

## “Cesar Chavez: the Man and the Movement”

1985 March 06

(Chavez speaking at UCI). 03/06/1985. 41:43 min., image and sound.

### **Horace Mitchell:**

I'm Horace Mitchell, the Vice Chairman for Student Affairs here at UCI and it is my pleasure to welcome you to this evening's program, as well as to welcome on behalf of Chancellor Peltason, our guest speaker for the evening, Cesar Chavez, founder and president of the United Farm Workers of America, who will speak this evening on “Cesar Chavez: the Man and the Movement”. This presentation is being sponsored by The University Center's Program Board as part of its “Remember When” series. This series is examining various political, social, and cultural phenomena of the last thirty years in terms of the impact of these phenomena on life in the 1980s.

Let me tell you just a bit about our speaker. Mr. Chavez was born in 1927 on his grandfather's small farm near Yuma, Arizona. At age 10, life began as a migrant farm worker when his father lost their land during the depression. Together with thousands of other displaced families, the Chavez's migrated throughout the Southwest laboring in row crops, grapes, and tree fruits. He left school after the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, to help support the family. Mr. Chavez joined the US Navy in 1945 and served in the Western Pacific. In 1952, he began his days as an organizer in San Jose: coordinating voter registration, battling racial and economic discrimination against Chicanos, and organizing new chapters of the community services organization across California and Arizona. Mr. Chavez served as a CSO National Director in the late 50's and 60's. But his dream was to create an organization to help the farm workers whose suffering he had shared.

In 1962, after failing to convince CSO to commit itself to farm worker organizing, he resigned his paid CSO job, moved his wife and eight small children to Delano, California, and founded the National Farm Workers Association. In September of 1965, Mr. Chavez's NFWA, with 1,200 member families, joined the AFL-CIO's Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee in a strike against Delano Area table and wine grape growers. Against great odds, Chavez led a successful five-year strike boycott that rallied millions of supporters to the United Farm Workers and forged a national support coalition of unions, church groups, students, minorities, and

consumers. His organization merged with AWOC in 1966 to form the UFW and the union affiliated with AFL-CIO. From the very beginnings, the UFW adhered to the principles of non-violence practiced by Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The 1965 strikers took a pledge of non-violence and Chavez conducted a 25-day fast in 1968 to reaffirm the UFW's nonviolent philosophy. The Late senator Robert Kennedy called Chavez "one of the historic figures of our time".

There's much that we can say about this man, and certainly those of us here at the University of California, Irvine are very honored to have him here this evening as our guest speaker. He continues to live with his family at La Paz, the Union's key headquarters in Central California's Tehachapi Mountains. Like all UFW officers and staff, he receives a \$10 weekly stipend plus modest food and living expenses.

Ladies and gentlemen, will you please join me in extending a very warm welcome to Mr. Cesar Chavez.

(Applause)

**Cesar Chavez:**

Thank you very much.

Thank you very much Dr. Mitchell, for the introduction. We all also want to thank this evening, Randy Lewis, for the invitation and for hosting us here at the university this afternoon, all the Chicano Latino organizations on campus, the whole university here, and also MECHA for the wonderful reception we had at the Cross Cultural Center earlier this evening. We would like to particularly thank a couple, who have been our supporters and have contributed to this movement, probably more than anybody else. In so many ways it would be difficult to tell you all of them. But, here in Orange County, Roy and Ginger O'Donnell have been a godsend to us, and we want to thank them especially and acknowledge their help tonight.

Hi Father, nice to see you! Oh wow, everyone is here tonight.

When I entered the hall a little while ago, a couple of attorneys handed me a whole stack of summons. They were serving me with a suit. I think I have been served at least a million times, but what's interesting is that this suit has already been served once before. And it's – and I tell

you because I thought it was real funny what happened. I came in and they served me, and you know it's like when you see legal papers being served, you right away get defensive. So one of our assistants looked at him and it's the Admiral Packing Company in Salinas who up the fee, the board in the labor camp, what they were charging for meals and also the rent for the camp. But under the contract, they couldn't do that because it was written in the collective bargaining agreements so we went to arbitration and we beat them almost three years ago, and we can't get them to give the people the money back. And so they've been going to court, and they're spending more money in court than what they would have spent if they just would have paid the people the money that they took from them.

