***“We Will Not Tolerate the Systematic Poisoning of Our People”***

The artifact below is a letter written by Cesar Chavez. To better understand it, we need to learn a few things about Chavez and his monumental unionization of farm workers.

Chavez’s social background and early life experiences prepared him for his work. He was raised on his family's farm and witnessed the harsh conditions the farmers tolerated. The farmers were often unpaid, lived in shacks and needed basic human resources, but lacked a united voice to fight for their rights. Chavez decided that it was his responsibility to help the poor and dedicated his life to working day and night to start an organization. He had to face the discouraging process of organizing farm laborers who strongly believed it couldn't be done.

Chavez worked with the Community Service Organization for 10 years before leaving to organize farm workers into a union. In 1962, Chavez founded the United Farm Workers Association to help laborers receive higher pay and better working conditions. It took him and other CSO organizers three years to develop the United Farm Workers Association. Chavez’s non-violent tactics and leadership skills gained popular support and the group added 50,000 members to the union. They held their first strike in 1966, and later became known for the Delano grape strike and, in the same year, the 340 mile march from Delano to Sacramento. The farmers often faced threats, physical intimidation and violence by locals but they were committed to Chavez's nonviolence tactics. The public’s support also developed economic leverage for the farm workers through the power of boycott. Chavez often risked his own life by practicing non-violent actions like hunger strikes and boycotts to ensure the farmers received their rights to better work conditions and higher pay.

To give more context for this letter, we need to look back about 50 years. Before the Grape Strike in 1965, farm workers in California earned less than $1,400 on average every year. Their working conditions were inadequate, and when one company decreased the wages of their farm workers in March 1965, the workers decided to strike for federal minimum wages. Chavez was in charge of the National Farm Workers Association at the time, and gave his support to the farm workers. This was the start of *la huelga-* the great grape strike.

That same year in November, violent attacks against the farm workers prompted the National Farm Workers Association to boycott specific major agricultural companies. On top of grape companies not meeting farm workers’ needs, the courts were more likely to side with farm owners; however, they did get support from many political leaders, such as Robert Kennedy, Dorothy Day and Walter Reuther. Chavez traveled the nation raising awareness by giving speeches and gaining support from members of other movements and unions.

In March of 1966, Chavez led the boycott on a *peregrinacion* (a pilgrimage) from Delano to Sacramento- making this the longest pilgrimage in California in history at the time. The *peregrinacion* got a great amount of publicity and gained more support for the movement. Many of the companies did give in to a 35 cent wage increase, but the contracts only covered 2 percent of the farm worker population. This led Chavez to emulate Gandhi and fast for 25 days. The movement began to spread nationwide, and so the NFWA grew into United Farmworkers of America. There were about 17 million allies and supporters from the U.S. to Canada by the year 1969, and thus Chavez decided to write this letter.

The letter expresses the importance of equal opportunities for Latino workers. Signed January 14th, 1969, it is conserved in UCLA Special Collections, along with other documents belonging to a city organization located in Long Beach, California. The organization was an outreach program for inner city youth safe havens. The letter interested us because it was associated with the Long Beach Community Center and news clippings from that time period. The letter is about the importance of making sure that all of the workers are treated equally and receiving the same wages as others. The letter has historical value in that it was written in the prime of Chavez’s activism and portrays how passionate he was about the cause.

Citations

Weeks, Maurice, and Lindsay Carpenter. "U.S. Farmworkers in California Campaign for

Economic Justice (Grape Strike), 1965-70." *Global Nonviolent Action Database*.