

Reflections on UFW Experience by Dolores Huerta – July/August 1985

Reflections on the UFW Experience

By Dolores Huerta

There aren't many grass-roots organizations in the United States today, and God knows we need them desperately, especially in the Hispanic community.

The type of organizing that Fred Ross pioneered is the kind of organizing that Cesar Chavez and the rest of us have been doing in the farm workers' movement. Back in the early nineteen-fifties, Ross desegregated some of the areas of California where Mexican-American children and Anglo children were attending separate schools. One of his first projects was in Tustin, in Orange County, where the Farm Bureau Federation tried to run him out of town. He developed his organizing technique — what came to be known as the “house meeting” approach — in Tustin. The farm workers themselves suggested this idea to Ross. He was talking to one group, and somebody said, “Look, let's go over to my friends' house, and we'll meet there with some of the other workers.”

So, Ross began a series of such house meetings, and then he called the Chicanos all together and started a voter-registration drive. As a result, the Mexican-Americans elected people to the school board who eventually ended Tustin's segregated school system.

Dolores Huerta is first Vice-President of the united Farm Workers of America. This article is edited from her opening statement and from her answers to questions at a Center dialogue on “Leadership and Popular Movements: The UFW Experience.”

This is much the same technique we later used when we started our Community Service Organization — the first mass-based organization of Spanish-speaking people in California. While forming this organization, Fred Ross found Cesar Chavez and taught him the house-meeting method. I must emphasize that Fred Ross stumbled on this method. Previously he had tried various other ways of getting professionals, business people, and religious people together; invariably after he got them together, nothing happened.

Whenever we started the UFW, we analyzed the things that had been wrong in our Community Service Organization. First, the CSO had no economic base. Our dues in the CSO were five dollars a year. In the UFW, working with the poorest of farm workers, we were charging \$3.50 a month. These were people who did not have enough money for food. We had no unemployment insurance. We had no surplus commodities. We had no food stamps. So, asking those people to pay \$3.50 a month was extremely difficult. I emphasize that because that is the crunch when you talk about organizing poor people. Cesar and I used to discuss this a lot. How could we ever form a union when the workers were so poor they could hardly pay the necessary dues?

But we used Ross's house-meeting method. I worked in the northern part of California's Central Valley, Cesar in the southern part. And initially we were able to get together a thousand farm workers who were willing to put their names on the line and start paying their dues.

A pioneering labor leader of Mexican-American farm workers discusses the charismatic qualities of UFW President Cesar Chavez, and the demands on the leadership in an organization that wishes to remain "grass roots" while at the same time developing an increasingly sophisticated decision-making and fund-raising operation.

One of the things the workers did get for their dues was a small death benefit. We contracted with an insurance company for that. Workers were then making fifty to sixty cents an hour, so this death benefit — one thousand dollars for the head of the family, and five hundred for each of his dependents — was important. Every time one of the workers died, we had a get-together, not only to pay our respects, but also to let everybody know that if they joined the United Farm Workers they would receive this little death benefit.

Then we had the grape-pickers' strike in 1965. That is when our dues structure fell apart, and we had to live on the contributions that began to come in from outside our organization.

We had already done some work with the AFL-CIO agricultural workers' organizing committee. So when the AFL-CIO sent a representative out to California in our early days, he couldn't believe we had been able to fill an entire hall with farm workers. The AFL subsequently helped to fund our organization.

But Cesar always said that whoever is paying the bills will determine what will happen in the organization. So when he started the farm workers' union, he made it very clear that the workers themselves would be paying the expenses. Whatever money came in, we would use to buy gasoline, and to pay ourselves a small salary, something like sixty dollars a month in the summer. In the winter, when the workers could not pay their dues, we took a salary of twenty dollars a month. We were just barely making it. I had seven kids; Cesar had eight. Helen Chavez's sisters used to go out and collect food from the welfare department so that we could continue to eat while we were forming the union.

