

This Day in History... August 23, 1970

The Salad Bowl Strike

On August 23, 1970, the largest farm worker strike in US history began.

In 1933, President Roosevelt's National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) gave most hourly workers legal protection for collective bargaining. While the act didn't specifically exclude agricultural workers, Roosevelt's administration essentially argued that it didn't apply to them. This was a move to please farm-state members in Congress. Two years later, the National Labor Relations Act was passed, this time specifically stating that farm workers were exempt from these rights.

There were several attempts to organize farm workers, but all achieved minimal success. The first to make significant strides were the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), founded in 1959, and the National Farmworkers Association (NFA), founded in 1962 by Cesar Chavez.

In 1965, farm workers had one of their first major victories as a result of the Delano grape strike. The strike began on September 8, 1965, when a group of migrant farm workers refused to harvest grapes. The workers demanded an increase in wages in accordance with the federal minimum wage. One week later, Chavez and his National Farmworkers Association joined the strike. More than 2,000 workers eventually joined in the strike.

In March of 1966, Chavez led 75 protesters on a 340-mile march from Delano, California, to Sacramento to focus attention on the plight of agricultural workers. The movement gained national media attention through its use of boycotts and nonviolent resistance.

Then in August 1966, the National Farmworkers Association joined forces with the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee to create the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, which later became the United Farm Workers (UFW). They adopted pacifist tactics including hunger strikes, boycotts, marches, rallies, and public relations campaigns. They soon began organizing agricultural labor unions and even negotiated contracts.



National Recovery Act stamp pictures FDR with three workers.

Despite these efforts, the Delano grape strike continued. Then in June 1969, about 25 growers gave up their fight and the strike ended the following month. While many expected this to lead other growers to recognize the UFW, other groups were watching the events unfold. On July 17, 1970, some 6,000 drivers and packers represented by the powerful Teamsters union refused to work. Lettuce prices tripled over night and crops spoiled on the ground. The strike ended after

just 6 days with growers signing an agreement giving the Teamsters access to the farms and the right to organize unions.

This infuriated Chavez and the UFW, which had spent years working toward that goal. Chavez went on a hunger strike and the UFW eventually met with the Teamsters to work out an agreement to prevent their workers from going on strike. They reached a settlement on August 12, but it quickly disintegrated.



The right to collective bargaining was one of the main goals of the strike.

As a result, between 5,000 and 7,000 UFW workers went on strike on August 23 – the largest in US history. In the coming weeks, many more workers went on strike. The price of lettuce doubled and lettuce growers lost an estimated \$500,000 a day. In September, the UFW asked Americans to boycott lettuce not picked by the United Farm Workers. Soon violence broke out, including a bombing at a UFW regional office.

Then in December, Chavez was arrested for ignoring a court order to stop boycotting the lettuce industry. During his two-week incarceration, Chavez was visited by Olympic gold medalist Rafer Johnson and Ethel Kennedy (widow of Robert F. Kennedy). The two visitors were attacked by an anti-union mob outside the jail, but were protected by the police. When he was released, Chavez called for strikes against six more lettuce growers.

The strike continued until March 26, 1971, when the UFW and Teamsters signed a new agreement giving the UFW the right to organize field workers. However, the two forces would continue to clash for several years before reaching a long-lasting agreement in March 1977.



Stamp issued on the 10th anniversary of Chavez's death.



Stamp pictures pinot noir grapes.



The UFW joined the AFL-CIO in 1972.

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