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FARM WORKER MOVEMENT

Early efforts to organize farm workers in the southwest United States were stymied by the migratory and temporary nature of agricultural labor as well as by an inability to bridge cultural and ethnic divides. However, emerging from the Chicano movement (civil rights actions taken to counter racial and economic inequalities directed against U.S. residents of Mexican descent) of the 1950s, the leadership of César Chávez (1927–1993), Dolores Huerta, and Gilbert Padilla provided the vision for a farm worker movement that continues to this day.

The United Farm Workers (UFW) organization was created to build a sense of community that would empower farm workers to recognize their rights as well as allow them to take an active role in the farm worker movement rather than the passive role of following orders from some distant labor leader. Holding tightly to their religious and ethnic Chicano and Mexican heritages, Chávez, Huerta, and Padilla drew upon the organizational skills they had learned from Fred Ross and his Community Service Organization (CSO)—a grassroots program to educate and empower local citizens—and also took cues from successful demonstrations and political achievements of the civil rights movement and Martin Luther King Jr. Although the traditional labor tactic of strike (*huelga*) was often utilized, new tactics of nonviolent protest, national and international boycotts, and hunger strikes were introduced to bring widespread attention to the hardships faced by farm workers. Such attention provided the wellspring of support needed to successfully challenge the economic and political power of agribusiness.

LARGE-SCALE AGRICULTURE

The farm worker movement originated in California. An exception to the egalitarian ideology and the small-farm model of frontier agricultural development, California agribusiness received a head start by emulating the *rancheros* of the Mexican territory. During the late nineteenth century the shift to specialty crop—citrus fruit, grapes, lettuce, sugar beets—production by large-scale estate farms solidified an agricultural system that required a cheap and flexible workforce. The need for a large supply of manual labor was reinforced by the fragility of the specialty crops; such crops rarely withstood the abuses of machine processing. As a result, profits to the growers were realized through “sweating” the labor by forcing competition for jobs.

A virtual army of docile laborers willing to work for low wages and in undesirable conditions could be found in the socially marginal groups within the Chinese, Filipino, Mexican, and Japanese communities. The growers quickly learned to keep the farm laborers migratory—following the harvest season across the California countryside—and isolated to discourage attempts at collective action. They also learned the tactic of playing ethnic groups against one another to keep labor costs low. Economic downturns for the country were beneficial for the growers because they could then utilize Anglo workers to undercut migrant workers and effectively drive down wages.

Even with the rise of labor movements in the early twentieth century, the lack of power among farm workers was exemplified by their exclusion from the worker benefits and protections established under the Wagner Act of 1934, the Social Security Act of 1935, and the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. By contrast, the political influence of the growers was readily apparent in the development of the *bracero* (a Mexican laborer admitted to the United States) system. With U.S. involvement in World War II, the growers successfully argued that the uninterrupted production of their crops was necessary for national security. Working with the U.S. Department of State and with Mexico, the growers were able to draw upon a new labor force consisting of Mexican work-

ers allowed to enter United States to work the fields during harvest season on condition that they return to Mexico at the end of the season. *Braceros* were ideal in that they had no ties to the local communities, were available on short notice, and provided the cheap and docile labor sought by the growers. *Braceros* who complained or sympathized with striking domestic farm workers were labeled “undesirable,” sent back to Mexico, and not allowed to return to the United States. Even after the end of the war in 1945, the growers were able to extend the *bracero* program for another twenty years.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s attempts to unionize farm workers met with limited degrees of success. The National Farm Labor Union (NFLU) found initial support among Anglo workers, mostly “Okies” (Oklahoma migrant workers) from the Depression era, who held permanent positions crating the produce in the packing sheds located on the various farm operations. The division of labor among farm workers as well as language barriers resulted in Mexican field workers continuing to harvest crops despite walkouts and picketing by packing shed employees. Later, translators were used to broaden the base of worker support; subsequent strikes were often broken through the growers’ ability to utilize local law enforcement to intimidate the pickets as well as the ability to draw upon *bracero* labor to cross picket lines. With the demise of the NFLU, new efforts at farm worker unionization were taken up by the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC). Cultural barriers remained problematic for the AWOC. However, the main reason for the inability to achieve widespread collective action lay in the organization’s emphasis on the wage strike. Although at times successful, the wage strike yielded only short-term gains, leaving workers without extended contracts and benefit guarantees. The AWOC strike against Coachella vineyards in 1965 marked a shift in the effectiveness of farm worker efforts.

