

Dorothy Healey

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1:11:28 Ok this interview is Dorothy Healey and we're gonna talk about things that happened in the 30's. Um, from early in the 30's on up through 38, 39. You were out organizing in the fields. What was it like out in the fields in the 1930's?

11:42 It was rough uh, it was incredibly rough. Uh, living conditions of course were, were pretty terrible because you were living like the rest of the workers were which meant that most of the time you were either sleeping on the ground or sleeping on the floors of the headquarters or the benches. Uh, you were eating the same food which was very skimpy and, and not very nutritious. Uh, but most particularly you were always uh, being uh, aware of the fact that uh, uh, the growers with all of their enormous political power were uh, a constant menace to your life and security.

12:19 Um, I know your politically active and have been from an early age but what was it that drew you to the issues in the fields?

12:27 Well I originally started as a matter of fact in a cannery in San Jose in 1931. Uh, where I went down to work during the summer time. And after a strike there which was brutally broken by the, by the cannery owners uh, I moved to Los Angeles and in I guess really the most important uh, development then was that a group of Mexican workers from the Imperial Valley came in to the headquarters of the Young Communist League and uh,

told us that they'd been on strike uh, in the lettuce fields since uh, December and asked if we would come down and give some help that they needed uh, more help. I didn't particularly want to go but uh, finally I did go and with a coworker uh, Sally Hancock who later became an informer for the, for Hugh ??, for the House un-American Activities Committee and so that the Imperial Valley strike was probably the first major uh, agricultural strike I was in. Uh, and one that uh, without much question uh, played a very significant role in helping to influence and determine uh, what I would be doing from then on.

13:44 Later in the decade you were, you were active in the San Joaquin Valley and the cotton strikes in 33 and all the way up to 38.

13:50 Not, not, not the 1933 cotton strike. I was active in the 1938 cotton strike in Kern County.

13:57 Tell me a little bit about what that was like walking in to that situation, that was in Corchran?

14:01 I beg your pardon.

14:02 Around Corchran?

14:03 Around Corchran, Bakersfield, uh, Buttonwillow, uh, all the areas around there. Well it was, it was uh, I, I stayed in the camps for the migratory workers lived uh, slept on a bed with seven children. Uh, you know people would talk about uh, the lack of cleanliness uh, of farmworkers

and what they didn't realize a bar of soap costs as much money as, as a meal would cost and there was no facilities for, for cleaning except for washing, except for the irrigation ditch water that ran through that was used for everything else and just the minimum problems of, of cleanliness uh, became incredibly difficult. Uh, workers uh, they, I think they, they, they were paying eighty cents for, for a pound for cotton or something like that, I've forgotten the exact amount. Uh, and, and you couldn't, workers could never earn enough to sustain uh, in the most meager kind of, of living. Uh, you were followed constantly by police but I must say that Kern County wasn't as bad as the Imperial Valley had been. Uh, it was not as sealed off from the rest of the country as the Imperial Valley was. It was more subject to uh, uh, communication and media presence so that it didn't have the vigilante attacks that Imperial Valley had had.

15:38 Um, now when workers in the fields go out on strike the first thing that happens is they're red baited, the Communists are running. You were out there in 38, you were a Communist. Were they right to criticize you?

15:50 I, I never made any secret of the fact that I was a, a Communist as a matter of fact it was the first thing that I would announce when I'd come to an organizing meeting. And workers that they should know about it and if they disapproved they should let me know that too and I would leave. Workers didn't care what my politics were. All they wanted to know was could you help us organize? Could you help us gain a, a living wage? Could you help us gain decent working conditions. Uh, my politics were completely irrelevant to them. Uh, and as a matter of fact the important

thing and the thing that was always stressed and fought for was the immediate issues of the strike, of the workers. That was what was dominant in my life and in the union's life. As a matter of fact uh, uh, one of the investigating committees that the state set up, The Simon J. Lubin Soci, uh, investigating, it was a commissioner stated that the Red issue, the Communist issue was being deliberately used by the growers in order to hide the fact of their extraordinary oppression and exploitation of these workers. It was simply a convenient handle to uh, be able to avoid having scrutiny on what was, what they were doing to workers.

