

***La Causa* : The Delano Grape Strike, 1965–1970**

We are men and women
who have suffered and endured much
and not only because of our abject poverty
but because we have been kept poor.

The color of our skins,
the languages of our cultural and native origins,
the lack of formal education,
the exclusion from the democratic process,
the numbers of our slain in recent wars—
all these burdens generation after generation
have sought to demoralize us,
to break our human spirit.

But God knows we are not beasts of burden,
we are not agricultural implements
or rented slaves, we are men.

— Cesar E. Chavez, 1969
an open letter to the grape industry



Photograph by George Ballis, April 4, 1966

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In September 1965 Filipino and Mexican American farm workers went on strike against grape growers in the Delano, California, area. More than a simple labor dispute, the strike became a movement for social justice. It helped to redefine Latino and overall American politics, and catapulted its leader, Cesar Chavez, into prominence as one of the most celebrated political figures of the 20th century.

On March 17, 1966, Cesar Chavez led a *peregrinación* (pilgrimage) from Delano to the state capitol in Sacramento to put pressure on growers and the state government. The 230-mile march drew national attention. When 10,000 workers and supporters arrived 25 days later at the capitol on Easter Sunday, they learned that Schenley Industries, an early target of the strike, had agreed to a settlement.

On September 8, 1965, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee went on strike against Delano, California, area table grape growers. The union, largely representing Filipino farm workers, struck for wages equal to the federal pay standards for foreign workers. A week later, the mostly Mexican American National Farmworkers Association, led by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, joined the walkout. The strike spread quickly as over 2,000 workers left the fields.

The two groups of strikers merged, establishing the United Farm Workers of America (UFW). Through community organizing, marches, nonviolent resistance, and consumer boycotts, the UFW built a national support network. By focusing attention on the deplorable conditions of some of the nation's lowest paid workers, the union slowly won contracts from the grape growers. By summer 1970, the UFW signed contracts covering about 10,000 workers.



United Farm Workers flag, early 1970s

Gift of Rick Steady

While the new union's fortunes have risen and fallen with the political climate, the victory in Delano for the first time established an ongoing union advocating for the rights of agricultural workers. The union's early victories served as an inspiration to labor and community activists, and encouraged a whole generation of Latino youth to demand equal opportunities in all walks of life.



Poster with Cesar Chavez and farm workers
Gift of John Armendariz

From its earliest days the union recognized the importance of rallying public opinion to its cause. Through a national network of support groups and boycott committees, the union made the struggle for unionization part of the larger civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s.



Buttons

Gift of John Armendariz, Roger Fischer, and Sam Steinhart

The short-handled hoe, *El Cortito*, (the short one) was used throughout the Southwest. It became a hated symbol of forced stoop labor and growers' disregard for workers. Through union pressure the hoe was finally banned from the fields in the mid-1970s. By the 1920s Filipino workers were a small but significant part of California's farm labor force. Often organized into exclusively Filipino crews, they worked in key crops such as grapes and asparagus, which increased their importance to the state agribusiness beyond their numbers.



Short-handled hoe used by Marcelino Zavala, a California farm laborer and union activist

Gift of Marcelino Zavala

American Farm Labor in the 21st Century

Although the UFW has made progress to improve the lives of farm workers and their families, many of the more than 2.5 million farm laborers across the country continue to live under harsh conditions.

Recent conditions of agricultural workers have been documented by several United States government agencies:

The Centers for Disease Control has found that agriculture ranks among the most hazardous industries, and that farm workers suffer some of the highest work-related injury, disease, and fatality rates in the nation.

According to the Department of Labor, about 30 percent of all farm workers in 2002 had family incomes below the poverty line.

The Environmental Protection Agency in 1999 estimated that at least 10,000 to 20,000 farm workers were poisoned by pesticides each year.

The United States General Accounting Office last reported in 1998 that as many as 290,000 children between the ages of 15 to 17 work in agriculture. The UFW estimates that the number of all children under 17 working as agricultural laborers may be as high as 800,000.