CÉSAR CHÁVEZ AND *LA CAUSA*

The roots of the farm worker movement are intertwined with those of the civil rights and Chicano movements of the 1950s. Social change was being



César Chávez, founder of the National Farm Workers Association, talks with strikers in Delano, California, during the 1980s grape-pickers strike.

Source: Ted Streshinsky/Corbis; used with permission.

effected throughout California's urban centers as a result of collective action sparked by the Community Service Organization (CSO). César Chávez began his career as an organizer in 1952 after meeting Fred Ross and becoming a community leader for the CSO. With the rhetoric of empowerment calling upon individuals to build their communities from the ground up rather than rely on change to filter down from the bureaucracies of state and local government, Ross's words resonated with Chávez. Through his involvement with Ross and the CSO, Chávez came to know other community organizers such as Dolores Huerta and Gilbert Padilla.

As Chávez refined his organizational skills, he turned his attention to the plight of farm workers. In addition to facing wage exploitation, farm workers

lived under deplorable conditions while on the farm site, were not covered under the Social Security Act, and had no benefits to cover health care, which was much needed, given both the hazardous nature of the work and the chronic conditions associated with repetitive tasks. Many factors—the structure and seasonality of agribusiness, the power and influence of the growers, misuse of the bracero system, ethnic divides among farm workers—led many people to conclude that the workers could not be brought together for collective action. Chávez believed the contrary; however, repeated attempts to garner support from the CSO for programs to aid farm workers met with rebuke because the concerns of rural workers were not seen as relevant to the plans of urban programs. Leaders in the CSO felt that farm workers should better themselves by leaving the fields and not by seeking to reform conditions in the fields. Realizing that farm workers were marginalized even within minority communities, Chávez left the CSO in 1962 to establish the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA).

Chávez selected Delano, California, as the location for the headquarters of the new association because the community was centrally located among numerous farm operations. Thus, workers in the area were more established, having to travel only nominal distances to harvests rather than having to follow the crops around the countryside of the southwestern United States. For Chávez, this location was ideal for an organization that would be built by farm workers. Using lessons learned from the CSO, Chávez laid the foundation for a community of action. Sharing the vision that power and change are most effective when they emanate from within the community rather than from a distant bureaucracy, Dolores Huerta and Gilbert Padilla joined Chávez in Delano.

After only six months of organizing, the time was right for a convention to formalize the NFWA. In September of 1962 Chávez was elected president of the new association; Huerta, Padilla, and Julio Hernandez were elected vice presidents. Although the structure of the association mirrored that of a union, the word *association* was used for fear that farm workers would have a negative reaction to the word *union* in light of past failures to achieve substantive

collective action. Relatively steep monthly dues were set for association members to help fund burial programs and establish a credit union. Unlike a union, the association had no local chapters, thereby allowing migrant farm workers to register grievances and seek assistance no matter where they were working at the time.

Chávez knew that a strong organization would take years of nurturing and that a solid foundation must be built with resident farm workers before the association could have any hope of finding support among migrant farm workers. The leadership of the NFWA realized the importance of gaining the trust of skeptical individuals, and there was no better way to gain trust than by the sharing of experiences. The association relied mostly upon volunteers who lived and worked with farm workers. For the association to be successful, the volunteers had to understand the needs of farm workers, and they could not do this by working a normal eight-hour day and then returning to the comforts of a middle-class home.

In September 1965, the NFWA had to prove the effectiveness of its organizational efforts and its mettle as an association. Earlier that year, AWOOC organizer Larry Itliong had headed a strike of Filipino farm workers against grape producers near Coachella. As the harvest season progressed northward, Itliong called upon his past associate, Dolores Huerta, to ask Chávez for NFWA support in a strike against grape producers in the Delano area. Although Chávez felt that it was too soon for the NFWA to become involved such a large mobilization, the farm workers of Delano did join the cause of the Filipino workers. This decision exhibited the charisma of Chávez to the nation and showcased the power of the NFWA.

NEW STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

Chávez, Huerta, and Padilla were well aware that wage strikes, the mainstay strategy of labor unions, are rarely successful in gaining any long-term benefits for farm workers. Short harvest seasons, the ease with which striking farm workers could be replaced, and little or no financial support from national organizations for strike funds all conspired to make this strategy ineffectual. An astute observer of social

movements, Chávez learned from the accomplishments of the civil rights movement and drew upon the undercurrent of social activism that ran throughout the country at the time to successfully challenge the control of the large growers in California. Given that the grape strike was already engaged, Chávez demanded that the NFWA take a position of nonviolence. As the nation came to see the intimidation and violence perpetrated against farm workers, the farm worker movement gained support from the Catholic church, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), other labor unions, and student organizations. SNCC organizer Marshall Ganz joined the NFWA campaign and became a longtime member of the association.

