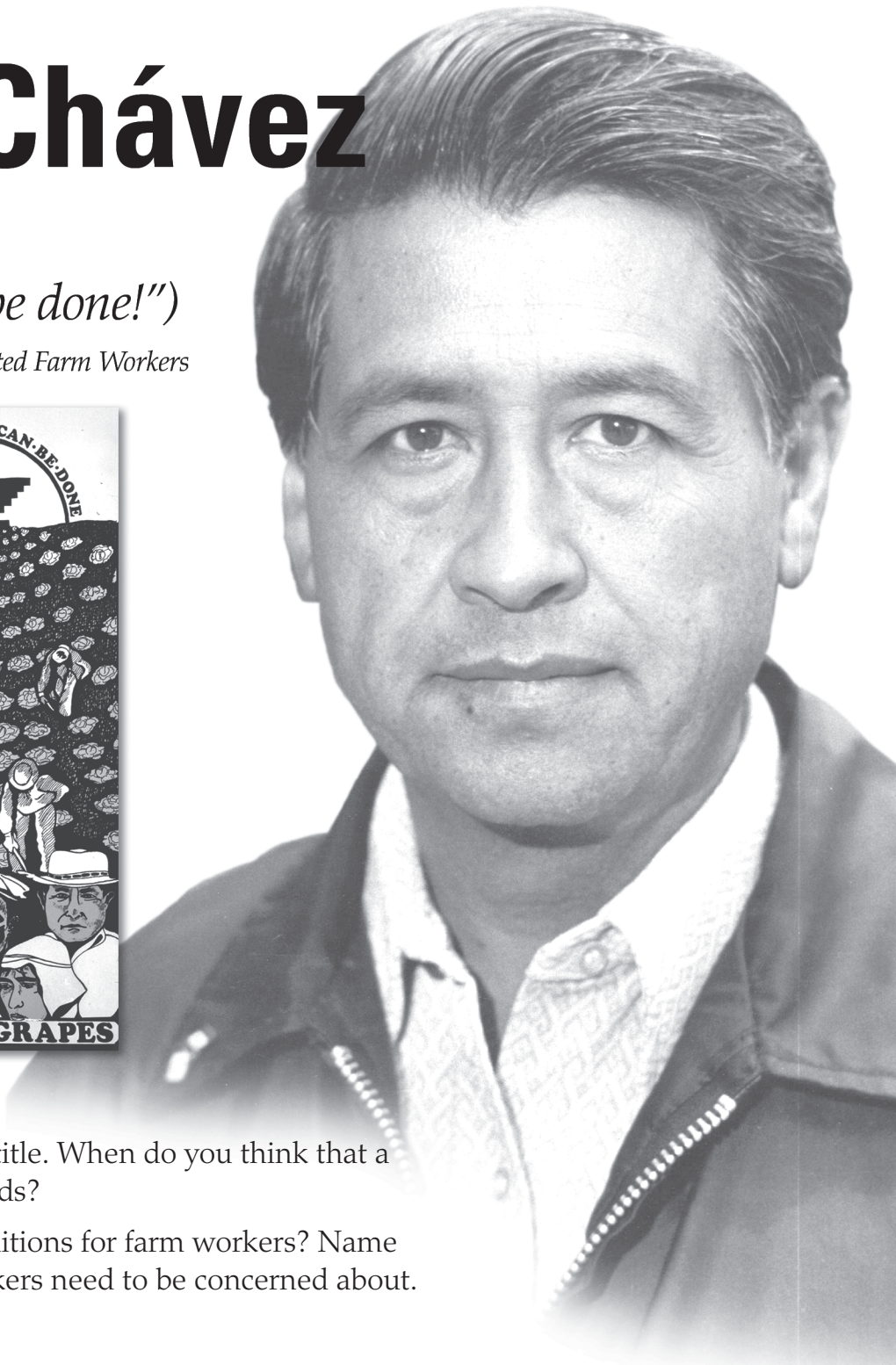
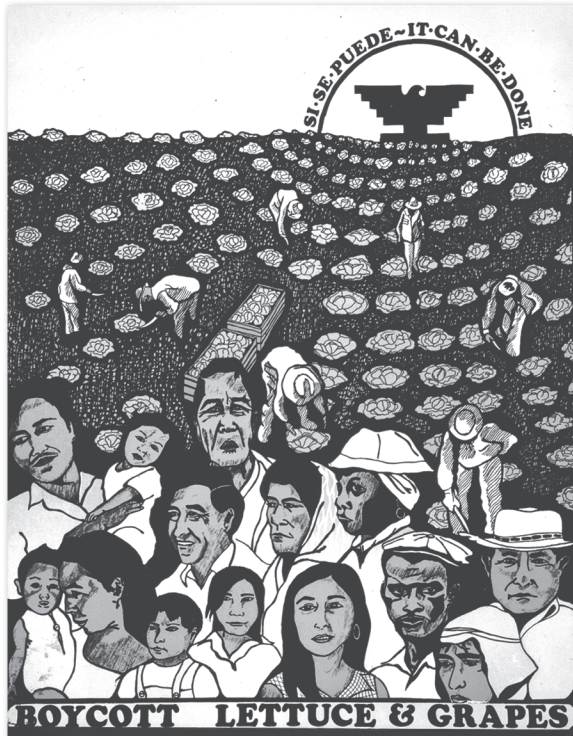


