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Cesar Chavez

Lead: In the 1970s few public figures ignited the level of conflicting emotions on labor and social issues than farm work organizer Cesar Chavez.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Itinerant farm workers are often a forgotten part of the American political economy. Forming no organized constituency on which politicians can depend, they move from place to place following the crops to be harvest. These workers often are temporary U.S. residents,

occupy the lowest segment of the laboring class, live and work in meager circumstances and are willing, sometimes happy, to work for very low wages. In the 1960s, a time of social and political ferment, farm workers found a champion in the person of Cesar Chavez.

Born in 1927 in Yuma, Arizona, Chavez watched the Depression snatch his family's farm through foreclosure and with his parents and four siblings began the life of worker migrancy, taking work where it could be had. Moving, always moving, living a life that was typically short, poor, exposed to high rates of diabetes and hypertension, picking crops often sprayed with dangerous

pesticides. Chavez later said he attended 65 elementary schools and never graduated from high school. After Navy service in World War II it was back to the fields, but he gradually moved into voter registration and in 1960s organized the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee. In 1968 he led a successful grape boycott which resulted in organizing many vineyards. Through non-violent confrontation and negotiations, the UFW helped improve wage and working conditions for migrant worker.

Chavez was often criticized for bad strategic decisions and he ran the union with a heavy hand, but to the

end like the workers he sought to represent, he owned no home and lived a simple life reflecting his Catholic upbringing and humble origins. He died in 1993 a controversial figure to the end, a symbol of an era of political and social activism.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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