

# Honor Chavez by helping present-day farmworkers

Seattle Times  
5/19/01



BY RUBEN  
NAVARRETTE JR.  
Syndicated  
columnist

DALLAS – Now that Cesar is buried, all that remains is to argue over how to praise him – if at all.

Last month in California, Texas and just about every state that can boast of having a bounty of fruits, vegetables and Latinos, supporters of the United Farm Workers gathered to mark the eighth anniversary of the death on April 23, 1993, of former UFW president Cesar Chavez.

Since Chavez's passing, scores of middle-aged and middle-class Mexican Americans have rushed to atone for abandoning the UFW when the union needed them the most – in the 1980s when its membership was down, its boycotts failing, and its political influence waning. Having supported *la causa* as college students a decade earlier, Latino Yuppies all but forgot about the UFW during the Reagan years as they pursued their professional goals.

When Chavez died, the guilt-ridden – who were by then doctors and teachers and politicians – joined in one commemorative march after another. From Los Angeles to El Paso to Chicago, they convinced city councils and school boards to name streets, parks, schools and libraries after Chavez.

Even Congress tried to get into the act with a bill that would have made Chavez's birthday – March 31 – a federal holiday. The proposal was eventually stripped and repackaged as a mere recommendation to states that they create holidays of their own. At least two have done so – Texas

and California – and others may follow.

In some places, the efforts to honor Chavez go off without a hitch. But in agricultural-rich California, supporters have run smack into a wall of resistance from petty but powerful farm groups that have neither forgiven nor forgotten the boycotts, fasts and other dramas that the labor leader staged at their expense.

One example comes to mind. In 1993, the City Council in Fresno named a street for Chavez, only to rescind the order weeks later amid complaints from longtime residents who viewed the gesture as a slap in the face to the state's \$27-billion-a-year agricultural industry. Fresno Latinos – then representing about 40 percent of the city's population – learned that the city's political leaders harbored no fear of reprisal from them.

Eight years later, California politicians are not nearly so brazen. Now that Latinos are voting and being elected to office in record numbers, the idea of naming just about anything after Cesar Chavez doesn't seem half-bad.

Recently, Fresno officials announced they are again considering ways to honor the controversial labor leader.

Certainly what the Fresno City Council did in 1993 was wrong. No ethnic group should be so disrespected by its political leaders – not the Boston Irish nor the New York Italians nor, in this case, the Fresno Latinos.

But, these attempts to name this street or that park after Cesar Chavez are misguided, and the passion that fuels them misdirected. The gestures are really less about honoring an old hero than about flexing new-found political muscle. And while the argument rages, better causes scream out for champions. The best way

to pay homage to the past is to pay attention to the present.

Those middle-aged, middle-class Mexican Americans should stop marching and start applying their influence to improve the plight of a new generation of workers. Nearly 40 years after Chavez and the UFW kicked up dust in the fields of Central California, today's farm laborers still contend with low wages, poor conditions and lax enforcement of labor laws.

Things won't get any better if farm interests and politicians succeed in resurrecting the "bracero" program to import guest workers, something that would undermine the already weak bargaining power of workers already here. For now, the issue in California and other farm states has shifted to how workers are treated, and often mistreated, by labor contractors who hire and tend to those workers. The UFW supports a bill in the California Legislature that would criminalize abuses by instituting penalties for employers who repeatedly use the services of corrupt or incompetent contractors.

This is the second time at bat for the issue, which has drawn the ire of farming interests. A similar measure was vetoed last year by Democratic Gov. Gray Davis. The state's energy fiasco notwithstanding, political observers speculate that Davis would someday like to run for president. He probably figures that ticking off his contributors in the farm community is not a good way to get there.

OK, so maybe not everything has changed.

(Copyright 2001, Dallas Morning News)

Ruben Navarrette's column appears regularly on editorial pages of *The Times*. His e-mail address is [rnavarrette@dallasnews.com](mailto:rnavarrette@dallasnews.com).