Twenty-one years ago, this last September, when a lonely stretch of railroad tracks, paralleling US Highway 101 near Salinas, 32 Bracero farm workers lost their lives in a tragic accident. The Braceros had been imported from Mexico to work on California farms. They died on their bus, which was converted from a flatbed truck, drove in front of a freight train. Conversion of the bus had not been approved by any government agency, the driver had tunnel vision, most of the bodies laid unidentified for days. No one, including the growers who employed the workers, even knew their names.

Today, thousands of farm workers live under savage conditions beneath trees and amidst garbage and human excrement, near tomato fields in San Diego County. Tomato fields, which use the most modern farm technology. Vicious rats gnaw on them as they sleep, they walk miles to buy food at inflated prices, and they carry in water from irrigation ditches. Child labor is still common in many farm areas. As much as 30% of Northern California's garlic harvesters are under-aged children. Kids as young as six years old have voted in State-conducted union elections since they qualified as workers. Some 800,000 children, under age children, work with their family harvesting crops across America. Babies born to farm worker families suffer 25% higher infant mortality rate than the rest of the population. Malnutrition among migrant worker children is ten times higher than the national rate. Farm workers' average life expectancy is still 49 years.

All my life, I have been driven by one dream, one goal, one vision: to overthrow a farm labor system in this nation that treats farm workers as if they are not important human beings. Farm workers are not agricultural implements, they are not a beast of burden to be used and discarded.

That dream was born in my youth, it was nurtured in my early days of organizing, it flourished, it has been attacked. I'm not different from anyone else who has ever tried to accomplish something with his life. My motivation comes from my personal life. From watching what my mother and father went through when I was growing up. From what we experienced as migrant farm workers in California. That dream, that vision, grew with my own experience with racism, with hope, with a desire to be treated fairly, and to see people treated as human beings and not as chattel. It grew from anger and rage, emotions I felt forty years ago, when people of my color were denied to see a movie or eat at a restaurant in many parts of California. It grew from the frustration and humiliation I felt as a boy who couldn't understand how the growers could abuse and exploit farm workers when there were so many of us and so few of them.

Later in the 50s, I experienced a different type of exploitation. In San Jose, in Los Angeles, and in other urban communities, we, the Mexican American Chicanos, were dominated by a majority that were Anglo. I began to realize what other minority people had discovered, that the only answer, the only hope, was in organizing. More of us had to become citizens, we had to register to vote, and people like me had to develop the skills it would take to organize, to educate, to help empower the Chicano people. I spent many years before we founded the union, learning how to work with people. We experienced some successes in voter registration, in politics, in battling racial discrimination. Success was in an era when Black Americans were just beginning to assert their civil rights and when political awareness among Chicanos, Latinos was almost non-existent. But deep in my heart, I knew I could never be happy unless I tried organizing the farm workers. I didn't know if I would succeed, but I had to try.

Those who attack our union often say, "It's not really a union, it's something else. A social movement, a civil rights movement, it's something dangerous". They're half right. The United Farm Workers is first and foremost a union and like any other union, a union that either produces for its members on the bread and butter issues, or it doesn't survive. But the UFW has always been something more than a union. Although, it has never been dangerous if you believe in the Bill of Rights. The UFW was a beginning. We attacked at a historical source of shame and infamy that our people in this country lived with. We attacked that injustice, not by complaining, not by seeking handouts, not by becoming soldiers in the war on poverty, we organized. Farm workers acknowledge we have allowed ourselves to become victims in a democratic society. A

society where majority rules and collective bargaining are supposed to be more than academic theories or political rhetoric. And by addressing this historical problem, we created confidence and pride and hope in an entire people's ability to create the future.

