“Si, Se Puede”: The Life and Activism of Dolores Huerta

GRADE LEVEL: 9-12

INTRODUCTION:

Although most people identify Cesar Chavez as the leader of the Chicano Civil Rights movement, few are aware that he had a female partner in his advocacy for farm workers in the Mexican-American labor organizer, Dolores Huerta. Together the two co-founded the United Farm Workers Association (UFWA) in 1962 and directed several boycotts of agricultural products including, most notably, a multi-year boycott of table grapes. Their efforts unified diverse farm workers, led agribusinesses to negotiate with their laborers, and encouraged Congress to pass the Agricultural Labor Relations Act in 1975 protecting the rights of farmers to unionize. In the midst of her political activities Huerta, who was raised Catholic and was pro-choice, married twice and had 11 children with three men, the third of whom was Richard Chavez, Cesar’s brother. Today, Huerta continues her activism for immigrants, laborers, women, and the environment. She is also the grandmother of fourteen and the great grandmother of four children.

This exercise calls on students to consider the life choices that Huerta made in terms of her commitment to poor farmers, to the labor movement, and to her family. It asks students to evaluate how Huerta chose to define and protect her family, herself, and her community and to consider the decisions they would make in her place.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Historians and journalists have written extensively about Cesar Chavez, but few have documented the life of his labor organizing partner, Dolores Huerta. Huerta was born in New Mexico on April 10, 1930 to a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother. Her parents divorced when she was young, and she and her four siblings subsequently moved to a racially integrated, poor neighborhood in Stockton, California where she was raised by her single mother and grandfather.

After acquiring an Associate’s Degree and teacher’s certificate, Huerta, who was then a divorced mother of two small children, began a career teaching farm worker’s children. But she quickly became disillusioned with her work. Huerta and her mother had become politicized by the establishment of the Community Service Organization (CSO) in Stockton, CA. The CSO, which grew out of Saul Alinsky’s Chicago-based Industrial Areas Foundation and was led by labor organizer Fred Ross, focused on the problems faced by working class Mexican-Americans. Believing that education alone could not undo the poverty and racial discrimination that the Mexican-American children of farm workers confronted, Huerta left her teaching job in 1955 to work for CSO organizing voter registration drives, advocating for better public services, promoting anti-discrimination legislation, and countering police brutality. Her decision had profound financial consequences: Her weekly salary dropped from roughly $125 to $10. She and her family relied on food and clothing donations to survive.
At CSO, Huerta began a professional partnership with Cesar Chavez. The two, however, wanted to tackle the issues that poor farm laborers faced, and CSO was hesitant to take on a struggle that would pit illegal immigrants, non-English speakers from a range of countries, and migrant workers whom employers could easily replace against the Goliath of the agricultural industries. Despite emotional and financial costs, Chavez and Huerta embraced the mantra “si, se puede” (“yes, it is possible”) and took on the challenge of organizing this diverse, marginalized, and poor cohort. In 1962, Chavez left CSO and moved to Delano, CA, where he and Huerta co-founded the National Farm Workers’ Association (NFWA). Although both Chavez and Huerta jointly built the farm laborers’ movement, Chavez convinced Huerta to remain in Stockton, CA working at CSO until 1964 so that she could continue to draw a modest salary to support her family during the NFWA’s earliest days.

In 1965, the mainly Filipino AFL-CIO sponsored Agricultural Workers’ Organizing Committee (AWOC) went on strike and asked the NFWA to join them in what became the Delano grape strike of 1965. Huerta, who had moved to Delano that year, played a pivotal role in organizing a wide array of groups, including farm workers from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, socially conscious middle class consumers, feminists, church members, anti-war activists, and the labor community. While Chavez served as the public and spiritual head of the movement, conducting fasts, marches, pilgrimages, and retreats, Huerta coordinated the nuts and bolts of the strike and played a leading role in gaining the trust and participation of women, particularly California-based farm workers and middle class consumers located in New York. The cross-class, cross-cultural, and national alliances Huerta and Chavez built forced grape growers to negotiate with strikers in 1970. Shortly thereafter, Chavez and Huerta led a second boycott of table grapes, Gallo wine, and lettuce, until Congress passed the Agricultural Labor Relations Act in 1975, which protected the rights of farm laborers to unionize. Industrial laborers had had this right protected and enforced since 1935 with the passage of the National Labor Relations (or Wagner) Act and the subsequent creation of the National Labor Relations Board.

In the midst of these political activities, Huerta formed a personal partnership with Richard Chavez, Cesar’s brother, and the two had four children together. On the domestic front, Huerta relied heavily on her mother’s help and, after her death, the support of her sisters, her older children, live-in-help, and fellow union members. She viewed herself as part of a communal family organized around the union and Chicano community. She entrusted her nuclear family to that world and sought to instill in her children the centrality of self sacrifice, spirituality, and community. Her children certainly felt the consequences of their mother’s choices. When she finally moved to Delano, she had no regular income, and her children went without fresh milk for two years during the strike there. Yet, Huerta appears to have conveyed to them her wider goals, since all of them, with the exception of a physically disabled daughter, worked for the union at one point or another. Her children have gone on to teach, practice law and medicine and work in the film and music industry.

