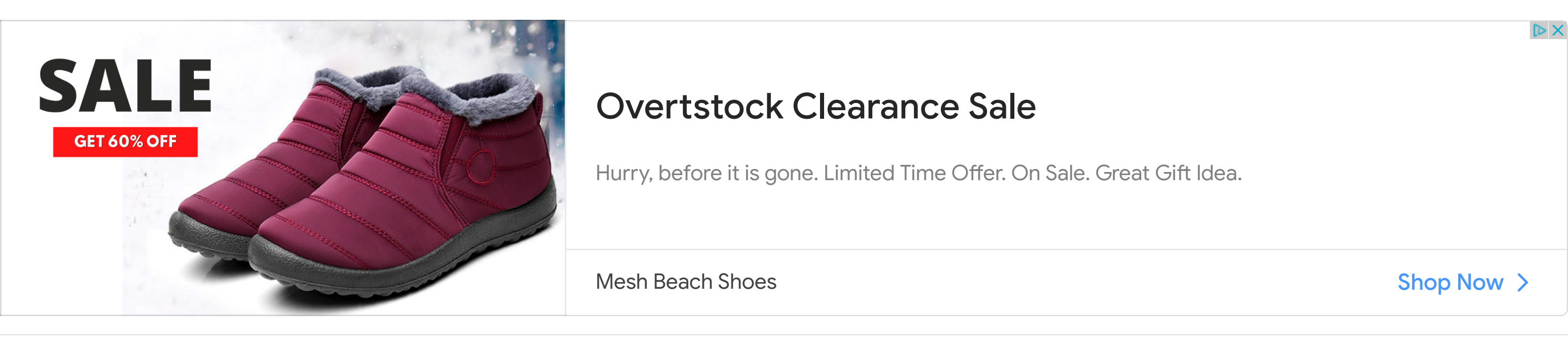

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Unions can help beyond their membership. César Chávez proved it.

Legendary labor leader blazed a trail connecting working conditions, environmental damage and consumer choices

Perspective by Shana Bernstein
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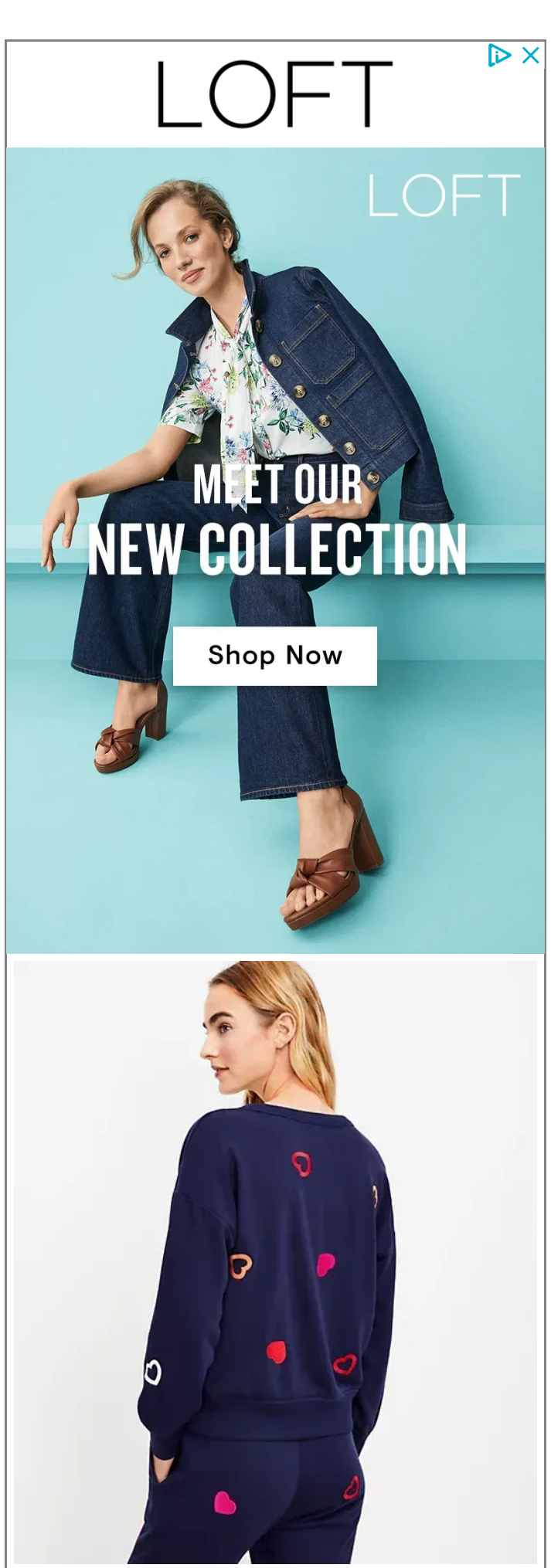
A bust of César Chávez in the Oval Office. (Bill O'Leary/The Washington Post)



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Last month, 3M, the conglomerate behind products like Post-it notes and Scotch tape, announced that it will stop using PFAS (polyfluoroalkyl substances), or "forever chemicals," by late 2025. 3M joined many other companies and government agencies as diverse as McDonald's, Target and the Environmental Protection Agency in phasing out PFAS and other chemicals like chlorpyrifos, asbestos and methyl iodide that endanger the environment and public health.

These decisions owe much to shareholder and public pressure — activism that follows the path blazed by the legendary Chicano activist and organizer César Chávez.

