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Women In the Huelga

By Pat Hoffman

(The quotes in this article are from a tape-recorded interview with Maria Saludado.)

"AT OTHER TIMES I didn't see the strikers. But this day, when I saw the strikers I felt very bad. I saw an old lady, very old. She said to me, 'Please don't cross my picket line.' And I felt like crying, because these are my people, and I know their problems. That night I told my parents, 'I'm going to the strike (*huelga*).'"

Maria Saludado joined the Grape Strike in March 1966. A farm worker woman, "*campesina*," 25 years old, she had already worked nine years in the fields. A transplant to white American society, Maria had come with her family from Mexico when she was sixteen (although an American citizen by birth), with seven years of formal education in Mexico. At sixteen she began working in the fields with her father to help support the family. Who would have believed that by 1969 this "farm worker girl" would have traveled to Chicago, spoken on radio in New York City, and developed a successful boycott in Indianapolis?

Women's Liberation is not a prime topic of conversation in the *huelga*. Yet in the movement, Mexican-American women, like Maria, have been paying the price of freedom for women. In telling me what is expected of Mexican-American women, Maria says they have a home-centered role. Bearing children, caring for the home, staying close with the family, and building up "machismo," manliness, in the men, are the broad definitions of their role.

The story of Maria Saludado provides an example of the move toward freedom being made by many women—and men—in the *huelga*.

I interviewed Maria in Delano where she is currently working in the Kennedy Medical Plan office of the United Farm Workers' Organizing Committee (UFWOC). She's a lovely, attractive woman. Maria lives with her family in Earlimart, seven miles north of Delano, in a house the family has been buying for a number of years. I asked her how she got started with the farm workers' union.

She told me that back in 1963, “Cesar, he come to us about the union. I don’t believe very much about the union. I know very much about the problems in the field.” But she didn’t trust union organizers. “We need a union—we need *something* to help us. (But) other organizers, they come for a couple of months, organize a couple of people, and they left. My father, he was very interested in the union because he’s had more experience with the union. He told me, ‘The union is very good. Cesar is different, because Cesar is a Mexican.’ “

Maria was unconvinced. It wasn’t until March of 1966 when the old woman on the picket line appealed to her, that she decided to risk quitting her work to go with a strike which might fail like very other farm labor strike in this country up to 1965. In Maria’s five years with the farm workers’ movement she has set aside the known to try the unknown.

“In 1966 they sent us to the UAW convention in long Beach to try to sell buttons. That was my first place, you know, when I went out. Fred Ross, he talked to me about organizing—to try to organize the workers at DiGiorgio’s Sierra Vista Ranch in Delano. This is my first experience in organizing people. I don’t have good words to convince the people.

“In the same year they send us to L.A. to try to work on the boycott in L.A. in the last days of November. I stayed in L.A. for seven months. When we come back from L.A. they send us to organize farm workers in Marysville. ...

“Cesar called us and sent us to Chicago. Oh, this is another problem. It’s a problem, but it’s beautiful. When I went to Chicago I didn’t speak any English. But I started working with the Spanish-speaking people to organize the boycott in Chicago. ...

“They sent us to New York. It’s another problem. New York is a big city. I got lost a lot of times—in the same building. ‘Maria, you’re going to Indianapolis.’ No, because I cannot speak English. ‘Maria, you’ve learned a lot of things. And you have a lot of experience. You try.’ “

For Maria and other women in the *huelga*, going out on strike was a risk; but going out on the boycott was a radical break with tradition for a Mexican women.

“For the Mexican people the idea is to live very close with their families. Sometimes that’s very good. In some ways it’s so bad. For the families sometimes it’s bad because the women they don’t try to live a little bit (independent). I think the Mexican ladies who live a little separate from the parents; it’s to learn more, to educate their selves. Because when we live very close we don’t have a chance to learn something very much about other people. We concentrate only for the family.”

Maria tells of when she and five other farm workers arrived in Chicago. “We didn’t have much money. We had \$85 for two weeks and we had six of us. With \$85 we tried to

coordinate everything. And I'm in charge to buy the groceries. But \$85 is nothing. For three months we ate only one time a day."

In 1969 when Maria was in charge of the grape boycott in Indianapolis, she went on a fast for 10 days. "The first three days were the hardest. I had tea and a little molasses." Her fast was to call to the attention of people there, the five-year struggle of farm workers to get contracts with the men who employ them.

Farm worker women are setting their own style for liberation: not because they selfconsciously want to be liberated women, but because things are bad for farm workers and here is a movement offering the hope of change. The hope of bringing change has kept these women pushing out the walls of their living space. "I no longer belong to myself but to the thousands of people struggling to be free," says Jessica Govea.

Our society doesn't expect much of farm worker women. The farm workers' union is saying to these women, "We need all the talents you have to offer. Come try to do the jobs that must be done to bring a better life for farm workers.' And women are responding.

Dolores Huerta, vice-president of the union, has said, "We couldn't have a union without the women. Their sacrifices have been unbelievable. And the participation of women has helped keep the movement non-violent." A number of farm worker women hold positions of leadership in the union: Gloria Soto, in charge of services; Ester Uranday, in charge of membership; Dolores Huerta, chief negotiator; Jessica Govea, boycott personnel director; Helen Chavez, credit union manager.

In working to liberate farm workers from poverty and powerlessness, these women have been liberating themselves—from the narrow confines of society's expectations; from the enclosing demands of fathers, husbands and lovers; but most of all the bindings of their own uncertainties and fears.

"When I went out to Indianapolis. Eliseo (Eliseo Medina, Chicago boycott coordinator for three years) gave to me only the last name for a person, and the phone number. Anderson, I can't forget. One of the problems is to rent an apartment for myself. Indianapolis is a very conservative city and I am a Mexican. I was afraid. 'Maria, you've learned a lot of things. You try.' This is the reason I stay in the union. When I remember these things. In the potatoes it is so hard for the ladies. You know, sometimes the ladies, the pregnant ladies, and they work in the fields."

The good word from farm worker women is that they are choosing life. They are risking—setting aside the known, trying the unknown for the sake of their brothers and sisters who have suffered too long. *Viva la cause! Viva las campesinas!*

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