17:04 Now hindsight's almost twenty twenty but one of the things the people said in the sixties when they started to organize was their critique of early organizing was that people would come in, pull people out on strike and then leave and the workers would be disappointed. Was there any sense that you had to build a continuing organization in the field and that you had to be there the rest of the year and work with them and help them in other ways.

17:27 Well the fact is the workers weren't there the rest of the year. I mean uh, we, we traveled with the workers uh, where the workers migrated to there was a steady stream of migration from the Mexican boarder all the way up to Northern California to the, to what was called small fruit uh, uh, industry. Uh, but there was never a time when we quote abandoned the workers. Uh, we stayed with the workers uh, as long as the workers were there. The difficulty of course was and this was the major problem, the Achilles Heal of all our agr, our organizing in the 30's was the fact of the migratory workers uh, problem. Uh, the constant traveling, the constant

migration made it very difficult uh, to build a stable base that had any continuity to it. Uh, in hindsight I think many of us regretted that we hadn't concentrated on the very small cadre of workers that work year round in the, in the fields in order to maintain a base.

18:29 Now the other thing that was different for the 30's, between the 30's and the 60's was the 30's the country was in a depression so people were in much worse shape then weren't they?

18:40 Well yeah.

18:41 And it made them easier to organize but it was harder for them.

18:44 Well actually I'm not sure that's true that it was easier to organize in the 30's than the 60's because uh, the conditions of agricultural workers didn't change that much. Uh, the migratory agricultural worker has always been at the uh, lowest of the, of the totem pole economically and socially and politically. And I don't think you'd find a qualitative change in the conditions between the 30's and the 60's. There would be one enormous change is that is the change in the politics of the country between the 30's and the 60's. When we were organizing in the 30's uh, the power of the growers was unchecked uh, to form the vigilante squads that uh, made up American Legionnaires and bank clerks and whatnot in, in the small towns uh, extra legal violence that was uh, used against us. But in addition the open collusion of the highway, State Highway Patrol, of the governor's office, of, of the State Relief Administration, of, of all the agencies of government, uh, state, federal and local uh, could be used in the 30's in a, in

a united, combined way against the workers that was not as possible in the 60's. And that made an enormous difference in terms of the ability to organize and maintain organization. There was not the terror, the physical terror that was utilized in the 30's. I don't mean just, as an example, give the example of the State Relief Administration because this isn't a very well known fact but it was one of the most important problems uh, in the 30's particularly in the, in the mid, in late 30's. Uh, the, the State Relief Administration would cut workers off of relief, would refuse to give them relief unless they took the jobs at the growers wages which were always of course the, the starvation wages. If a worker refused or went on strike the worker couldn't get relief.

20:44 That's a pretty effective tool.

20:45 Yes.

20:47 Now the other thing was that the 30's was a turning point for labor because after the Wagner Act most of labor had the right to organize. But farmworkers didn't and did that figure in your thinking when you were organizing in 38, we're going out there but there's no government protection at all?

21:03 It made a great deal of difference. The contrast between, the difference between the, the uh, farmworkers being uh, eliminated from the provisions of the Wagner Labor Relations Act and cannery workers and shed workers being covered made all the difference in the world. Uh, you had absolutely no protection for the field workers. Uh, the shed workers and the

cannery workers were covered by the provisions of the board and therefore the, the ability to organize and to utilize the agencies of the federal government and state in some cases were incredibly different and made all the difference in the world in terms of, of organizing.

21:44 And in fact that was the, the ???? was pretty successful in the sheds and canneries, weren't they?

21:50 Well uh, I remember organizing a cannery in Los Angeles, the uh, California Canning Company uh, owned by a man named Shapiro, I remember uh, in 1938 and later the California Walnut Growers Association also in Los Angeles. And in each case the role of the National Labor Relations Board was decisive in terms of uh, forcing agreement. Although when I say it was decisive it must be understood in, in the fact that, that without the organized pressure of the workers, without their willingness to strike and stay united then the, the National Labor Relations Board would have been irrelevant. The people who depend solely on the government without organizing a rank and file pressure are.....