For much of the 20th century, "merchants of doubt" exploited the uncertainty inherent in science to undermine policies to fight climate change, tobacco poisoning and prescription drug addiction, among other health and environmental risks. Just this month, Americans read how Exxon scientists fueled public doubts about the connection between fossil fuels and climate change, even while they knew that their products definitively warmed the climate. (Exxon told the New York Times that "those who talk about how 'Exxon Knew' are wrong in their conclusions.")

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Sometimes these industries even worked together. Historian Elena Conis has unmasked how pesticide companies fostered public doubts about their products' dangers — sometimes even with support from Big Tobacco, whose executives hoped that a resurgence of the DDT pesticide in the 1990s would reinforce their own story about regulatory overreach.

But Chávez and the United Farm Workers union he led recognized in the 1960s what was happening — long before most other Americans did. They started blowing the whistle on how the chemical industry and agribusiness manipulated the idea of scientific uncertainty to continue selling pesticides they knew were dangerous. The UFW's crusade against toxins like DDT — its 1972 ban was a milestone in U.S. agriculture that marked the beginning of a decade of bans — revealed how activists could triumph over big business and make American life safer.

In 1962, when Chávez and his allies began organizing farmworkers, chemical companies deceptively asserted that their pesticides could be used safely, so long as they weren't applied beyond the recommended dosage. But farmworkers' own experiences helped them realize that these claims were specious.

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Days spent working with crops that had been sprayed with pesticides left workers with burning eyes and itchy skin — even though the chemical had been applied at purportedly "safe" levels. Activists like Jessica Govea witnessed small children falling sick and dying after hugging parents returning from the field coated in pesticides.

In September 1965, one of the UFW's predecessors, the mostly Latino National Farm Workers Association, followed the lead of Larry Itliong and the Filipino American Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee and went on strike in the wine-grape-growing industry in California. Three months later, the farmworkers experienced an epiphany that bolstered the strike. Led by Chávez, they realized that adding the voices of parents and others shocked to learn that their shopping habits endangered their families would give their movement a leg up. By opening the eyes of consumers, the farmworkers could mobilize Americans to use their spending power to influence industry behavior and policymakers.

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In December 1965, the farmworkers launched the boycott phase of their work to improve conditions in the vineyards. Consumers were a crucial part of the grape boycott. The farmworkers urged them to avoid grocery stores, bars and liquor stores that sold wines made from California grapes. In 1966, the NFWA and AWOC merged into the UFW, and by 1967 their efforts targeted table grapes in addition to wine grapes.

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Pesticide poisoning soon became a focal point of boycott publicity, which included leaflets featuring pickers who discussed vomiting and bleeding after eating grapes from the vine and days-long bouts of vomiting, sleeplessness and breathing problems after accidental sprayings. Leaflets cautioned that many of the toxins came from "nerve gases developed by the Nazis."

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This messaging reflected how pesticide poisoning was moving to the center of the UFW's activism more broadly. In 1967, the 19-year-old Govea joined the UFW's legal team and convinced its chief counsel Jerry Cohen that the issue of pesticide poisoning was central to farmworker well-being alongside bread-and-butter concerns such as pay, sanitation and housing. Better pesticide regulation soon became a central element of the UFW platform.

The UFW understood that this fight required getting information to the public. They fought crop-dusting companies' attempts to keep information secret by filing restraining orders and by suing the government. Farmworkers also filed a steady stream of pesticide-related lawsuits and tried to involve the elected branches of government, including 1969 testimony in hearings held by the Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor (chaired by eventual presidential candidate Walter Mondale).

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By that time, the UFW had put pesticides — what Chávez called "economic poisons" — front and center in its messaging to both union members and the public. That spring, the UFW campaigned to get supermarkets to test grapes they sold for pesticide residue, including DDT, which fanned consumer fears and deepened their engagement in the boycott as they increasingly recognized their shared toxic plight with farmworkers.

The farmworkers became environmental crusaders as well, explaining that the fate of producer and consumer also depended on the health of the soil, air and water. As reporter Ruth Harmer wrote in the Nation in August 1969, testimony the UFW presented in a court hearing trying to force growers to make their pesticide records public was really about whether the law would and could limit the ability of "agricultural and chemical entrepreneurs" to jeopardize the health and lives of people, but also "man's greatest natural resource — the earth itself!"

Because of this kind of messaging about the danger of pesticides, the grape boycott was at least temporarily successful, as most of the major grape growers in the Delano, Calif., area agreed by summer 1970 to most of the UFW's demands, including better protection against pesticides.

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When Chávez died in 1993, Marion Moses, who began her career as a UFW nurse before becoming a doctor and eventually founding the Pesticide Education Center, memorialized him by prophesying that future generations would see him as "a shining light amid the folly," someone who challenged "unsustainable toxic farming practices that imperiled the health of workers, consumers, and the environment."

Moses correctly understood that Chávez and his allies were visionaries. The UFW efforts were the first step in what has become more than a half-century of activism to rid farming of dangerous chemicals that put workers, consumers and the planet at risk. They created a template for citizen activism that continues to push companies to stop using such products.

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Many food activists have followed in the footsteps of the UFW, which helped open the eyes of the public to the reality that companies prioritized the bottom line over the well-being of Americans. That laid the groundwork for a nation increasingly unwilling to watch passively as the tobacco, prescription drug, fossil fuel and other industries sacrifice public welfare for profit.

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The UFW's role as a pivotal force in helping eliminate dangerous chemicals and providing this template for activism offers a crucial — if oft forgotten — lesson: Labor unions' struggles to improve their members' own lives also often benefit society as a whole. It's a valuable reminder at a moment when labor unions have returned to the spotlight through campaigns to unionize everything from Starbucks to the University of California, and as public sentiment supporting unions is the highest since 1965. While we think of unions fighting on behalf of their members, the UFW reminds us how they can achieve far more.

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