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USA

Cesar Chavez, Civil Rights and Labor icon, raped girls and women

- IV Online magazine - 2026 - IVP614 - March 2026 -

Publication date: Wednesday 25 March 2026

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Cesar Chavez, who in the 1960s led the struggles of Mexican Americans for civil rights and of farmworkers for labor unions, was accused in a carefully researched *New York Times* article of having raped women and sexually abused girls as young as 13. Among those women was Dolores Huerta, herself a founder and leader of the union, who confirmed that he forced himself on her and fathered two of her children, secretly raised by others. Debra Rojas reported that Chavez had had intercourse with her when she was 15, which is rape under state law because she was too young to give legal consent.

These revelations come as a shock to many. Chavez was a progressive icon. Some 86 schools in 14 states and Puerto Rico were named after him, as were dozens of streets, libraries and other public buildings. President Barack Obama proclaimed Cesar Chavez Day a national commemorative holiday. But not this year as statues to him are coming down and local governments are voting to remove his name from public places.

The revelations about Chavez come as a blow both to the Mexican American and broader Latino civil rights movement and to the labor movement that held him in high esteem. At the same time, Mexican American farmworker women have come forward to talk about the sexual abuse that is common in the agricultural fields and that they too endured. And Ana Avendaño of the Service Employees Union, points out other union officials have engaged in sexual abuse and remain in office despite evidence of their wrongdoing. And all of this at a time when President Donald Trump and the Republican Party are engaged in an attack on both Labor in general and Latinos in particular.

In California. Chavez created the first stable agricultural workers unions in American history, organized strikes and national boycotts and won labor union contracts. At the same time, he raised the profile of Mexican Americans and helped carve out a greater role for them in American society and politics. Yet we on the left were always critical of Chavez.

The United Farm Workers (UFW) that Chavez led was the result of a merger between a Filipino American and a Mexican American farmworkers union. But once Chavez became the president, Mexican American culture, the Spanish language, Mexican nationalism became dominant, overshadowing the Filipino and Arab workers traditions. The UFW also became a virtual Catholic union, marching behind the Mexican Catholic banners of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Chavez formed a personal bond with Democratic Party leader Robert Kennedy, a Roman Catholic, who visited the union leader during his hunger strikes, but that was part of a union-party partnership that made the UFW part of the Democratic political machine. Chavez praised mutualismo, that is, cooperativism, the notion that workers pooled their resources and shared, but in fact the union became dependent upon the Democrats who distributed federal funds to the union for its social welfare programs.

Chavez was from the beginning an autocrat, placing his family members and close friends in union leadership positions. Unlike other unions the UFW, though it was stretched across California’s 800 miles, never created local unions because Chavez feared they might rebel against him. He periodically purged other union leaders, staff, and rank-and-file members who were dissidents.

Dolores Huerta, now 95 years old says, “The farmworker movement has always been bigger and far more important than any one individual. Cesar’s actions do not diminish the permanent improvements achieved for farmworkers with the help of thousands of people. We must continue to engage and support our community, which needs advocacy

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and activism now more than ever.” True, but we also need a struggle against machismo and patriarchy in the unions.

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