

Famous Speeches: Cesar Chavez's 1984 Address to the Commonwealth Club

By Original speech from the public domain on 08.11.16

Word Count **3,597**



Farm labor leader and activist Cesar Chavez stands in front of a supermarket as he leads a demonstration in Philadelphia, Penn., on Nov. 14, 1985. AP Photo/George Widman

Editor's Note: The following speech is from an address Cesar Chavez gave to the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco on Nov. 9, 1984. Chavez was a community organizer, a Latino, an activist and labor leader. In his speech, Chavez starts by describing a tragedy that highlights the mistreatment of migrants. He rallies listeners around his belief that the Hispanic laborers are key to the future of California.

Twenty-one years ago last September, on a lonely stretch of railroad track paralleling U.S. Highway 101 near Salinas, California, 32 Bracero farmworkers lost their lives in a tragic accident.

The Braceros had been imported from Mexico to work on California farms. They died when 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 lay unidentified for days. No one, including the grower who employed the workers, even knew their names.

"Child Labor Is Still Common"

Today, thousands of farmworkers live under savage conditions. They live beneath trees with garbage and human excrement nearby. They are 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 pumps.

Child labor is still common in many farm areas.

As much as 30 percent of Northern California's garlic harvesters are underaged children. Kids as young as 6 years old have voted in union elections held by the state since they qualified as workers.

Some 800,000 underaged children work with their families harvesting crops across America. Babies born to migrant workers suffer 25 percent higher infant mortality than the rest of the population. Malnutrition among migrant worker children is 10 times higher than the national rate.

Farmworkers' average life expectancy is still 49 years — compared to 73 years for the average American.

"Driven By One Dream, One Goal, One Vision"

All my life, I have been driven by one dream, one goal, one vision: To overthrow a farm labor system in this nation which treats farmworkers as if they were not important human beings.

Farmworkers are not agricultural tools. They are not beasts of burden to be used and discarded.

That dream was born in my youth. It was nurtured in my early days of organizing. It has flourished. It has been attacked.

I'm not very 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 farmworkers in California.

That dream, that vision, grew from my own experience with racism. It grew with hope, and the desire to be treated fairly and to see my people treated as human beings and not as property owned by others.

"The Only Hope Was In Organizing"

It grew from anger and rage — emotions I felt 40 years ago when people of my color were denied the right 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 take advantage of farmworkers when there were so many of us and so few of them.

Later, in the '50s, I experienced a different kind of exploitation. In San Jose, in Los Angeles and in other city communities, we — the Mexican American people — were dominated by a majority that was 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.

"Condemned To A Life Without Pride"

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. We had successes in an era when black Americans were just beginning to assert their civil rights and when there was almost no political awareness among Hispanics.

But deep in my heart, I knew I could never be happy unless I tried organizing the farmworkers. I didn't know if I would succeed. But I had to try.

All Hispanics, urban and rural, young and old, are connected to the farmworkers' experience. We had all lived through the fields — or our parents had. We shared that common humiliation.

How could we progress as a people, even if we lived in the cities, while the farmworkers — men and women of our color — were condemned to a life without pride?

How could we progress as a people while the farmworkers — who symbolized our history in this land — were denied self-respect?

"Victims In A Democratic Society"

How could our people believe that their children could become lawyers and doctors and judges and business people while this shame, this injustice was permitted to continue?

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 (UFW) is first and foremost a union. A union like any other. A union that either produces for its members on the bread-and-butter issues or doesn't survive.

But the UFW has always been something more than a union — although it's never been dangerous if you believe in the Bill of Rights. The UFW was the beginning! We attacked that historical source of shame and reputation of evil that our people in this country lived with. We attacked that injustice, not by complaining; not by seeking hand-outs; not by becoming soldiers in the War on Poverty.

We organized!

Farmworkers acknowledged we had allowed ourselves to become victims in a democratic society. It is a society where majority rule and workers bargaining as a group are supposed to be more than academic theories or insincere political language. And by addressing this historical problem, we created confidence and pride and hope in an entire people's ability to create the future.

"If It Could Happen In The Fields, It Could Happen Anywhere"

The UFW's survival — its existence — was not in doubt in my mind when the time began to come, after the union became visible, that Chicanos started entering college in greater numbers. The time came when Hispanics began running for public office in greater numbers. Our people started asserting their rights on a broad range of issues and in many communities across the country.

The union's survival — its very existence — sent out a signal to all Hispanics that we were fighting for our dignity. We were challenging and overcoming injustice, and 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 Hispanics that are only now beginning to be seen.

I've traveled to every part of this nation. I have met and spoken with thousands of Hispanics from every walk of life — from every social and economic class.

One thing I hear most often from Hispanics, regardless of age or position — and from many non-Hispanics as well — is that the farmworkers gave them hope that they could succeed. The farmworkers gave them the inspiration to work for change.

"Why Do The Growers Continue To Fight Us?"

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 which argue so passionately that the union is not influential are the same forces that continue to fight us so hard. (<https://newsela.com/wire/articles/speeches-chavez-commonwealthclub/id/17534/#>)

The union's power in agriculture has nothing to do with the number of farmworkers under union contract. It has nothing to do with the farmworkers' ability to contribute to Democratic politicians. It doesn't even have much to do with our ability to conduct successful boycotts.

