

DOLORES HUERTA

TAPE 29, CR 19, SR 9, TC 15:00:00

15:07:45 This is an interview with Dolores Huerta on June 9, 1995 in La Paz. Before we start the interview, can you say an establishing line that we'll need...

15:07:55 I was born in Dawson, New Mexico in 1930.

15:08:00 Let's start out talking about things that happened when you were young, that shaped who you are.

15:08:50 Um...I don't know where to start. I think probably when I was young I was, like, my mother always kind of pushed me to be active in different things. I was a girl scout from the time I was 8 to the time I was 18. I used to like to read a lot. And when you're young and you read you always read about the hero and the evil people. And when I became a teenager I especially was subjected to racial discrimination, you know once you started going to high school, when you started becoming aware of the injustices that occur when your friends get arrested and you see other people doing worse than they do and they don't get arrested, and seeing how the school discriminated against the kids of color and the poor white kids also. And the rich kids always got really special treatment in our high school. So I think that's when I first started being aware of injustices that happen. My mother was always, she was a very religious person, and always very charitable individual. She always was helping people whenever she could. We always had people staying at our house, different people that needed a place to stay that were having some hardship or the other, so our culture growing up with my mother was that you were

supposed to help people if you could, that that was part of being a human being, is if there was any way that you could help someone you did that. And the other thing is that you were not supposed to talk about what you did because if you did then that removed the grace for that good deed. I guess the word in Spanish is “servicial.” You’re supposed to be of service to others in every way that you can, so I guess that would probably be my strongest influence, because when you’re raised with that then you would always look for ways that you could help people. And then of course being in the Girl Scouts also kind of reinforced that. And I was active in the church also, I sang in the choir, active in the church organizations. And, so I guess my life was sort of, I was an activist, growing up as an activist. When I was growing up farmworkers were actually getting paid pretty good wages during the War years.

END OF CAMERA ROLL 19

CR 20, SR 9

15:11:20 So we were talking about growing up in Stockton and how being of service was part of what you got from your family values. How did you make the leap from that to actually dedicating your life to service, how did you start on the road to being an organizer?

15:11:42 Well, as I said before I was kind of, I belonged to church groups and in Stockton there were other organizations I belonged to. One of the groups was a group of women who would always have these dances and then they would give charity baskets out, you know, for Thanksgiving and Christmas and I just always felt that there should be more. So when I met Fred Ross and he started about the...oh, before that I had organized youth groups, I had organized a couple of teenage groups, just so that we would have some place to go without the police

harrassing us, and I had gotten into it with some of the local city officials, or actually, business people gave us a place and gotten other people so that we could...we would have table tennis and have a juke box for dancing and stuff of this nature. So I was always organizing people to do things, and the police shut down our youth center because they didn't want to see Chicanos and African Americans and whites and Filipinos hanging around together, so they closed it down, for no reason, that was the only reason, because we never had any alcohol or anything like that.

15:12:53 It's 1956 when this Anglo comes to town. Do you remember meeting Fred?

15:12:58 Um, so, since I was sort of an activist I was also belonged to, I was always doing things in the community, you know what I mean? I was always organizing, belonging to different organizations that were doing things. I belonged to a group where we organized the Comision Honorifica which organized the 15th of September and 5 de mayo celebrations. So I already had a reputation as an activist. So when Fred Ross came to Stockton and he was organizing CSO then I was one of the people that was invited to that meeting, to a house meeting and that's where I met Fred. Of course when Fred spelled out what CSO could do or what people could do it they got together, and this is of course something I had been looking for all my life. I had been involved in a lot of different organizations to try to do something for the community but they never did as much as I thought should be done. So it very, for me it was very, when Fred showed us pictures of people in Los Angeles that had come together that had organized, that had fought the police and won, that had built health clinics, that had gotten people elected to

office I just felt like I had found a pot of gold! If organizing could make this happen, then this is definitely something that I want to be a part of.

15:14:23     When did you first hear about Cesar?

15:14:27     Well, Fred would always tell us about this great organizer named Cesar Chavez, right, and so of course, he was like the example, Fred would always...we were organizing our community and we started doing voter registration and of course so Fred would give us reports of things that were happening in other CSO chapters, different fights that different chapters were in. The Los Angeles chapter, and then he'd always mention Cesar. Because Cesar and Fred Ross were the only two paid staff of the CSO, and so he would always give us reports about what Cesar was doing, what he was doing in the San Jose area. So we knew him to be a really great organizer, because this is the way that Fred always described him.

