

Delano Farm Workers' Strike



- Date** ★ 1965–1970 (given in 2005)
- Place** ★ Mainly Delano, California
- Type of Source** ★ Eyewitnesses (recollections)
- Author** ★ Various
- Context** ★ In 1965, Filipino and Mexican immigrants launched a strike in Delano, California, against local grape growers (farm owners), calling for minimum wage pay, as required by the federal government. The strike lasted five years and was ultimately led by labor leader and civil rights activist Cesar Chavez. The strike resulted in the birth of the labor union, the United Farm Workers of America, and the first major victory for U.S. farm workers. Although it began as a labor issue, the strike inspired Mexican-Americans and other Latinos to become more politically active. These accounts were given at a reunion to mark the 40th anniversary of the strike.

ANDY IMUTAN

My name is Andy Imutan and I am one of the original Filipino workers who went on strike in 1965. I am now only one of two living Filipino workers from that era as most of my brothers have passed away. The one thing that does remain is their legacy and their fight for a just cause.

The whole movement began in **Coachella** that same summer [of 1965]. That's when a group of Filipino workers went on strike demanding that their wages be increased from **\$1.10** an hour as well as better living conditions. Finally, after 10 days of **picketing**, we finally accomplished what we had set out to do; we increased our wages by **30¢** an hour. The victory was more **grandiose**, not so much for the wage increase but for its significance at defeating the growers. We knew then that we could accomplish a lot more.

As I look back, I don't think we could have accomplished such victory in Coachella had it not been for the leadership of our brothers Ben Gines, Pete Manuel, and Larry Itliong, who were all instrumental in that victory.

After a successful first strike we did it again, this time in Delano where wages were also starting out at \$1.10 an hour. However, the struggle became a lot harder when Mexican workers started crossing our picket lines. There was no unity between the Mexicans and the Filipinos. The growers were very successful in dividing us and creating conflict between the two races. Although we tried to discourage and reason with the Mexicans that this was just hurting everyone, we weren't able to convince them.

So Larry Itliong and I decided to take action by seeing Cesar Chavez, the leader of the National Farm Workers Association. We met to come up with a plan that would be beneficial for everyone, including the Mexican workers. However, Chavez said his organization wasn't ready to go on a strike. It took several discussions and a lot of faith, but finally the Filipinos and Mexicans

Andy Imutan

One of the original Filipino strikers. Leader of the AWOC and later vice-president of the UFW.

Coachella

a small town and region of southeastern California

\$1.10

about \$7.20 today

picketing

a strike tactic involving protesting outside a business and asking people not to enter it.

30¢

about \$2.00 today

grandiose

impressive

joined as one on September 16, to picket the Delano growers. On March 17, 1966, we set out on a march from Delano to Sacramento that initially only had 70 farm workers and volunteers. But by April 11, as we climbed the steps of the state Capitol, there were 10,000 supporters who had joined us in the cause.

A few months later our union, **AWOC**, and the **NFWA** joined as a single union. Out of this union the United Farm Workers was born. It was a very exciting time as we knew the potential when we joined together not as competitors but as true brothers joined in a very legitimate cause.

DOLORES HUERTA

It is important to remember not just the strike but how it developed. Some people don't realize that Cesar and I had been organizing since 1962. In fact, I had worked with Filipino leaders like Larry Itliong for a while before we went on strike.

When our Filipino brothers went on strike in Coachella, the union only had \$70 in its account. Those were the only funds that we counted with. I still recall the evening when we gathered and found out about the Coachella strike. We knew we had to support it. Yet I had seven kids to feed and **Helen** and Cesar had eight. As we discussed the situation all eyes turned to Helen and without a blink of an eye she said, "Well, we have to support the strike!"

We didn't know how we would make ends meet, but it didn't matter because our faith was too strong. I believe there were key moments such as the evening that **transpired** into Cesar's struggle and how people put not just their trust but also their wallets in the union.

It was this faith and our belief in justice that allowed us to overcome even the biggest struggles. How else could we get by when we didn't even have money for gas and our diets consisted of beans and tortillas?

The strike was a very difficult time especially when the growers got **injunctions** so that we weren't allowed to picket. We couldn't even wear shirts that had the word **Huelga**.

