

membership was only twenty-six thousand, a stark contrast to the seventy thousand members during the union's peak years in the mid-1970s.¹⁸ The obstacles to organizing farm labor had proved insurmountable. Moreover, the rapid development of mechanization—machines harvested fewer than 2 percent of California's tomatoes in 1963, but five years later they harvested 95 percent—created another formidable obstacle. An integral part of corporate America, growers were as strong as workers were weak; it truly was a David and Goliath battle.

Still, the failure to unionize farm labor should be seen in a wider perspective. Chávez brought about much-needed reforms in the fields, including medical, pension, and unemployment benefits. The determined UFW leader served as a crucial catalyst in this regard. He was also responsible for focusing national attention on the abuses of agribusiness interests, particularly monopolistic tendencies vis-à-vis land and water.

Moreover, it is a mistake to see and measure Chávez solely in terms of union activity. His movement was much more than an attempt to organize farmworkers; it was a vital component of the civil rights movement, which partly accounts for the enthusiastic support he found among most churches. Chávez was concerned about the plight of Mexicanos generally, not just those among them who happened to be campesinos. He succeeded in politicizing a large part of the ethnic community, his paramount contribution to the Chicano movement. Indeed, he even found this expanded focus to be too constricting. Like Gandhi and Dr. King, he eventually came to espouse the entire gamut of human rights, irrespective of race, perhaps his most enduring legacy.

In recent years, it has become fashionable to focus on Chávez's shortcomings both as man and leader, with the historian Matt García being the most vocal of Chicano critics.¹⁹ Even sympathetic observers have pointed out that he sometimes made poor decisions and fostered authoritarian tendencies within the union. Alienated by these actions, many UFW stalwarts eventually resigned from the organization in disgust, including Gilbert Padilla, who had served as its first vice president, an appointment he shared with Dolores Huerta.

Among his own people, Chávez has been attacked from both ends of the political spectrum. Most Mexicanos who have disliked him allege that his movement is un-American. Often products of the Cold War era and middle class in background, these conservative critics are embarrassed by his emphasis on Mexican ethnicity, use of the tactics of confrontation, and alliances with radical groups. Even some farmworkers, usually with economic ties to agribusiness, have withheld their support. Though less evident, there is some criticism of Chávez from the other end of the political spectrum, Chicanos who assail him for his conservatism. These have generally been student radicals, often schooled in Marxist ideas, who felt that his nonviolent approach was misguided, who objected to his emphasis on Catholic