15:15:08     And did he come over and was there some sort of personal contact?

15:15:12     No, I didn't meet Cesar for a long time, until after we already had our chapter in Stockton organized and we were already doing our voter registration drive, and then Cesar was working I believe in Dakota or in San Jose, and they were going to be having the Oakland chapter of CSO. I remember it was the Oakland chapter they were organizing, they were going to have a dance, and so we went over to meet, they were having some kind of a fundraiser or something so we went over to, the group from Stockton went over there and that's where we met Cesar. But, it was like Fred Ross introduced him to us and then he disappeared. I mean, we saw him for about five seconds. "This is Cesar Chavez," "Hello," and

then he was gone. Cesar was very shy then, and he didn't, at least with people that he didn't know I guess. But later on when I saw him at various conventions he always gave a very impressive report and then sat down and that was the end of Cesar. He would just give a very impressive report. So it was actually from the time I started CSO, it was like a couple of years before I really got to know Cesar well. Because he was very private, and just wouldn't talk to anybody. I mean, at least not talk to us.

15:16:15 Towards the end of the decade there's a move toward specifically organizing farmworkers. I suppose you were still involved with CSO but you also got involved with that first [?].

15:16:31 Oh, better than that. I organized the two organizations, one of them was the agricultural worker's association, and the CSO, what we had done was set up, with Ernesto Galarza...Oh, let me back this up. We set up farm labor committees to deal with the problems of the farmworkers, especially during the braceros, they had the braceros in those days, and Ernesto Galarza had been assigned, I guess he got some money from the meat cutters' union, to organize farmworkers. So Fred Ross brought Ernesto Galarza around to every CSO chapter, and then we were supposed to organize farmworkers for Ernesto Galarza. So our chapter in Stockton organized, and I was like the head of the committee, we organized a group of farmworkers which we turned over to the meat cutters union. But right after we turned them over then they asked us not to come back to the meetings any more. And then the group dissolved. So after that I again started organizing another group called the AWA, the Agricultural Workers' Association, and that one became a very very large group, and I had... 15:17:24 I was organizing it and my then-husband Ventura Huerta helped me and my brother

Marshall. And so we went door to door, I went to speak in all of the black churches, went to where all of the white farmworkers lived, so we got a really really large group together. I went and was looking for a Filipino leader 18:04

and everybody kept telling me about Larry Itliong, so I went and I spoke to Larry Itliong to see if he would help us and he said he would. So we really organized a very very large group of farmworkers, and once we had them all organized, then we contacted the AFL-CIO and they sent a representative out. And that was what became AWOC. The group that we organized, which was the Agricultural Worker's Association, called AWA. And then when they were going to officially, the AFL-CIO, after coming to our meeting and seeing how many people we had organized, then they decided to hire an organizer and to appropriate some money, and that became the Agricultural Workers' Organizing Committee. And the people, I then became the secretary of AWOC and was also a staff person, and Norman Smith was sent out to be the director of it, and the people that they hired were the people that I recommended, and of course Larry Itliong was one of the people I recommended. But the other organizers were also 15:19:08

people I recommended. Because they didn't really know anybody, because it was, it came out of the group that we had organized out of the AWA group. And that went along pretty well at the beginning. We would send out, invite people to the meeting, but then they hired a guy named [Oleg Cranach?] who decided that that wasn't the way to do it. There were a couple of big differences of opinion that we had. The first disagreement was that they decided to start sending out postcards to invite people to the meetings. So the first couple of meetings I just took the machine home and sent the postcards out from my home, to make sure that the people came to the meeting. But then they decided no, that they weren't going to do that anymore. The second decision that they made was that they were going to start working with labor contractors. What they do is like a family would go out

there and they would take a dollar from each family, which was supposed to be “dues,” right, but they weren’t getting any kind of benefits and of course the workers hated the labor contractors. But I walked into the office one day, and they had all these labor contractors, all of these crooks in the union office, and I got very upset about it, right? Then the other thing that finally, I decided I wasn’t going to hang, was not going to continue to be the secretary or a staff person of the AWOC is that I was trying to get them to bring Cesar up, because Cesar had been very successful in having 15:20:40 some strikes with the braceros in the Oxnard area, and so that Cesar could come up and just give everybody the guidance on the organizing that he was doing in Oxnard, and they didn’t want to. And the reason they didn’t want to is because they were just very threatened and very jealous of what Cesar was doing. And so I couldn’t get any support from Galarza or Father McDonnell or any of the other people, Norman Smith, the other people that were on the committee. None of them would support me on that. So that’s when I decided to leave, because I felt that it wasn’t going to go anywhere at that point. The meetings were getting smaller, they were no longer really interested in organizing the workers. What they were doing is they were deducting dues to send to the AFL-CIO or to make it look like they had some kind of organization, but it was really coercion because the labor contractors were deducting the dues and the workers had no say over it.

