

DOLORES HUERTA: CESAR CHAVEZ' PARTNER IN FOUNDING THE UNITED FARM WORKERS UNION IN CALIFORNIA

**M. Christie Mullikin
Carol Larson Jones**

**Graduate Business Program
Management and Human Resources**

Only recently have women had the opportunity to hold positions of leadership in unions. In fact, by 1993 there were only three women presidents of national unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). One of the first women involved in union leadership was Dolores Huerta who co-founded the United Farm Workers (UFW) union with Cesar Chavez. This paper will present a brief study of the challenges women have faced in achieving leadership in unions and an overview of the contributions of Dolores Huerta to the UFW.

Introduction

Prior to the 1960's there were several unsuccessful attempts to organize California farm workers to improve their miserable working conditions, low pay, and lack of job security. Organization attempts were regularly crushed by the political and social power of the growers who were supported by the police, the courts, state, and federal laws. Farm workers were excluded from protection under the Norris-La Guardia Act and the Wagner Act and were not given the same protection of their right to organize as were other types of workers. Activists who tried to organize farm workers and those who joined them were often beaten, jailed, and sometimes killed. Union leaders who were committed and fearless of their adversaries were needed to help farm workers to organize. One of those selfless activists was Dolores Huerta.

Challenges Women Faced in Assuming Union Leadership

Women in the 1990's who aspire to leadership roles have better opportunities to be involved in all areas of union activities than in the past. Historically women were not given the role of leaders in society. Most women were assigned the role of homemaker. Their primary responsibilities were to maintain the home and raise the children. These responsibilities made it difficult or impossible for most women to devote the necessary time and energy to develop the skills required for union leadership. Those women who were involved in union activities were usually assigned "supportive" roles. "Historically, union women disproportionately carried the duties of recording secretaries and served mainly on women's committees" (Cobble, 1993 at p. 381). As women's roles in society changed, so have the opportunities in unions. Today women can gain experience in organizing, collective bargaining, research, legislation, and public relations.

Dolores Huerta—Union Organizer

Dolores Huerta had to overcome many of the same obstacles that women face today in their attempts to achieve leadership positions. Dolores Huerta didn't allow her family responsibilities as a single mother to eleven children deter her from her commitment to organize farm workers. She often found herself in situations in which she had to teach herself the skills necessary to succeed. She never let fear stop her. She is an excellent example of how hard work and personal dedication can enable any woman to achieve her goals if she believes strongly enough in them.

When she became a union activist in the mid-1950's, Dolores Huerta was a pretty, petite young woman with Indian features and long, black hair. Like many women, she faced the

challenge of sexual stereotyping and discrimination. As a Mexican-American and a woman, she faced both. Dolores found that she had to be smarter, work harder, achieve more than her male counterparts, and lead an exemplary personal life to succeed (Cobble, 1993 at p. 385). Dolores Huerta became a leader among men and women because she was willing to take risks, work hard, study intensively, and make many personal sacrifices to achieve her goals.

Early Years

Dolores Fernandez Huerta was born on April 10, 1930, in Dawson, New Mexico, the daughter of a miner, farm worker, and union activist. Through her father, Dolores witnessed first hand the terrible working conditions of the farm workers. He often worked 12 to 16 hours a day harvesting beets while earning incredibly low wages and had no job security.

In 1936, she moved with her mother and two brothers to a racially mixed neighborhood in Stockton, California. Her mother worked in a canning factory and as a waitress; she later operated a hotel catering to farm workers and their families. The hotel proved to be a profitable business, even though her mother often let poor families stay for free. Dolores' mother was a strong role model for her daughter who not only taught her children respect and compassion for others, but also demonstrated that women had the potential to be successful. Dolores has said of her mother:

"My mother was one of those women who do a lot. She was divorced, so I never really understood what it meant for a woman to take a back seat to a man. My brothers would say, 'Mama spoiled you,' because she pushed me to the front. She won the first prize in Stockton for registering voters and increasing membership" (Bear & Matthews, 1974 at p. 236).

Dolores never personally faced the discrimination experienced by farm workers until she was in high school. She then became aware that she and others were treated differently because they were Mexican-Americans. She has said, "I started noticing racism as a teenager and it took a long time to get over the feelings" (Perez, 1996 at p. 14). The seeds of her future activism were probably sown at this time.

Career Beginnings

After graduating from high school, Dolores enrolled at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California. She dropped out to marry her high school sweetheart and have two daughters, but later divorced and returned to earn a teaching credential.

She became an elementary school teacher and taught the children of migrant farm workers. The children were a reflection of the harsh realities of the lives of farm workers who were hardworking people, but poor and living in deplorable conditions.

