

## César Chávez and Nonviolence

### Grades 11 & 12



César Chávez was a great man who was strong and unwavering in his fight to secure farm workers' rights. He led marches to demand improved working conditions, increased wages, and fair treatment of farm workers by growers. He fasted for weeks at a time to demonstrate his disagreement with the inequality experienced by farm workers.

Later, you will be asked to make a biography board about Chávez, but first, it is important to learn about an aspect of Chávez's life that is often overlooked by historical references and biographies—his animal rights activism. Chávez was born on a farm and learned, from an early age, about the value of treating all life with respect, empathy, and kindness. In an interview with the animal rights magazine *The Animals' Agenda*, Chávez recalls an early lesson in compassion:

"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. ... 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.'"

Read the article "Fighting for Ideals" from *The Animals' Agenda*, then answer the following questions on the back of this sheet or on a separate piece of paper:

**1. What inspired Chávez to value and respect animals?**

[Answer: Growing up on a farm, he was taught to put the needs of animals before his own.]

**2. Whose writings exposed Chávez to the concept of nonviolence and the connection between nonviolence and animal rights?**

[Answer: Gandhi]

**3. Who was Boycott? What influence did Boycott have on the way that Chávez regarded animals?**

[Answer: Boycott was Chávez's dog and friend. Boycott helped Chávez understand the ways in which humans and other animals are similar.]

**4. According to Chávez, what is the best way to spread the word about the importance of adopting a vegetarian diet?**

[Answer: Through providing a good example]

**5. What was the nonviolent philosophy that Chávez and Gandhi shared?**

[Answer: Both believed in nonviolence toward all living beings and in nonviolent "purposeful action for purposeful change against injustice."]

**6. How did this philosophy play a part in Chávez's campaign for farm workers' rights?**

[Answer: Chávez used this nonviolent philosophy as a basis for determining the tactics that he would use in his campaign. The philosophy led him to choose nonviolent methods such as boycotts, marches, and demonstrations to get better wages, fair treatment, and better working conditions for farm workers.]

**7. Why did Chávez organize his first boycott?**

[Answer: Chávez wanted to protest the fact that farm workers had been excluded from the collective bargaining legislation passed in 1935. He and the United Farm Workers felt that giving this protection to farm workers was long overdue, and they staged their first boycott in 1965 over this issue.]

**8. As a vegetarian, Chávez boycotted animal flesh as well as industries that exploited animals. How does a vegetarian diet contribute to nonviolence?**

[Answers may vary. Example: Those who refuse to eat animals do not support the meat industry, which profits from the suffering and violent deaths of animals.]

**9. What is the common link among the campaigns of farm workers, suffragists, abolitionists, and animal rights activists?**

[Answer: Each movement works to gain equal rights for a group that is being oppressed by those in power.]

**In 1992, animal rights organization In Defense of Animals awarded Chávez an Outstanding Achievement Award for promoting nonviolence, compassion, and respect for all life and for the environment. Upon receiving the honor, Chávez said, “The respect for all living things is essential to anyone working for social change. What benefits the animals, benefits people too. It is time to end the exploitation of animals for science, for fashion, and yes, even for food.”**

**According to the information that you’ve read, did Chávez’s philosophy of nonviolence discriminate based upon species, gender, race, or any other factor? Why or why not?**

[Answer: No. Chávez believed that all life is connected and that discrimination is violent. He thought that people could learn to live well only after they became nonviolent toward all life.]

**Read the letter that Chávez wrote to animal rights organization Action for Animals. “Kindness and compassion towards all living things is a mark of a civilized society,” Chávez wrote. “Conversely, cruelty, whether it is directed against human beings or against animals, is not the exclusive province of any one culture or community of people.” Why do you think that this concept was so important to Chávez?**

[Answer: Chávez believed that acting in a nonviolent way toward all beings was the only path to a healthy, peaceful society.]

**Do you agree with Chávez?**

[Answers will vary. Encourage the class to discuss responses.]

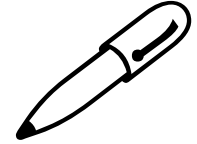
Activity: Create a biography board about César Chávez using the instructions provided to you by your instructor. Include a timeline, photographs, quotes, and historical information about Chávez and his fight for animals’ and farm workers’ rights.

[Students’ projects will vary. It might be helpful to suggest a specific size or to require that specific elements be used. You may also want to encourage students to choose a particular focus for their board.]

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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5. What was the nonviolent philosophy that Chávez and Gandhi shared?
6. How did this philosophy play a part in Chávez's campaign for farm workers' rights?
7. Why did Chávez organize his first boycott?
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