15:21:24 But even then when you tried to work with AWOC, did you have a sense that Cesar was on the right track? That there was another way to organize farmworkers, similar to the way you had been?

15:21:40 Well, the way that Cesar and I both worked in organizing farmworkers was the way that we had been taught by Fred Ross, to organize from

the bottom up, through house meetings to get people together, to keep people participating, and that's what Cesar was doing, and what AWOC was doing was just exactly the opposite, they were just going to work through the foreman. Now, in the Filipino community, I have to modify this because among the Filipinos it worked differently. The Fillipino crew leaders worked differently than the other labor contractors because they would negotiate for the workers, they set up their own kitchens, so the Filipino crew leaders were more like representatives of the workers, right, and they had a whole different type of relationship than say the latino labor contractors or the white labor contractors.

END OF CAMERA ROLL 20

TAPE 31, CR 21, SR 9, TC 16:00:00

16:00:10 Larry had operated as a crew leader and so that, what they were trying to do with AWOC probably worked out good with the Filipino crews because they did have some kind of representation through the crew leader system, which is very different from the Latinos or the whites. So Larry and I, Larry Itliong and I kept our relationship going, since I'm the one that had first gotten him into help us organize AWA and also got the AWOC to hire him, so we kept our relationship strong, and we kept in CSO, I continued working for CSO and continued to help farmworkers, and then when we started arguing in the National Farmworkers Association Larry and I kept our communications always strong. And that was very important, because when it came down to the time of merger between our independent union and AWOC it was Larry and I who were able to bridge that gap. Although Al Green, who later on replaced Norman Smith, was very hostile to Cesar and myself. It was that relationship that I had with Larry that, we kept that going. Larry by the way had also joined CSO, or had to join CSO because our



initial organizing of AWA was primarily started with CSO members, so he was also a member of CSO.

16:01:40 Let's get to when the break came in 1962. I know that Cesar was head of CSO...

16:02:04 Oh no, he was a director, he wasn't an elected official.

16:02:10 At what point did that start to coalesce, where the goal was to organize farmworkers?

16:02:18 Well, Cesar had been working on organizing farmworkers and I was, that was what I had been doing in Stockton, organizing farmworkers, and that was like my big priority and that was his big priority, and he had also organized a large group of farmworkers in Oxnard, which he turned over to the packing house workers union, and that organization had the same fate at the groups that I had organized in Stockton. When we turned them over they dissolved. So we both had tried to work within the AFL-CIO structure at that time, and saw that it wasn't going to make it, so at that point...So then what we were working on was to start organizing farmworkers, but to do it under the CSO, and to do like a pilot project, and Cesar was going to do that in Oxnard. He didn't want CSO to pay him though; what he wanted to do was to work out some procedure where the workers would have to pay him, sort of like a dues structure. But it would be under the auspices of CSO. And that's what we thought was going to happen. We met with the whole executive board of the CSO and...well, I shouldn't say the whole executive board, but at least the people that were in California, and they approved the project. Olinsky came out and he thought it was a good idea. Of course Fred Ross was

totally with Cesar and myself. We kept planning how we're going to do this, and but then when we went to the convention, people like Tony Rios who was then the president of CSO and they didn't support us. In fact it was the opposite. They talked against it at the convention, and organized against it. So when the vote came for the CSO to support this pilot project to form a union, it was voted down at the convention. And at that point that's when Cesar got up and left. He resigned. And he stood up...

16:04:19 Did you know that that was the option there, that if they didn't go through Cesar was ready to leave?

16:04:22 Oh, right. No, he had already said if the CSO doesn't [NOISE]  
[SLATE]

16:04:32 Let's talk a little more about the convention.

