

The Great Grape Boycott: Purchasing, Power and Politics

GRADE LEVEL: 4-8

INTRODUCTION:

In 1941 the United States and Mexican governments started the bracero program, which recruited thousands of Mexican nationals north to replace U.S. workers who had moved off of farms and into war-related industries. The word comes from the Spanish word *brazo*, or arm, which refers to the kind of work Mexicans were asked to do —manual labor. The program was intended to solve labor shortages during World War II, but proved so popular with growers that it was extended until 1964.

But conditions on American farms often did not match what bracero workers had been promised, and it was difficult for them to change their circumstances. Fieldworkers moved frequently from farm to farm in search of work, and huge labor surpluses allowed employers to replace anyone who demanded improved working or living conditions or tried to strike. As a result, farmworkers' conditions steadily deteriorated. Wages declined, and employers failed to deliver the housing, clean water, and medical attention bracero recruiters had promised.

In this lesson, students explore the concept of a consumer boycott as a strategy to change work conditions. They then work in small groups to examine boycotts from multiple perspectives and create posters illustrating their conclusions.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The origins of the United Farmworkers Organizing Committee began with a novel approach to labor organization: that united action could make positive changes in the lives of individuals and communities. Fred Ross, director of California's Community Service Organization (CSO) in the 1950s was instrumental in training Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and other community leaders in this approach. In the CSO, organizers helped people with everyday problems – filling out tax forms, getting children into schools, or studying for citizenship. They taught people to work collectively to change their lives. The next step was taking these ideas of community activism and applying them to the workplace.

From 1962 to 1965 Cesar Chavez and a small group of organizers formed the National Farm Worker's Association (NFWA) and traveled up and down California's agricultural valleys, talking to people, holding house meetings, helping with problems, and inviting farmworkers to join their new organization.

On September 8, 1965 another farmworker group, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), decided to target the Delano table grape growers and begin a strike. Most of AWOC's members were Filipinos who had come to the U.S. during the 1930s. One week later the NRWA voted to join the effort. Under Chavez' leadership, the farmworkers' movement adopted non-violence as its guiding philosophy and became known as the cause, or "la causa!"

In 1966, the NFWA and AWOC merged to become the United Farmworkers Organizing Committee (UFWOC).

By 1967 the UFWOC began enlisting consumers in their battle, calling for a national boycott of all table grapes. Striking farmworkers spread out across the country, forging alliances with students, churches, and consumers and other union members to try to stop the sale of grapes. At its height, more than 14 million Americans participated and the pressure was irresistible. The Delano growers signed historic contracts with the UFWOC to improve grape workers living and working conditions in 1969.

The contracts protected workers from exposure to the dangerous pesticides that are widely used in agriculture. There was also an immediate rise in wages, fresh water and toilets became available in the fields, and employers provided farmworkers with medical plans and access to clinics.

THEMES: wage labor, boycott, protest, union, strike

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students, following this activity, will be able to:

1. Examine the boycott as a political tool in American history.
2. Understand the relationship between labor, the goods they produce, and the people who buy them.
3. Explore a variety of current or historic boycotts through small group research and discussion.

NEW JERSEY STANDARDS

STANDARD 6.1 (Civics): All students will learn democratic citizenship and how to participate in the constitutional system of government of the United States.

STANDARD 6.2 (Civics): All students will learn democratic citizenship through the humanities, by studying literature, art, history, philosophy, and related fields.

STANDARD 9 (Career Education and Consumer, Family and Life Skills)

A.1. Apply communications and data analysis to the problem-solving and decision making processes in a variety of life situations.