The UFW survival is existent. Where not a doubt in my mind when the time began to come, after the union become visible, when Chicanos started entering college in greater numbers, when Hispanics, Latinos began running for office in greater numbers, when our people started asserting their rights on a broad range of issues and in many communities across the country. The union survival, its very existence, sent out a signal to all Chicanos, to all Latinos, that we were fighting for our dignity. That we were challenging and overcoming injustice. That we were empowering the least educated among us, the poorest among us. The message was clear: if it could happen in the fields, it could happen anywhere. In the cities, in the courts, in the city councils, in the state legislatures. I didn't really appreciate it at the time, but the coming of our union signaled the start of great changes among Chicanos and Latinos that are only now beginning to be seen.

I've traveled to every part of this nation and I have met and spoken with thousands of Chicanos and Latinos from every walk of life, from every social and economic class. One thing I hear most often, from these people, from them, is that regardless of age or position, and from many non-Hispanics and non-Chicanos as well, is that the farm workers gave them the hope that they could succeed and the inspiration to work for change.

From time to time, you will hear our opponents declare that the union is weak, that the union has no support, that the union has not grown fast enough. Our obituary has been written many times. How ironic it is, that the same forces that have argued so passionately that the union is not influential, are the same forces that continue to fight us so hard. The union's power in agriculture has nothing to do with the number of farm workers on the union's contract. It has nothing to do with the worker's ability to contribute and to fight in democratic politics. It doesn't have much to do with our ability to conduct successful boycotts. The very fact of our existence forces an entire industry, unionized and non-unionized, to spend millions of dollars year after year on increased wages, on improving working conditions, on benefits for workers. If we're so weak and unsuccessful, why do the growers continue to fight us with such passion? Because as long as we continue to exist, farm workers will benefit from our existence even if they don't work under

union contract. It doesn't really matter whether we have 100,000 members or 500,000 members. In truth, hundreds of thousands of farm workers in California and in other states are better off today because of our work. And Chicanos and Latinos across California and the nation who don't work in agriculture are better off today because of what the farm workers taught people about organization, about pride and strength, about seizing control of their own lives. Tens of thousands of children and grandchildren of farm workers, and the children and grandchildren of poor Chicanos and Latinos are moving out of the fields and out of the barrios and into the professions and into business and into politics and that movement cannot be reversed.

Our union will forever exist as an empowering force among Chicanos in the Southwest. That means that that our power and our influence will grow and not diminish. Two major trends gives up hope and encouragement. First, our union has returned to our tried and tested weapon in the farm workers' non-violent arsenal, the boycott. After the Agricultural Labor Relations Act became law in California in 1975, we dismantled our boycott to work with the law. During the early and mid-70's, millions of Americans supported our boycotts. After 1975, we redirected our efforts from the boycott to organizing and winning elections under the law. The law helped farm workers make progress in overcoming poverty and injustice. At companies where farm workers are protected by union contract, we have made progress in overcoming child labor, in overcoming miserable wages and working conditions, in overcoming sexual harassment in women workers, in overcoming discrimination in employment, in overcoming dangerous pesticides which poison our people and poison the food we all eat. For we have organized these injustices soon passed into history.

But under Republican Governor George Deukmejian, the law that guarantees our right to organize no longer protects farm workers. The law doesn't work anymore. In 1982, corporate growers gave Deukmejian 1 million dollars to run for governor of California. Since he took office, Deukmejian has paid back his debt to the growers with the blood and sweat of California farm workers. Instead of enforcing the law as it was written against those who break the law, Deukmejian invites growers who break the law to seek relief from the governor's appointees. What does all this mean to farm workers? It means that the right to vote in free elections is a sham. It means that the right to talk freely about the union with your fellow workers on the job is a cruel hoax. It means that the right to be free from threats and intimidation by growers is an

empty promise. It means that the right to sit down and negotiate with your employer as equals across a bargaining table and not as peons in the fields is a fraud. It means that thousands of farm workers who are owed millions of dollars in back pay because their employers broke the law are still waiting for their money. It means that 36,000 farm workers, 20,000 of them in the vineyards of California, who voted to be represented by the union and free elections are still waiting for contracts from the growers who refused to bargain in good faith. It means that, for farm workers, child labor will continue. It means that infant mortality will continue. It means that malnutrition among children will continue. It means that the short life expectancy and the human living working conditions will continue.

