

“Chavez Explains the Need for Boycotts” 1972

Clip from TV interview with United Farm Workers leader Cesar Chavez

[KQED News report featuring an interview with Cesar Chavez, September 25, 1972](#)



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DOCUMENT 9.2

Historical Era

**POSTWAR UNITED STATES
(1945-early 1970s)****Document Title:**

"Chavez Explains the Need for Boycotts" 1972

Document Type: Video of TV interview**BRIEF DESCRIPTION:**

A KQED interview with United Farm Workers leader Cesar Chavez conducted at the height of the struggle during the 1972 election season.

Document Selection and Teaching Guide by:

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SOURCING THE SOURCE

KQED was one of the first public television stations in the country. It was a well-known source for news and public interest programming in the San Francisco Bay Area. This interview took place during the run-up to statewide and national elections, which would be held the first week of November.

Cesar Chavez, the first speaker in the TV interview clip, was a founder and long-time leader of the United Farm Workers [UFW] union. Chavez was a familiar name and face at the time of this interview.

George McGovern, the second speaker in the TV interview clip, was also well known. He was a U.S. Senator from South Dakota and, most importantly, the Democratic Party candidate for U.S. President.

Intended Audience: KQED's audience would have included customers of the companies and agricultural industry targeted by the UFW organizing campaigns, and potential political and social movement allies in the northern California range of the TV broadcast. It's likely that many viewers had supported the UFW's boycotts and union campaigns of the previous seven years. Viewers would have been well aware of the upcoming election and trying to decide how to vote on the statewide ballot measure, Proposition 22, that Chavez opposes in the interview.

UNDERSTANDING THE SOURCE **Historical Context:**

In 1965, a group of some 2,000 Filipino farm workers in Delano, CA, an agricultural town in the fertile San Joaquin Valley in central California, walked out of the grape fields where they worked, in protest of their meager wages and unfair working conditions. They demanded \$1.40 an hour, 25 cents a box, and the right to form a union.

Informed by decades of struggle and militant organizing, which had been costly and at times violent, the Filipino workers were led by Larry Itliong, a Filipino immigrant and a gifted organizer who had helped establish the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) in 1959. As momentous as it was, Itliong understood that Filipino workers alone could not win against California's powerful agricultural industry. Indeed, immediately after the walkout, growers brought in ethnic Mexicans to replace the Filipino workers. Appealing to their class consciousness, to their shared history of abuse and discrimination, and invoking previous cross-racial alliances, like the 1903 Oxnard strike that brought together ethnic Japanese and Mexican workers, Itliong asked Mexican American farm workers to join the fight. A week after the Filipino workers walked out, Mexican Americans did just that. This coalition of Filipino American and Mexican American workers went on strike, beginning the larger farm worker movement.

The Mexican American contingent was led by a still-obscure figure, Cesar Chavez, who led the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA). Chavez was the son of poor migrant Mexican parents from Arizona who had moved to California's San Joaquin Valley in search of work. Chavez had formed the NFWA in 1962, after serving as the director of the Community Service Organization (CSO), founded in 1948 by the well-known community organizer Fred Ross, who trained Chavez to lead the organization.

When AWOC and the NFWA joined forces, they did not expect to form a massive social movement. They had only intended to confront the local conditions of farm workers, which were abysmal. The pay for farm workers was low, with some making as little as \$1.20 an hour (less even than Mexican guest workers, who made \$1.40 an hour). Farm workers toiled for long hours without breaks and without access to toilets or safe drinking water (when they did have access, they often had to pay for it); they regularly lived in shacks with no running water, no bathrooms, no electricity, and no cooking facilities—insecure dwellings prone to infestations and disease. Many lived out of their cars. The workers' pay and benefits were so paltry that often every member of the family had to work in order to survive, making child labor pervasive. Racial segregation, which treated Mexican Americans and Mexican guest workers much the same, was the norm.