MATERIALS:

- map (of the state, nation, or world depending on the scale the teacher selects for the activity)
- variety of fresh produce (apples, bananas, oranges, etc.)
- bunch of grapes

- pens/pencils
- paper
- classroom blackboard
- copies of the graph “The Cost of a Bunch of Grapes” (Appendix A)
- copies of the article excerpt, “A Weapon for Consumers: The Boycott Returns,” *New York Times* (March 26, 2000) (Appendix B)
- copies of the article excerpt “The Little Strike that Grew to La Causa,” *Time Magazine* (July 4, 1969) (Appendix C)
- copies (or one large copy) of the 1968 protest poster “Si Se Puede” (Appendix D)
- poster board (one per small group)
- reference materials (encyclopedias, American history text books, computers with Internet access, newspapers and magazines)

DETAILS OF ACTIVITY:

Part 1: Where Crops Come From (15 min.)

Bring fresh fruits and vegetables to class that still have the grower’s stickers or wrapper (make sure the name of the city or country is on the sticker). Put up a large map of California, the United States, or the world (depending on where the produce is from). Divide students into small groups and pass around the produce. Have them remove the stickers and place them on the area of the map where the produce was grown.

Hold up a bunch of grapes and ask students to try to determine who is involved in growing them and how the grapes get to customers in the market—for example, who plants, harvests, packs, ships, sells the grapes? Then show them the graph in Appendix A (this can either be shown as a power point slide that the entire class can see, or distributed as copies to each student group). Explain that this graph illustrates how the final cost of a bunch of grapes is divided among all the parties involved. Ask them to compare who gets what part of the total. How much does the grower get? The grocer? The trucker? The sales broker? The farmworker? Ask them to speculate about why the farmworker receives the least.

Part 2: What is a Boycott (15 min.):

Boycotts have been used as a peaceful protest method by a variety of causes: to protest taxes, improve work or living conditions, eliminate use of pesticides, encourage better stewardship of the environment, and demand raises in wages.

Distribute Appendix B, an excerpt from Steven Greenhouse’s article “A Weapon for Consumers: The Boycott Returns,” *New York Times* (March 26, 2000). Divide students into small groups and give them a few minutes to look over the article, keeping the following questions in mind:

1. What is a boycott?
2. How did the boycott get its name?
3. How was the boycott, originated in Ireland, adapted by Americans?
4. What was the Montgomery bus boycott?

5. What was the 1984 grape boycott? Since it largely failed, why is it still in effect?
6. How does the 1984 grape boycott contrast with the 1967 grape boycott headed by Cesar Chavez? What did Chavez's boycott accomplish?

Reconvene as a group and ask students to share how their group answered the questions above (alternatively, teachers can opt to specifically assign one question to each group to encourage more targeted reading).

Part 3: Recreating a Boycott (25 minutes)

Simulate what it is like to pick certain crops that require bending over all day (for example grapes or strawberries). Instruct students to form a single-file line or large circle, and then have them bend their knees and touch their toes. Have them walk around the room in a line or circle keeping their fingers on their toes for one full minute. When finished with simulation, discuss what this felt like. Inform students that summer vacation was created so that children could harvest the crops. How many students in your class work summers harvesting crops or doing other work? If few or none do, is it still necessary to have summer vacation?

Divide students into groups of four and distribute the excerpt in Appendix C. Assign one student in each group each of the following identities: spokesperson for an organization being boycotted, union organizer, farmworker, and consumer. In their groups, students should try to recreate the boycott, focusing on the following questions (written on the board for easy reference):

1. Who is affected by a boycott?
2. How is a boycott organized?
3. What are the goals of a boycott?
4. What other measures have been or might be taken instead of a boycott?
5. What were/are some possible outcomes of a boycott?

At the end of the exercise, students should discuss their findings between groups, sharing ways in which they think each member of their group (spokesperson for the organization being boycotted, worker, consumer and protester) might be affected by such an action.

Part 4: Putting in on Paper (20 min.)

After students complete their role-play, distribute copies of "Si Se Puede—It Can be Done," (Appendix D), a poster distributed during the grape boycott. As a group, analyze different elements of the poster. What images are used? What are they intended to convey? Do the students see women, children and families? Is labor portrayed and, if so, how? Does the sun appear to be rising or setting in the backdrop and what, if they can identify it, is the image the sun contains? Following this discussion, encourage each group to create their own poster about the California grape controversy. Students should be encouraged to make their posters visually interesting, using headlines, photographs, and student artwork, as well as text.

