

OPINION

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Bernice Powell Jackson

Remembering Cesar

Warrior for justice proved that in unity there is power

BY BERNICE POWELL JACKSON

The son of a poor farm worker and general store owner, Cesar Chavez was a warrior for justice, born in Arizona in 1927. When his family lost their land during the Depression, he was forced to quit school and work in the fields. In the early 1960's, he and his wife and eight children moved to California, where he dedicated his life to organizing farm workers, who lived in dingy, overcrowded quarters without electricity, bathrooms or running water. In his lifetime he never owned a house or earned more than \$6,000 a year. But when he died in 1993, 40,000 people marched behind his casket.

Cesar Chavez's life was an inspiration to a whole generation of farm workers—men and women, some even today living very closely to slavery. In helping to found the United Farm Workers of America, Chavez showed that in unity there is power, even for the powerless.

For his organizing work, for his voter registration work, for his repeated jailings because of this work and for his fearless and yet non-violent approach to those who threatened him, Chavez is remembered as a human rights advocate and a man of justice and peace.

But to do honor to this great man, it is not enough to recall his manner or his accomplishments or his faith or his dedication to the poorest of the poor. It is not enough to lift up his name as one of the prophets sent to remind the wealthiest nation in the world of the plight of those who work so that we might be fed.

Cesar Chavez was a fine man and a great American who forced this nation to look at how we treated farm workers.

—Bernice Powell Jackson

Rather, Cesar Chavez would want us to work for justice ourselves. Cesar Chavez would want us to join the farm workers' struggles against Mt. Olive pickles and against Taco Bell and the growers who supply these large companies.

The farm workers who live in the little town of Immokalee not far from Ft. Myers, Fla. and who pick tomatoes which then are sold to Taco

Bell and others, are paid 40 cents for filling a 32 pound bucket. Like the migrant farm workers who pick cucumbers for Mt. Olive pickles in North Carolina, they have not had a pay raise in three decades. When they finish paying for their lodging, for the transportation and for the food which they receive (conveniently) from the nearby little grocery stores mostly owned by their overseers, there is little or no money left over. If they try to run away they are beaten and sometimes worse. Girls and women sometimes find themselves sold into lives of prostitution by the same overseers. Meanwhile, the large corporations—the citrus companies, the food industries which use tomatoes and cucumbers for their foods—purchase what they need from these growers while winking at these skirtings of the law and proclaiming their own innocence.

Cesar Chavez was a fine man and a great American who forced this nation to look at how we treated farm workers. Many of us—people of faith, people of conscience, people who recognized injustice when we saw it—responded by not buying table grapes then. The spirit of Cesar Chavez lives on and forces us to look at the below-poverty wages, the unsafe working conditions of those picking pesticide-laden fruit, the unsanitary, sub-sub standard living conditions and the involuntary servitude that thousands of farm workers face today. Will we respond to this injustice now?

Bernice Powell Jackson is the executive minister for the United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries.

Make Health Care a Civil Right

Every American should have medical coverage

U.S. Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, D-Md., chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, joined hundreds of participants last week at a rally for universal health care. The rally was spearheaded by the Congressional Black Caucus, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, the Congressional Native American Caucus and the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus and is the culmination of the celebration of Minority Health Month.

According to a report from the Kaiser Family Foundation, 44 million Americans are uninsured. According to the Census Bureau, of those uninsured, 12.4 million are Hispanic, 6.8 million are African-American and 2.3 million are of Asian Pacific Islander descent. This means over half of the uninsured are from racial and ethnic minorities.

The United States is the only industrialized country that does not have a health insurance program for everyone. According to the World Health Organization, the U. S. spends more on health care than any other country in the world, but ranks 37th among the 191 member states in health care performance. Cuba ranks 39th and France is number one.

"It is time to make health care a civil right for all Americans," said Cummings. Unless human rights are transformed into civil rights protected by law, they are not guaranteed 'rights' at all. That is the hard lesson that Americans of color have learned from our experience with this nation's health care system. And that is the same hard lesson that many, many other Americans are learning today."

The Congressional Black Caucus has made guaranteeing universal health care for every American its number one health care legislative priority for the 108th Congress. U.S. Rep. John Conyers, D-Mich., the dean of the CBC, has sponsored HR. 676, the United States National Health Insurance Act.

Support Programs Should Help, Not Penalize

BY JOHN LEWIS

What do grandparents raising children, foster parents, and single fathers have in common? They are the newest targets in the Bush administration's war on the working poor.

If the Internal Revenue Service gets its way, by 2006 many low-income Oregon families will have to provide exhaustive documentation before they can claim the Earned Income Credit when filing their tax returns.

Most EIC claims come from two-parent families or single mothers. About a third comes from grandparents or other relatives caring for related children, foster parents, stepparents or single fathers. The IRS determined this second group is at high risk for erroneously claiming the credit.

Later this year, 45,000 of these "high risk" families nationwide will have to provide additional documentation to the IRS before they can receive the EIC. The list of acceptable documents is more restrictive than for any other federal program that assists the poor.

Work-support programs should help people, not penalize them for applying.

The IRS's plan adds layers to the already complex process of claiming the EIC. It will "succeed" by driving eligible families away from the credit.

Certainly, only those who are eligible for the credit should receive it and the IRS has procedures for examining returns and tracking down errors.

The IRS examines about two percent of EIC returns each year, about twice the rate they

examine all returns. If the administration's "pre-certification" program is fully implemented almost one in three EIC recipients will be required to undergo what is essentially an audit before they have even submitted their tax returns.

Imagine if a third of all taxpayers were required to "pre-certify" their mortgage interest deduction, their medical expenses, or their IRA contributions. Politically such a proposal would never fly; the outrage would be tremendous. So should it be with this proposal aimed at the working poor.

John Lewis is with the Oregon Center for Public Policy, a group working to improve the economic and social prospects of low- and moderate income Oregonians, the majority of Oregonians.

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Adams High Awaits Wrecking Ball

The Portland School District has proclaimed that there will be a new Whitaker Middle School to replace the empty and former Adams High School at 5700 N.E. 39th Ave. Of course the new building will look very different and will bring new housing with it — something that makes nearby existing neighbors a little nervous.

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Keeping a Close Eye On Crime

Despite program cuts and budget shortfalls, returning Northeast Police Precinct Commander Bruce Prunk is positive the community he calls home will continue to make strides.

Spraying Makes Progress in Mosquito Fight

Take a sigh of relief. Multnomah County health officials are reporting success in the fight to rid your backyard of mosquitoes.

THE WEEK REVIEW

From border to border, from coast to coast... here are some of the top stories making news across the United States and from around the world.