16:04:42 Yeah, Cesar had already decided that if the convention was not going to support our plan then we were going to do it without the CSO, that was... The decision had been made that we were going to start a union. And the initial plan was we'll do it under CSO. But then also that if CSO did not approve it, then we would do it without them. So, when we went to the convention and the officers actually spoke against, Tony Rios spoke against the project, and the delegates  
05:22 voted it down, of course we were really hurt and disappointed. Very hurt and very disappointed, because we thought that we might be able to get them to approve it. But nevertheless... because we knew it would be a lot harder doing it without CSO, because CSO already had a very favorable reputation throughout the state, a lot of political backing. The other labor unions all backed CSO, the religious groups, a lot of the politicians because we were very active politically.

We had passed some major legislation. And so it was a big disappointment. But looking back it was probably the best thing that ever happened. So at that convention after they voted the project down, then Cesar got up and he resigned. And of course nobody believed him. He got up and said, “I just want to submit my resignation.” And Tony Rios took the podium and said, “Of course, we’re not going to accept his resignation,” right? And then delegates got up from the floor and they said, “No, we don’t accept his resignation.” I mean, what could they do? And Cesar never said another word. He never said why. It was kind of, a very significant day.

16:06:35 You talked about CSO having had all that support, including church support. Was there any indication that if you left and worked independently that there would be church support?

16:06:52 No, there wasn’t. The decision that we made is that we would work very quietly until we built our base of farmworkers before we would even go to the outside. So the only persons from the outside that were helping us were Fred Ross and my father. He used to send us money. And Cesar didn’t solicit money either. There was a woman in Oxnard that wanted to give Cesar a big amount of money, but Cesar didn’t want to take it because he felt that the money had to come from the workers, because it had to be a bonafide, a union had to come from the bottom. So he really didn’t solicit any outside help. The one—interestingly enough, for the record—that Fred asked Olinsky to help, and Olinsky refused. And Fred was very hurt by that and he told Olinsky, and I was with him when he asked him, he said, “Saul, you’ve supported everything from the Civil War in Spain to all of these other organizations and you mean you’re not going to support Cesar?” And Olinsky said, “No,” he said, “because it’s never going to...” he indicated it was

going to be a failed project, that it was never going to be successful. So I guess if you look around at who had faith in what was going to happen, Fred Ross was the only one who had the faith.

16:08:10 Fred was a pretty key individual, wasn't he, in both your life and Cesar's life?

16:08:15 Yeah. At the beginning though, Fred really was involved, at the very beginning he didn't come back into the picture because he took a job in Rochester, New York, I believe it was, one of the universities there, to teach organizing. So the contact that we had with Fred was mostly through correspondence or he would, the contribution that he gave every month.

16:08:40 When you look at his contribution over his whole lifetime...

16:08:42 Then Fred came back into the...when he came back in was after the first march to Sacramento in 1966, when we marched to Sacramento and then we got our first contract with Shenley, and then Fred flew out at the end of the march and then Cesar met with him and asked him to come and start working with us. But of course, also, we had no money, so we couldn't pay Fred at the beginning. We didn't have any money at all. And we were just barely living on the little bit that we could get. Then by the time we had that first march to Sacramento then we were already having talks to merge with the AFL-CIO.

16:09:19 Let's talk about that early period from 1962 to 1966, and what it took for you to become an organizer. What you did was a relatively unusual thing for a Mexican American woman. Talk about your role as a woman in this process.

16:09:54 Well, I guess going back again to CSO, you know what I mean, using that community organizing structure, where people from the community can become activists. My mother was very active in CSO and I was very active. I got my aunts involved. You wanted to get everybody to help. So that there were a lot of women who were involved as being activists in CSO. When I decided to work full-time, then that was a little difficult because I had been working as a teacher, and people thought I was a little looney, because I had, I was also going through a divorce, and I had seven children and was going to quit my job teaching to come to organize the union, so people thought that was a little strange. I got a lot of pressure not to do that, that I shouldn't do that.

16:10:50 You're a modest person I think, but you're a very unique person as a woman to achieve that position of leadership.

16:11:00 Well, I think I was very fortunate, again, because I was raised by my mother, my mother had always been a leader, she was  
END OF CAMERA ROLL 21

TAKE 5, CAMERA ROLL 22, SR 10

16:11:22 So, you were saying that coming from the way you were raised it wasn't so unusual for you to take a leadership role.