Those who knew Cesar back in the nineteen-fifties would not recognize him as the kind of leader that we have today. He was a most self-effacing, soft-spoken person. I had been in the Community Service Organization for several months before I met Cesar. It was at a meeting, and five minutes after I met him, I couldn't find him again. He looked like everybody else. He was not the kind of person who called attention to himself.

But he was a tremendously effective organizer. On one occasion he organized a big campaign —including a strike — in Oxnard to get rid of the *bracero* program. The *braceros* were contract nationals from Mexico whom the growers had brought in to work in the fields. Well, Cesar was in all the newspapers at the time, but through it all he remained a very quiet person.

Just about the time the grape strike started, Cesar made a conscious decision that somehow our organization had to have an identification. We designed a badge with our slogan, "Nonviolence Is Our Strength," and put Cesar's picture on it. He had a fit about that. He did not want to be the focal point of the organization. But because of the grape strike and the boycott, the rest of us in the organization were convinced that we had to focus the identification of the organization on Cesar Chavez as the head of our union, especially since the other organization —the AFL-CIO Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee — was still in existence. We had not yet merged with that group.

We merged with the AFL-CIO in 1966. That was a survival decision. Had we not merged, the Teamsters Union would have wiped us out, because they moved into the fields in 1966. Having Cesar identified as the head of the union made it easier in our fight with the Teamsters. Here we had an indigenous leader, a farm worker himself, as the head of the union, whereas the Teamsters were outsiders who had come in to try to destroy us. But Cesar suffered a lot from this focus on him as the leader. In our meetings, all the workers would shout, “viva Chavez,” and Cesar just groaned. But he learned to accept that as a part of the organizing.

Cesar committed himself and the union to the concept of organizing the workers without violence. He was convinced that if we resorted to violence, people would start killing each other and the killing would never end. So, he had his first fast to dramatize his adherence to nonviolence. That was widely publicized, and Bobby Kennedy came out to California to end the fast at a Mass. That was a big breakthrough and it attracted national attention.

Today, the farm workers refer to the United Farm Workers as “La Union de Chavez,” Chavez’s union. I am the first vice-president of the union. In a difficult situation the workers trust me because they know that whatever I represent is what Cesar is thinking. The workers have complete faith in Cesar.

In our American educational system, students, as early as in high school, are warned to be wary of the man on the white horse, the demagogue, the false leader. But working people and poor people do not have that problem. They recognize genuine leadership, and they are willing to follow whomever they consider their leader. It is a simple kind of faith. They want leadership, and to them leaders are people who are responsible, who are willing to take risks, who will be out in front fighting for them. The farm workers’ respect for leadership extends down to the level of the ranch and our ranch committees. The heads of each committee are elected and are expected to show leadership.

We merged with the AFL-CIO in 1966. That was a survival decision. Had we not merged, the Teamsters Union would have wiped us out.”

I don’t know whether that respect and desire for leaders is because many of our members are from Mexico. One of the things we always say in the union is that our liberal supporters often want to feel our heads to see if we have grown any horns since the last time they saw us. Maybe that is because we are Hispanic; but somehow they expect us to become bandits or dictators of some kind. Our history books, for example, never portray Pancho Villa as a great leader of the Mexican revolution. He is always shown as a bandit.

I want to talk a bit about Fred Ross. He did some work with the late Saul Alinsky in Chicago. He also trained leaders in the technique of organizing. One of them was the late George Wiley, who started the welfare rights organizations. Most recently, Fred has been working with the nuclear-freeze movement.

Fred Ross believes in organizing and training the leadership, and then stepping back. That, I guess, is the mark of the true organizer — someone who trains people and then steps back. His whole life has been to find leaders and then train them.

Fred Ross is now seventy-five years old. He is not going to be around much longer, which is a shame. He has done great work, finding people like Cesar — and I’ll include myself — and his particular skills are disappearing. I first met Fred at a meeting where he

talked about what poor people could do if they only got together and formed an organization. It would be most useful if we could have a center where the technique of organizing could be taught.

One of Fred's basic premises is that you must start with voter registration. Next, you have to get out the vote, and along with that is voter education, identifying the issues.