Dolores' union involvement began in 1955 when she met Fred Ross, an organizer with the Community Service Organization (CSO). The CSO was a grassroots organization which helped Mexican American farm workers build better lives by teaching English and citizenship classes. One of the goals of the organization was to register farm workers to vote so that they could elect politicians sympathetic to their cause. Fred Ross recruited Dolores and taught her everything he knew about union organizing.

Dolores realized that unless the living conditions of their farm workers were improved, the children were destined to a life of poverty. She said, "I couldn't stand seeing kids come to class

hungry and needing shoes. I thought I could do more by organizing farm workers than by trying to teach their hungry children" (*Biography of Dolores Huerta*, UFW AFL-CIO at p. 1). Following her heart and forfeiting her steady paycheck, she gave up teaching to become a full-time volunteer for the CSO. Her work with the Community Service Organization (CSO) and Fred Ross gave Dolores self-confidence and invaluable experience in organizing. Dolores has said that she owes a lot to Fred Ross's belief in her abilities:

"If I hadn't met Fred Ross then, I don't know if I ever would have been organizing. People don't realize their own worth and I wouldn't have realized what I could do unless someone had shown faith in me. At that time we were organizing against racial discrimination—the way Chicanos were treated by police, courts, politicians. I had taken the status quo for granted, but Fred said it would change. So I started working" (Bear & Matthews, 1974 at p. 234).

Dolores became so involved and committed to her work in the CSO that she became a founding member of the Stockton Chapter of the Community Service Organization. She also organized her first group of farm workers within the CSO, the Agricultural Workers Association.

The CSO and Personal Challenges

While working with the Community Service Organization (CSO), Dolores met the man who would eventually become her union soulmate—Cesar Chavez. Cesar and Dolores discovered that they shared a common passion and goal—to get justice for the farm workers.

As a lobbyist for the CSO, Dolores pressured the legislature to pass bills entitling farm workers to benefits like disability insurance, unemployment insurance, and minimum wages. During this period of her life, she married Ventura Huerta and had five more children. It surely wasn't easy working for the Agricultural Workers Association (AWA) and having a family with seven children to support. And, as a Mexican American woman, Dolores felt pressure from her family and her Church, especially her priest Father McCullough, to assume the role of the "traditional" wife and mother. It was difficult for her to not be actively involved in the work that was so important to her. She said, "I made my husband Ventura quit his job to work for the AWA. My brother also quit his job and worked full time without pay to organize the union. But Father McCullough didn't want me to be involved. He said that farm labor organizing was no place for a woman. So I kind of worked under cover, doing the work through my husband and my brother" (Levy, 1975 at p. 284).

This was a challenging time for Dolores and her family and her marriage felt the strain. They had very little money. The Agricultural Workers Association provided shelter, food, and a salary of \$5 per week. Dolores traveled frequently while organizing and lobbying and her children were often cared for by other union families. She noted that, "It was difficult for us, to work for nothing, because I was having a baby every year. They were hard times! In fact, it ended up in a divorce" (Levy, 1975 at p. 145). Her mother helped her financially and in caring for the children, but Dolores had to deal with the disapproval of relatives and others who didn't understand her commitment to helping the farm workers. She said,

"I had a lot of doubts to begin with, but I had to act in spite of my conflict between my family and my commitment. My biggest problem was not to feel guilty about it. I don't any more but then, everybody used to lay these guilt trips on me, about what a bad mother I was, neglecting my children. I had six and one on the way when I started—and I was driving around Stockton with all those little babies in the car, the different diaper changes for each one. It's always hard, not just

because you're a woman, but because its hard to really make that commitment. It's in your own head. I'm sure my own life was better because of my involvement. I was able to go through a lot of very serious personal problems and survive them because I had something else to think about. Otherwise, I might have gotten engulfed in my difficulties, and I think, I probably would have gone under..." (Bear & Matthews, 1974 at p. 233).

A New Union—A New Association

During this time Cesar Chavez was serving as the National Executive Director of the Community Service Organization, he was becoming progressively frustrated with that organization. His goal was to create a true union for farm workers, one that would represent a social movement for justice in the fields. He envisioned himself not as a traditional union boss but as a volunteer in the fight for justice for all farm workers. He approached the CSO with his idea but was unable to obtain the organization's support. He resigned from the CSO and asked Dolores to join him in Delano to help organize the new union. He knew she would be a committed volunteer in the fight for pay equity and safety in the fields for men, women, and their unborn children. Dolores says that her first reaction was "When Cesar told me, 'I'm going to start my own union', I was just appalled, the thought was so overwhelming. But when the initial shock wore off, I thought it was exciting" (Levy, 1975 at p. 147).