16:11:26 No, because my mother was the dominant person in our family. She had a restaurant that she ran, it was her business. Then she had a hotel which she ran. I mean, she's the one that gave the order. In CSO she was very active and she

always won all the prizes for membership, for voter registration. She initiated a lot of projects in the community, so she was seen as a leader, and she always pushed me into doing things, she always had me doing something. Unfortunately I didn't get the other gifts that she had, which were her homemaking skills, right? Because she always had me out there doing things. So to me it was a very natural role. It was not the usual traditional Mexican role. Also, my family was from New Mexico. They had been there for many generations and very active in politics, etcetera, so it was kind of a different upbringing than what people think of as a traditional Mexican American or Mexican upbringing.

16:12:30 But those years from 1962 to 1965 were pretty difficult years, right?

16:12:40 Well, they were difficult because... They were personally extremely difficult because I had seven children, I was a divorcee, and there was no money. So in that respect it was very difficult. But it was good because I knew what hunger was, I knew what it was to worry about what I was going to feed my children every day. We literally had oatmeal and beans for months at a time. Helen's sisters Teresa and Peta would go get surplus commodities for both Cesar and myself, because we were like paying each other like about 30, 35 dollars a week, and Cesar for his children, his 8 kids and me for my 7 children. I knew what it was like to send my kids to school with shoes that had holes in the rain. So it was a very very hard time for us. But again, this is what farmworker families go through every day of their lives. And knowing that, it made it possible to survive those years when we were first organizing. And I remember when I made the decision that I was going to do it, the next morning somebody left a big box of groceries on my front porch in Stockton, and I thought that was just like a sign to

me. And I was worried that I wasn't going to be able to, I didn't have a coat for that winter, and somebody gave me about 5 coats, so I had coats to give away.

TAKE 6

16:14:17 OK, we're almost getting up to 1965. One time when you between 1962 and '65 you were sick in the hospital, and you wrote Cesar and Helen a letter apologizing for being sick. What moved you to write a letter like that?

16:14:37 Well, I was supposed to be coming out to Delano in July, and then I got this, I got very sick and they told me that I had to have a complete hysterectomy, which was then going to put me out of commission for another couple of months. So I felt really bad because I knew that Cesar was depending on me to come, we were going to start the newspaper, we were going to start other projects and...I was organizing up in the Northern part of the state but we were getting members and what have you, and just keeping up with the membership, the administrative work was getting to be too much for Cesar. And so I just felt really bad that I wasn't going to be able to come and help out. Luckily I never had that operation, and that's another story, so I was able to come up after all. But at first I thought I wasn't going to be able to make it.

16:15:28 So by 1965 you were in Delano?

16:15:30 No, I came out in '64. I had been organizing members for the union, and I was also doing the lobbying in Sacramento, that's why I was staying in Stockton. But I was having house meetings and organizing members in Stockton. My area was San Joaquin County, Stanislaus County, and Merced County, the three northern counties were my area. And Cesar was doing Kern, Tulare, and

Fresno, and Kings County. So what we would do is we would go and leaflet all the neighborhoods. I would take my kids to leaflet, and Cesar was doing the same thing with his kids. These were our crews, the children, they were the ones that were doing the leafletting door to door about the union. Then we were also signing people up as members, and also putting out the [macreado?].

16:16:33 There's another letter, I think you wrote to Cesar at one point, you went to an AWOC meeting where they were taking a strike vote and a woman came up to you afterwards and said, "I want to join the AFWA, you're the group that doesn't strike." So obviously you weren't thinking about going into a grape strike at that point.

16:16:45 Well, I was already in Delano when that happened. Because as I mentioned to you before Larry and I had kept this relationship and always communicated with each other, so that when they were going to have, well, there had been a strike in Coachella with Filipino workers in the Coachella Valley, and they'd gotten a wage increase, and so naturally when the workers came to Delano, then they wanted to do the same thing again. They wanted to have a strike. And so when they had a strike meeting, then Larry asked me to go to the strike and in our plan that we had, we did not want to strike. We wanted to organize a very large base. In fact, our plan was to organize the whole San Joaquin Valley before we ever had a strike. And so, we were very concerned about what might happen if the Filipino workers went on strike. And since they had the crew leader organization that I mentioned earlier, they were all organized through the crew leaders. So basically it was going to be the crew leaders that were going to pull everybody out, pull all the Filipinos out. And we were concerned because we also were concerned that they would start the strike and then it would be, they wouldn't follow through



on it, that it would be abandoned. So we were very worried about what was going to happen. The other thing is, we had no money. We had like \$70 in our treasury I think. Because the money that we used to collect in dues, half of that money had to go for an insurance program that we had. We collected \$3.50 a month, and half of the money went to pay for death benefit insurance for the workers. And we were also building up the credit union. We had the credit union already, which we had organized in 1963, so we were building a base, and on services that we would give to the members, and the credit union, and our dues base.