César Chávez

“¡Sí, Se Puede!”

(Spanish: “Yes, it can be done!”)

—slogan of the United Farm Workers



Pre-Reading Questions

1. Read the words below the title. When do you think that a leader might use these words?
2. What are the working conditions for farm workers? Name some things that farm workers need to be concerned about.

Reading Preview

César Chávez was a labor organizer. He brought national attention to working conditions for farm workers in the United States. These conditions were difficult and sometimes dangerous. Chávez successfully led the first national farm workers' union. His commitment to workers' rights added spirit to the growing Chicano movement.

César Chávez

César Chávez was born in 1927 near Yuma, Arizona. As a child, he heard his grandfather's stories about the Mexican Revolution. He also heard about problems between the rich and the poor. Chávez saw his mother feed hungry people who came to their door. Before bed, his mother told the children *cuentos*, or stories. These stories contained moral lessons. His grandmother taught him about religion. He went to mass with her every week. Chávez's life was shaped by his family's spirituality and commitment to the poor.

In the 1930s, Chávez's family suffered in the Great Depression. They lost their farm in Yuma. The entire family became migrant workers. They traveled through Arizona and California looking for farm work. Chávez saw that farm workers faced injustices every day. Growers often paid very low wages and made workers pay high rents for housing.

When Chávez was in eighth grade, his father was injured and couldn't work anymore. Chávez became a full-time farm worker.

Chávez spent two years in the Navy and then returned to California. He married Helen Fabela. He had known her since he was 15 years old. They moved to San José, where Chávez worked as a laborer. Chávez also became involved with the Community Service Organization. This group fought discrimination against Mexican Americans. It supported workers in labor disputes. At the Community Service Organization, Chávez learned about labor relations. He also learned about the beliefs and leadership style of Mahatma Gandhi in India. Later, Chávez used Gandhi's strategy of fasting to bring attention to his cause.

Chávez wanted the Community Service Organization to organize farm workers. When the group refused, Chávez quit. He decided to build a labor union for farm workers. Chávez moved his family to Delano, California. He went from farm to farm, talking to the workers. He told them about a new union called the United Farm Workers, or UFW. He explained why they needed labor contracts.

Chávez opened his home to farm workers who needed help. He became famous for his optimism and persistence. Soon, more than 1,000 workers had joined the UFW. The union's slogan was

“¡Sí, Se Puede!” It means “Yes, it can be done!” It says that the union can overcome any obstacle.

In 1965, Chávez gained national attention and sympathy for the farm workers. There was a conflict between the laborers who picked grapes and the large wine makers that owned the farms. The companies often brought in workers just for the grape harvest. On some farms, these “imported” workers got higher wages than the workers who worked there every day.

Chávez and the UFW decided to protest these unfair wages. They wanted permanent contracts for the grape pickers. The union voted to go on strike against the grape growers in the Delano area of California. Chávez called for Americans to boycott grapes and wine, and people stopped buying them. The national media showed the strikers on picket lines.

In the 1960s, many people were working to make the United States a fairer society. Other workers traveled to California to help the strikers. Chávez’s struggle became part of a social and political trend of the time.