Dolores concluded that legislation alone would not solve the problems of the Mexican-American farm workers. She resigned from the Community Service Organization and, in September of 1962, joined Cesar Chavez in Delano. She "was convinced that these workers, mired in poverty, could never escape through the CSO's strategy of pressure-group politics. What they needed was a union" (Foner, 1980 at p. 459). Dolores and Cesar established the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA). This new organization was founded on the principles of non-violence, public action, and volunteerism. Dolores and Cesar covered the state recruiting new members for the NFWA. In January 1963, Cesar Chavez was elected President of the National Farm Workers Association and Dolores Huerta was elected Vice-President.

By 1964, the NFWA had signed up 1,000 families, who paid monthly dues of \$3.50. The union provided the farm workers with community service programs such as insurance and a credit union. Dolores knew they were gaining wide acceptance among the farm workers, but she and Cesar agreed that they would need three to five years of dues and organizing for the national Farm Workers Association to lay a solid foundation and be in a position to strike for a contract.

Delano Grape Strike

In September of 1965, the National Farm Workers Association was asked to join in a walkout with the Filipino grape workers of the AFL-CIO Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC). The farm workers were asked if they would join the walkout as a sign of solidarity. Over 1,700 farm workers signed cards supporting the strike and authorizing the NFWA to represent them. This was the start of a five year effort that would become known as the Delano Grape Strike.

Dolores and Cesar knew that it was unlikely that the strikers would be able to win on their own for history had already proven that power of agribusiness was too great. The NFWA decided on a strategy that would create a public controversy. The union hoped that with public awareness would lend support to their cause. Their plan was to call for an economic boycott against certain growers: Schenley Industries, Di Gorgio (S&W Foods and Treesweet), and Giumara Vineyards. Because the union was committed to a non-violent philosophy, aware-

ness would be gained by the use of picket lines and press conferences. Unfortunately, during the boycott, both strikers and picketers were met with violence and arrests. Dolores describes this time as follows: "It was like a war, a daily kind of confrontation. We never slept. We'd get up at 3:00 or 4:00 a.m. and then we'd go till 11:00 p.m." (Golman, 1995 at p. 70). The support and commitment of the workers were so strong that the boycott became "La Causa" and soon the National Farm Worker Association's slogan, "Viva La Causa" (long live the cause), became the battle cry for justice among farm workers.

During the boycott, some union workers picketed local growers and others were sent to metropolitan areas like San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York. Their job was to inform consumers of the plight of the striking farm workers and urge them not to buy scab grapes. Dolores was to be the chief negotiator for the union but ended up directing boycott efforts in New York City in 1968. She explained how she ended up in New York. "Cesar and I had a lot of personal fights, usually over strategy or personalities. I thought we had to work much more with the labor unions and other groups to get the boycott going. So I ended up on the boycott myself. I should have kept my mouth shut. My job wasn't on the boycott, it was supposed to be on negotiating" (Levy, 1975 at p. 267). The time spent in New York was a tremendous learning experience. At first she was overwhelmed and afraid of how to approach the work. "There were no ground rules. I thought, 11 million people in New York, and I have to persuade them to stop buying grapes. Well, I didn't do it alone. When you need people, they come to you. You find a way" (Foner, 1980 at p. 461). The plight of the National Farm Workers Association was finally gaining much public support.

Some boycotted growers found a way to sell their grapes in spite of the boycott by simply changing the labels on their boxes to a name that was not associated with the boycott. To counteract this tactic, Dolores proposed a generic boycott of all California grape growers. Since the farm workers were not covered by the Landrum-Griffin Act, this was not considered an illegal secondary boycott. This strategy was considered somewhat risky because it affected all grape growers, not just those involved in the strike. It was successful, however, because it gave the union the opportunity to bring all the issues, including those of food safety and the environment, to more consumers. The union also learned that the bigger the industry, the better the chance of winning.

Dolores' generic boycott strategy worked. Public support for the farm workers forced the growers to negotiate with the National Farm Workers Association. Five years after it started, the boycott was officially ended on July 30, 1970. Dolores was now challenged with the job of negotiating the first union contracts. She had no experience in negotiating contracts, but as always, she rose to the occasion. She met the challenge as she had many times before by writing and negotiating the contracts by herself.