Farm owners (commonly called “growers”) managed to maintain these conditions in part because of the Bracero Program, which had been established in 1942 to address the labor shortage induced by World War II mobilization. Instead of ending with the victory abroad, the government expanded the program after the war, giving growers nearly unlimited access to low-wage labor from Mexico. Over the life of the program, almost five million men contracted to work in the U.S., primarily in the agricultural sector. The ease with which American growers could import cheap, temporary, unorganizable labor kept wages low for domestic farm workers because although the program was governed by a bilateral agreement and included protections for laborers, these were, in fact, seldom enforced. In response, some Mexican Americans lobbied to bring the Bracero Program to an end. None was more important than the Mexican-born American labor organizer Ernesto Galarza, who worked to publicize both the exploitation of Mexican braceros and the impact their importation was having on wages and conditions for domestic workers. After years of pressure from activists and consumers, Congress finally ended the program in 1964.

Domestic farm workers saw an opening. They began to organize to gain better wages and working conditions. Against the backdrop of the African American civil rights movement, the Delano workers captured national attention and support. Intent on capitalizing on media attention and civil rights support, Chavez and his nascent movement worked to maintain the momentum. Inspired by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi, Chavez took a nonviolent approach and engaged in peaceful resistance and protest designed to mobilize workers and build public support in the form of national boycotts of grapes—and beginning in 1970 in what came to be called the Salad Bowl Strike, lettuce, too—picked by non-union members. Across the country, consumers became activists simply by refusing to buy non-union produce.

Keeping consumers engaged required holding their attention, and Chavez had been masterful in this regard. In 1966, a year after the Selma to Montgomery march (and no doubt emulating it), Chavez organized a 340-mile march from Delano to Sacramento that began with seventy-five Mexican American and Filipino workers but gathered supporters every step of the way. When the march reached the state capitol nearly a month later, the marchers numbered around one thousand and were met by 10,000 more supporters. The movement was in the national eye and had reached the conscience of millions of people.

Chavez continued to keep the spotlight on his movement through other means, including a widely publicized fast in 1968, during which he consumed only water for twenty-five days. When he finally broke his fast, he was joined by Senator Robert F. Kennedy, who had come to support “la causa.” The movement was making a difference. By 1970, the UFW had organized over 50,000 workers, involved millions of consumers in a five-year boycott, signed some 150 contracts with employers, and forced the largest growers to the bargaining table.

However, there were signs that these victories were fragile. Growers, concerned for their profits, found ways to circumvent the union’s strategies. One strategy involved signing “sweetheart” contracts with rival unions (most often, the Teamsters) that were more concerned with power than with farm workers’ well-being. Another involved the use of undocumented workers from Mexico. Although the Bracero Program had ended, workers did not stop coming across the southern border. Poor and often desperate, Mexican laborers continued to migrate to the United States in search of work, only now without documents or the semblance of Bracero Program protections. Like braceros, they were susceptible to abuse and growers often used them as strikebreakers. A third anti-union strategy involved grower support for Proposition 22, placed on the ballot in the 1972 general election, and the subject of Chavez’s TV interview. Modeled on a recently passed Arizona law, Proposition 22 would have outlawed some of the UFW’s primary organizing strategies, including contacting workers in the fields, picketing growers or retailers, and calling for consumer boycotts. The UFW organized a massive grassroots campaign in opposition to this initiative, ultimately defeating it by a comfortable margin.

Nevertheless, in the years after this interview, the union began to decline, despite its earlier success. Historians, journalists, and activists have debated the reasons and have pointed to the loss of the union’s “organizing capacity”; to the failure of pro-union political initiatives; to the conservative anti-union resurgence in California; and to Chavez’s increasingly authoritarian, paranoid, and detached leadership style. Another important factor in the union’s decline, and a still-controversial topic, was the UFW’s treatment of the undocumented. Chavez attempted to confront growers’ access to undocumented Mexican citizens, whom the union called by the derogatory term “wetbacks,” in order to discourage their employment or use as strikebreakers. The union pressured the U.S. Border Patrol to conduct raids. At times, union investigators spied on immigrant communities and reported undocumented migrants to the authorities. And, perhaps most troubling, in 1973 the union set up its own border watch (the “Wet Line”) near Yuma, Arizona, where it turned over immigrants crossing the border to the Border Patrol. At times, it engaged in physical confrontations, with numerous reports indicating that union guards routinely brutalized border crossers. Likely, all of these factors contributed to the union’s troubles.

