



**National
Urban League**

To Be Equal #11

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Cesar Chavez Day Calls Us to Unite to End Poverty and Honor the Dignity of Work

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"We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community. Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and for our own." Cesar Chavez

While it is commonly thought that the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s was by, of, and exclusively for the benefit of African Americans, the life and legacy of Cesar Chavez remind us of how much it touched the lives of our Hispanic brothers and sisters and oppressed people everywhere. A Mexican-American who was born March 31, 1927 on a farm near Yuma, Arizona, Chavez and his family moved to California in 1938 to eke out a living like thousands of other overworked and underpaid migrant farm workers in his community. But rather than tolerate the daily injustices heaped upon them, which also included forced child labor, sexual harassment of women workers and the use of pesticides harmful to both workers and consumers, Chavez devoted his life to organizing and improving the lives of migrant workers.

In 1962, he and Delores Huerta co-founded the United Farm Workers Union. Inspired by the non-violent examples of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Chavez embraced the philosophy of non-violent protest and employed such tactics as marches, boycotts and hunger strikes to garner mainstream support for the rights of migrant workers. In 1968, he fasted for 25 days for better wages and working conditions in the fields of California's San Joaquin Valley. Upon ending that strike by breaking bread with Senator Robert Kennedy, Chavez addressed his supporters, saying, "We are gathered here today, not so much to observe the end of the Fast, but because we are a family bound together in a common struggle for justice. We are a Union family celebrating our unity and the non-violent nature of our movement."

Chavez's work and sacrifice inspired millions of people around the world, including Dr. King and National Urban League President Whitney M. Young, Jr. In 1969, towards the end of a five-year strike and boycott for the rights of Mexican and Filipino grape workers, Young met with Chavez and his supporters in Delano, California. Young was moved to write a To Be Equal column in which he said, "I was inspired by their spirit and their faith in the face of the odds

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against them.” He added, “Labor, by organizing the poor and the friendless, can help end poverty by protecting low-wage workers, and it can give the lie to those who happily proclaim the selfishness and prejudice of some unions.”

Cesar Chavez died on April 23, 1993. Following Whitney Young's example, subsequent National Urban League leaders, me included, have continued to work in solidarity with the goals of the United Farm Workers and numerous other Latino civil rights organizations. I spoke at the National Council of La Raza conference last summer and attended part of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) conference last month. We are all united in many of our struggles, especially the fight to end income inequality and poverty. As an iconic labor leader and anti-poverty activist, Cesar Chavez would have likely also been an enthusiastic supporter of the National Urban League's current petition to raise the minimum wage and all of our work for jobs with living wages and fair benefits.

President Obama has proclaimed Chavez's birthday, March 31, as Cesar Chavez Day “to remember a man who made justice his life calling.” We believe that the best way to honor Chavez's legacy is through service and a renewed commitment to end income inequality and poverty. Congress can do its part by raising the minimum wage now.

To sign the National Urban League's Raise the Minimum Wage petition, visit nul.org – and do your part to help put millions of Americans on a path to a better life.

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