It was around this time that one of the attorneys working with us suggested to Cesar that we start a **boycott**. Cesar liked the idea a lot and just like that we began the boycott. The plan was very simple: To take the fight into the cities and have the people help us out with one very easy task of not buying grapes.

The difficult part of it all was getting the strikers to the cities. We didn't even have money for gas. We did whatever we had to do in order to get to the cities, including hitchhiking. Others left for New York City in school buses.

Once we arrived, we encountered even more problems as police began arresting the boycotters in New York City. Fortunately, we were able to get our people out [of jail] when **Robert F. Kennedy** sent his crew of lawyers to help us out.

Back in Delano we had new enemies: some Catholic priests. Since a lot of

AWOC

Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, the mainly Filipino farm workers union

NFWA

National Farm Workers Association, the mainly Mexican farm workers union led by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta

Dolores Huerta

one of the main founders of NFWA and UFW

Helen

Helen Chavez, Cesar's wife

transpired

happened

injunctions

legal restraining orders, in this case preventing the union from picketing farms

Huelga

Spanish for "strike"

boycott

Campaign not to purchase something. The UFW led several successful boycotts against anti-union farming companies beginning in 1966, most famously against table grape growers.

Robert F. Kennedy

Senator from New York, former Attorney General and brother of the late President. In 1968, he was a major candidate for the Democratic nomination for President. Kennedy would be a major supporter of the UFW until his assassination in June 1968.

these priests were related to the growers, they started spreading propaganda against the strike and started preaching to the workers to stop the picketing.

Fortunately for us, just as we had our share of enemies, we also had our share of friends. These included the Puerto Ricans who taught us how to strike, the Jewish people with their generosity and the **Black Panthers** who helped out in our boycotts. Without the contribution of all these groups the boycott and strike wouldn't have been a success.

ESTHER URUNDAY

When the 1965 strike occurred, my family and I were working for the D.M. Steele Co. (later it became Tex-Cal) in Earlimart under the supervision of the foreman Joe Mendez. The major buzz around town was whether or not we would join the Filipinos on strike. Everyone was undecided and there was a lot of tension around town on what would happen next.

Finally, my father-in-law, sister-in-law and I broke the news to our foreman, Joe Mendez. I am sure it wasn't a huge surprise since that is all anyone seemed to talk about during that time. We then headed off to the union office in Delano and spoke to Cesar and Dolores. It was then that I was the first one to sign the declaration of strike against our company. We were then to wait on things while the strike details were sorted out.

As I recall we didn't go on strike right away, on September 16. In fact it was a few days later that we went to a town hall meeting where everyone in Earlimart happened to be there. The vibe and energy were amazing. The hall was decorated with union flags and pictures of **Emiliano Zapata**.

Cesar began speaking and told us all about the Filipino union, AWOC, and what they were after. There was a vote held and people started shouting "Strike! Strike!" It was at that moment that the **imminent** had become reality.

A few days later, on September 20, we met up at one of our co-workers [sic] house at around 3 a.m. We were discussing strategy and how to begin our strike and make our presence felt. Gilbert Padilla was the picket captain, and it was right there and then that we left as a caravan to the growers' home.

Our first encounter was with the John Pagliarulo & Son farm. From there we headed off into several other farms, picketing and showing our demands. I am sure it must have been quite a sight for all those growers to see these farm workers waking them up at 3 a.m., ready to do battle with them. It must have been quite a wake up call.

HORTENSIA MATA

Back in 1965, I wasn't aware and didn't even know what a strike was. That is until the day that Gilbert Padilla came into the field where I worked one spring day in '65. Gilbert Padilla was a young, tall, **amiable** man working for Cesar Chavez as an organizer. That day my life was changed forever, Gilbert opened our eyes to the many injustices we were living everyday.

Black Panthers

a militant African American group popular and well-organized in poor black neighborhoods in the late 1960s and early 1970s

Esther Urunday

an early striker, later ran the UFW's Membership Department

Emiliano Zapata

an important Mexican revolutionary during the 1910 Revolution

imminent

approaching

Hortensia Mata

another early striker

amiable

likeable

Gilbert said, "There is going to be a meeting tonight at my house and Cesar Chavez will be there to show you how we can change things." So that night we went to Gilbert's home and started listening to what Cesar had to say. After listening to him speak in such a calm and decisive manner I made up my mind to go on strike as well. Cesar told us that it would be difficult and to not expect success right away. "In the end we will win," he said.