Hundreds of contracts were signed, raising the workers' minimum wage to \$1.75 an hour, with a \$.25 bonus for each box picked. The following year the minimum would rise to \$1.90 an hour. The growers would contribute \$.10 an hour for a health and welfare plan and \$.02 an hour for a fund established to provide low-cost housing and retraining. The contracts also gave the workers paid holidays and vacations. Workers were made eligible for unemployment insurance and would no longer be exposed to certain pesticides, including DDT. Dolores' negotiated contracts were an incredible personal accomplishment and are remarkable in that there was no legal recognition of the union as a collective bargaining agent for farm workers.

United Farm Workers is Established

In 1966 the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee and the Nation Farm Workers Association merged and were given the status of an organizing committee under the

Executive Council of the AFL-CIO. The new organization was called the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO. In 1973 the UFWOC was granted an independent charter and became the United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO. Dolores Huerta was elected Vice President.

In 1975, Dolores helped organize the grape, lettuce, and Gallo wine boycotts which resulted in the enactment of the first state legislation protecting the farm workers' right to organize—the Agricultural Labor Relations Act (ALRA). The Act required growers to participate in collective bargaining with farm workers who have voted for union representation. It also prohibited "unfair labor tactics" and established a five-person California Agricultural Labor Relations Board (ALRB) to conduct secret ballot elections. Although the workers finally had laws to protect their right to organize, problems with the Act soon became evident. Repeatedly the General Counsel of the ALRB took no action against violations of the law by the growers. The United Farm Workers has said, "As such, the ALRA is perhaps the best labor law which protects the rights of workers, but the effectiveness of a law is determined more by its enforcement than by its mere existence" (*Brief History of the United Farm Workers, UFW AFL-CIO* at p. 7). The union still works to ensure enforcement of the Act.

During the 1980's Dolores continued her political action by speaking before Congress about pesticides and other health issues. Her lobbying efforts led the way for passage of major legislation including the removal of citizenship requirements for public assistance, disability and unemployment insurance for farm workers, and enactment of Aid for Dependent Children. Her lobbying for amnesty for farm workers also resulted in the Immigration Act of 1985.

In addition to continued lobbying, Dolores was active in other union activities. In 1988 Dolores was brutally beaten by the San Francisco police while handing out news releases on the UFW's grape boycott. Her participation at this protest cost her six broken ribs and emergency surgery to remove her spleen. Always the activist, Dolores was able to make a positive change for the oppressed through this experience. "A significant part of her out of court settlement was that the city agreed to change their crowd control procedures in the use of their batons and elimination of SWAT teams from demonstrations" (*Biography of Dolores Huerta, UFW AFL-CIO* at p. 2).

The Contribution of Women to the UFW

Dolores Huerta has been an active feminist throughout her life. She believes that women should be in leadership positions within the union and has ensured that women are very visible in all levels of the United Farm Workers' organization. Almost half of the UFW organizers are women and both the union's Credit Union and Health Clinic are headed by women. However, Dolores admits that the women weren't always accepted by the union men. In the beginning it was much harder for women. She talked about women in the UFW over the years:

"I really believe what the feminists stand for. There is an undercurrent of discrimination against women in our own organization even though Cesar goes out of his way to see that women have leadership positions. Cesar always felt strongly about women in the movement... no married man went out on the boycott unless he took his wife. We find day care in the cities so the women can be on the picket line with the men. Of course we take it for granted now that women will want to be as involved as men. A certain discrimination still exists. Cesar—and other men—treat us differently. Cesar's stricter with the women, he demands more of us. But the more I think of it, the more I am convinced that the women have gotten stronger because he expects so much of us. You could even say women are stronger than men" (Bear & Matthews, 1974 at p. 234).

Dolores Huerta asserts that women were essential to the success of "La Causa". As they became more involved with union activities, they gained the respect of the men. She felt that women were especially effective on the picket lines and admitted and respected their courage and tenacity. Dolores describes what it was like for the women who were on the picket line during the strike against the Teamster contracts:

"I was in charge of the line. We made the men go to the back and placed the women in front. The Teamsters beat our arms (with 2 x 4 boards) but they couldn't provoke the riot they wanted, and we didn't give in. The police stood there, watched us get beaten; the DA wouldn't even let us sign a complaint. But we gained a lot of respect from our men. Excluding women, protecting them, keeping them at home, that's the middle-class way. Poor people's movements have always had whole families on the line, ready to move at a moment's notice, with more courage, because that's all we had. It's a class, not an ethnic thing" (Foner, 1980 at p. 463).

