
DOCUMENT 20.6**CESAR CHAVEZ, "We Shall Overcome"**

1965

Cesar Chavez (1927–1993) cofounded the United Farm Workers (UFW) union and was instrumental in bringing the issues of Latino American economic rights to public attention. The following item appeared in the farm workers' underground newspaper, *El Malcriado*, on January 16, 1965, at the beginning of the Delano, California, grape strike. Its title, "We Shall Overcome," became a rallying cry for the movement. The strike continued for more than five years.

In a 400-square-mile area halfway between Selma and Weedpatch, California, a general strike of farm workers has been going on for six weeks. The Filipinos, under AWOC AFL-CIO, began the strike for a \$1.40 per hour guarantee and a union contract. They were joined by the independent Farm Workers Association, which has a membership of several thousand Mexican Americans.

Filipino, Mexican American and Puerto Rican workers have been manning picket lines daily for 41 days in a totally non-violent manner. Ranchers in the area, which include DiGiorgio Fruit, Schenley, and many independent growers, did not take the strike seriously at first. By the second or third week, however, they began taking another look and striking back. Mechanized agriculture began picketing the pickets, spraying them with sulfur, running tractors by them to create dust storms, building barricades of farm machinery so that scabs could not see the pickets. These actions not only increased the determination of the strikers, but convinced some of the scabs that the ranchers were, in fact, less than human. Scabs quit work and the strike grew.

The growers hired security guards for \$43 a day. They began driving their Thunderbirds, equipped with police dogs and rifles, up and down the roads. The people made more picket signs, drew in their belts, and kept marching.

Production was down 30 percent and the growers began looking for more and more scabs. They went to Fresno and Bakersfield and Los Angeles to find them. They didn't tell the workers that they would be scab crews. The pickets followed them into every town and formed ad hoc strike committees to prevent scabbing. They succeeded in these towns. Within two weeks, only one bus, with half a dozen winos escorted by a pearl gray Cadillac, drove into the strike zone. A new plan was formed. The ranchers would advertise in South Texas and old Mexico. They bring these workers in buses and the workers are held in debt to the rancher before they even arrive in town. We have a new and more difficult task ahead of us with these scabs.

As our strike has grown, workers have matured and now know why and how to fight for their rights. As the strike has grown into a movement for justice by the lowest paid workers in America, friends of farm workers have begun to rally in support of *La Causa*. Civil rights, church, student and union groups help with food and money.

We believe that this is the beginning of a significant drive to achieve equal rights for agricultural workers. In order to enlist your full support and to explain our work to you, I would like to bring some of our pickets and meet with you.

Cesar Chavez, "We Shall Overcome," *El Malcriado*, September 16, 1965, in Cesar Chavez, *An Organizer's Tale: Speeches*, ed. and introduction by Ilan Stavans (New York: Penguin Group, 2008).

PRACTICING Historical Thinking

Identify: Identify the significant numbers in Chavez's statements. Why did you select these?

Analyze: Who is Chavez's intended audience? Use your class notes and textbook to assist you.

Evaluate: Synthesize Chavez's statement with Martin Luther King Jr.'s (Doc. 20.4) and Betty Friedan's (Doc. 20.3). To what extent do all three documents present a shift in power away from the federal government to a more populist approach toward reform?