16:18:29 So, looking back it's clear that September, 1965 was a really historic moment. But did you have a sense then of how important it was going to be?

16:18:37 Oh, we knew. We knew it was going to be very important. First of all...

16:18:44 We knew that the grape strike was going to be a very decisive moment. But another thing too, is that before we started the union, we had carefully studied what had happened in the past, and what had happened in the past of course was that there were always strikes in the fields, and the workers would strike, and especially when outside organizers came in, and then they would leave and the workers then would get blacklisted and they would be left worse off than what they were before. So we didn't go into the organizing with the intention of trying to build a union through strikes. Because we already knew that that had failed. This is why we were using a whole other approach, which was the community organizing approach that we had in the CSO, is to build a strong base of workers through services and through the dues base, and our credit union. And eventually the newspapers, El Mal Criado.

16:19:33 And then when the strike started I guess you realized soon that it had to be a different kind of strike.

16:19:35 When the strike started, and all the workers came out, the strike started on September the 8th and it lasted the whole week, and of course what happened is that the growers used such brutality against the Filipino workers by, they shut out the lights in the bunkhouses, they shut off their gas, their lights, some of them were even barricaded so they couldn't leave, and some of the Filipinos were beaten up, and all these stories started coming out. So then we knew that we had to support it, and we had a big strike meeting. First we had our own meeting, to decide whether we would strike or not, and I always tell a story about Helen, because [?] we got to Helen, of course Cesar was worried about what she would think because of all the kids, and when he got to Helen, she said "Well, what are we? Aren't we a union? That's what we're a union for, right?" And so there was no question. Of course, her sister Peta was working out in the fields, and Helen herself, she was supporting the organization, especially their immediate family, by going out to work in the grapes every day. So she had a double job, because she'd go out and work in the fields and have to come home and do the housework and help with the union work also.

16:20:53 When we look at what happened with the grape strike, there are a couple of remarkable differences from normal strikes. Talk about how the teatro evolved, and how the union decided to use culture and music and all those things.

16:21:08 Well, first of all, going back to the grape strike, had the NFWA, the National Farmworkers Association, had we not joined in that strike, then it would

have failed. Because once we came into the strike we just took over the leadership of the strike, and we merged the two organizations. Of course, Al Green was very reluctant to do that at first, but he was kind of forced into it by...he didn't want to do it, but he was finally forced into it. But the Filipino workers and us started working together almost immediately after the strike started.

16:21:41 So, the idea of the culture and the songs and what have you, in fact, I was speaking at San Jose State and Luis Valdez came up to me and he asked me did I think that they would like to have a teatro in Delano. And so I told him, "Oh, there's a caravan going down from San Jose State, why don't you come on down? Then we can talk about it when you get down there." So we got very excited about it, so when he came down, we got some of the farmworkers together and they did an acto, and once they got it together then I called Cesar over to come and see it, and of course he thought it was great, and so that was the birth of the Teatro Campesino. But I'm the one that got Luis to come, so I always feel kind of good about that.

END OF CAMERA ROLL 22

TAPE 33, CR 23, SR 10, TC 17:00:00

17:00:07 Let's switch gears from the story of the strike to your role in it. In 1966, during the march, Cesar got a call from Shenley that they wanted to negotiate...you all of a sudden became the union's first negotiator, which was again an unusual role for you to play. What did it mean for you to negotiate that first contract?