Fred always maintained that the politicians must work for you and so you should find their pressure points and put the heat on them. In our Community Service Organization we definitely had a strong political axis. I do not see that in some of the other organizations like UNIO and those in East Los Angeles. They are doing a lot of what I call safe work, not the really strong political work.

Look at the situation of the farm workers in California today. They are having trouble with Governor George Deukmejian's administration, which has severely cut the budget of the Agriculture Labor Relations Board. The ALRB has lost about fifty-five staff positions, so that the law on the books is no longer working for the farm workers. As a result, we must resort to such tactics as the grape boycott that we used in the past. And for that you really need a political base in your organization.

The most difficult task for mass organizations today is getting enough money to survive. In a labor organization you can get a dues check-off, the members all paying a percentage of their pay in dues to the union. That is how you function. With the dues from our members, we can organize and do all of the other things we must do.

Our Community Service Organization was a volunteer group. We had few staff people. Cesar was one of them. He was the executive director. I was a staff person. We had a total of three or four staff people for the organization to cover the states of California and Arizona.

The big question is, how can you have a strong community organization, one with political clout; that is politically independent? That has not been answered yet. Maybe this is why many community organizations just work in the safe areas. Since they depend upon foundations or individuals for their money, they cannot get too involved politically. They fear losing their tax-exempt status.

The need for mass organization is greater now than at any time since the nineteen-fifties. We have all these people coming into our cities from Mexico, from Central America, from Asia. Many people are on welfare. There are a lot of unemployed workers. But we do not have the resources to support the organizers and the organizations that are needed.

Still, the allegiance of the workers to the union remains strong. Of course, there is also a lot of fear, because people have to eat, and when it comes down to a union election, if the employer convinces the workers that they will not have a job if they vote for the union, then we lose their votes. They are loyal, but they are worried about their jobs.

"The need for mass organization is greater now than at any time since the nineteen-fifties. WE have all these people coming into our cities from Mexico, Central America, Asia. Many are on welfare. But we do not have enough resources."

We never win with a strike. There are always ten unemployed workers ready to take the job of the one who strikes. Large numbers of workers are now being brought in from Mexico, including Indians from Oaxaca who do not even speak Spanish. They are brought

in by a crew leader, who negotiates and speaks for them. It is hard to reach these workers. But those who have been here for a while are loyal to our organization.

We won an election at one ranch several years ago, but we still have no contract. The employers know that they can get away with that. They are no longer compelled to bargain in good faith. So, we have to go back in there and reorganize that work force and keep on trying to get a contract. It is a continual struggle.

We have now started what we call a high-tech campaign to counter this. We are using mass media, television, and direct-mail solicitation for help from the workers and other potential supporters.

We have been sending letters out all over the country telling people about our new grape boycott and some of the other boycotts. The response is incredible.

The basic problem in our first boycott was letting people know that we existed, and getting them to realize that a boycott could work. Even when we told them this was a consumer boycott, not, as they thought, a secondary boycott in which one union, sympathetic to another union on strike, refuses to do business with the struck employer, they were skeptical. When it worked, people were surprised. Now organizations use the consumer boycott routinely.

The success of our boycotts is due both to the memory of the New Deal tradition among older Americans and to the younger generation, which responds to Cesar's charismatic leadership. Cesar once spoke to a giant nuclear-freeze rally in Los Angeles — eighty thousand people — and he asked the audience to boycott Dole because we were having a struggle at one of Dole's plants. As a result, Dole settled within weeks.

I spoke at a nuclear-freeze rally at a time when we were having a lot of trouble with the California Legislature in Sacramento. A number of bills had been introduced which would change the laws so that we could not organize the workers, and which would change the Agriculture Labor Relations Law in ways unfavorable to the workers. We passed out leaflets to people — many of them young people — asking them to sign an authorization for us to send telegrams in their name to the legislators. We got close to seven hundred authorizations.

Recently we heard that the Teamsters Union might be coming back into Salinas. Within a week we organized a rally and a march of twenty-five thousand farm workers in the Salinas Valley.