The very fact of our existence forces an entire industry to spend millions of dollars year after year on improved wages, on improved working conditions, on benefits for workers. This is true for both unionized and non-unionized businesses.

If we're so weak and unsuccessful, why do the growers continue to fight us with such passion?

Because so long as we continue to exist, farmworkers will benefit from our existence — even if they don't work under union contract.

"Better Off Today Because Of Our Work"

It doesn't really matter whether we have 100,000 members or 500,000 members. In truth, hundreds of thousands of farmworkers in California, and in other states, are better off today because of our work.

Hispanics across California and the nation who don't work in agriculture are better off today because of what the farmworkers taught people about organization, about pride and strength, about seizing control over their own lives.

Tens of thousands of the children and grandchildren of farmworkers and the children and grandchildren of poor Hispanics 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. And that means our power and our influence will grow and not decrease.

Two major trends give us hope and encouragement.

First, our union has returned to a tried and tested weapon in the farm workers' non-violent arsenal — the boycott!

"We Decided To Work With The Law Instead"

After the Agricultural Labor Relations Act became law in California in 1975, we dismantled the protest action we started by having the public not buy produce to show they were on our side. We decided to work with the law instead.

During the early and mid-'70s, 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 farmworkers make progress in overcoming poverty and injustice. At companies where farmworkers are protected by union contracts, we have made progress in overcoming child labor, in overcoming miserable wages and working conditions, in making the fields safer for female workers and in overcoming dangerous pesticides which poison our people and poison the food we all eat.

Where we have organized, these injustices soon pass into history.

But under Republican Governor George Deukmejian, the law that guarantees our right to organize no longer protects farmworkers. It 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 farmworkers.

Instead of enforcing the law as it was written against those who break it, Deukmejian invites growers who break the law to seek relief from the governor's appointees.

"The Right To Vote... Is Not Real"

What does all this mean for farmworkers?

It means that the right to vote in free elections is not real. It means that the right to talk freely about the union among your fellow workers on the job is a cruel trick. It means the right to be free from threats and intimidation by growers is an empty promise.

It means the right to sit down and bargain with your employer as equals across the bargaining table — and not as poor laborers in the field — is fake. It means that thousands of farmworkers — who are owed millions of dollars in back pay because their employers broke the law — are still waiting for their checks.

It means that 36,000 farmworkers — who voted to be represented by the United Farm Workers in free elections — are still waiting for contracts from growers who refuse to bargain in good faith.

It means that, for farmworkers, child labor will continue. It means that infant mortality will continue. It means malnutrition among our children will continue. It means the short life expectancy and the inhuman living and working conditions will continue.

Are these make-believe threats? Are they exaggerations?

Ask the farmworkers who are still waiting for growers to bargain in good faith and sign contracts. Ask the farmworkers who've been fired from their jobs because they spoke out for the union. Ask the farmworkers who've been threatened with physical violence because they support the UFW.

"Join The Farmworkers By Boycotting Table Grapes"

Ask the family of Rene Lopez, the young farmworker from Fresno who was shot to death last year because he supported the union.

These tragic events forced farmworkers to declare a new international boycott of California table grapes. That's why we are asking Americans once again to join the farmworkers by boycotting California grapes.

The Louis Harris poll revealed that 17 million American adults boycotted grapes before. We are convinced that those people and that good will have not disappeared.

That part of the population which makes our boycotts work are the Hispanics, the blacks, the other minorities and our allies in labor and the church. But it is also an entire generation of young Americans who matured politically and socially in the 1960s and '70s. They are millions of people for whom boycotting grapes and other products became a socially accepted pattern of behavior.

If you were young, white and on or near campus during the late '60s and early '70s, chances are, you supported farmworkers.

Fifteen years later, the men and women of that generation of are alive and well. They are in their mid-30s and 40s. They are pursuing professional careers. Their disposable income is relatively high. But they are still inclined to respond to an appeal from farmworkers. The union's mission still has meaning for them.

Only today we must translate the importance of a union for farmworkers into the language of the 1980s. Instead of talking about the right to organize, we must talk about protection against sexual harassment in the fields. We must speak about the right to quality food — and food that is safe to eat.

I can tell you that the new language is working; the 17 million are still there. They are responding — not to picket lines and leafletting alone, but to the high-tech boycott of today — a boycott that uses computers and direct mail and advertising methods which have revolutionized business and politics in recent years.

"Monumental Growth Of Hispanic Influence"

We have achieved more success with the boycott in the first 11 months of 1984 than we achieved in the 14 years since 1970.

The other trend that gives us hope is the monumental growth of Hispanic influence in this country and what that means in increased population, increased social and economic clout and increased political influence.

South of the Sacramento River in California, Hispanics now make up more than 25 percent of the population. That figure will top 30 percent by the year 2000.

There are 1.1 million registered voters with Spanish surnames in California; 85 percent are Democrats and only 13 percent are Republicans.