17:00:32 Well, I think that the reason that Cesar asked me to be the negotiator for the union is because I had also done all the legislative work. I'm the one that did the lobbying to get the pension for the non-citizens, disability insurance for the farmworkers, drivers licenses in Spanish, I had done all of that lobbying work for CSO and then also later on for the union, and so I think he felt that that experience...I'm kind of prejudging or judging why he made that decision to put me in charge of negotiations. So what I did is, right away I talked with all the big labor leaders like Lou Goldblatt from the Longshoremen's union, other people from the carpenter's union, people that I knew, and talked to them about what is  
17:01:13 negotiations, what do you do. I got copies of different labor union agreements and started picking out what I thought would apply to farmworkers, and then started getting the farmworkers together to, so we could write the proposals. And so when we met with Shenley for the first negotiations I had the contract completely written. And Cesar was surprised—he was shocked, because he thought that the first meeting was going to be just like a get-together meeting. And Bill Kircher didn't want us to sign that first contract because it was the National Farmworkers' Association. It was not AFL-CIO. But I already had the contract all written, and Cesar was just like, totally shocked that I had the contract already done and working together with a committee we had already formulated the whole agreement, so when we had our first meeting I had the whole complete proposal to give them. And everybody was stunned that we had it  
17:02:12 ready. And that was really fun because we took the workers with us and we were also dealing with DiGiorgio and the first word out of Korshak, who was the person who had been assigned by Shenley to negotiate with us, he was a big shot labor fixer from Chicago, and he said, "Well, we've got deGiorgio, we want to wait until we see what happens with DiGiorgio before we sign a contract." And then one of the workers, Daniel Sanchez said to him, "We don't work for DiGiorgio, we work for

Shenley. We want you to negotiate with us.” And the company representatives from the local area from Delano were extremely conservative, extremely negative, so what Korshak did is that he left them in one room, and we went over and negotiated the contract in another room. And so our first agreement was a recognition agreement, but it included the hiring hall, it included the wages, and some of the key provisions. It was a very small recognition agreement, with the time to negotiate the rest of the contract. And, so this is what we started with. But since I already had a contract written, I administered the first contract, I ran the hiring hall, and pretty much went out there and put into effect, implemented what I had written up as a contract. And eventually got the entire contract negotiated.

17:03:36 When you read the accounts of grower-farmworker negotiations, the accounts focus sometimes more on the style than the actual contract language. It was a different approach to negotiating, wasn't it?

17:03:56 Right, because we involved the workers from the very first step of writing the proposals and...And our contracts were mostly very good. If you look at that very first contract that we had, we had extremely strong protections for the workers. In fact, we had protections for the workers in those contracts that we don't have today in our later agreements. But the companies literally cannot do anything without negotiating with the union. They couldn't subcontract, workers got paid call time, despite whatever the weather was, we had rest periods for the workers, a lot of things that we had in that contract. In fact, Phil Burton, when he was in Congress told me that I got more in the first contract for farmworkers than he had in all of his years as a legislator.

17:04:41 Later you moved back into the political arena. Talk a bit about the 1968 elections and Bobby Kennedy and what that meant to the union.

17:04:55 Well, in CSO, this is what CSO was, it was a civic action organization, so the first program that we did was to go do voter registration and then to get out the vote. We did it on a non-partisan basis. In CSO we helped many democrats get elected to office because we registered the people in the Spanish-speaking community and then got them out to vote. So all of that CSO experience really helped in terms of the union. So when Bobby Kennedy was running in '68 and, first of all when he came, when Cesar ended that first fast and he saw that everybody was saying Kennedy for President, he made the decision after being in Delano with all of those thousands of farmworkers that he was going to run for the Presidency. That's when he made his decision. And they had these plans where I was going to ride with Bobby Kennedy on the train as it was going through the Valley, and Cesar was going to go in to all of these rallies all over the state of California, the Latino communities, to start getting people committed to the campaign. But when Eugene McCarthy won in Oregon, then they changed all their plans and Cesar went, he went to Los Angeles to start setting up the precinct operation and then I went and did all of the rallies. And a lot of us went to L.A. to set up precinct committees in all of the different areas to get out the vote. And we did an incredible job.

TAKE 8

17:06:25 So, CSO was non-partisan...but Kennedy became a special person for the union. He became more than just a normal politician.

17:06:38 Right, yeah. We all wanted to see Bobby win, so it was...we were able to get...We went to Los Angeles to East L.A., East Los Angeles and South Central L.A. and even in the Black community, and we would just go to people's homes and ask them to set up, if they would be willing to be the precinct captain. And once we got people committed to do that, we'd give them the precinct kits and then we'd jump over to another precinct. So the idea was that we would try to set up so many precincts per day, and so we got the whole area covered, and it was an incredible vote which of course gave Bobby the victory. Unfortunately later on we lost him.

17:07:14 You were there the night of the primary at the Biltmore Hotel. Describe that experience.