PRACTICE/REINFORCEMENT

Activity #1: The following exercise can be done either a preface or as a reinforcement activity. To underscore the relationship between wages and living standards, ask students if they know the current United States' minimum wage (\$7.25 at the end of 2009).

As a class, calculate how much a worker would make if they worked an 8-hour day at minimum wage (the answer: \$58 a day).

Now ask students to calculate how much someone earning minimum wage would earn in one week (40 hours)? ($\$58 \times 5 \text{ days} = \290.00)

In 4 weeks, or a month? ($\$290 \times 4 \text{ weeks} = \$1,160$)

In one year, which is 12 months? ($\$1,160 \times 12 = \$13,920$)

You might want to bring in copies of the “want ads” from your local paper to distribute in class for comparison. Divide students into groups and ask them to look for jobs that have higher salaries and lower salaries than \$7.25 per hour. Record their findings on the board.

Activity #2: For teachers interested in dedicating more time to the subject, the video “The Fight in the Fields” by Paradigm Productions (2 hours) includes an excellent curriculum guide available online at [http://www.paradigmproductions.org/resources/Study Guide.pdf](http://www.paradigmproductions.org/resources/Study%20Guide.pdf) (look under “The Fight in the Fields,” which includes a link to educational materials for school and community).

REFERENCES and WEBSITES:

This lesson plan is adapted from Elyse Fischer, “Powerful Consumers,” part of the *New York Times* Learning Network (<http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2000/03/27/powerful-consumers/>) and *The Fight in the Field: Cesar Chavez and the Farmworkers' Struggle: Study Guide* (Berkeley, CA: Paradigm Productions, [http://www.paradigmproductions.org/resources/Study Guide.pdf](http://www.paradigmproductions.org/resources/Study%20Guide.pdf)).

Appendix A:

The Cost of a Bunch of Grapes

Average Retail Price: \$2.71

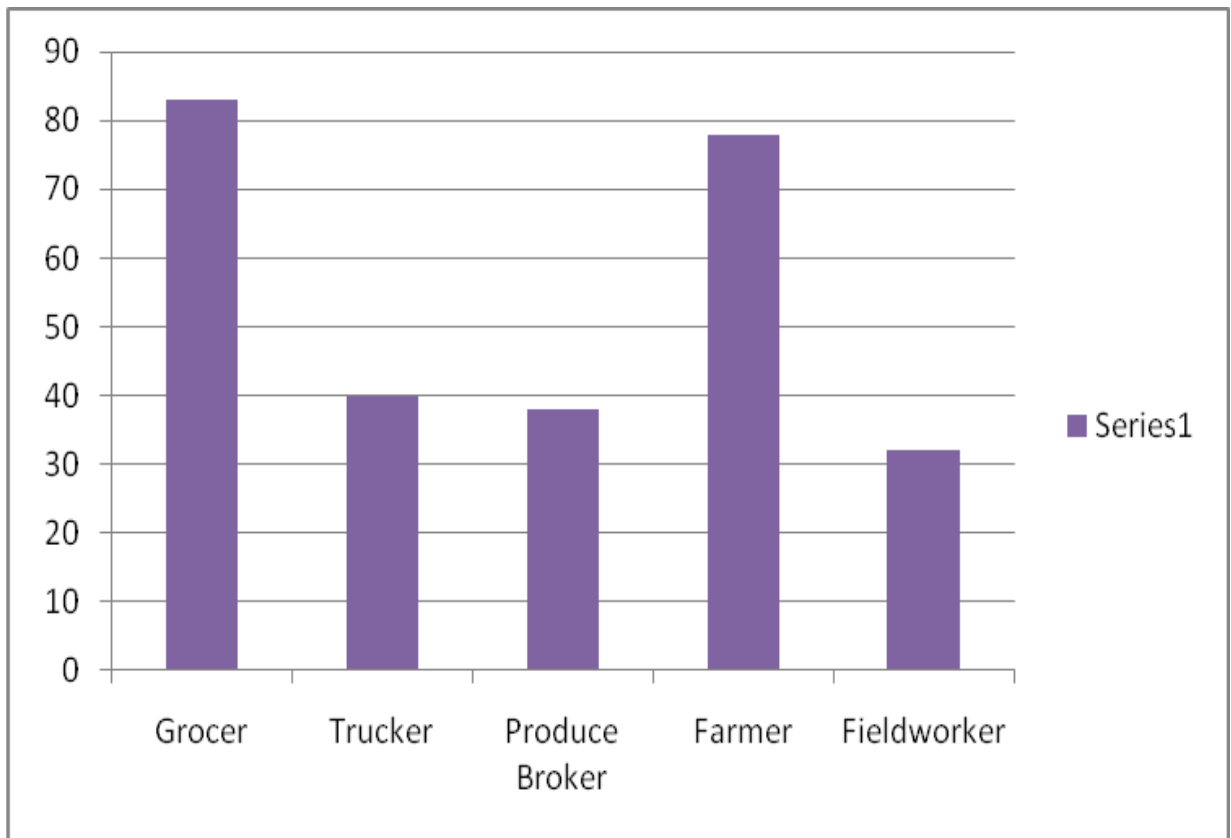
Price paid to grocer: 83¢

Price paid to trucker: 40¢

Price paid to sale broker: 38¢

Average price paid to farmer: 78¢

Average price paid to farmworker: 32¢



Appendix B:

Excerpt from Steven Greenhouse, “A Weapon for Consumers: The Boycott Returns,” *New York Times* (March 26, 2000).

“The times may be ripe for more consumer boycotts,” said Jeff Faux, executive director of the Economic Policy Institute, a research group in Washington. “We have more of a consumer culture, and people see themselves more as consumers today. While people are participating less in the political process, as consumers they see that one way they can exercise power is by where they spend their money and where they don’t.”

The boycott takes its name from an economic war waged by Irish farmers in the 1880s against an English land agent, Charles Cunningham Boycott, who refused demands to cut rents during a time of poor crops. Their subsequent refusal to work his land or sell him goods forced him to return to England.