Are these make believe threats? Are they exaggerations? Ask the farm workers who are waiting for the money they lost because growers broke the law. Ask the farm workers who are still waiting for growers to bargain in good faith and sign contracts. Ask the farm workers who have been fired from their jobs because they spoke out for union. Ask the farm workers who have been threatened with physical violence because they supported the UFW. Ask the family of Rene Lopez, the young farm worker from Fresno who was shot to death two years ago because he supported the union. And ask the farm workers who watches their children go hungry in this land of wealth and promise. Ask the farm workers who see their lives eaten away by poverty and suffering.

Deukmejian has stopped issuing complaints against growers who break the law. In 1982, 137 complaints were issued – that's before he took office. In 1985, we estimate 24 complaints *may* be issued. None have been issued so far against growers who break the law. Deukmejian has caused a huge increase in the back log of farm worker charges against growers which go uninvestigated. In 1982 there were 392 uninvestigated charges. By 1984, there were more than 1000 charges that have not been investigated. Deukmejian has reacted to the attention focused on his failure to investigate farm worker charges. He has reacted to the back log of uninvestigated charges that he has caused. During the last six months of 1984, Deukmejian's prosecutors arbitrarily dismissed a massive number of farm worker charges without investigating them and in violation of the internal procedures for dealing with cases that Deukmejian's men established. More than 403 charges were dismissed. This massive dismissal of charges was timed so Deukmejian could deliver a speech to the Nisei Farmers League in Fresno on February 8<sup>th</sup> claiming "This year, we

have nearly eliminated the back log that we inherited and Mr. Chavez doesn't like that either. Now he complains because we're moving too fast".

Every day farm workers are fired, coerced, and abused by corporate growers, many of whom who have financed Deukmejian's political campaigns. The farm workers file charges under the law in the State of California and Governor Deukmejian as governor has the responsibility for enforcing that law. He has no choice, he's got to enforce it, that's the law, and he's not doing it. But instead of enforcing the law, Deukmejian manipulates the statistics. Instead of investigating the charges farm workers have filed, Deukmejian has fashioned those charges into a dagger which he has thrust into the backs of farm workers in California. Deukmejian has conducted a systematic purge of the best staff of the Agricultural Labor Relations Board which enforces the law. He cut the agency's budget by 27%. One third of the ALRB's investigators were eliminated. One third of the prosecutors were cut along with 40% of the hearing judges and one third of the appeals attorneys. Deukmejian has harassed and hounded out of the agency the most competent staff, many of them Chicanos. Everyone who doesn't share his pro-grower ideology goes. Most newly hired investigators and prosecutors don't speak Spanish, although 80% of the workforce speaks Spanish and have no labor law experience.

Deukmejian has closed off the compliance process. The process of getting farm workers the money that they are owed because growers broke the law. Deukmejian's men refused to process claims so workers can get their checks after growers have exhausted their appeals in the courts. California growers owe their farm workers some \$72 million in back pay as a result of convictions and court rulings. But not a single farm worker has recovered a dime because Deukmejian has blocked the compliance process. Many of the growers who owe farm workers millions of dollars are also major political contributors to Deukmejian. Last year, the state legislature voted a million dollars for compliance work. Deukmejian vetoed the appropriation. Deukmejian's agents have settled farm workers' cases against growers without consulting with workers for as little as ten cents on the dollar.

For example, Abatti Farms in Imperial County owes its workers \$10 million in back pay. Deukmejian's men settled the case for \$1.5 million. That settlement was rejected by the board as being too low. So what did Deukmejian do? The representative of the governor goes down to Imperial Valley and then settles the case a second time for \$900,000. That'll teach us a lesson.

