

Lunch with Cesar Chavez

In the 1960s and 70s United Farm Workers leader Cesar Chavez and co-founder Dolores Huerta fought tirelessly for workers' rights in prolonged battles with powerful California lettuce growers, but also had to fight Jimmy Hoffa's Teamsters Union, and both the California and United States governments.

Laborers in the fields finally had had enough poverty-level wages and constant abuse—long hours, lack of housing, no health care, unsanitary conditions, and working in fields being sprayed with DDT that caused lung damage, skin disease and blindness. Chavez and Huerta initiated worker strikes, rallies, boycotts and public relations campaigns. Like Ghandi and Martin Luther King before them, Chavez, Huerta, and their followers practiced non-violent action in pursuit of justice.

The United Farm Workers union eventually won a hard-fought victory through a five-year national grape boycott organized by Huerta that ended in July 1970. Chavez and Huerta then found themselves in battle with the Teamsters, who had posed as allies late in the action but then they signed contracts with growers, treating the UFW union as if it didn't exist. Chavez went on a hunger strike, but to no avail.

On August 23, 1970, the UFW led seven thousand farm workers on a strike that became the largest farm worker action in American history. Without workers in the fields, lettuce shipments ceased and growers lost a fortune. A California district court ordered Chavez and the UFW to end the strike.

They ended the strike but declared a nationwide consumer boycott of any lettuce not picked by United Farm Workers. Widespread violent retaliation ensued against field workers and a UFW office was bombed. In early December, federal marshals arrested Chavez, unjustly putting him in jail. Bobby Kennedy's widow Ethel and a famous Olympic athlete visited Chavez behind bars, but were attacked by an anti-union mob on the jail house steps and had to be rescued by police. The scene nearly became a riot.

Shortly before Christmas, the California Supreme Court released Chavez from jail and he immediately called for a national boycott against non-union lettuce growers. Supporters across the country stood with farm workers, and students joined picket lines to protest non-union lettuce served in dining halls. The lettuce boycott and violence against the UFW and supporters became national stories.

In support of Cesar Chavez, Delores Huerta and the UFW, the Eggsnatchur Natural Food Restaurant bought only lettuce picked by United Farm Workers or grown locally by organic farmers. In solidarity we joined picket lines at grocery stores and we encouraged customers to buy only UFW lettuce.

Several co-workers and I joined a nation-wide three-day hunger strike in support of the UFW. We ended the fast with other participants at a televised media event in front of Safeway, explaining the importance of buying only UFW lettuce. We did what we could to support the American farm workers who heroically fought for poor working people much worse off than we were.

On a summer day in 1974, Cesar Chavez spoke at the University of Oregon. Actively involved in state politics, Bob and I went to see his speech. His words reminded me of what I heard Martin Luther King say at Kansas State University in 1968, that for far too long, poor people have suffered systemic abuse by powerful wealthy interests and governmental bodies, especially when the poor are people of color. It continues today.

As the rally ended, Bob and I waited to shake hands and speak with Chavez. Short, with jet black hair, his ruggedly handsome, tanned face stood out with his white shirt. Bob knew Chavez was a vegetarian and invited him to be our guest at our vegetarian restaurant. Smiling, Mr. Chavez said, yes, he would like that.

As we walked to the restaurant with Chavez, we talked about the Eggsnatchur collective and what we were doing to promote healthy living. Once there, we sat at a table and one of our workers brought menus. Chavez ordered soup and a sandwich, as did Bob and I. During our lunch I was impressed by his air of patience and strength. He spoke with warmth and sincerity, directly to the point. He didn't talk about his own life but asked about our little collective, how we came to be and how we worked as a group. He listened to us intently.

We talked about Bob's congressional run with me as campaign manager, and how we'd brought up worker's rights at candidate debates. We mentioned fasting in support of the UFW boycott and how we gave free meals to needy travelers and disadvantaged people. Chavez respected our work for justice and the way we made decisions with equal voices. I got the unmistakable feeling we were kindred spirits.