Drawing attention to the plight of the fieldworkers (*la causa*) was paramount for the success of the farm worker movement. Emulating the civil rights demonstrations in Alabama, Chávez utilized marches to capitalize on media coverage and to present a show of strength to the California state legislators in Sacramento. More than mere political spectacle, the marches were considered *perigrinación* (a pilgrimage) and came to symbolize the solidarity of those fighting against injustice; the penance of grueling marches embodied the commitment and sacrifice required to affect social change. The dedication to *la causa* can be seen in the importance that Chávez placed on the marches. Each night Chávez would mark the spot where he stopped for the day, and each morning he would locate the exact spot to continue the march; there were no shortcuts in his mission.

Ironically, the exclusion of farm workers from the protections guaranteed by the National Labor Relations Act allowed the NFWA to utilize strategies unavailable to labor unions. Boycotts were initiated to take the message of *la causa* worldwide in attempts to apply pressure to those large growers seemingly unaffected by strike efforts. The NFWA sent hundreds of association members across North America—Jessica Govea to Toronto and Montreal, Huerta to New York City and the East Coast, Padilla to Texas and the Southwest—to elicit support for the farm worker struggle. As the public became aware of the injustices and violence inflicted upon the



Selection from the 2000 Annual Report on Labour Rights: Agricultural Workers

The success of the Farm Workers Movement in the United States has encouraged similar movements around the world. The following text is from a report issued by the World Federation of Agriculture, Food, Hotel, and Allied Workers.

Women Workers and Agriculture

The role of women workers in the rural world is crucial. Rural women workers are responsible for half of the world's food production. In third world countries, they produce between 60 percent and 80 percent of food output.

According to the FAO, women farm workers are mainly responsible for the production of staple foods, such as rice, wheat, and corn, which represent 90 percent of the food consumption among poor people living in rural areas.

In spite of the existence of the ILO Convention, which establishes salary equality between men and women, the latter almost always receive wages inferior to those of men. In most countries, this convention is infringed. Minimum wage rates in the agricultural sector are different between men and women who perform the same tasks. Wages for women are always lower.

Farm women workers sow, apply fertilizers and pesticides, recollect and thresh. They also work on secondary crops, like legumes and vegetables.

The knowledge women have on the genetic resources applied to agriculture make them special guardians of biological diversity.

In the livestock sector, women feed and milk large animals, raise fowl and other small animals like sheep, goats, rabbits, and guinea pigs.

Once the harvest is done, women also participate in storage, manipulation, elaboration and trading.

Although women farm workers are evermore important in agriculture, they remain an unprivileged minority. Due to military conflicts, male migration to urban areas in search of jobs, and increasing mortality caused by AIDS, the number of families led by women is growing in developing countries.

Despite the fact that women are significant producers and suppliers of food, they are considered as "invisible" associates. Women possess valuable knowledge regarding the importance of genetic resources and its use in agriculture and food.

In the sub-Saharan Africa, women cultivate up to 120 different vegetable species within open spaces right next to commercial crops planted by men.

In the Andean regions of Colombia, Bolivia and Peru,

women keep seed stockpiles in order to guarantee food production.

In Rwanda, women are the main producers of beans, also known as "the meat" of the rural areas. Beans supply a fourth of the calories consumed by the population and half its protein intake.

A phenomenon known as the "feminization of agriculture" is becoming a trend in many areas of the world. The role of women in agriculture is becoming more crucial, as men keep leaving this economic sector.

For example, in Africa, male population in rural areas is descending rapidly, whereas female population remains relatively steady. In Malawi, rural male population decreased 21.8 percent between 1970 and 1990. During that same period, female population only declined 5.4 percent.

According to several studies, women who are the head of their families are usually younger and less educated than their male counterparts. Often, women have less farmland, financial resources and additional labor force to harvest.

Due to the lack of labor force and capital, female heads of families are forced to modify their harvesting systems. These adjustments have caused the reduction of agricultural output and, in some cases, the adoption of less nutritional crop varieties. Therefore, it is no surprise to find these families undernourished and more food insecure than other families.

In most developing countries, farmers in general do not have access to adequate resources. Women, however, have even less access than men, due to traditional sociological and cultural factors.

Union Martyrs

Many female unionists have lost their lives because of their union activities.