For years it has been NLRB precedent, that's the National Labor Relations Board precedent, that back pay owed workers by employers is the same as wages earned. It must be paid in full.

Deukmejian has caused farm workers' cases to be arbitrarily dismissed. In 1982, 46% of the cases were dismissed. In 1985, we expect the dismissal to be somewhere like 70% of the cases brought by farm workers will be dismissed and many without even being investigated.

But the most outrageous incident of abuse occurred last fall when Governor Deukmejian's prosecutors allowed lawyers for a major lettuce grower, Bruce Church, unrestricted access to fifteen boxes of confidential files. Those files contained the names of farm workers who bore witness against the company in return for the promise of anonymity. The files shown to grower attorneys featured internal staff memos, attorney-client communications, and other confidential documents. They also include the names of hundreds of farm workers, witnesses, many of whom were promised confidentiality by prosecutors in return for informing on grower lawlessness. State investigators and prosecutors often agreed to keep growers from learning the identity of farm worker witnesses because many workers will not otherwise cooperate for fear of reprisals from the employers. Now it is well known among farm workers throughout California, Governor Deukmejian's men will turn your name and what you said over to your boss if you talk to the state about grower abuses. Deukmejian's prosecutors agreed to show the privileged files to growers' lawyers even though their client's conviction for breaking the law is being appealed in the appellate court. What Deukmejian's prosecutors did is the same as the district attorney giving convicted criminals privilege information about their cases which are in appeal. It's outrageous, it's unheard of, and it's a shame that our state would stoop that low to fight this union.

These tragic events forced farm workers to declare a new international boycott of California table grapes and also a boycott against the Red Coach lettuce and incidentally a boycott against of Alpha Beta stores which sell that product. That's why we're asking America once again to join the farm workers by boycotting California grapes. Not raisins, and not wine, just fresh California grapes. The Louis Harris Poll revealed that 17 million American adults boycotted grapes in the late 60's and early 70's. And we are convinced that those people and that good will have not disappeared. That segment of the population which makes our boycotts work are the Chicanos, Latinos, Blacks, and other minorities, our allies in labor, the church, the many movement people in the country, but also an entire generation of young Americans who mature

politically and socially in the 60's and 70's. Millions of people, for whom boycotting grapes and other products became a socially accepted pattern of behavior. If you were young, Anglo, and or near the campus during the late 60's and early 70's, chances are you boycotted grapes.

Fifteen years later, men and women of that generation are alive and well. (Applause) They are in their early 30's. They are pursuing professional careers. Their disposable income is relatively high. But they are still inclined to respond to an appeal from farm workers. The UFW's mission still has meaning for them and it has meaning for a new crop of young people who are still concerned about racism, about social justice, who still would respond to poor people who are battling non-violently against great odds and wealthy special interests.

Only today, we must translate the importance of a union for farm workers into the language of the 80's. Instead of talking about the right to organize, we must talk about protection against sexual harassment of women in the fields. (Applause) We must speak about the right to quality food and food that is safe to eat for all of us. I can tell you that the new language is working. The 17 million are still there and here. They are responding not to picket lines and leafletting alone but to a high-tech boycott of today. A boycott that uses computers and direct mail and advertising techniques that have revolutionized business and politics in recent years. We achieved more success with a boycott in 1984 than we achieved in 14 years since 1970.

The other trend which gives us hope is a monumental growth of Chicanos and Latinos influencing this country in particularly the southwest. And what that means is increased population, increased social and economic clout, and increased political influence. South of the Sacramento River in California, Chicanos now make up more than 25% of the population. That figure will top 30% by the year 2000. There are 1.1 million Spanish surname registered voters in California. 85% are Democrats, 13% are Republicans. (Laughter) In 1975, there were 200 Chicanos, Latinos, Hispanic elected officials at all levels of government in California. In 1984, there were over 400 elected judges, city council members, mayors, and law makers. In light of these trends, it is absurd to believe or suggest that we are going back in time as a union or as a people. (Applause)