In 1972, however, it was unclear where the union’s trajectory would lead. It was also a moment when on-the-ground labor struggles and electoral politics converged. 1972 was a crucial election year, one with mixed results for farm workers. On the one hand, despite growers pouring millions of dollars into the initiative, a large and coordinated grassroots campaign defeated it in the end. On the other hand, pro-union Democrat George McGovern was soundly defeated in his attempt to unseat the incumbent president, Richard Nixon.

□ **Meaning and Significance of the Source**

Chavez's TV interview came at a pivotal time in the farm workers' struggle ("la causa"). Chavez regularly used local, state, and national media to broadcast and explain the union's message. Here, he hoped, consumers could be persuaded to become political players by boycotting non-union produce, which now included not only grapes but also lettuce and other crops. When Chavez says the union is "taking our fight to the citizens" he positions consumers as active and meaningful players in the struggle against injustice in the fields. He repeatedly solicits the action of consumers and hopes to "have them help us." "We need that," he reiterates, to win protections for vulnerable farm workers.

By 1972, when this interview aired, it had become clear to union leadership that "la causa" was both a moral movement and a political struggle. Proposition 22 was part of the political struggle. Chavez stresses the importance of defeating Proposition 22, which he says would limit farm worker unionization efforts and which he frames as an effort "to destroy the farm worker movement." Chavez notes that the proposition would "take away the rights of the workers to do . . . two very important things": the right to strike and the right to boycott, the two strategies that had led to the union's most significant victories.

Chavez grounds his argument on the point that "agriculture is different" given growers' and other employers' use of undocumented Mexican workers. He notes, for example, that in the ongoing strike against the Butte Gas and Oil Company (which owned large farms), which had hired large numbers of undocumented workers in order to break strikes, "there's no way to win" except with the help of citizens, whom he asks to vote against Proposition 22 even as they continue to engage in boycotts of non-union crops. Citizen action and allyship were critical because, as the case of the fight against the Butte Gas and Oil Company illustrated, the permissive use of undocumented Mexican workers often negated strike victories. But, Chavez reasoned, if consumers in the cities—far away from where the struggle was taking place but where much of the produce ended up—refused to buy non-union products, the movement could force the hand of growers and employers.

This interview takes place at a critical moment not only in the history of the farm worker struggle but in the course of American political history as well. It is no coincidence that George McGovern is seen in this same clip speaking about his support for labor struggles, calling anti-labor legislation "a stab in the back to every working man and woman in California" and denouncing the dangers of "singling out" farm workers, a strategy he compares to "a disease." McGovern here aims not only to help the farm workers' movement but to offer a political alternative to Nixon and the Republican Party.

GLOSSARY

Boycott: organized refusal by consumers to buy or deal with a certain product, company, or industry.

Bracero Program: program instituted bilaterally between Mexico and the United States in 1942 to contract Mexican workers on a temporary (often seasonal) basis to work in agriculture and other industries experiencing a labor shortage brought about by the Second World War. Although the program was supposed to end with the war, Congress continued to reauthorize it through 1964.

Contract: a collectively bargained agreement between workers (represented by their union) and employers, outlining the employment rules, rights, and responsibilities of each party. Contracts include provisions regarding wages, seniority, work conditions, and grievance procedures.

Delano: agricultural town in California's San Joaquin (or Central) Valley where the farm workers' movement began with the grape strike of 1965-1970. This was also the location of the United Farm Workers' headquarters, known as the "Forty Acres."

Proposition 22: A 1972 ballot initiative backed by agri-business that aimed to limit the union's access to farm workers by invoking growers' private property rights to prohibit union organizers from entering farms. Growers poured millions of dollars into the initiative, which ultimately failed in the face of a large grassroots political campaign.