We had another march in Calexico to commemorate the anniversary of the death of one of the farm workers who had been killed. Five thousand farm workers gathered there to march in his memory.

When Cesar was on the "Night of 100 Stars" on the ABC television network, many of the celebrities came up to him and said, "Cesar, if you need our help, call on us."

One of the questions we have had to face is how to make the transition from the early days when Cesar's charismatic leadership held everything together to the point today where the permanent structuring of the organization is our principal task.

I think it was at our 1977 convention that the farm workers passed a resolution stating that they wanted the organization to be run by farm workers. That sounds like an innocuous resolution. Of course, a farm workers' union should be run by farm workers. But because of the work in our first grape boycott, we had a lot of non-farm workers in our organization — people had come in to help us out.

However, from 1977 on, we took seriously the need for the farm workers themselves to take over the leadership. We recognized the need to train farm workers to become the organization's attorneys and accountants. That was not well received by non-farm workers in our organization, people who had spent much of their lives in the organization and had a vested interest in it.

We also had to think about how to organize a national union. Until then, we had divided the union into regional districts. For example, the director of our Oxnard district was in charge of all union activities in that district, including citrus, vegetables, strawberries, nurseries, whatever. The same was true in the Delano and Salinas districts. That was a big burden, because each director was always overwhelmed with problems.

So, Cesar met with Peter Drucker, the management expert. We got Drucker's book, *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*, and we had weeks and weeks of meetings on management, the tasks of the union, the responsibilities of the union. We then tried to develop a management structure that would enable us to go national. We couldn't stay just in California. Our people in Florida and Texas were complaining about the lack of union contracts in those states.

Today our organization is structured along crop lines. One person is in charge of the whole citrus division, which includes citrus in Florida, in Oxnard, in Porterville. That means he can concentrate on such matters as prices and marketing. He develops his own leadership and staff. He organizes his own consumer boycott. We have another person in charge of vegetables and another in charge of grapes.

Next, we began training farm workers in leadership, in learning how to be organizers and negotiators. That was extremely hard. Many farm workers may be effective organizers, but are not good at negotiating. For one thing, there is the language problem, always an obstacle in negotiations. So we started a school at our headquarters and taught a lot of farm workers how to speak English. We sent them back to the fields, and then invited some of them to come back to work on staff.

Another point: our United Farm Workers constitution prohibits paying wages to staff people. They work on a volunteer basis. Some joke about this; they say, if you want to work for the farm workers' union you must commit yourself to poverty for the rest of your life. The union pays our rent. Either we get food stamps or we get a small stipend for food. We get an allowance for clothes. If we are ill, the union pays our medical bills. We do have a medical insurance plan for our members, but not for the staff.

So, I guess that makes Cesar and all of our board members the poorest-paid union officers in the whole country. But it has always been our philosophy that you cannot help farm workers if you are much richer than they are.

We do have good cars, which we never had before, Volkswagen Rabbits. So we now have adequate transportation. But we get no money.

Some people ask us, are you losing the original community spirit and allegiance now that you have are becoming more conventional in developing management structures? I don't think we are. I mentioned the instant response we got when we put on that anti-Teamster rally in Salinas. The same kind of thing is happening all over the state. That is a test of the quality of our community spirit. I don't think we are losing that.

What we really need are the weapons to get contracts with the growers. Farm workers get frustrated when they win an election and then it takes them three, four, or five years to get a collective bargaining agreement from the grower. Right now we represent between fifty and sixty thousand farm workers in areas where we have had elections and have been

certified, and where the companies still refuse to bargain with us. And we can't make them bargain. The only thing we can do is organize a consumer boycott.

“Cesar Chavez is both a strong leader and a taskmaster. He demands production. He will say, don't tell me what you plan to do. Tell me what you've done.”

I was doing the bargaining with one company, and I started having house meetings with the new workers to explain to them the history of the company. The company immediately sent its goons and they threatened the workers with tire irons and chains. They said, if you go to any more meetings with Dolores Huerta, you will get beat up. Then the company transferred some of the tomato workers to the corn-cutting crew. They had never cut corn before, and some of them lost their fingers in accidents.

