

Cesar Chavez Written Primary Source Activity

Speech to the Commonwealth Club of California San Francisco, September 9, 1984

I. Motivation

...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 farm workers as if they were not important human beings. Farm workers are not agricultural implements. 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 farm workers in California.

That dream, that vision, grew from my own experience with racism, with hope, with the desire to be treated fairly and to see my people treated as human beings and not as chattel. 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 exploit farm workers 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 urban communities, we--the Mexican American people--were dominated by a majority that was Anglo.

According the excerpts above, what motivated Cesar Chavez to fight for the rights of farm workers?

II. Organization

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. 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--successes in an era when Black Americans were just beginning to assert their civil rights and when political awareness among Hispanics was almost non-existent. But deep in my heart, I knew I could never be happy unless I tried organizing the farm workers. 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 farm workers' 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 farm workers--men and women of our color--were condemned to a life without pride? How could we progress as a people while the farm workers--who symbolized our history in this land--were denied self-respect? 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?...

...The union's survival--its very existence--sent out a signal to all Hispanics that we were fighting for our dignity, that we were challenging and overcoming injustice, that 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 travelled 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 farm workers gave them hope that they could succeed and the inspiration to work for change....



Why did Chavez think that organizing an agricultural union was important not just for the farm workers but for all Hispanics (*Latino*'s) as well?

III. Impact

...Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You cannot uneducate the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore. 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 farm workers, 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 idealism. 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.

As Chavez looked toward the future, what did he envision for Hispanics in the United States?

IV. Summary

Chavez gave this speech during a time that both he and the United Farm Workers union had declined in public favor. What message do you think that he wanted members of the Commonwealth Club to walk away with? Do you think he was successful? Why or why not?