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30:02 We were just talking about the difference in organizing between the 30's and the 60's um, essentially the strikes, the organizing effort in the late 30's in the fields really didn't fail, didn't win. At that point looking to the future could you think of a way to make farm labor organizing work?

30:20 Well one qualification on whether the strikes in the 30's won uh, we didn't win formal victories in the sense of signed contracts but as the historic record shows we were able to force wages up uh, even though we never got credit for it but that was unimportant, what was important is that in a very slight way wages were forced up and at least uh, in the height of the depression we were, were able to prevent them being forced downward again. Uh, there were great lessons to be learned from our weaknesses and failures though. The most important that I've indicated was the not concentrating on year round workers to build a base. I think secondly uh, was uh, our our failure to build more alliances outside of the agricultural field, coalitions, alliances, support groups, with forces, with people, with churches, institutions, other unions, that would have been able to help. Because the, the ability of, of farmworkers by themselves to sustain an organization is very limited uh, and therefore the need for outside support is, is, is probably greater than any other industry.

31:32 I know I was reading about the Cal San strike where uh, where you had an effective boycott working in terms of forcing that issue and so, so you were using the same tools, right?

31:44 Well as a matter of fact we initiated something with that strike that has been used by other unions since and that was uh, we picketed the owners home in uh, Beverly Hills or Westwood, one of the areas in West L.A. uh, with signs saying you know what a, what a shame that he lives in this marvelous, wonderful home and won't pay his workers even the minimum wage. Uh, and that helped to force an end to the strike to, we got a union contract from it. Uh, but I would say that, that uh, that we didn't

have the resources as a union, we were a very small union. We didn't have the resources that would've allowed us to go on and, and, and capitalize on that uh, and build greater strength. But in addition, we then became a victim of the jurisdictional fights between the AFL-CIO uh, the Teamsters were much favored.

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32:43 Dorothy would you, let's talk a little bit about this idea that even if things don't succeed that there is a continuity, that people learn from that and they go on and that there is progress.

32:54 Uh, I think one of the most important lessons that, that I learned in this lifetime of activity was the, the fact that what appears to be a defeat on the surface, you may not win a contract uh, workers are scattered, you go to jail. But within that defeat there's also a sense of, of victory and that thousands of people have acquired a new consciousness, a new awareness, a new knowledge of the world in which they live. An awareness of the meaning of solidarity, that an injury to one is an injury to all. Uh, a, a, a hatred of, of racism. I, I can remember the biggest impression I had from, from those days of watching those white people coming in from Oklahoma and Arkansas and Texas, the people whom John Steinbeck called the Okies and the Arkies, coming in with all of their ingrown prejudices and hatred and learning in the course of the strikes and the struggles that they had more in common with that worker with the brown skin and the black skin than they had with the vigilantes with the white skin who were beating everybody

up. Uh, there was an awareness of the need of, of organization, that individually you couldn't do much but if you joined together with others you could go forward. And though you, you watched that it was like a pebble being thrown in to a river, you watched the ripples going out and in later generations I would see in the 60's the children of the workers whom I had been organizing in the 30's carrying on that same struggle.

34:34 So, so it does work in the end, right?

34:36 It did. There was a continuity that, that was acquired.

34:40 So let's, let's move on to the 60's um, give me a sense briefly of what did you think was different, why, why things could come together in the 60's.

34:51 I think that, that the 60's represented a, a turning point both in the uh, politics of California as well as in the, the uh, capacity of, of Cesar Chavez and his coworkers in organizing and stabilizing a union among migratory workers and among agricultural workers generally. In the first place the political change was significant, in that, that there was no longer the same uh, unholy alliance between the State Highway Patrol and the, and the growers and the district attorney and the judges and, and the, the whole, the whole combine that you had against you in the first, there was still, I assure you a lot of those same pressures but they it wasn't as, as correct, or direct. Secondly uh, the, the ability to organize vigilante squads uh, extra legal groups of men to beat up strikers and, and union organizers was no longer possible because such a spotlight of inquiry had been played on them

that, that they could no longer sustain it. The illegality of it was, was so opened. Um, but I think the other part was that I, I think uh, the United Farm Workers had a far more thoughtful and systematic and thought out strategy for organizing, based I'm sure on some of the experiences and lessons they'd learned from, from what had happened in the 30's and the 40's. Uh, it enabled them to develop a base. It enabled them to develop coalitions of supporters, of churches, of unions, of organizations and media support that was totally lacking in the 30's. So that I, I, I felt enormously excited and exhilarated by watching the progress that the workers made in, in the 60's with the United Farm Workers Union.

