**Cesar Chavez Speech Excerpts**

**Part One:**

"The Central Valley of California is one of the wealthiest agricultural regions in the world. In its midst are clusters of children dying from cancer. The children live in communities surrounded by the grape fields that employ their parents. The children come into contact with the poisons when they play outside, when they drink the water, and whey they hug their parents returning from the fields. And the children are dying. They are dying slow, painful, cruel deaths in towns called cancer clusters, like McFarland, where the children's *cancer rate is 800 percent above normal*."

"Other young children are suffering from similar fatal diseases that the experts believe are caused by pesticides. These same pesticides can be found on the grapes you buy in the stores. My friends, the suffering must end. We have no choice, we have to stop the plague of pesticides."

**Part Two:**

"The growers responsible for this outrage are blinded by greed, by racism, and by power. The same inhumanity displayed at Selma, in Birmingham, in so many of Dr. King's battlegrounds, is displayed every day on the vineyards of California."

**Part Three:**

"The simple act of refusing to buy table grapes laced with pesticides is a powerful statement that the growers understand. For your safety, for the workers, and for the children, we must act together. My friends, Dr. King realized that the only real wealth comes from helping others. I challenge you to carry on his work by volunteering to work for a just cause you believe in."

**Part Four:**

"Our struggle is not easy. Those who oppose our cause are rich and powerful and they have many allies in high places. We are poor. Our allies are few. But we have something the rich do not own. We have our own bodies and spirits and the justice of our cause as weapons. When we are really honest with ourselves we must admit that our lives are all that really belong to us. So, it is how we use our lives that determines what kind of people we are. It is my belief that only by giving our lives do we find life. I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice."

**Cesar Chavez**

Born in Yuma, [Arizona](http://www.history.com/topics/us-states/arizona), to immigrant parents, Chavez moved to [California](http://www.history.com/topics/us-states/california) with his family in 1939. For the next ten years they moved up and down the state working in the fields. During this period Chavez encountered the conditions that he would dedicate his life to changing: wretched migrant camps, corrupt labor contractors, meager wages for backbreaking work, bitter racism.

His introduction to labor organizing began in 1952 when he met Father Donald McDonnell, an activist Catholic priest, and Fred Ross, an organizer with the Community Service Organization, who recruited Chavez to join his group. Within a few years Chavez had become national director, but in 1962 resigned to devote his energies to organizing a union for farm workers.

A major turning point came in September 1965 when the fledgling Farm Workers Association voted to join a strike that had been initiated by Filipino farm workers in Delano’s grape fields. Within months Chavez and his union became nationally known. Chavez’s drawing on the imagery of the civil rights movement, his insistence on nonviolence, his reliance on volunteers from urban universities and religious organizations, his alliance with organized labor, and his use of mass mobilizing techniques such as a famous march on Sacramento in 1966 brought the grape strike and consumer boycott into the national consciousness. The boycott in particular was responsible for pressuring the growers to recognize the United Farm Workers (ufw; renamed after the union joined the afl-cio). The first contracts were signed in 1966, but were followed by more years of strife. In 1968 Chavez went on a fast for twenty-five days to protest the increasing advocacy of violence within the union. Victory came finally on July 29, 1970, when twenty-six Delano growers formally signed contracts recognizing the ufw and bringing peace to the vineyards.

That same year the Teamsters’ union challenged the ufw in the Salinas valley by signing sweetheart contracts with the growers there. Thus began a bloody four-year struggle. Finally in 1973, the Teamsters signed a jurisdictional agreement that temporarily ended the strife.

Believing that the only permanent solution to the problems of farm workers lay in legislation, Chavez supported the passage of California’s Agricultural Labor Relations Act (the first of its kind in the nation), which promised to end the cycle of misery and exploitation and ensure justice for the workers. These promises, however, proved to be short-lived as grower opposition and a series of hostile governors undercut the effectiveness of the law.

After 1976 Chavez led the union through a major reorganization, intended to improve efficiency and outreach to the public. In 1984 in response to the grape industry’s refusal to control the use of pesticides on its crops, Chavez inaugurated an international boycott of table grapes.

For thirty years Chavez tenaciously devoted himself to the problems of some of the poorest workers in America. The movement he inspired succeeded in raising salaries and improving working conditions for farm workers in California, [Texas](http://www.history.com/topics/us-states/texas), Arizona, and [Florida](http://www.history.com/topics/us-states/florida).