In 1975, there were 200 Hispanic elected officials at all levels of government. In 1984, there are more than 400 elected judges, city council members, mayors and legislators.

In light of these trends, it is absurd to believe or suggest that we are going to go back in time — as a union or as a people!

The growers often try to blame the union for their problems — 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 from decades of environmental damage they have brought upon the land — the pesticides, the herbicides, the soil fumigants, the fertilizers, the salt deposits from thoughtless irrigation — the violent destruction of years of unrestrained poisoning of our soil and water.

"The Growers Only Have Themselves To Blame"

Thousands of acres of land in California have already been irrevocably damaged by this wild abuse of nature. Thousands more will be lost unless growers understand that dumping more poisons on the soil won't solve their problems — in the short term or the long term.

Health authorities in many San Joaquin Valley towns already warn young children and pregnant women not to drink the water because of nitrates from fertilizers which have contaminated the groundwater.

The growers only have themselves to blame for an increasing demand by consumers for higher quality food — food that isn't tainted by toxic chemicals; food that doesn't result from plants that have genetically changed, or chemicals which produce red, luscious-looking tomatoes that taste like alfalfa.

The growers are making the same mistake American automakers made in the '60s and '70s when they refused to produce small economical cars — and opened the door to increased foreign competition.

Growers only have themselves to blame for increasing attacks on their publicly financed handouts and government welfare: government grants for water; mechanization research; huge payments made to farmers 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 lawmakers dominated the government. Soon, those handouts could be in danger as government searches for more revenue and as city taxpayers take a closer look at farm programs — and who they really benefit.

"The Times Are Changing"

The growers only have themselves to blame for the humiliation they have brought upon succeeding waves of immigrant groups which have sweated and sacrificed for 100 years to make this industry rich. For generations, they have subjugated entire races of dark-skinned farmworkers.

These are the sins of the growers, not the farmworkers. We didn't poison the land. We didn't open the door to imported produce. We didn't wish for billions of dollars in government handouts. We didn't abuse and take advantage of the people who work 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 approaching.

I am told, these days, why farmworkers should be discouraged and negative: The Republicans control the governor's office and the White House. They say there is a conservative movement in the nation.

Yet we are filled with hope and encouragement. We have looked into the future and the future is ours!

"Once Social Change Begins..."

History and inevitability are on our side. The farmworkers and their children — and the Hispanics and their children — are the future in California. And corporate growers are the past!

Those politicians who ally themselves with the corporate growers and against the farmworkers and the Hispanics are in for a big surprise. They want to make their careers in politics. They want to hold power 20 and 30 years from now.

But 20 and 30 years from now — in Modesto, in Salinas, in Fresno, in Bakersfield, in the Imperial Valley, and in many of the great cities of California — those communities will be dominated by farmworkers and not by growers, by the children and grandchildren of farmworkers and not by the children and grandchildren of growers.

These trends are part of the forces of history that cannot be stopped. No person and no organization can resist them for very long. They are certain to happen.

Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed.

You cannot uneducate the person who has learned to read. You cannot shame the person who feels pride. You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore.

"...It Cannot Be Reversed"

Our opponents must understand that it's not just a union we have built. Unions, like other institutions, can come and go.

But we're 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 farmworkers, 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 Hispanics who will never work on a farm!

Like the other immigrant groups, the day will come when we win the economic and political rewards which are in keeping with our numbers in society. The day will come when the politicians do the right thing by our people out of political necessity and not out of charity or very high standards of behavior.

That day may not come this year. 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 shall enrich us all.

Thank you very much.

Quiz

1 According to Chavez, Hispanic people and communities are continuing to gain power.

Which selection from the last two sections of the speech BEST supports this idea?

- (A) The day will come when the politicians do the right thing by our people out of political necessity and not out of charity or very high standards of behavior.
- (B) History and inevitability are on our side. The farmworkers and their children — and the Hispanics and their children — are the future in California. And corporate growers are the past!
- (C) 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."
- (D) Those politicians who ally themselves with the corporate growers and against the farmworkers and the Hispanics are in for a big surprise. They want to make their careers in politics. They want to hold power 20 and 30 years from now.

2 Read the selection from the section "Driven By One Dream, One Goal, One Vision."

Farmworkers are not agricultural tools. They are not beasts of burden to be used and discarded.

How do the words "beasts of burden" affect the tone of the sentence?

- (A) They convey Chavez's respect for the strength and endurance of farmworkers.
- (B) They convey the depth of Chavez's frustration at the treatment of farmworkers.
- (C) They convey Chavez's anger that more farmworkers do not stand up for themselves.
- (D) They convey Chavez's sadness that farmworkers do not have better tools to use.

3 Select the paragraph from "Condemned To A Life Without Pride" that shows how Chavez's personal feelings and values contributed to his decision to organize.

- 4 Read the selection from the section "Victims In A Democratic Society."

They're half right. The United Farm Workers (UFW) is first and foremost a union. A union like any other. A union that either produces for its members on the bread-and-butter issues or doesn't survive.

What does Chavez mean by the phrase "bread-and-butter"?

- (A) basic needs
- (B) farm crops
- (C) equal rights
- (D) labor justice