Before I realized it, I was on strike as well. I was afraid of how I would make ends meet and how I would take care of basic necessities. I am not sure if my crew was ready, mentally more than anything. The hardships were tremendous, especially when we had nothing to eat. I would sit up all night sometimes just thinking how I would pay off my house and even though it wasn't very luxurious it was still my family's home.

The fight in the fields was especially difficult because the police sided with the growers and every time we tried to put something together the police struck it down.

Fortunately for us we always had people to help us out any way they could. A man by the name of Chris Hartmire was one of those kind souls. Chris brought food to all the strikers in my crew, sometimes canned or a hot meal. Whatever it was we appreciated deeply. I am sure that if it hadn't been for people like Chris, I would have lost my faith.

By the time the San Francisco boycott came around in 1968, I was more determined than ever. I recall packing in a car with my other friends and co-workers and heading off to San Francisco to the grapes up there. I believe that was the key to our success. Had we stayed in Delano no one would have been aware of our struggle. There wasn't any media coverage in the Central Valley and we finally got the attention we deserved when we arrived in San Francisco.

There was plenty of support from everyone in the Bay Area and it helped tremendously. Suddenly, no one was buying grapes. We had the grape industry cornered. It was all a matter of time before we came to an agreement.

When the day finally came I was extremely proud of all the sacrifice I had made and had no regrets about everything I had to go through. It was during those strike years that I learned invaluable lessons that I still carry to this day. What I will always remember though is that united we can overcome any obstacle including powerful companies and corporations.

MARCOS MUNOZ

I would go to great lengths to make sure we defeated the growers, even if it meant going to Boston. Of course, I didn't know this at the time. In fact, I thought I was being sent to **Barstow**. At least that's what I had heard. But then I realized I didn't need a plane ticket to get there. It finally clicked that I was going to the great city of Boston!

A city full of revolutionaries and rebels. The city that is known for throwing the famous Boston Tea Party and dumping all that tea into the harbor during

Marcos Munoz
another early striker, he later organized the grape boycott in Boston

Barstow
a small California city not far from Delano

the American Revolution. And although, it was an **intimidating** task taking on such a large city, especially since I didn't know how to read or write, I went anyway.

With just a few contact names and a few dollar bills in my pocket, I set out to send the message to the other side of the country. When I arrived there, I was allowed to sleep overnight in a meat packing plant. It wasn't very comfortable, but at least I was able to shower.

Once I was engaged in the Boston scene, I became aware of the Vietnam War as well as so many civil rights movements at the time. It was during one of this protests that I met an anti-war demonstrator who helped me build a sign for the cause. The sign read something along the lines of, "America: Shame on you for bombarding Vietnam. Help the farm workers instead." This was just the beginning of a movement that would eventually be embraced by the whole city. People everywhere began to sympathize with what was happening in Delano.

I tried to get my point across any way I could. I remember one certain instance where I filled up a box of stones and had people lift it so they had an idea of the weight [of grape lugs] these farm workers had to carry.

Then in an effort to copy the events of the Boston Tea Party, we **emulated** the event by dumping grapes arriving from California into the harbor instead of tea. Then Cesar suggested we leave some for Ronald Reagan, who was the California governor at the time and a huge supporter of the **farmers**. So we sent these smelly, rotten grapes back to California, to the governor's office.

There was plenty of help from everyone in the city, including the Boston mayor, Kevin White. Mr. White supported us by sending a letter to Reagan warning him that if any more California grapes were to arrive in Boston, he would personally dump them over into the harbor. It was a great gesture and a symbolism [sic] of the support we received in Boston.

intimidating
frightening

emulated
copied

farmers
*meaning the farm owners,
not the workers*

Source: "Veterans of historic Delano Grape Strike mark 40th anniversary with two-day reunion in Delano and La Paz" *El Malcriado Special Edition*, September 17-18, 2005, http://www.ufw.org/_page.php?menu=research&inc=history/05.html (June 19, 2008)