. There are not people waiting to get that job in the fields. It's extremely difficult, it

requires a lot of talent and skill, and profession. For someone to be able to endure the circumstances, and simultaneously be able to pick the kind of product that the grower calls on, that the consumers want and to ensure they pick it at the pace required by the growers.

That is our way of honoring Cesar Chavez, as well as we're going to be in all parts of the country these next few days. You know, I just returned from the Department of Labor in Washington, D.C., where Secretary Hilda Solis honored the five martyrs of the United Farm Workers.

This year we celebrate our 50th anniversary so the Department of Labor inducted the five martyrs of the UFW into the Labor Hall of Honor, which is unheard of and we're so grateful to Secretary Solis for taking the time, and then they named the auditorium there at the Secretary of Labor offices there in Washington, D.C., after Cesar Chavez.

So it was a real emotional event, as you might imagine Dennis, when the families of those farm workers were recognized by the Secretary of Labor, they were recognized by the Secretary of the Interior, Ken Salazar, as well as the Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack. So we are very blessed with a lot of support. We thank everyone that's joining in with us in various activities as we celebrate this year.

DB: And please tell us the names of the five martyrs.

AR: The first one was a woman named, a young Jewish woman named Nan Freeman, who was killed in 1972 on the picket line in Florida. And then there was two individuals that were killed during the 1973 grape strike, in the San Joaquin Valley, in the Lamont, California area. And one was Nagi Daifallah and the other was Juan de la Cruz.

The fourth was killed in 1979 during the vegetable strike, the Salinas and Imperial Valley lettuce strike, and broccoli and other vegetables, and that was Rufino Contreras. And then the last worker was a 21-year-old farm worker from the Fresno area. His name was Rene Lopez. And he was killed actually during a union election, if you can imagine that! Where the employer's brother-in-law came and pulled Rene over to his car and pulled a pistol out and shot him dead right there at the election site.

DB: And I was just going to say before ... the folks in Alabama found out how important the farm workers were, and how hard the work was, and how the skills were needed, when they passed that draconian series of laws, and they had a real problem, in fact, they almost lost their crops.

AR: That's exactly right, Dennis. And I think it didn't only happen in the

state of Alabama, Georgia is seeing the same thing, Arizona is seeing the same thing. There's nobody there to pick the crops except for the farm workers that are here today. And unfortunately most of us are undocumented and that's why we continue to fight so hard for immigration reform so that farm workers can be respected just like any other worker in this nation.

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