When I filed charges on this against the company, the charges were dismissed. However, even though the California State Supreme Court found the company guilty of not bargaining, they are still not bargaining. And the growers use this with the workers. They say, “The union won an election with this company or that, and they still do not have a contract. Your union is not effective in negotiating or bargaining for you.”

We think the boycott will bring growers to their senses. The boycott is what got us the Agriculture Labor Relations Law to begin with. At that time the growers knew that they were not going to be able to sell their grapes, so their attorneys got together with our attorneys and with Governor Jerry Brown's people, and they drafted the Agriculture Labor Relations Law.

The problem today is that the general counsel of the Agriculture Labor Relations Board is not prosecuting the employers when they engage in unfair labor practices against the workers. If we can just get complaints of unfair labor practices filed against such employers, they know they will have to go into a court hearing. A lot of employers will then say, forget it, we'll sign the contract.

When we talk about leadership — charismatic or not — we must deal with how decisions will be made. Should they be made in a centralized or in a more decentralized way? Members of our executive board are all elected at our convention. We establish the policy. Then the decisions on how to implement that policy are made at the regional or local level, and there is little interference from the executive board at that level.

Leadership is a creative quality. Cesar Chavez is an extremely creative person. He is a genius. The only thing that has held him back is that he does not have enough help in bringing some of his ideas to fruition. As Drucker says, you have to structure your organization in such a way that the creative potential of your people can be developed and put into operation, not stifled.

Cesar is both a strong leader and a taskmaster. He is terrible to work with. He is at work at five-thirty or six o'clock in the morning; everybody else comes in at eight o'clock. He works on into the evening. He works Saturdays and Sundays. On one occasion, Cesar wanted to have a meeting on New Year's Day, when everybody else had partied the night before.

He demands work, production. If it's not happening, he wants to know why. He wants to know what the results are. He will say, don't tell me about activities, or what you plan to do. Tell me what you've done.

One thing Cesar and I learned early on from Fred Ross is not to be afraid to make mistakes. You will make mistakes because you are always going into new territory. But when you make a mistake, tell your people you made a mistake.

I think people develop charisma in trying to reach people, in trying to get to them. Gradually and before you know it, you become a charismatic leader.

I have seen this happen to other people. When I first met Bobby Kennedy, I didn't think he was charismatic. But I met him again just before he was killed, and you could just feel the energy coming out of him. So, people develop charisma. I have seen it among our own farm workers leadership.

To me a leader is someone who does things for people and whom people will follow. It is not somebody who gets out there and imposes himself on people, and says, "Follow me." It has to be someone who goes out and produces for the workers.

Cesar is smart. He knew in Delano that we had to produce for the workers in order to get them to make a commitment to the organization. He is also opposed to doing things for workers without getting anything back from them. That was one of my problems. I had come from a middle-class background. When I worked with the Community Service Organization we had many service programs; we helped people, and helped people, and helped people. So when I went to Delano, Cesar said, "You are giving away your services to the workers, but you are not getting any commitments from them." He watched me closely, and he would not let me do anything for a worker unless that worker made a commitment to help build the union.

I have been asked whether being a woman has made it difficult for me in my exercise of leadership. For years I never thought about that. We were too busy in our organizing struggles. Now suddenly I am invited to speak here and there, the suggestion being that I am a symbol of the women's movement, or that I speak for Hispanic women. And that has been difficult. I am a sort of born-again feminist.

Today, I look around at my sisters who were leaders in the early days of the farm workers' movement. Some of them married organizers and now they are at home taking care of their babies. That makes me angry. I feel they should have stayed in the organization. A lot of these young women had seniority. They had been in the movement from the time they were seventeen or eighteen years old. They should be in leadership positions today. The energy of women is important.

Many of the basic foundations of our organization are things I fought for like the retirement village for the Filipino workers, our dues structure, our ranch committee structure, our collective bargaining agreement. These are all things that I developed.

I know that the history of our union would have been quite different had it not been for my involvement. So I am trying to get more of our women to hang in there.