Strikebreakers: non-union workers hired to do the work that striking workers are refusing to do in protest. As the term implies, these workers are used to break strikes. Union workers often call them "scabs."

Sweetheart Contract: a labor contract, often negotiated in secret and without workers' input, between an employer and a union, that favors the employer and grants a union influence and nominal representation, but which does not provide substantive protections for workers.

United Farm Workers (UFW): union formed in 1966 by the merger of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), largely made up of Filipino farm workers, and the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), led by Cesar Chavez and mostly made up of Mexican American workers.

"Wetbacks" (sometimes referred to as **"Illegals"**): A derogatory term for undocumented immigrants from Mexico and sometimes Central America. The term, historically used as a slur, stems from the fact that many undocumented border crossers waded across the Rio Grande River that forms the border between Mexico and the United States. The term was used widely in the first half of the twentieth century, but by the 1950s and later was used only as an insult.

QUESTIONS -- DISCUSSION POINTS

Source Specific

- Who did Chavez intend to reach in this interview?
- What is the connection between "the fields" and "the cities" that Chavez alludes to?
- What does Chavez's body language suggest about his personality and style?

Historical Era

- What other civil rights actions were happening around the country at this time? In what ways was the farm workers' movement ("la causa") similar to and/or different from them?
- What does Chavez's use of the term "wetbacks" in a TV interview tell you about public attitudes regarding immigration during this time?
- How were immigration policies and patterns changing during the 1960s and early 1970s?

Labor & Working Class History

- What made the farm workers' struggle different from other labor struggles?
- What challenges did the UFW face in organizing farm workers?
- What strategies did farm workers use to challenge the growers' abuses and the conditions facing farm workers and their families? How did they engage the public, especially in strikes and boycotts, and what other tactics did they employ?
- What role did race and citizenship play in the union's fight for farm worker rights?

CITATION & FAIR USE

Chavez Explains the Need for Boycotts. Bay Area Television Archive. J. Paul Leonard Library's Department of Special Collections. San Francisco: KQED News, 1972.

<https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/189746?searchOffset=0>

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

Web-based & other Media:

Chicano! History of the Mexican-American Civil Rights Movement. 5-part documentary film. (1995) Farm Worker Documentation Project, compiled and published by LeRoy Chatfield, 2004-2012,

University of California San Diego, <https://libraries.ucsd.edu/farmworkermovement/>

Mapping UFW Strikes, Boycotts, and Farm Worker Actions, 1965-1975, Mapping American Social Movement Projects. https://depts.washington.edu/moves/UFW_map-events.shtml

Articles & Books:

Bardacke, Frank. "The UFW and the Undocumented." *International Labor and Working-Class History* 83 (2013): 162–69. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547913000045>.

Dunne, John Gregory. *Delano: The Story of the California Grape Strike*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

Ganz, Marshall. *Why David Sometimes Wins: Leadership, Organization, and Strategy in the California Farm Worker Movement*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Garcia, Matthew. *From the Jaws of Victory: The Triumph and Tragedy of Cesar Chavez and the Farm Worker Movement*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

Pawel, Miriam. *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez: A Biography*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014.

Shaw, Randy. *Beyond the Fields: Cesar Chavez, the UFW, and the Struggle for Justice in the 21st Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

CURRICULAR & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CONNECTIONS

Curricular Connections:

NCHS US ERA Standard 1: The economic boom and social transformation of postwar United States.

This primary source allows exploration of the uses and impacts of the new mass media technology of TV, of the expansion of consumer culture to supermarkets, and of the difficulties faced by those whose labors made the abundance of food in post-war America possible.

NCHS US ERA Standard 4: The struggle for racial and gender equality and for the extension of civil liberties.

This primary source offers an opportunity to examine connections between and similarities/differences between the African American and Mexican-American civil rights movements, including the problems faced, goals and strategies.

Common Core Standards:

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1](#) Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2](#) Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.3](#) Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.4](#) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.5](#) Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.6](#) Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7](#) Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.8](#) Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.