News



An image of César Chavez is shown on a mural in San Francisco, Wednesday, March 18, 2026. (AP/Jeff Chiu)

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Phoenix — March 19, 2026
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Mary Rose Wilcox and her husband marched and fasted alongside César Chavez. They helped him open a radio station in Phoenix and plastered their Mexican restaurant with photos and a mural of the widely admired Latino icon.

So when Wilcox's daughter called this week to inform them of sexual abuse allegations leveled against Chavez, she said it felt like a punch to the gut.

By Wednesday morning, the couple had taken down Chavez's photos from their restaurant walls and made plans to cover the mural.

"We love César Chavez. But we cannot honor him and we cannot even love him anymore," said the former Phoenix City Council member.

Many like Wilcox are working to reconcile the legacy of a man who fought tirelessly for the rights of farmworkers with stunning allegations that he sexually abused girls and the co-founder of the United Farm Workers of America union, Dolores Huerta.

Latino leaders and community groups quickly condemned the alleged abuse by Chavez but emphasized that the farmworker movement was never just about a single man. Chavez died in California in 1993 at age 66.

There were calls to alter memorials honoring the man who in the 1960s helped secure better wages and working conditions for farmworkers and has been long revered by many Democratic leaders in the U.S. The California Museum said it will remove Chavez from the state's Hall of Fame — something it's never done before.

Some local and state leaders in both parties urged their communities not to celebrate Chavez's birthday on March 31, and to rename buildings and streets

named for him. Celebrations for Chavez in California, Texas and in his home state of Arizona have been canceled at the request of the Cesar Chavez Foundation.

Dolores Huerta stamped her own legacy on the fight for justice

Huerta, who is a labor rights legend in her own right, said in a statement released Wednesday that she stayed silent for 60 years for fear her words could hurt the farmworker movement. She said she did not know Chavez had hurt other women.

Huerta described two sexual encounters with Chavez; one in which she was "manipulated and pressured" and another when she was "forced against my will." She said both led to pregnancies, which she kept secret, and that she arranged for the children to be raised by other families.

She joined Chavez in 1962 to co-found the National Farm Workers Association, which became the United Farm Workers of America. For many, they were akin to Martin Luther King. Jr. and Rosa Parks because of their work advocating for racial equality and civil rights.

Huerta's resolve and dedication to civil rights, women's rights and social justice won wide admiration. Some, including a group of Democrats in Texas, are calling for Huerta's name to replace Chavez's on places that bear his name.

The New York Times first reported Wednesday that it found Chavez groomed and sexually abused young girls who worked in the movement. Huerta, too, revealed to the newspaper that she was a victim of the abuse in her 30s.

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Some knew about Chavez's abusive behavior, biographer says

Chavez is known nationally for his early organizing in the fields, a hunger strike, a grape boycott and eventual victory in getting growers to negotiate with farmworkers for better wages and working conditions.

Streets, schools and parks across the Southwest bear Chavez's name. California became the first state to commemorate his birthday, and in 2014, then-President Barack Obama proclaimed March 31 César Chavez Day. President Joe Biden had a bronze bust of Chavez installed in the Oval Office when he moved into the White House.

Biden and Obama have not yet commented on the allegations. California Gov. Gavin Newsom said he was still processing the news.

Chavez was full of contradictions even as a union leader, said Miriam Pawel, a California journalist who wrote a biography of him. There was abusive behaviors within the union, but people didn't speak out because they believed the union was the best way to protect farmworkers, she said.

"For many, many years, for most of those people, even when they saw things that they found disturbing, they did not wanna talk about it," Pawel said.

Chavez's family and foundation voice support for the victims

Born in Yuma, Arizona, Chavez grew up in a Mexican American family that traveled around California picking lettuce, grapes, cotton and other seasonal crops.

Chavez's family said in a statement that they are devastated by the allegations.

"We wish peace and healing to the survivors and commend their courage to come forward. As a family steeped in the values of equity and justice, we honor the voices of those who feel unheard and who report sexual abuse," the family said.

The Cesar Chavez Foundation pledged support for the labor leader's victims, saying — with the Chavez family's support — the organization will figure out its identity going forward.

The United Farm Workers union quickly distanced itself from annual celebrations of its founder, calling the allegations troubling.

Wilcox, the former Phoenix council member, said Chavez helped people understand the value of workers at all levels.

"There's two things: Chavez the man and Chavez the man who we didn't know," she said. "And the one we knew, we knew the good things he did and the things we saw put in place. ... And the one we did not know is like a monster."

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