Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title: Cesar Chavez and Strategies for Nonviolence

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Grade Level/ Subject Areas: US History, 11th grade

Duration of Lesson: 2 class periods

Content Standards:
California State Standards for US History, 11th grade
11.8 Students analyze the economic boom and social transformation of post–World War II America.
2. Describe the significance of Mexican immigration and its relationship to the agricultural economy, especially in California.
11.10 Students analyze the development of federal civil rights and voting rights.
5. Discuss the diffusion of the civil rights movement of African Americans from the churches of the rural South and the urban North, including the resistance to racial desegregation in Little Rock and Birmingham, and how the advances influenced the agendas, strategies, and effectiveness of the quests of American Indians, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans for civil rights and equal opportunities.

Lesson Abstract:
Students will examine Ward Churchill’s arguments regarding violent action as compared to Cesar Chavez and his use of nonviolent action for bringing about social change. Students will match events from the UFW campaign to the type of strategy employed, specifically coercion, conversion or persuasion.

Guiding Questions:
What primary methods of nonviolent action did Cesar Chavez and the UFW use in order to gain better working conditions for California farm workers?
What can we learn from Cesar Chavez regarding the impact of nonviolent action?

Content Essay:

What makes nonviolence a powerful force?

When theories such as those proposed by Ward Churchill attempt to destroy the notion and impact that nonviolent action has on creating social change, how can we counter these ideas? Churchill proposes the idea that nonviolent action does nothing to change poverty and racism and therefore supports oppression and racism. In his view, the nonviolent methods employed by Gandhi, King and Chavez are mere attempts to beg the state for justice. Churchill describes
nonviolence “as passive moral begging that essentially keeps unjust authorities in control” (Orosco, 41). The state, being all powerful, then gives small tokens of justice to keep the real violent threats of social change at bay; the only real threat to institutional injustice is armed insurrection. Even President Barack Obama recognizes the need for violence at times, as he stated in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize “a nonviolent movement could not have halted Hitler’s armies. Negotiations cannot convince al-Qaeda’s leaders to lay down their arms.” So why should we employ nonviolent methods for bringing about social change? We can turn to Cesar Chavez to better understand the force that nonviolent action creates.

Chavez proposes that nonviolent action will serve to construct a greater community. “I think that once people understand the strength of nonviolence – the force it generates, the love it creates, the response that it brings from the total community – they will not be willing to abandon it easily” (Chavez, 65). Where Churchill sees violence as the only source of power, Chavez recognizes the power that is generated when a group of people work together to accomplish a goal. By employing nonviolent tactics to the plight of the farm workers in California, Chavez was able to organize a mass movement that brought significant social change to American agribusiness, resulting in increased rights for many Mexican and non-Mexican immigrants in California.

Cesar Chavez effectively used the components of nonviolence that, according to George Lakey include coercion, conversion and persuasion. Coercion is a tactic “meant to take away the ability of those in power to maintain the status quo by withholding labor or money” (Orosco, 41). The 1965 Delano strike organized by Chavez served to withhold labor upon which the growers depended, thereby causing the growers economic losses. When the strike didn’t convert the growers, the farm workers initiated a boycott, the “Wrath of Grapes.” The boycott that swept the United States during the 1980s and 1990s “can force the authorities to change their ways or they will suffer economic losses” (41). Farm workers and volunteers travelled around the country to inform consumers of the plight of farm workers. Millions of Americans refused to purchase California grapes. After more than five years of boycotting, grape growers in California finally signed contracts with the UFW (United Farm Workers).

Chavez also used methods of conversion, such as letter writing and his notorious fasts. In his Good Friday Letter to E. L. Barr, who was the president of the California Grape and Tree Fruit League, Chavez responded to accusations of the use of violence by the striking farm workers. He articulated the struggle faced by the farm workers and his commitment to nonviolent action as a way to bring about social change. In his letter, he invokes ideas reflective of Gandhi: “we do not hate you or rejoice to see your industry destroyed; we hate the agribusiness system that seeks to keep us enslaved and we shall overcome and change it not by retaliation or bloodshed but by a determined nonviolent struggle carried on by those masses of farm workers who intend to be free and human” (Chavez, 63). Chavez, like King, studied Gandhi’s ideas on nonviolent action as a means for social change and increasing civil rights.