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36:56 Ok let's continue with what we were saying.

36:58 Well one of the big differences between the 30's and the 60's, in the 30's the attorneys who came down in to the Imperial Valley, Al Weiran (?) from the American Civil Liberties Union, Grover Johnson uh, Wilbur Breedan from Arizona, uh, were either kidnapped and, and taken out of the, the valley or jailed as both Grover Johnson and Wilbur Breedan were jailed. You didn't have that happen to the attorneys in the, in the 60's and I use that simply as an example of the changed political atmosphere that made one possible and the other impossible.

37:33 But, but apart from the objective conditions getting easier did you sense I know you said you spent time with Dolores, I don't know if you

met Cesar or talked to him but did you sense that there was something else some other intensity or power or direction that was a positive thing that.

37:51 No. (laughs)

37:53 It was just the time was right?

37:55 I think so. I know I, I, I.....

37:58 I guess the question, the question I have then is are we saying that you can only organize farmworkers in the 60's when the times are right? What about now when the times aren't right can you do it again?

38:10 That's a good question. Uh, well there is, there is the continuity that is present from the 60's to the 90's in the sense that, that the lessons that were learned in the 60's, that the farmworkers learned in the 60's are being put to good use now. The, the need to maintain a unified organization, the need to maintain a, a collegiality among your fellow organizers and, and uh, so forth I think are lessons that the union learned so that the fact that, there are still political obstacles in the way of the, of organizing, there's no question of that. Uh, and particularly not just in California uh, the Eastern shore of Maryland uh, Florida, you go anywhere with Agriculture and you're gonna find desperate, horrible, depraved conditions. But uh, so that, that problem still remains the same but I think that, that uh, again there is not, there is more opportunity, more latitude uh, for organizing, difficult and complicated as it is than it was in the earlier days uh, that doesn't mean that it will ever be easy. It uh, it is a, it is an industry that while the popular

opinion would have it you know you have these individual farmers struggling all by themselves, coping with the, the seasons and catastrophes and in reality of course most agriculture is dominated by a handful of corporations. And, and these corporations are not about to give up the ease with which they can exploit unskilled migratory workers. But uh, and, and what you see, well you see it again being echoed today uh, in the debate on immigration of what was said in the 30's. Uh, the Lubin Society uh, uh, documented, Simon J. Lubin documented a statement of one of the growers testifying for the States Legislature uh, that the reason they wanted uh, Mexican workers brought over and the border open, kept open was that they were, as soon as they were through with them they could deport them back to Mexico. Well today with all the immigration debate going on you see in the halls of Congress the same agricultural industry demanding their right to bring in Mexican workers as they need them and of course the ease with which they will then deport them again as soon as they're through with them. Uh, and, and a terrible, terrible sense sometimes one feels that that old saying, *the more things change, the more they stay the same* remains true for agricultural workers no matter what the decade.

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41:00 Now I know that you weren't involved in farm labor organizing in the 60's and 70's but you followed what was going on and one of the, at a certain point that farmworkers really seemed to lose their vitality and their strength and they weren't winning anymore and, and one of the frequent criticize, criticisms was the issue of union democracy, that they, they weren't

effective because they didn't let workers participate. Does that seem reasonable?