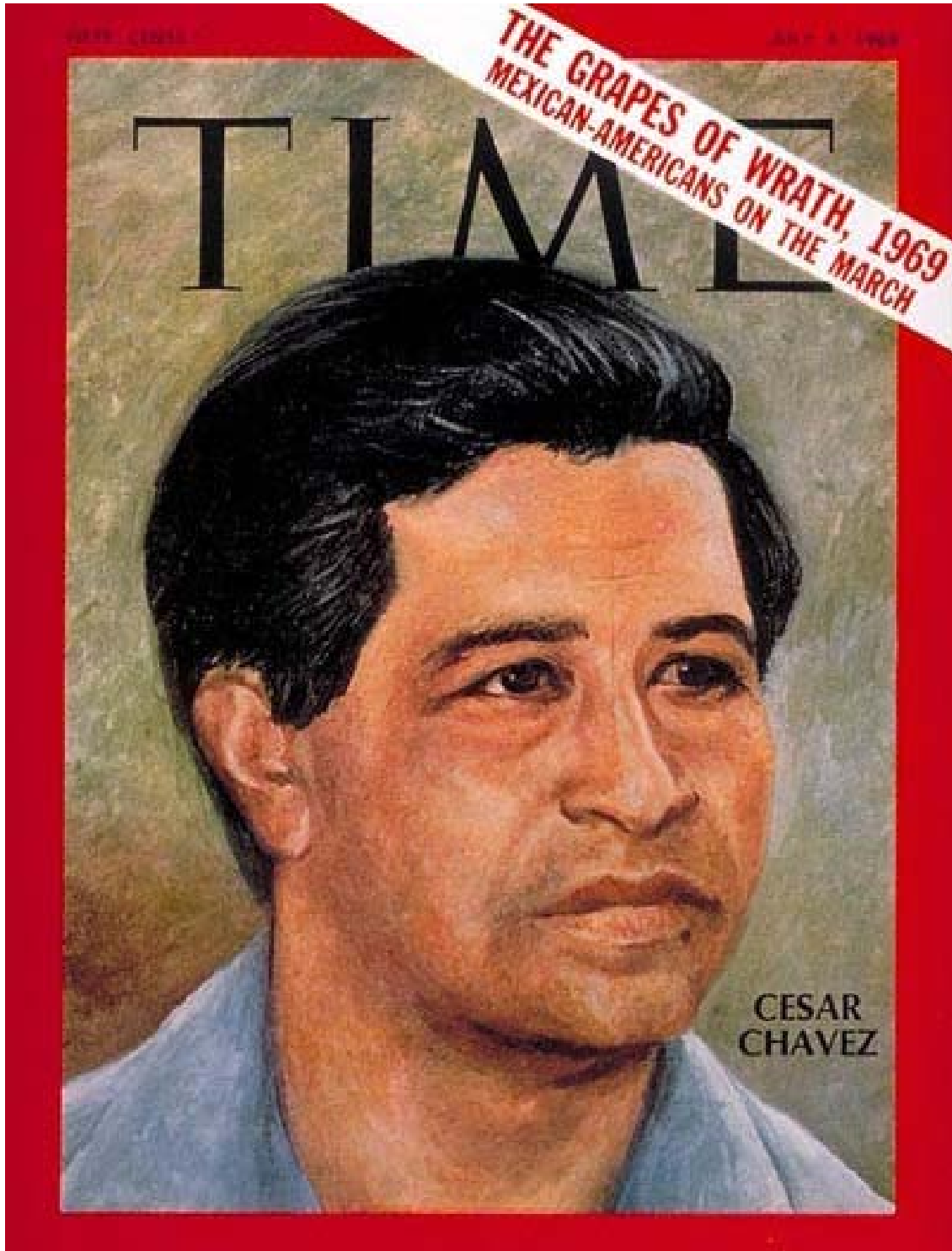
In the late 1880s American farmers were already shunning railroads charging exorbitant rates. In 1885 alone, American labor unions carried out 196 official boycotts.

One boycott that made a profound impression on 20th-century America was the Montgomery bus boycott, which came after Rosa Parks famously refused to sit in the back of the bus in 1955 because she was black. Since then, civil rights activists have repeatedly embraced boycotts.

But sometimes boycotts, which require organization and consumer awareness, fail. Most Americans do not realize that the United Farm Workers’ 1984 grape boycott remains in force. Begun when growers refused to sign new union contracts, it has largely failed because the union stopped promoting it when it failed to catch on. Union officials say it remains in effect because lifting the boycott would give a victory to the grape growers. In sharp contrast, the original boycott called by Cesar Chavez in 1967 persuaded millions of Americans to give up grapes and pressured California growers to recognize unionized workers and raise wages.

Appendix C:

Excerpt from “The Little Strike that Grew to La Causa,” *Time Magazine* (July 4, 1969).



ITEM: At a dinner party in New York's Westchester County, the dessert includes grapes. The hostess notices that her fellow suburbanites fall to with gusto; the guests from Manhattan unanimously abstain.

ITEM: At St. Paul's, a fashionable New Hampshire prep school, grapes are the only part of the meal invariably left untouched.

ITEM: In San Francisco, a Safeway official observes: "We have customers who come to the store for no other reason than to buy grapes. They'll load up their car with grapes and nothing else."

