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Chavez is only beginning to get the recognition he deserves

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NCR Today

March 31 was the birthday of César Chávez and a state holiday in California, though most in the state seem totally unaware of it. Schools are still in session and few state agencies close that day. It is more of a symbolic holiday than a real one. In the public schools, there is supposed to be time to reflect on the legacy of Chávez, but few do that.

I ask my students if they can recall doing this, and most say this did not occur in their schools. Most teachers probably don't teach much about Chávez to begin with, and this may be true of many of my readers.

Chávez was one of the great American labor and civil rights leaders of the 20th century. He accomplished what had never before done: He successfully organized farm workers into a union, the United Farm Workers (UFW). From 1965 to 1970, Chávez and his co-organizers, such as Dolores Huerta, and the brave rank-and-file farm workers engaged in a national and international strike and boycott of California agribusiness and eventually triumphed. But victory was not complete, and until his death in 1993, Chávez continued the struggle, which he called "La Causa" -- "The Cause" of farm workers.

In my opinion, Chávez is also one of the great American spiritual leaders of the last century. He was a major advocate of nonviolence, self-sacrifice, social justice and many other spiritual causes. In my book *The Gospel of César Chávez: My Faith In Action*, I brought attention to his spirituality. I maintain that you cannot understand Chávez without understanding his deep Catholic faith.

Although Americans need to know more about César Chávez, I was pleased to learn recently that the Department of Labor under Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis has named its auditorium in Washington, D.C.,

after Chávez. He is also included in that department's Hall of Fame with legendary labor leaders Samuel Gompers and George Meany.

In a *Los Angeles Times* article last week, I also learned that a Navy ship has also been named after him. (Chávez served in the Navy in World War II.)

There have recently been efforts by Latino groups to get a national holiday for Chávez, and I hope this happens sooner rather than later. Latinos are the largest minority in the country and are major political players today, but many Latinos and other Americans lack important historical figures of Latino background to look up to. César Chávez is certainly at the top of that list.

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