



# Fighting for Ideals

*Cesar Chavez, social activist, talks about animals, nonviolence and his campaign for farmworkers.*

—Victor Aleman/UFW

**“Kindness and compassion toward all living things is the mark of a civilized society,” Cesar Chavez once wrote to a friend regarding bullfighting. Widely known for his founding and leadership of the United Farm Workers union—the most successful union of farm workers in recent history, Chavez has helped tens of thousands of Californians gain better lives for themselves. It is not so widely known that he has been concerned about non-human animals since childhood. Years ahead of the animal rights movement, he became a vegetarian based on his ethic of nonviolence toward all creatures.**

**Interviewed by Jeri Ryan**

**Where does your animal consciousness come from?**

I was born on a farm. Anytime an animal was born, it was assigned to one of us. We were responsible for that animal. You get very close to them because you see them from the time they are born.

Then we left the farm. I was 10. We were migratory workers and just had enough to eat ourselves. There were simple rules. My mother would say, “You are the last to eat. You feed the animals first; when they’ve been taken care of, then you eat.” She’s 93 now, and I talk to her about these things, and she says, “It’s because they’re dependent on you. When you bring them in you make a commitment to them, and you gotta keep that commitment. The best way to keep that commitment is by having this simple rule: if you’re hungry, that’s the best way to remind you that they’re also hungry.”

My parents would point out things like when a cow died, all the cows on the farm would react. We would know by

the way the others acted before we found the animal dead. You talk about being street-wise, we were farm-wise. A lot of attention was paid to animals. You looked at them as part of your environment, part of who you lived with.

The next big thing was I discovered Gandhi by accident. I must have been about 14 years old. I went to a movie. In those days they had the news in the movies, and they had this report on Gandhi. What struck me was that he was poor, dark-skinned, had no armies, and was giving the British government trouble. It made sense, so it stuck in the back of my mind. One of my teachers who knew about Gandhi said, “Oh, there’s a good book about him.” She got me the book and I read it. I started seriously thinking about being a vegetarian. I went to the war and came back from the war. I read about nonviolence and connected that with animal rights, and with the other things we believe in. I made the decision not to be a party to any killing of animals to eat. That was 30 years ago.

The last big discovery was when I was fully grown. A newspaperman brought me a dog, a German shepherd pup. I fell in love with him. I called him “Boycott,” and I had him for 12 years. It was through him that I made a lot of discoveries about animals—how sensitive they are, how they know. The amazing thing was that he was a friend. You can’t describe that. He became part of my life.

**What are your concerns about animals today?**

I’m concerned about the slaughter of cattle. They kill thousands and thousands of them wholesale. I’m also concerned about laboratory animals. I have this crazy notion that it won’t be during my life, but there’s going to be a time when it’s going to be illegal to kill animals.

**Most people don’t know about the relationship between vegetarianism and world famine. It takes a lot of grain to feed animals to become meat. How can we inform people that vegetarianism is**



Victor Alaman

*Cesar Chavez (center) marching with farmworkers for better wages, fair treatment by growers and safe working conditions. Chavez has been an ethical vegetarian for 30 years and is committed to non-violent action for social change on several fronts.*

**critical for the survival of humans and animals?**

The best way is by example. When I moved into the La Paz headquarters, I was the only vegetarian. Vegetarians were laughed at. We're still a minority, but I'm not the only one now. I haven't pushed anyone.

**Would you tell us about your philosophy of nonviolent struggle?**

One rule is that I don't write about it and I talk about it very little. Everything has been written and said from Christ all the way down. There's nothing really new to add. I see nonviolence in the front line of struggle for change. It has a tremendous spiritual force. One of the dangers is if you talk too much about nonviolence you will end up only talking about it. Nonviolence has to be like Gandhi said, action-oriented; purposeful action for purposeful change against injustice.