The growers often try to blame the union for their sins. To lay their sins off on us, sins for which they only have themselves to blame, the growers only have themselves to blame as they begin to reap the harvest of decades of environmental damage they have brought upon the land. The

pesticides, the herbicides, the soil fumigants, the fertilizers, the soil deposits from thoughtless irrigation, the ravages of years of unrestrained poisoning of our soil and of our water. Thousands of acres of California have already been damaged by this abuse of nature. Thousands more will be lost until growers understand that dumping more and more poisons on the soil won't solve their problems on the short term or the long term. Health authorities in many San Joaquin Valley towns already warn young children and pregnant mothers not to drink the water because of nitrate from fertilizers which have poisoned the ground water. The growers only have themselves to blame for an increasing demand by consumers for higher quality food. Food that isn't tainted by toxics. Food that doesn't result from plant mutations or chemicals that produce that red luscious looking tomatoes that taste like alfalfa. (Laughter) The growers are making the same mistake that American auto makers made in the 60's and 70's when they refused to produce small and economical cars and open up the door to increased foreign competition.

Growers only have themselves to blame for increasing their tax on publicly financed handouts and government welfare. Water subsidies, mechanization research, huge subsidies for not growing crops. These special privileges came into being before the Supreme Court's one person one vote decision at a time when rural law makers dominated the legislature and the Congress. Soon, those handouts could be in jeopardy. As government search for more revenue, and as urban tax payers took a closer look at farm programs and what they really do for them.

The growers have only themselves to blame for the humiliation they have brought upon succeeding waves of immigrant groups. That they have sweated and sacrificed for a 100 years to make this industry rich. For generations they have subjugated entire races of dark-skinned farm workers. These are the sins of the growers, not the sins of the farm workers. We didn't poison the land. We didn't open up the door to imported goods. We didn't covet billions of dollars in government handouts. We didn't abuse and exploit the people who worked the land.

Today, the growers are like a punch-drunk old boxer who doesn't know he's past his prime. The times are changing. The political and social environment has changed. The chickens are coming home to roost and the time to account for past sins is fast approaching. I am told these days why farm workers should be discouraged and pessimistic. The Republicans control the governor's office in California and the White House. There is a conservative trend in the nation. Yet, we are filled with hope and encouragement. We have looked into the future, and the future is ours.

History and inevitability are on our side. The farm workers and their children, and the Chicanos and their children are the future in California and corporate growers are the past. Those politicians who align themselves with the corporate growers and against the farm workers and the Chicanos are in for a big surprise. (Applause)

They want to make their careers in politics. They want to hold power twenty and thirty years from now. But twenty and thirty years from now, in Modesto, in Salinas, in Fresno, in Bakersfield, in the Imperial Valley, and in many of the great cities in California, those communities will be dominated by farm workers and not by growers. By the children and grandchildren of farm workers and not by the children and grandchildren of growers. These trends are a part of the forces of history which cannot be stopped. No person and no organization can resist them for very long, they are inevitable.

Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You cannot uneducate the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore. Our opponents must understand that it is not just a union we have built. Unions, like other institutions, can come and go. But we are more than an institution. For nearly 20 years, our union has been on the cutting edge of a people's cause and you cannot do away with an entire people. You cannot stamp out a people's cause. Regardless of what the future holds for the union, regardless of what the future holds for farm workers, our accomplishments cannot be undone. *La Causa*, our cause, doesn't have to be experienced twice.

The consciousness and pride that were raised by our union are alive and thriving inside millions of young Chicanos and Latinos in California and throughout the land. Like other immigrant groups, the day will come when we win the economic and political rewards which are in keeping with our numbers in society. That day will come when the politicians will do the right thing by our people out of political necessity and not out of charity or idealism. That day may not come this year, and that day may not come during this decade, but it will come someday. And when that day comes, we shall see the fulfillment of that passage from the book of Matthew in the New Testament: that the last shall be first, and the first shall be last. And on that day, our nation shall fulfill its creed, and that fulfillment will enrich us all. Thank you.

(Applause)

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