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

Unions can help beyond their traditional role in collective bargaining and organizing workers. They can also advocate for policies that prioritize the public interest. Labor leaders often take the lead in movements for environmental and consumer justice, highlighting the connections between exploitative working conditions, harm to the environment and unsafe or unhealthy products.

Shana Bernstein, a historian and clinical associate professor of legal studies and American history at the University of California, is the author of "Rights Activism in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles." Her book shows how unions' early efforts to improve safety in the tobacco, prescription drug, fossil fuel and other industries sacrificed some in the name of profits. That laid the groundwork for future activism.

The National Farm Workers Association, which later became the United Farm Workers, had a particularly forward-thinking strategy. It prioritized the bottom line over the well-being of Americans. That laid the groundwork for an activist movement that would continue to push for greater public health and safety.

In the late 1960s, the UFW and its allies began a campaign to rid farming of dangerous chemicals. The UFW's demands included better protection against pesticides, which the farmworkers believed were poisoning their communities. The movement's success was partially due to the public's growing awareness of pesticide poisoning, which had not been widely reported before.

The UFW's campaign included a grape boycott, which targeted California winemakers. The boycott was at least temporarily successful, as most of the major wineries stopped using the chemicals that had been shown to be harmful. The UFW's success was bolstered by the strike. Led by César Chávez, they realized that adding the voices of consumers would help bring about change.

Three months later, the farmworkers experienced an epiphany that reinforced their belief in the power of collective action. They realized that the voices of consumers could be just as powerful as those of workers and organizers. This messaging reflected how pesticide poisoning was moving to the public consciousness, ahead of the scientific consensus.

Pesticide poisoning soon became a focal point of boycott publicity, as it highlighted the dangers of chemical exposure. The movement's success was partially due to the public's growing awareness of pesticide poisoning, which had not been widely reported before.

The UFW's crusade against pesticides set a template for future activism. 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 pesticides was a key moment in the history of environmental activism.

These decisions owe much to the UFW's leadership and their commitment to public health. They understood that the public's health and safety were paramount, and that the chemical industry was prioritizing profit at the expense of those values. The UFW's success was partially due to the public's growing awareness of pesticide poisoning, which had not been widely reported before.

In the 1980s, the UFW expanded its efforts to include consumer health and safety. They fought for better pesticide regulation, and their efforts were partly successful. The UFW's success was partially due to the public's growing awareness of pesticide poisoning, which had not been widely reported before.

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