Fasting also became a tool of conversion for Chavez. In 1968, he began a fast that would last for 25 days. For him the fast was a rededication to nonviolence. Yet, his actions caught the awareness of Americans, including Robert F. Kennedy. Chavez took to fasting again in 1989 to draw awareness to the suffering of farm workers and their families as a result of the grower’s use of pesticides. These tactics were used to “change the minds of authorities so that they would
adopt a new point of view that embraces the values of the nonviolent protestors” (41). In an interview he responded to Catherine Ingram’s comment that his fast had done a lot to raise awareness on the issue of pesticides. “It did a lot. The fast is a great communicator. Like Gandhi, because we don’t have the economic or political force, we have to appeal to the moral force” (Ingram, 105). Although the fast for Chavez was an act of penance, it served to convert Americans toward righting an injustice and work to resolve the problem of pesticide use in California agriculture. Chavez noted “when somebody stops eating for a week or ten days, people … want to be part of that experience. Someone goes to jail and people want to help him” (Orosco, 29).

The use of persuasion by Chavez can be seen in the 1966 Sacramento March. The march initiated as a sort of pilgrimage aimed to not “transform the basic beliefs of the authorities, but it convinces them that the protestors might have valid concerns and ought to be taken seriously” (41). The march according to Chavez was “a trip made with sacrifice and hardship as an expression of penance and of commitment – and often involving a petition to the patron of the pilgrimage for some sincerely sought benefit of the body or soul” (25). Farm worker activists involved in the march experienced suffering in order to achieve a resolution to their plight. It worked to transform the marchers as well as others, as the Sacramento March of 1966 started with 70 and had grown to more than 10,000 people by the time the 240 mile trek had finished.

The tactics of coercion, conversion and persuasion were not new to nonviolent movements. Both Gandhi and King used marches to draw attention to injustice. Both also used boycotts as a way to coerce. Where Chavez seems to carve out his own niche in the theory and practice of nonviolence involves his ideas regarding time and money. “Chavez relies on nonviolent activities that will draw in sympathizers to give their time, effort and commitment” (Orosco, 105). Chavez was offered $50,000 from a private organization to help his organizing drive and would not accept it. The work and center of nonviolent action for Chavez was not just in demonstration, but in doing real work. “If you organize for demonstration, all you have is demonstration. You must demonstrate and then return right away to the real work. We’re so flexible, yet there’s so much discipline that we do things and don’t even talk about them … For instance we can be striking today, and tomorrow morning or a couple of days later we can move the effort into a boycott without missing a step” (Orosco, 104). For Chavez nonviolence was a way of life, and the work continues. For us, and for our students, Chavez provides an appropriate argument to counter the ideas such as those proposed by Ward Churchill that social change must come through the barrel of a gun. Chavez provides a lesson vital for all of us.

Bibliography:


Teaching Activities/ Materials Needed:
1. Ask students to respond to the question: Is violent or nonviolent action more effective in bringing about change? Have them do a think, pair, share followed by a class discussion.
2. Provide students with the basic ideas of Ward Churchill, specifically his ideas favoring violent action as a means for social change. Allow discussion on this topic.
3. Show the film *Viva La Causa* to familiarize students with Cesar Chavez. Discuss the role of Chavez in the UFW movement. Students should already have been exposed to the American Civil Rights movement. The addition of Chavez will build on previous ideas and show how the Civil Rights movement spread throughout the US, impacting many different groups.
4. Next provide Chavez’s view on the effectiveness of nonviolent action and provide background on the three forms he used – coercion, conversion and persuasion.
5. Provide students with primary sources connected to the major events from the UFW campaigns, specifically those referenced in the content essay. Have students decide whether each action was coercion, conversion or persuasion and justify their responses. Conduct a class discussion.
6. Conclude by asking students which of the three they think was most effective and justify their response. As a wrap-up, ask them if Chavez provides a compelling case for nonviolence.