The grape strike lasted five years. Sometimes strikers faced violence. But the UFW had a commitment to nonviolence. In February 1968, Chávez began fasting. On the 25th day, he ended his fasting in a county park. Thousands of union supporters held a Catholic mass there. Senator Robert Kennedy spoke emotionally about Chávez and the farm workers.

In 1970, Chávez and the UFW saw results. The public was putting pressure on the growers. Many growers wanted to settle the dispute. They signed contracts with almost 85 percent of the grape pickers. These contracts provided better working conditions. At that time, the Chicano, or Mexican American, movement was growing. Publicity for the farm workers gave momentum to that movement too.

The 1980s, however, were more conservative. The UFW lost many labor disputes. Yet Chávez worked tirelessly. He gained more contracts for grape pickers. He also helped lettuce and vegetable workers get contracts and better working conditions.

In the early 1990s, the UFW had financial and legal problems. Growers who lost money during the grape strike sued the union.

“A symbol is an important thing. That is why we chose an Aztec eagle. It gives pride. . . . When people see it, they know it means dignity.”

—César Chávez¹

On April 23, 1993, Chávez was in Arizona. He was going to testify there in a lawsuit. He had just finished fasting. He was exhausted when he went to sleep. The next day the world was shocked to learn that Chávez had died in his sleep.

Chávez is remembered for his courage and for his belief in the value of every human being. In 1994, President Bill Clinton recognized Chávez with a major posthumous award. It was the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the United States.

Comprehension

Complete the sentences. Use information from the reading.

1. Chávez became a full-time farm worker when _____
_____.
2. The Community Service Organization worked to _____
_____.
3. Chávez quit the Community Service Organization because _____
_____.
4. To find members for the new UFW, Chávez _____
_____.
5. In 1965, grape pickers went on strike because _____
_____.
6. In the 1960s, people stopped buying grapes and wine because _____
_____.
7. Chávez fasted in 1968 because _____
_____.
8. The UFW had problems in the 1990s because _____
_____.

Sequence

Work with a partner. Number the events in the correct order.

- _____ The United Farm Workers is founded.
- _____ Chávez works at the Community Service Organization.
- _____ Grape pickers go on strike.
- _____ Chávez fasts for 25 days.
- _____ Chávez plans to testify in an Arizona lawsuit.

Vocabulary

Look at these words from the reading. Put a check next to words that you know. Underline words that you don't know yet. Find the words in the reading. Try to guess their meanings.

boycott
commitment

dispute
fast

migrant
momentum

posthumous
strike

Check the correct meaning for each word.

1. commitment

- _____ a. belief
- _____ b. happiness
- _____ c. suspicion

2. migrant

- _____ a. hard-working
- _____ b. traveling around
- _____ c. living in one place

3. dispute

- _____ a. disagreement
- _____ b. meeting
- _____ c. silence

4. fast

- _____ a. to refuse to speak
- _____ b. to refuse to sleep
- _____ c. to refuse to eat

5. strike

- _____ a. refusing to buy
- _____ b. refusing to work
- _____ c. refusing to talk

6. boycott

- _____ a. to refuse to buy
- _____ b. to refuse to work
- _____ c. to refuse to talk to