**Tell us about the issues and problems you're facing in the United Farmworkers campaign.**

Farmworkers were excluded from col-

lective bargaining legislation in 1935 when the law was passed covering all other workers. We did the first boycott in 1965 to protest this. In those days the issue of representation was at the core of our dispute with the growers. We would tell the growers, "The workers on your ranch want to have a union. They selected us to represent them, and we want you to bargain with us." The growers would say, "You don't represent the workers." We would say, "Let's have an election to prove it." They didn't have elections because there was no law to force them. We won the boycott, got contracts, built a small union. We got a lot passed in 1975 giving us those rights under state law. It worked okay.

Then Governor Deukmejian came into power and began to purposely dismantle the agency, the Agriculture Labor Relations Board (ALRB). The first thing he did was cut off a procedure for workers' grievances. If a worker felt some injustice had been committed, he/she would file a charge. That has been pretty much eliminated.

We're trying to have elections, but to get workers to vote their conscience,

they have to be free. They can't vote in an election and be free if they are threatened with firing if they vote for the union. There's all sorts of intimidation and discrimination against the workers. All of that is against the state law, but we can't get the law to work so we don't have a law. That's why we're boycotting again, making a plea to consumers not to buy fresh grapes. Our demands are simple. We want the table grape industry to sign a pre-contract, an agreement that sets rules of conduct for the union and the growers. One of these rules would guarantee workers a free and fair election. Our second demand is that a grower will bargain in good faith in those cases when we win an election. Third, we're asking the ALRB to ban pesticides, herbicides and fumigants that are wreaking havoc for workers and consumers. Right now there's wholesale dumping of poisons in the environment, no concern for the workers, and no concern for the consumers. Methyl bromide is a highly toxic fumigant that poisoned 11 women in Tracy, two were hospitalized. The tolerance levels that are set for consum-

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*Cesar Chavez, founder and president of United Farm Workers, speaking with workers and supporters in Salinas, California.*

## CESAR CHAVEZ

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ers are politically inspired and have nothing to do with scientific fact. The pesticide Parathion is allowable to ten parts per million in the U.S. In Canada, it's five parts per million; in Scandinavia it's 3 parts per million. We've just put a call out to growers to join with us and do residue tests on grapes throughout the country. They rejected that. They don't want anything to do with testing.

### **How can the animal rights community help you?**

Just don't buy grapes, and tell friends and other people not to buy them. Not wine, not raisins, just fresh grapes. We'd like people to sign a boycott pledge not to buy grapes, then we can send them our monthly magazine which tells them more in depth what we're doing.

### **What is your involvement in other Hispanic campaigns, for example, Central America?**

We endorsed the Sandinista movement, I think we were the first ones, over ten years ago. The work we've done has been mostly with the labor unions. We did planning work and gave economic help to them. We're now involved in a training program with campesino leaders and workers. We train them from one to two years, and we pay for all of the cost.

**Oppression of humans and nonhumans is based on a hierarchical structure with the powerful over those who have less power. The farmworkers movement, the anti-racist movement, the animal rights movement and the women's**

**movement have been attempting to advance the rights of all beings. What do you think we all have in common?**

We share the same ideals. It's a very special high ideal that binds us. If you're for animal rights, you're for all the other good things in the world; if you're for justice for workers, you're for the same thing. If you're for peace, the same thing.

We all have a lot of work to do. And there's got to be a fight. We've got to take them on, and find a way to make it economically unsound for them to do all these things.

**Among the principles you live by in your work with the United Farmworkers, in the effort to set an example, I assume self-sacrifice is a crucial part of the fight, is it not?**

Yes. It's a good fight and a winnable fight. The issue of war and peace is so difficult because it's so removed, people can hardly imagine what peace means. The issue of animal rights, well, we're surrounded by animals; they come into our lives in one way or another constantly.

*Activists of all stripes, pitch in and help United Farmworkers (UFW) in their struggle for justice by joining the grape boycott. Send for their magazine, **Food and Justice**, and for a packet of grape boycott pledge cards. Get your friends and others to complete the pledge cards and send them to UFW. Write to: Cesar Chavez, P.O. Box 62, Keene, CA 93531-0062.*