41:26 Well I, I, I'm not so sure that the decline in the fortunes of the farmworkers in the 60's was because the union wasn't democratic enough. Uh, that may have validity to it I don't know but what I did get the distinct awareness of was the uh, amount of, of interunion dissidence that there was present. Uh, I, I had the feeling that the union was centering too much, you can't have any organization that is built solely around one individual and expect that organization to retain all of the flowering of democratic uh, life. Uh, because willy nilly, whether the individual wants it or not the individual starts to feel, first of all that the individual is above reproach and is infallible and, and, and can't be challenged. Uh, and that may be done in the best of intentions with the feeling that the individual after all knows best what's best for the, but you can't be father to a union or a mother, as the case may be, you've got to be part of something. And I had the feeling in the 60's that the, the uh, adoration circle around Cesar Chavez tended to block off the type of participation uh, that was absolutely, is absolutely necessary for any organization to flourish uh, it was not there. Uh, it may, I may have exaggerated the feeling about it because I wasn't there, but.....

43:00 But do you think this is a problem unique to the farmworkers, or to all organizations?

43:03 To all organizations. Any organization where you have it centered, any organization that centers around uh, one individual as being absolutely in, you know important without that org, that individual nothing

can go on. Any organization is going to suffer that, that, the impact of that. You can't live, you can't flourish with that type of, of idolatry.

43:28 Now during the 80's which was the period when the farmworkers wasn't particularly effective, it was a period where labor itself was not doing well. Is it, is it fair to hold the farmworkers to a higher standard than the rest of labor?

43:41 I don't think that the problems that the rest of labor was suffering uh, were uh, uh, were as, as felt by, by the farmworkers. I'm thinking now of the results of, the 80's was really the, the decade that brought in the worst anti-union bashing that corporations had indulged in since the 30's. Uh, and certainly the farmworkers had some effect from that, but I think that, that over and above that general union bashing decade were the particular problems that the farmworkers had that were unique to that union.

44:19 And also the agricultural industry, the fact that the law what they thought was going to save them turned sour.

44:25 Exactly. No problem, no question of it. And, and of course probably the most saddest part of what happened to the farmworkers was not of their doing. It was the fact that, that uh, with the uh, election of, of a new state government uh, the laws as had protected the farmworkers union and had given them, not protected them but given them equal access at least to the protection of law. The law wasn't changed but the appointment of judges and, and, and hearing examiners and so forth which changed, was drastically

changed and the, the, that which had been an enormous benefit to the union became simply a great detriment.

45:08 Um, let's switch gears a little bit and, and give me your thoughts about Cesar himself. Was he someone who really contributed something? How should we think of him now that he's gone?

45:19 I think Cesar Chavez was, was, was a, a giant. I think he had extraordinary capacity, extraordinary ability, uh, as an organizer. He had a that, that magical quality called charisma, which can't be defined and I guess that's why it's charisma that uh, brought about the, the huge uh, wave of support and, and solidarity with him. Uh, he had his will however. A fact that as a, he was a human being. That that which was also the most important and dominant feature that was so im, so uh, necessary to his success also helped to diminish him. Uh, because he started to believe himself all that the, his followers thought. That he was unique. That he was indispensable. That he was a mission and in believing in that uh, I think he made unnecessary uh, problems within the union by firing people. I particularly I'm thinking of some of the Filipino leaders who had helped to organize the union in the very first place, who were there at the beginning. Uh, and I think it led to needless uh, fraternal strife. Uh, but having said that uh, I would say that, that overall the record and the contribution of the man uh, was a heroic one and one that should be nurtured and, and encouraged.

47:03 So I mean is it possible to, to take good things from, from the thing without idealizing him?

47:10 It's a difficult thing. It's always difficult to be critical of that which is, which is admirable. Uh, and yet it's a very necessary part of life to be able to understand, to grasp what is positive, what is heroic, what is real. And at the same time recognize that there is much that is unheroic within that same either individual or event.

47:36 So what do you, what do you see looking to the future? Do you think those lessons can be learned and, and built on again?

47:43 Well sometimes I think I agree with Hagle that the only thing one learns from history is that nothing can be learned from history but at other times I feel more optimistic. That, that new generations can stand on our shoulders. They don't have to do the same things, repeat the same things. They can if they, if all understand what is present in, in continuity in history can extract that which is most essential for growth and at least make their own mistakes don't repeat ours. (laughs)

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