7. momentum

- _____ a. energy
- _____ b. money
- _____ c. supplies

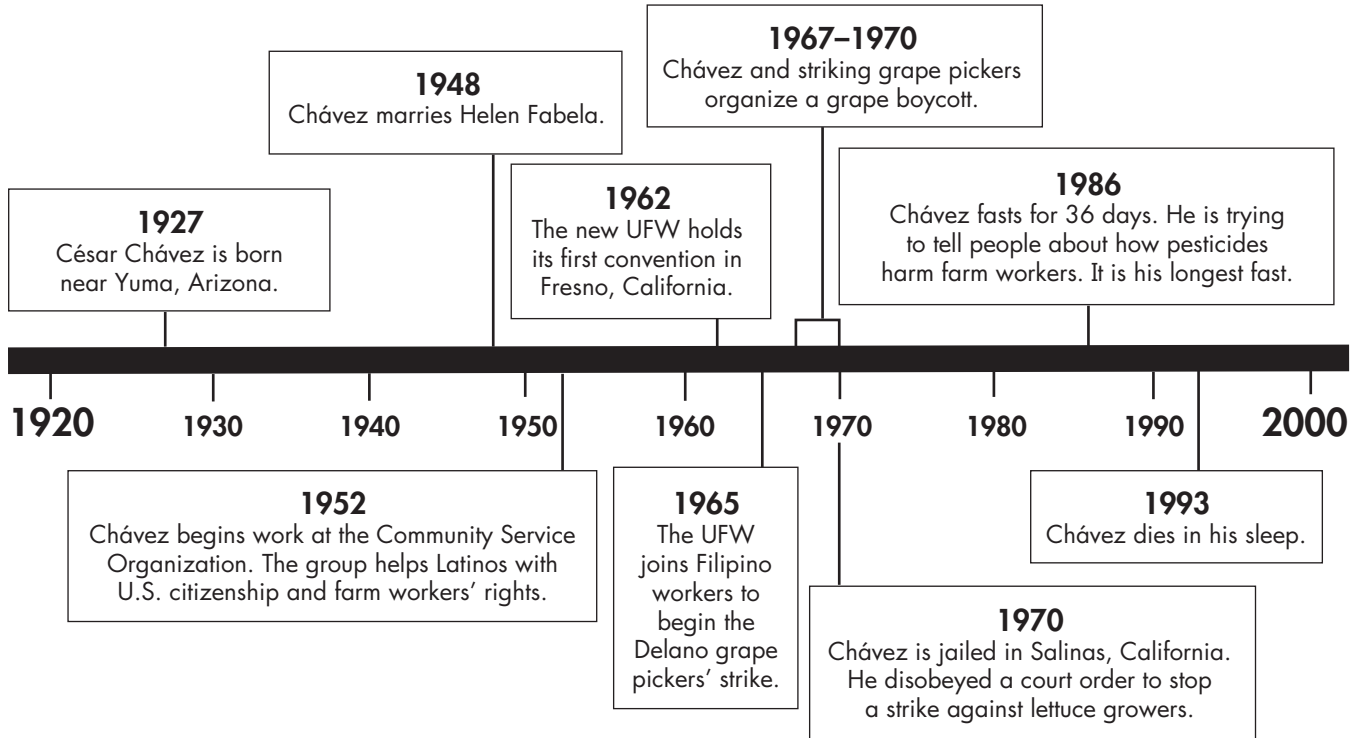
8. posthumous

- _____ a. unfair
- _____ b. late
- _____ c. given after death

Reading a Time Line

A time line shows dates and events in order on a line.

Life of César Chávez



Answer the questions. Use information from the time line.

1. In what year did Chávez join the Community Service Organization? _____
2. How did the Community Service Organization help Mexican Americans? _____

3. In what years did farm workers try to get people to support their strike by boycotting grapes? _____
4. In what year did Chávez fast for the longest time? _____
5. What was the reason that he fasted then? _____

6. In what year was Chávez jailed in Salinas, California? _____
7. Chávez led the UFW from its beginning until he died. For how many years did he lead the union? _____

Connecting Today and Yesterday

1. What issues did farm workers face in the 1960s? What issues do they face today?
2. March 31, César Chávez's birthday, is César Chávez Day in many parts of the United States. Why is there a holiday in his honor? Do you know how this holiday is celebrated?

Group Activities

1. Research the UFW strike that began in 1965. How did TV and newspapers report the story? Look for interviews with Chávez. Then tell your group about what Chávez said.
2. Bring in a picture of the UFW flag. Why was it an important symbol for Chávez and his union? Discuss in your group.

Class Discussion

1. How did early experiences influence Chávez's attitudes and beliefs?
2. Why did Chávez's family become migrant farm workers?
3. What did Chávez do to get support for the UFW?
4. How did TV influence people's attitudes about the UFW strike in 1965? Was the TV coverage a benefit or a disadvantage for the farm workers?
5. What are Chávez's most important contributions to U.S. society? Explain your opinion.

Reflections

1. What was the most interesting thing that you read in this lesson?
2. Can you use anything from César Chávez's story in your own life? Explain.
3. How can you learn more about César Chávez or the UFW?

Robert Kennedy called César Chávez "one of the heroic figures of our time."²

**Why did he say that?
Do you agree? Why
or why not?**