ITEM: In Oakland, a conscience-ridden housewife explains apologetically to her dinner companions: "I really wanted to have this dessert, and I just decided that one little bunch of grapes wouldn't make that much difference"

ITEM: In Honolulu, the Young Americans for Freedom organizes an "emergency grape lift" by jet from the mainland, inviting "all of those starved for the sight of a California grape to come to the airport."

WHY all the excitement about this smooth, sweet and innocent fruit?

The answer is that the table grape...has become the symbol of the four-year-old strike of California's predominantly Mexican-American farm workers. For more than a year now, table grapes have been the object of a national boycott that has won the sympathy and support of many Americans—and the ire of many others. The strike is widely known as *la causa*, which has come to represent not only a protest against working conditions among California grape pickers but the wider aspirations of the nation's Mexican-American minority as well. *La causa's* magnetic champion and the country's most prominent Mexican-American leader is Cesar Estrada Chavez, 42, a onetime grape picker who combines a mystical mien with peasant earthiness. *La causa* is Chavez's whole life; for it, he has impoverished himself and endangered his health by fasting. In soft, slow speech, he urges his people—nearly 5,000,000 of them in the U.S.—to rescue themselves from society's cellar. As he sees it, the first step is to win the battle of the grapes.

As the workers and their sympathizers march, supermarket chains, middle-class consumers, and even the grape growers are choosing sides. Some supermarkets are leaving the choice to the shopper. Others sell only grapes imported from Africa or Israel, and make a point of advertising that they do not carry the California product. On Capitol Hill, diners in the House restaurants have not seen a grape for months, while the Senate refectory has been using 15 lbs. to 20 lbs. a week. When one California Congressman sent large bags of grapes to each of his colleagues, many of the recipients returned them. Within a few hours, the corridor outside the Congressman's office was asquish with trod-upon fruit.

The conditions under which farm laborers toil have improved somewhat since the squalid Depression era so well evoked by John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *In Dubious Battle*; yet field work remains one of the most unpleasant of human occupations. It demands long hours of back-breaking labor, often in choking dust amid insects and under a flaming sun. The harvesttime wage for grape pickers averages \$1.65 an hour, plus a 250 bonus for each box picked, while the current federal minimum wage is \$1.60.

Despite this, the seasonal and sporadic nature of the work keeps total income far below the poverty level. Average family income is less than \$1,600 a year. There is no job security, and fringe benefits are few. If they are migrants, the workers must frequently live in fetid shacks without light or plumbing (though housing, bad as it is, is frequently free or very cheap.) As a result, many have moved to the cities, where even unskilled labor can find work at decent wages.

Table-grape growers are particularly vulnerable to strikes because their product requires continual attention through much of the year. Since the appearance of the fruit affects its value—unlike the case of wine grapes—the bunches must be carefully picked by hand. Because of their vulnerability, Chavez picked the table-grape growers as his first target.

Chavez has now finally achieved a breakthrough: nationwide grape sales were off 12% in 1968, and prices for this year's first California grapes are down as much as 15%. Last month ten growers representing about 12% of the state's table-grape production announced that they would sit down with Chavez to write a contract.

Most of the growers bitterly dispute Chavez's contentions. His claim to represent the workers is false, they say; only 3% of California's grape pickers have joined his union. Chavez has not been able to strip the fields of workers and, they argue, even if he personally preaches nonviolence, his followers do not practice it. Packing sheds have been set afire, foremen threatened, tires slashed.

The growers of Delano are difficult to cast as villains. Many are self-made men, Yugoslavs and Italians who came to the valley between 1900 and 1940 with nothing and worked hard to amass enough capital to practice the grape-growing arts they learned in Europe. Most of the Delano spreads are family enterprises, and many of them have had rough going. Costs have risen sharply over the past decade, and grape prices have now begun to decline.

The California growers also pay the second highest agricultural wages in the U.S. (after Hawaii, where unionized workers average \$3 an hour).

Appendix D:

Consumer Boycott Poster “Si Se Puede,” 1978

