

Address to the Commonwealth Club of California (Abridged)

By Cesar Chavez

1984

- 1 Twenty-one years ago last September, on a lonely stretch of railroad track paralleling U.S. Highway 101 near Salinas, 32 Bracero farm workers lost their lives in a tragic accident. The Braceros had been imported from Mexico to work on California farms. They died when their bus, which was converted from a flatbed truck, drove in front of a freight train. Conversion of the bus had not been approved by any government agency. The driver had “tunnel” vision. Most of the bodies lay unidentified for days. No one, including the grower who employed the workers, even knew their names.
- 2 Today, thousands of farm workers live under savage conditions—beneath trees and amid garbage and human excrement—near tomato fields in San Diego County—tomato fields which use the most modern farm technology.
- 3 Vicious rats gnaw on them as they sleep. They walk miles to buy food at inflated prices. And they carry in water from irrigation pumps.
- 4 Child labor is still common in many farm areas. As much as 30 percent of Northern California’s garlic harvesters are under-aged children. Kids as young as six years old have voted in state-conducted union elections since they qualified as workers. Some 800,000 under-aged children work with their families harvesting crops across America. Babies born to migrant workers suffer 25 percent higher infant mortality than the rest of the population. Malnutrition among migrant worker children is 10 times higher than the national rate.
- 5 Farm workers’ average life expectancy is still 49 years—compared to 73 years for the average American.
- 6 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.
- 7 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.
- 8 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.

...

- 9 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.
- ...
- 10 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.
- 11 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?
- 12 How could we progress as a people while the farm workers—who symbolized our history in this land—were denied self-respect?
- 13 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?
- 14 Those who attack our union often say, 'It's not really a union. It's something else—a social movement. A civil rights movement. It's something dangerous.'
- 15 They're half right. The United Farm Workers is first and foremost a union. A union like any other. A union that either produces for its members on the bread and butter issues or doesn't survive.
- 16 But the UFW has always been something more than a union—although it's never been dangerous if you believe in the Bill of Rights.
- 17 The UFW was the beginning! We attacked that historical source of shame and infamy that our people in this country lived with. We attacked that injustice, not by complaining; not by seeking hand-outs; not by becoming soldiers in the War on Poverty.
- 18 We organized!
- 19 Farm workers acknowledged we had allowed ourselves to become victims in a democratic society—a society where majority rule and collective bargaining are supposed to be more than academic theories or political rhetoric. And by addressing this historical problem, we created confidence and pride and hope in an entire people's ability to create the future.
- 20 The UFW's survival—its existence—was not in doubt in my mind when the time began to come—after the union became visible—when Chicanos started entering college in greater numbers—when Hispanics began running for public office in greater numbers—when our people started asserting their rights on a broad range of issues and in many communities across the country.
- 21 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.

- 22 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.
- 23 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.
- 24 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.
- 25 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.
- ...
- 26 Our union will forever exist as an empowering force among Chicanos in the Southwest. And that means our power and our influence will grow and not diminish.
- ...
- 27 The Louis Harris poll revealed that 17 million American adults boycotted grapes. We are convinced that those people and that good will have not disappeared.
- 28 That segment of the population which makes our boycotts work are the Hispanics, the Blacks, the other minorities and our allies in labor and the church. But it is also an entire generation of young Americans who matured politically and socially in the 1960s and '70s—millions of people for whom boycotting grapes and other products became a socially accepted pattern of behavior.
- 29 If you were young, Anglo and on or near campus during the late '60s and early '70s, chances are you supported farm workers.
- 30 Fifteen years later, the men and women of that generation of are alive and well. They are in their mid-30s and '40s. They are pursuing professional careers. Their disposable income is relatively high. But they are still inclined to respond to an appeal from farm workers. The union's mission still has meaning for them.
- 31 Only today we must translate the importance of a union for farm workers into the language of the 1980s. Instead of talking about the right to organize, we must talk about protection against sexual harassment in the fields. We must speak about the right to quality food—and food that is safe to eat.
- 32 I can tell you that the new language is working; the 17 million are still there. They are responding—not to picket lines and leafletting alone, but to the high-tech boycott of today—a boycott that uses computers and direct mail and advertising techniques which have revolutionized business and politics in recent years.
- 33 We have achieved more success with the boycott in the first 11 months of 1984 that we achieved in the 14 years since 1970.
- 34 The other trend that gives us hope is the monumental growth of Hispanic influence in this country and what that means in increased population, increased social and economic clout, and increased political influence.
- 35 South of the Sacramento River in California, Hispanics now make up more than 25 percent of the population. That figure will top 30 percent by the year 2000.

- 36 There are 1.1 million Spanish-surnamed registered voters in California; 85 percent are Democrats; only 13 percent are Republicans.
- 37 In 1975, there were 200 Hispanic elected officials at all levels of government. In 1984, there are over 400 elected judges, city council members, mayors and legislators. ...
- 38 Yet we are filled with hope and encouragement. We have looked into the future and the future is ours!
- 39 History and inevitability are on our side. The farm workers and their children—and the Hispanics and their children—are the future in California. And corporate growers are the past!
- 40 Those politicians who ally themselves with the corporate growers and against the farm workers and the Hispanics are in for a big surprise. They want to make their careers in politics. They want to hold power 20 and 30 years from now.
- 41 But 20 and 30 years from now—in Modesto, in Salinas, in Fresno, in Bakersfield, in the Imperial Valley, and in many of the great cities of California—those communities will be dominated by farm workers and not by growers, by the children and grandchildren of farm workers and not by the children and grandchildren of growers.
- 42 These trends are part of the forces of history that cannot be stopped. No person and no organization can resist them for very long. They are inevitable.
- 43 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.
- 44 Our opponents must understand that it's not just a union we have built. Unions, like other institutions, can come and go.
- 45 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.
- ...
- 46 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!
- 47 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.
- 48 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.

Thank you very much.