Dolores gives credit to the union women for their help in to strengthening the union's non-violent ideology. She said, "One of the reasons our union is non-violent is that we want our women and children involved, and we stay non-violent because of the women and children" (Foner, 1980). Dolores also believes that women have a natural ability for negotiations. She observed that they were especially effective during negotiations because they have "a lot of patience, no big ego trips to overcome and are more tenacious. It unnerves the grower to negotiate with us. Cesar always wanted to have an *all-women* negotiating team" (Foner, 1980 at p. 463).

Dolores Huerta continues to fight for farm workers' rights as an active member of the United Farm Workers. She currently directs the Collective Bargaining Department (which includes farm worker organizing, ranch elections, strikes and collective bargaining) and is a Board director of the Farm Workers Credit Union. Dolores is a Board member of the National Farm Workers Service Center and serves as a Trustee for the Robert F. Kennedy Medical Plan and the Juan de La Cruz Pension Fund. She has no plans to retire. "I'll just keep going as long as I can and die with my boots on" (Perez, 1996 at p. 45).

In recognition of her many accomplishments, Dolores Huerta has received many honors. Senator Robert Kennedy acknowledged her help in winning the 1968 California Democratic Primary only moments before he was shot in Los Angeles. In 1993 she was recognized by three different organizations. She was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame, received the ACLU Roger Baldwin Medal of Liberty Award, and was given the Eugene V. Debs Foundation Outstanding American Award.

Dolores Huerta is proof that a woman can accomplish anything she truly believes in. She overcame discrimination, inexperience, and the disapproval of family and friends and was willing to make personal sacrifices, including being arrested 22 times (no convictions) for union activities. Cesar Chavez once said of Dolores Huerta, "Dolores is the only one I fight with, the only one who makes me lose my temper. I guess that's because I like her so much, that girl is really something, really great. She's absolutely fearless, physically as well as psychologically, and she just can't stand to see people pushed around" (Matthiessen, 1969 at pp. 283-284).

Conclusion

Dolores Huerta's partnership with Cesar Chavez made the United Farm Workers an organization that is much more than just a union. The accomplishments of the UFW helped

to influence many positive changes for women over the past 30 years. Dolores Huerta, through her personal contributions and accomplishments, can serve as a role model for women. Her commitment to the UFW has not come without personal sacrifice. Her eleven children were raised non-traditionally, but are successful and proud of their mother. Among them are an attorney, a paralegal, a medical doctor, a therapist, a chef, an administrator, a performance artist, and students. All are activists which make Dolores especially proud.

As a woman, mother, union organizer, Vice-President, and activist, she proved that a woman can accomplish anything she desires through hard work and commitment. Dolores Huerta once said, "Women should remember this: be resourceful, you can do anything, whether you have experience or not" (Bear & Matthews, 1974 at p. 237). She believes that women must believe in themselves and take credit for the work that they do. That belief includes overcoming any fear that may hold women back. She acknowledges that fear is normal. Dolores admits that she was often afraid and says, "I've been afraid about everything until I did it. I started out every time not knowing what I was to do and scared to death" (Bear & Matthews, 1974 at p. 238).

Dolores Huerta's life story is an inspiration. She has devoted 41 years to a cause she truly believes in. Because of her commitment to the United Farm Workers, she has helped to improve the lives of thousands of people. Her work is altruistic—she still receives only \$5 per week salary from the union. Her work has not made her a wealthy woman, but she can reflect on her life and know that she has made a difference.

Dolores Huerta is also a symbol of courage. Despite great odds against her, she proved that a woman can be successful in two jobs—one at home and the other in a leadership position in an organization. She took chances, faced the unknown, and learned at every opportunity. When she was insecure or afraid, she forced herself to go forward. She has said, "One thing I've learned as an organizer and activist is that having tremendous fears and anxieties is normal. It doesn't mean you should not do whatever is causing the anxiety; you should do it" (Golman, 1995 at p. 70). Dolores Huerta definitely did it.

References

- Bear, B.L. and Matthews, G., "You Find a Way: The Women of the Boycott," *Nation* (February 23, 1974): 232-238.
- Cobble, D.S., *Women and Unions: Forging a Partnership* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1993).
- Foner, P.S., *Women and the American Labor Movement* (New York: The Free Press, 1980).
- Golman, P. *Strike!* (Brookfield: Millbrook Press, 1995).
- Levy, J.E., *Cesar Chavez—Autobiography of La Causa* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1975).
- Matthiessen, P., *Sal Si Puedes* (New York: Random House, 1969).
- Perez, F., *Dolores Huerta* (Austin: Raintree Steck-Vaughn, 1996).
- UFW AFL-CIO, "Biography of Dolores Huerta".
- UFW AFL-CIO, "Brief History of the United Farm Workers".