

FRIDAY, APRIL 30, 1993



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Pallbearers, including Rep. Joseph P. Kennedy II, left, carry casket of Cesar Chavez in funeral procession in Delano, Calif.

Chavez Buried in the Soil of His Struggle

In Honoring Life of Leader, Farm Workers Hope for Union's Rebirth

By William Hamilton
Washington Post Staff Writer

DELANO, Calif., April 29—As thousands of farm workers and their supporters gathered today in this sunbaked town to celebrate the life of Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta and other leaders of the United Farm Workers union wanted to convey just this message: *La lucha*, the struggle, will continue.

Chavez and his union experienced their greatest triumphs here, and reminders of those times were never far from view today.

The three-mile funeral proces-

sion began in the city park where Chavez, with help from then-Sen. Robert F. Kennedy (D-N.Y.), ended his first public hunger strike in 1968. Mass was said under a tent at Forty Acres, the complex where in 1970 the fledgling UFW union signed its first contracts with grape growers of the Central Valley.

But today, growers around Delano again employ nonunion labor, and support for the union's second grape boycott, launched in 1984, has echoed only faintly the backing generated by the first one in the 1960s and 1970s.

Moreover, by most statistical

measures, farm workers' wages and living conditions have deteriorated steadily for more than a decade, and even Chavez's efforts could not arouse the interest of a nation suddenly plagued by its own economic problems.

It has been a time of struggle for farm workers, not to get ahead but simply to avoid falling too far behind. With today's ceremonies, and attention again focused on the quiet pacifist and the movement to which he devoted his life, there was hope that somehow, out of Chavez's death, rebirth would emerge.

See CHAVEZ, A21, Col. 1

Chavez Buried In the Soil of His Struggle

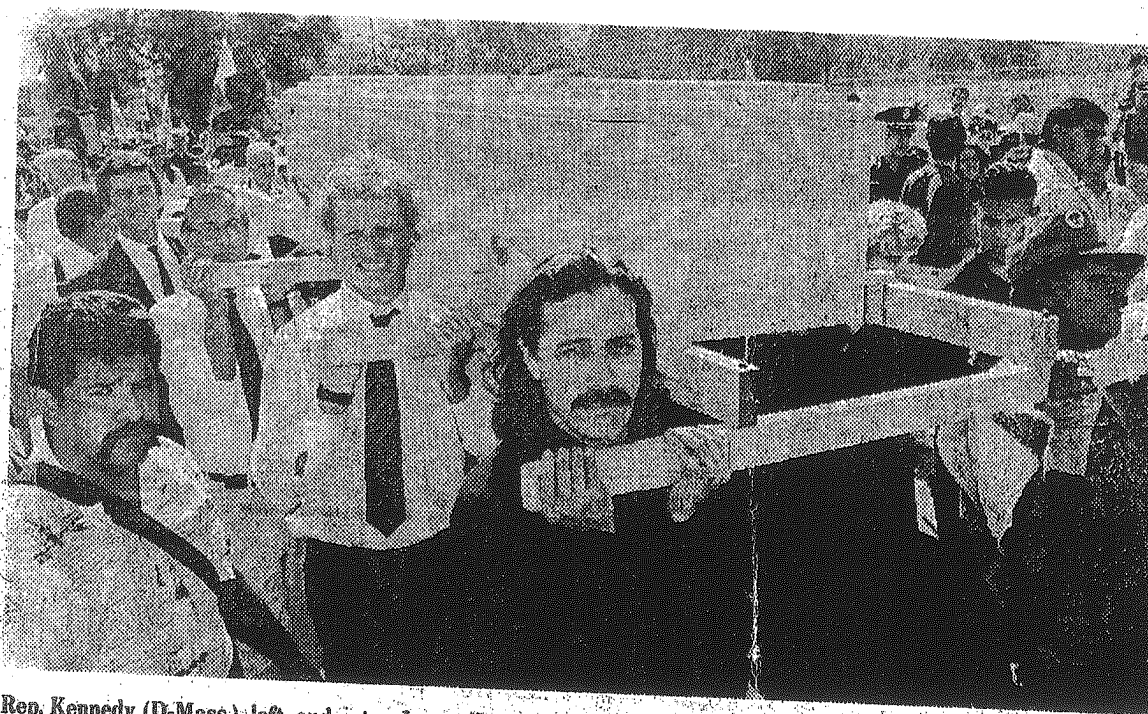
CHAVEZ, From A1

"Cesar had to die so we would awaken," a farm worker told Huerta Wednesday as Chavez's body was displayed at the union hall in Forty Acres. To Huerta, who had known Chavez since 1955 and helped him to found the union seven years later, that seemed a good answer to questions about how the movement could survive without him.

