

# Day 4 ELA II Sessions

P-5

Cesar Chavez: Protector of Workers' Rights

Winter Institute 2018

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Cesar Estrada Chavez (say-zar es-trah-da chah-vez) was born in 1927, in the Gila (hee-luh) River Valley, near Yuma (you-muh), Arizona. As the second of six children, Cesar and his siblings loved to explore the golden desert landscape and to gaze up at the sparkling desert sky that seemed to stretch on forever. Cesar was named after his grandfather who had come to the United States from Mexico in the 1880s. Cesar’s grandfather had settled on a small ranch in the Gila River Valley.

This was the very same ranch on which Cesar and his family now lived and worked. The Chavez family worked hard, and their farm was prosperous. Then tragedy struck. Rain stopped falling in the Gila River Valley— first one year, and then the next. Without rain the crops could not grow, and the cattle died. This was also the time of the Great Depression, and Cesar’s family, like so many others, lost their home. There was nothing else to do but to sell the ranch.

And so, when he was ten years old, Cesar and his family moved to California to become migrant workers, people who traveled from farm to farm, picking fruits and vegetables during harvest time. Like most migrant workers, Cesar and his family were poor and were often treated unfairly by the people who hired them. They were paid very little money for the work that they did, and that work was very difficult.

Cesar and his family had to live in many different migrant worker camps. The camps were overcrowded, and many families had to share one bathroom. The Chavez family missed their ranch. They dreamed of going back to Arizona one day and buying back their home. However, migrant workers earned just a few cents a day for the backbreaking work that they did. There was no chance of ever being able to save money.

Cesar’s family was considered to be Hispanic because they were originally from the Spanish-speaking country of Mexico. Hispanic, or Latino, people, just like African Americans, faced discrimination and segregation. However, Cesar’s family celebrated their Mexican heritage, and spoke Spanish, the language of their ancestral home.

Although it wasn’t always easy, Cesar did go to school in various places in California. In fact, he went to more than thirty different schools. He later said that he was lucky to have graduated from middle school because his family moved around so much. Later in his life, Cesar told a story about an incident that happened to him at school. One day Cesar accidentally spoke Spanish instead of English in his classroom. His teacher was not happy with him, and Cesar thought that he had done something wrong. Cesar felt he had been treated unfairly, and it made him sad.

It was not possible for Cesar to go on to high school. He was needed to work in the fields. However, during World War II, Cesar wanted to serve his country. He joined the navy, and his family was very proud of him. After two years in the U.S. Navy, Cesar returned to life as a migrant farmworker. Soon after his return, Cesar met and fell in love with Helen Fabela. The couple married and moved to San Jose, California.

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Cesar was one of the many Latino people who worked as migrant workers, moving from farm to farm harvesting fruits and vegetables. The work was so hard, and the hours were so long, that many workers found that their health suffered. They worked seven days a week, often fourteen hours a day, for very little pay. If they were injured or became sick, they found it difficult to pay medical bills. These migrant workers were only employed during harvest time. And of course, migrant workers did not earn money when bad weather prevented them from working, while waiting for crops to ripen, or when they traveled from job to job. Cesar believed that something had to change. He believed that these migrant workers deserved to be treated more fairly. He set out to change the treatment of farmworkers, and especially migrant workers in California.

One day, Cesar met an organizer for a social service group known as the Community Service Organization, also known as the CSO. This organization also wanted to improve the lives of Latino people. Cesar volunteered to be a CSO community organizer. He went from farm to farm, helping some farmworkers with their day-to-day problems, and instructing others on how to become U.S. citizens. He encouraged all farmworkers to register to vote, and he helped to register thousands of new voters. Immediately, some of the farm owners thought that Cesar was a troublemaker.

Cesar was shy. He did not like speaking in front of large groups of people, but he knew that his work was important. He became the leader of a new CSO group in California. In addition to speaking Spanish, Cesar spoke very good English. As a result, he was able to communicate with both the farm owners, most of whom spoke English, and the farmworkers, most of whom spoke Spanish. Slowly, many farmworkers became brave enough to attend meetings and rallies organized by Cesar. Without intending to, Cesar had become a labor leader and civil rights activist.

Cesar believed that all farmworkers needed a union to represent their best interests. A union is a large, organized group of workers who join together and elect leaders to speak for them. The union leaders try to make sure the members' needs are being met.

Cesar knew that a union would have the power to increase wages, or pay, and provide health care for farmworkers. And so, he and his friend Dolores Huerta decided to set up a union called the National Farm Workers Association. Cesar said, "You are never strong enough that you don't need help," and the union was intended to provide that help. Within two years, they had one thousand members.

Cesar thought Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had the right idea about protesting in a nonviolent way. He decided to do the same thing. Cesar led marches, fasts, and boycotts, but never violent protests.

One of the most important farmworkers' strikes Cesar led was against grape growers in California. At the time Cesar said, "The fight is never about grapes or lettuce. It is always about people." The strike began in Delano, California, where grape growers had decided to cut the little pay the farmworkers received, so the workers were

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earning even less money.

Cesar responded by organizing not only a strike, but a protest march, too. Thousands of farmworkers set off for the state capital of Sacramento. They walked for hours each day in the hot sunshine. More and more workers left the vineyards and joined in the march. People across the nation noticed what was happening. Many people refused to buy California grapes in sympathy for the plight of the workers.

While farmworkers were marching, they weren't harvesting the valuable grapes. The farm owners watched in horror as their precious crops withered and died on the vine. They discovered that without their workers, they would lose money. The farm owners recognized Cesar's union and agreed to discuss higher wages and health care for the farmworkers. The farmworkers' march to Sacramento became the longest protest march in American history.

This was indeed a victory, but there was more work to be done. Cesar defended farmworkers and migrant workers in many other cases of unfair treatment. Thousands of people joined his union. His union opened offices all over the country. Eventually, Cesar's union became known as the United Farm Workers.

Later, the United Farm Workers protested against grape growers who used pesticides, or poisons intended to kill insects, mice, and rats, on their crops. These pesticides harmed workers who harvested the grapes. Cesar called for another boycott of California grapes. Throughout his lifetime, Cesar dedicated himself to working for the rights of poor migrant farmworkers who seemed to have no voice in society.

Cesar Chavez died in 1993. Thousands of people attended his funeral. One year after his death, Cesar was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the United States. His wife, Helen, accepted the award. During his lifetime, Cesar often encouraged his fellow farmworkers by saying "Sí, se puede!" (see, seh pweh-deh)—"Yes, we can." And he certainly did.

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