Lidia Madariaga, who belonged to the Nicaraguan Autonomous Trade Union Movement (Movimiento Sindical Autónomo de Nicaragua—MOSAN), from the administrative district of Leon, in Nicaragua, was murdered on April 22, 1966.

Florinda Soriano Muñoz, a union leader also known as Mamá Tingó, was assassinated on November 1, 1974, in Gualey, Dominican Republic for defending her freedom of association.

picketers, support for the boycotts grew. However, it was the “secondary boycotts”—a threat to the distributors, wholesalers, retailers, and restaurants—that began to tip the scales for the movement. Ultimately, the mere threat of calling for a boycott would be enough for the NFWA to bring growers to the bargaining table. The ability to mobilize so quickly and effectively, coupled with the charisma of Chávez, established the NFWA as the dominant organization in the farm worker movement. In 1966 the AWOC and NFWA were combined to form the UFW. Although recognized and supported by the AFL-CIO, leaders of the UFW agreed that the association would not officially join the national labor organizations but rather would remain a grassroots effort.

With violence escalating along the picket lines and at association offices, some farm workers believed that the strikes and boycotts were ineffective and that the nonviolent position of the UFW should be set aside. Frustrated by these beliefs, Chávez in February 1968 began his first hunger strike. Lasting twenty-five days, the initial hunger strike drew much national attention to *la causa*, but more importantly it illuminated the charisma of Chávez as well as his sacrifice to the movement. This sacrifice galvanized the association members in their pledge to peaceful action. During his time with the UFW, Chávez’s hunger strikes became longer and more life-threatening, and although the growers and the nation became less interested in them, each hunger strike would reinforce the solidarity of association members.

As the political mood of the country changed throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, so did the strategy of the UFW. Adopting the position of a political action committee, the UFW fought the growers in Congress and the courts. For Padilla and other UFW members, this change was antithetical to the original goals of the movement. In 1981, tensions arising over which direction the UFW should pursue—bureaucratic or grassroots organization—led Jerry Cohen, Ganz, Govea, and Padilla to resign from the association. Chávez regrouped with the tried and true strategies of the farm worker movement and focused national attention on the use of hazardous pesticides

and the deplorable living conditions of undocumented farm workers.

FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN THE UFW

Dolores Huerta may be the most recognizable female leader of the UFW, and her early organizational experience as a lobbyist for the CSO helped her to become one of the most effective negotiators for the association. Like Chávez, Huerta was tireless in her dedication to *la causa*. Yet, she saw the farm worker movement as only one part of the mass organization to build a moral social consciousness. Her nontraditional role in the union movement set her apart from other women; however, the success of the movement would not have occurred without the efforts of women such as Huerta.

The struggles of Chicana farm workers are worsened by the double standard of the overarching patriarchy that permeates the Chicano culture. Little consideration is given to the contradiction that women working in the fields are regularly discouraged from participating in the decision-making processes of the association. Assuming a more traditional role in the movement, César’s wife, Helen Chávez, supported her family by returning to work in the fields and by participating in the picket demonstrations. Only at the behest of César did Helen reluctantly accept an appointment as manager of the association credit union.

The traditional and supportive roles that Chicanas played in the farm worker movement should not be taken lightly. The strategy of nonviolent activism promoted by the UFW often resulted in women being placed at the front of the picket lines. During times of confrontation the women were subjected to battery from the fists and clubs of job foremen and Teamster members. Although the sacrifices made by these women to *la causa* garnered respect from male members of the movement, the sacrifice of moving one’s family across the nation to organize boycotts was not as respected. The experiences and dedication of women such as Jessica de la Cruz, Jessica Govea, Hope Lopez, and Juanita Valdez were vital to carrying the spirit of *la causa* to the public.

NEW CHALLENGES

Arturo Rodriguez became the second president of the UFW after the death of Chávez in April 1993. Holding to the visions of the original leaders of the movement, Rodriguez is carrying on the efforts to ban pesticides, combat deplorable living conditions, and restrict the use of child labor. The changing demographics of farm workers are leading the UFW to forge new alliances with other movements and ethnic associations, highlighting the continued commitment of a grassroots organization interested in the concerns of all individuals.

Although the UFW remains a formidable advocate for the rights of farm workers, it is unclear what effects the global economy will have on the farm worker movement. Importation of specialty and other crops presents a significant threat to the jobs and wages of domestic and undocumented farm workers. The boycotts of the 1960s and 1970s had support from international unions in the form of European dock workers refusing to off-load California grapes. Although the boycott remains a powerful tool for the UFW, only time will tell if labor movements are strong enough to marshal international collective action to weather the storm of globalization.

—Matt Lammers

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