17:07:22 Well, when Bobby was going to come out to give his announcement, when it was obvious that he was winning, which meant the Presidency for him, right? because of all of our California votes that we had, then they came down to take, they came down to get Cesar and myself to go with the Senator. But Cesar was not there because he had gone back to get Helen, and so I went up to the room to walk down with Bobby and Ethel, and the first thing that struck me is that he had no security. And because Cesar, we were always worried about Cesar's security, he only had like one person with him and that kind of bothered me, but I didn't want to say anything because, how are you going to mar such a happy moment. And then, as we were walking down then he took us through the kitchen, and then he started to go over, people were waving to him, and he went over and started shaking hands with people, and I felt like saying, "Oh, don't do that," you know what I mean? Something said, "don't do that," but I didn't say anything. And he went and he started shaking hands with people, and then when we went up to

the podium, after he was speaking I was standing next to him, and as we started to come back, he was supposed to go to a room with us, we had mariachis waiting for him, that was immediately after his speech. But then someone came and said, “No, Senator, go through here,” and they took us back to the kitchen. And there was, someone came in and pulled up their mikes that were right there where he was speaking. I thought, “My God, that could have been a bomb or something, where he had been speaking.” I had these three distinct messages about his security, and as we turn around to walk back then Jim Drake and Marshall were there and they said, “Hey! The Senator’s supposed to come over here to the room.” And I said, “Wait, I’ll try to catch up with him,” but, because I had been walking right next to him, and as we tried to go back through there, I tried to catch up with him but you had Rosie Greer, you had Steve Allen, you had all these...Mike was looking at all these big giant guys and I was trying to get back next to the Senator to make sure that after we got through the kitchen we would go to the room where the mariachis were going to be. And of course, I never got there because then of course he was killed.

17:09:42     So if he had really gone to the mariachi room...

17:09:45     He wouldn’t have gotten killed. Probably. Unless they had some other alternate plan to kill him. The one thing is that as we were walking towards the podium through the kitchen he said “I really want to thank all of you for what you’ve done,” and he gave me this big old hug. He just came up and gave me a great big hug, and then I told him, “Well, you know, where Richard Chavez, the precinct that he had worked in he got 99% of the vote out.” And then he said, “Oh, by the way, this is my wife, Ethel,” and he turned around and introduced me to Ethel. So we were just very joyous as we were walking up to the podium.



17:10:18 That would have made a huge difference for the union as well as for the whole country, wouldn't it?

17:10:22 I think for the whole world, because of his affinity for Latin America, the things that he had said that he would try to do if he became President.

17:10:32 But that connection was preserved. Ethel came up and helped later on.

17:10:37 Yeah, in fact our first time that we met, the first time I met Robert was when we had done our big voter registration drive in 1960 under CSO, and I had met Robert in San Diego. I was in charge of the voter registration drive there. So I had met him there before. And I had met him in New York when we were trying to get him to come out for the fast. And he remembered me, which is really great, and he said, "Oh, I remember you!" And so I asked him to come out for the fast, which he did.

END OF CAMERA ROLL 23, TAKE 8, END OF SR 10

ROLL 24, SR 11, TAKE 9-SLATE

17:11:25 So let's talk about the stuff that you were just talking about, about how intense that period was.

17:11:33 Once the Delano strike started everything was extremely intense because you had picketing that started every morning like at 4 o'clock in the morning that went on all day, meetings that happened at night, then we had that march to Sacramento. Everything had to keep going, every single day there were

things that were going on, people were getting arrested. Some of the things were...like the big mass arrest, the first mass arrest that we had of the women and the children. Supporters coming down every Friday, there was a Friday night meeting that we had to prepare for, and of course the Teatro always had a new act for the Friday night meetings. We were having picketing down in the produce market in Los Angeles, picketing in the produce terminal in San Francisco, people going off to the boycotts, because we got Shenley through a boycott, we had people hitchhiking to New York and to St. Louis and these other places to do the first boycott. The first boycotters went out with their thumbs. They didn't have cars to drive. The march to Sacramento. And once we got the Shenley agreement then we had started the big fight with De Giorgio, which ended up in the first secret ballot election for farmworkers. And we had to bring in the American Arbitration Association, the merger with the AFL-CIO, we had the big fight with the Teamsters where they were beating people up, and then Cesar's first fast. Of course that was in '68, but all that, those first early days were just full of an incredible amount of intensity, going to San Francis