



**ROBERT F.  
KENNEDY  
HUMAN  
RIGHTS**

# **SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER**

**HUMAN RIGHTS  
DEFENDERS WHO  
ARE CHANGING  
OUR WORLD**

**DOLORES HUERTA AND LUCAS BENITEZ:  
FARMWORKERS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR  
HUMANE WORKING CONDITIONS**



# DOLORES HUERTA

(SHE/HER/HERS)

Labor leader Dolores Huerta was born in 1930 in a small mining town in New Mexico. She excelled in school, despite facing prejudice because she was Hispanic, and went on to the University of Pacific's Delta College in Stockton, earning a provisional teaching credential. She witnessed students attending school hungry and barefoot, and this sparked her lifelong efforts to correct economic injustice.

In 1955, Huerta co-founded the Stockton chapter of the Community Service Organization (CSO), which led voter registration drives and fought for economic improvements for Hispanics, and she founded the Agricultural Workers Association. She met activist Cesar Chavez and together they launched the United Farm Workers Union in 1962. Huerta organized workers, negotiated contracts, advocated for safer working conditions, and fought for unemployment and healthcare benefits. She was the driving force behind the nationwide table grape boycotts in the late 1960s that led to a successful union contract by 1970.

Huerta received the Eleanor Roosevelt Human Rights Award from President Bill Clinton in 1998 and the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Barack Obama in 2012.



# LUCAS BENITEZ

(HE/HIM/HIS)

Lucas Benitez was born in Guerrero, Mexico, and moved to Immokalee, Florida, at the age of 16 to work in the tomato fields. The wages were barely enough to live on, and workers faced a climate of intimidation, fear, and violence. Benitez got together with other workers and eventually helped found the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) in 1993 to raise awareness about farmworkers' conditions and advocate for their basic human rights.

In 2001, CIW launched its Campaign for Fair Food, which brought the fight for fair wages and better working conditions directly to the big corporations. Its first major victory occurred in 2005 when Taco Bell agreed to improve wages and working conditions in response to a national consumer boycott. Many other giant food chains and supermarkets have since joined in. CIW continues to educate farmworkers and has convinced major food corporations to purchase tomatoes only from growers who have signed a code of conduct.

Benitez's goal is to make "the Florida tomato industry a model of social accountability." He is transforming the lives of some of the worst- paid people in America by bringing dignity to their work.

# FARMWORKERS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR HUMANE WORKING CONDITIONS

Robert F. Kennedy was very close to the farmworker movement. Not only did he hold fundraisers in California, he also joined the United Farm Workers (UFW) in Delano and spent time with Cesar Chavez at the end of his 25-day hunger strike. Kennedy was appalled at the working conditions of farmworkers, and he used his position on the Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor to shine a spotlight on the tremendous injustices they faced. This senatorial appointment helped him to understand the importance of the unionization of farmworkers, and he even joined local picket lines in California in support of Latino and Filipino strikers.

In this lesson plan, we explore Robert F. Kennedy's legacy of ensuring workers' rights. As we build a bridge between the past and the present and reflect on the work of the advocates of then and now, we should keep one question in mind: What do we do next?

## UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

- **ARTICLE 4:** Prohibition of slavery
- **ARTICLE 23:** Right to fair and equal treatment and pay at work
- **ARTICLE 25:** Right to quality living standards

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

- How does the food we eat get to our table?
- How are the people who harvest our food treated?

## OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lesson, students will:

- Describe the labor conditions of farmworkers in the United States.
- Create an action plan to defend the rights of farmworkers.
- Highlight how Lucas Benitez's work furthers the farmworker movement.
- Identify the differences in the work of Lucas Benitez and Dolores Huerta.

## CONCEPTS

- Migrant labor
- Human dignity
- Courage
- Fair food
- Supply chain
- Collective organizing
- Human trafficking

## VOCABULARY

- Farmer
- Farmworker
- Coalition of Immokalee Workers
- Unionization
- Boycott
- Agriculture
- Exploitation

## GETTING FROM THEN TO NOW: A BRIEF HISTORY OF CIVIL RIGHTS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

### 1965

Delano Table Grapes Boycott  
Joint protest led by Filipino grape workers and Chavez's National Farm Workers Association for improved working conditions.

[Learn more](#)

### 1983

Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act  
This act regulated housing and transportation for farmworkers as well as the hiring process, but it didn't provide for collective bargaining rights.

[Learn more](#)

### 2005

Yum! Brands Taco Bell Boycott  
A product and business boycott that resulted in improved wages and working conditions for farmworkers.