The crowd that marched from Delano to Forty Acres looked much like the UFW, predominantly brown and Spanish-speaking. Pallbearers carried Chavez's body in a plain pine coffin built over the weekend by his younger brother, Richard. They were surrounded by red and white flags bearing the UFW's distinctive black eagle, a symbol that Richard Chavez designed years ago when Cesar wanted something that would represent the indigenous people of America.

In the 1960s and 1970s, that symbol was as ubiquitous as the peace sign, seen on T-shirts, posters and placards outside supermarkets as Chavez employed a new and effective tactic, the consumer boycott. It accomplished what a more conventional organizing campaign could never achieve against California's powerful agriculture industry.

Chavez achieved a position of moral and political leadership equaled perhaps only by that of Martin Luther King Jr., and subsequent years of frustration, political squabbling and life outside the limelight did little to diminish it. His death of undisclosed causes at age 66 in San Luis, Ariz., last Friday was a particularly stunning blow to supporters who thought of him as impervious to years of hard work and debilitating fasts.



Rep. Kennedy (D-Mass.), left, and actor James Edward Olmos, center, are among pallbearers in 3-mile funeral proc

ASSOCIA

Local police estimated that 25,000 people marched today, at least 5,000 and perhaps 15,000 more than the number of current members of the UFW, which at its peak had 70,000 members in the 1970s.

Many in the procession were like Mary and Salvador Mendoza, who came on a bus with their children from Santa Rosa in northern California. Salvador Mendoza works in a Gallo vineyard; his wife once worked at another vineyard. Neither is a UFW member, but both feel that they owe their health plan and relatively good wages to Chavez and the union's influence.

But the Mendozas also illustrate the gradual erosion of wages and benefits that agricultural workers have faced in the last decade. When the contract under which Mary Mendoza worked expired in 1989, the vineyard closed, only to reopen with different owners and no contract. Her husband, paid more than \$8 an hour a few years ago, now gets \$7.40 an hour.

Figures compiled by the federal Commission on Agricultural Workers, established by Congress to monitor the impact of the 1986 immigration reform law, showed that real wages for hired farm workers in California decreased 13 percent between 1986 and 1991. Nationally, real wages since 1977 have dropped in every year but 1986.

The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 was a major factor in the wage decrease because it resulted in a flood of "unauthorized" workers who have found it easy to forge documents needed to be hired in the fields. One study found that 10 percent of farm workers nationally are illegal immigrants, and Monica Heppel, research director for the federal commission, said that number is widely thought to be understated.

"There are so many people showing up for these jobs," said Don Villarejo, director of the California Institute for Rural Studies in Davis, "that employers find themselves in what they see as the wonderful position" of being able to bid down jobs and no longer offer services, such as housing, that they once used to attract workers.

The threat of losing a job never has been a more powerful deterrent to organizing workers or filing any type of grievance. "Everyone in Sonoma County is scared," Mary Mendoza said.

In this atmosphere, California farm workers benefit from perhaps Chavez's most lasting legacy: the state's landmark Agricultural Labor Relations Act, which became law in 1975 under Gov. Edmund G. "Jerry" Brown Jr. (D).

It is the only one in the nation that recognizes the right of farm workers to bargain collectively. But under Brown's two Republican successors, the state's Agricultural Labor Relations Board generally has been regarded as hostile to workers and controlled by industry.

Gov. Pete Wilson (R) ordered flags flown at half-staff at state offices in honor of Chavez. But he and his allies proved as good a target as any today in assessing blame for the bleak economy that outlives Chavez.

"It wasn't because of Cesar," said Ben Benavidez, president of the Mexican American Political Association, as he prepared to march. "It was because the politics of this state is run by farmers."