[Learn more](#)

# STUDENT ACTIVITIES

## ACTIVITY 1

### UNDERSTANDING THE DEFENDER

- Have your students read and analyze a primary source and then answer the following questions:
    - Identify three compelling aspects of Dolores Huerta's life.
    - What about Huerta, the person, stood out to you?
    - What about Benitez, the person, stood out to you?
    - Who were some of the people who influenced Huerta?
    - How did her journey from childhood to a leader of the farmworkers inspire her community and the movement?
    - What was the primary problem Huerta was seeking to address?
    - What were some of the specific issues?
    - What was her desired outcome?
    - What tactics did she use to seek resolution?
    - What was the political context in which she was working? Social context?
    - How does the work of Dolores Huerta and Lucas Benitez intersect with the work of Robert F. Kennedy?
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## ACTIVITY 2

### PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

- Divide the class into three groups and assign each group one of the timeline events. Have students research each of these events and answer the following questions:
  - Who were the key players in the event?
  - What was the political/social/economic context in which this event took place?
  - How does the THEN/NOW defender fit into

this event?

- How does the THEN/NOW defender's work intersect with the work of RFK?
  - How did this event/piece of legislation help or hinder progress in this area? What was the aftermath of the event?
  - How has this issue evolved over time?
  - Have students present their findings to the rest of the class, then moderate a discussion about how the events fit together to create a narrative about this issue. Use the following questions as a guide:
    - How do these events fit together?
    - Did one event affect or lay the groundwork for another?
    - What common threads or themes are present in each of these events/pieces of legislation?
    - How has this issue evolved over time?
    - What needs to happen now to create change in this area?
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## ACTIVITY 3

### COMPARE AND CONTRAST

- Building on what students have learned about both defenders and the context, have them create a visual representation of one of the following topics:
  - Analyze the similarities and differences in the tactics and approaches of these two defenders. Why do you think these similarities/differences exist?
  - How would Dolores Huerta react to the work of Lucas Benitez? What would she say about the work that is being done surrounding this issue? How would RFK react to their work and activism?
  - How did Cesar Chavez's activism pave the way for Lucas Benitez?

- What are the similarities and differences between the political/social/economic contexts in which Huerta and Benitez worked/are working?
- Why do you believe this issue is still a problem?
- Which parts of RFK's legacy are present in the work of each of these defenders?
- Have students make a list of their skills, passions, or hobbies.
- For each activity or skill on their list, have them create a plan of action that uses that activity or skill to help bring about change in the area of farmworkers' rights.
- Ask each student to choose and complete one of those plans.

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## ACTIVITY 4 CONTINUING THE LEGACY

- This activity is designed to help students think about how they can contribute to efforts to increase and protect farmworkers' rights. The key to becoming effective human rights defenders is turning what we find interesting, what resonates with us, and what we consider to be our assets into our own personal vehicles for change.



# INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORK

The **UNITED NATIONS DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS** was adopted in 1948 following World War II and stems from the Charter of the United Nations. This document articulates the rights and freedoms to which every person is entitled. Although not legally binding, it is the framework for both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

This particular lesson plan relates directly to:

- **ARTICLE 4:** Prohibition of slavery
- **ARTICLE 23:** Right to fair and equal treatment and pay at work
- **ARTICLE 25:** Right to quality living standards

*For more information, visit the United Nations website: [www.un.org/en/udhrbook/](http://www.un.org/en/udhrbook/).*

The **INTERNATIONAL COVENANT ON CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS** (ICCPR) is an international human rights treaty that gives legal force to the themes of the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Since this treaty came into force in 1976, it has protected issues related to the freedom to protest and the right to political participation.

*For more information, visit the UN website: [www.treaties.un.org/](http://www.treaties.un.org/).*

The **SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS** (SDGs) are a group of 17 goals set by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015 that aim to improve social and economic development in a variety of areas, including poverty, education, gender equality, and the environment. The SDGs offer a global plan to combat systemic problems and provide indicators to help track their successes.

The SDGs relevant to this lesson plan are:

- **GOAL 1:** No poverty
- **GOAL 2:** Zero hunger
- **GOAL 3:** Good health and well-being
- **GOAL 8:** Decent work and economic growth
- **GOAL 12:** Responsible consumption and production

*For more information, visit the United Nations website: <https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals>.*

## BECOMING A DEFENDER

Below are suggested activities that show students how they can become human rights defenders in their classroom and beyond

- Research the Campaign for Fair Food. How can you spend your money more ethically?
- Write to your representatives in Congress to tell them what you think about the current state of farmworkers' rights