THEMES: domestic labor, child care, wage labor, unionization, and activism
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students, following this activity, will be able to:

1. Understand the relationships among domestic labor, labor market participation, and political activism.
2. Explore their own values regarding work, family, and social justice.
3. Appreciate the costs and possibilities of collective action.

NEW JERSEY STANDARDS

STANDARD 6.1 (U.S. History: America in the World): All students will acquire the knowledge and skills to think analytically about how past and present interactions of people, cultures, and the environment shape the American heritage. Such knowledge and skills enable students to make informed decisions that reflect fundamental rights and core democratic values as productive citizens in local, national, and global communities.

STANDARD 6.3(Active Citizenship in the 21st Century): All students will acquire the skills needed to be active, informed citizens who value diversity and promote cultural understanding by working collaboratively to address challenges that are inherent in living in an interconnected world.

MATERIALS:

- PowerPoint slides (in PDF form) introducing students to Dolores Huerta (Appendix A).
- Cards with information about each role for the role play (Appendix B).

DETAILS OF ACTIVITY:

If possible, assign students to read all or part of Appendices B and C prior to this activity.

- Appendix B: Cards with information about each role for the role play
- Appendix C: Margaret Rose, “Dolores Huerta: The United Farm Workers Union” in *A Dolores Huerta Reader*
Tell students that they will use information from these texts to engage in a role play about the labor leader, Dolores Huerta. You might wish to describe the role play and divide them into seven groups in advance (see group list below), or wait to do so in the class when they actually perform the roles.

**Part 1: Family Values, Political Activism, and Dolores Huerta (15 min.)**

Write the term “family values” on the board. Ask students to brainstorm what they think this term means. What does it mean to have family values and to value one’s family? Ask them if there are different ways of doing so, and if so what might they entail?

Introduce Dolores Huerta as a woman who was profoundly committed to La Causa (the cause/movement for equality and justice for farm workers), but who was also the mother of eleven children. Describe Huerta’s background and her role in the Delano grape strike. You might use or adapt the information in Appendix A for this part of the lesson.

Ask students how Huerta’s personal and professional choices relate to their conception of family values. Did she have them? What does family mean and whom does it include (nuclear family, immediate relatives, extended family, neighbors, community, etc)?

**Part II. Role Play Preparation (20 mins.):**

Tell students that they will be participating in a role play for the remainder of class to explore the personal costs and potential rewards that activists make when they become deeply enmeshed in a movement. They will do that by imagining a discussion in 1962 around Huerta’s dinner table as she is debating whether or not she should leave the Community Service Organization (CSO) that she co-founded to move to Delano, CA with Cesar Chavez to build the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA).

There are several things at stake in this decision. Huerta is at this point a 30-year-old pregnant, recently divorced mother of six children with an extremely modest but steady salary working as a community organizer in Stockton (as well as a mother and an informal network of relatives and friends who are helpful on the home front). Aware of the emotional and financial risks involved in this move, Chavez convinces Huerta to remain at CSO for another two years, while helping to build the farm workers’ movement on the side. In your role play, there might be a different outcome.

Students will play one of several people in this role play:

- Dolores Huerta
- Huerta’s mother, Alicia Chavez Fernandez
- Huerta’s father, Juan Fernandez
- A farm worker living in Stockton, CA
- Cesar Chavez
f. Fred Ross  
g. Huerta’s eldest daughter, who was 10 year old at the time.

Divide students into 7 groups and give each group a card telling them which role they will play and some background on that person. Each group should select a spokesperson to participate in the actual dinner. Before the dinner begins, each group should discuss the attitude of the person they are representing toward Huerta’s potential move. They should develop a short speech that articulates their position and prepare at least two questions to ask Huerta to provoke further discussion.

Part III. The Dinner (20 mins.):
The seven selected spokespeople should come to the front of the room and pretend that they are eating a meal together. Huerta should speak first about her potential move from Stockton and CSO to Delano and the NFWA and then everyone at the table should make a statement regarding their thoughts on the matter. Huerta should respond and then the table should be opened to questions and comments from the audience.

Wrap Up (5 mins.):
Ask students if learning about Huerta and the choices she made and participating in this role play has influenced their own thinking about family values and social justice. What would they have done in her place?

PRACTICE/REINFORCEMENT

In 1966, Huerta and forty-three other individuals, many of whom were clergy members, were arrested for shouting “huelga” or strike. Huerta has been arrested three more times since then and, in 1988, was severely beaten by San Francisco police officers for similar acts of civil disobedience. Ask students to read Martin Luther King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963) (Appendix D) and Cesar Chavez’s “Letter from Delano” (1969) (Appendix E). Keeping in mind both those letters and what they have already read about Huerta, they should write a letter that Huerta might have written to her children, the eldest of whom was fourteen at the time, to explain her actions, her imprisonment, and what she wants/hopes/expects for them.

REFERENCES and WEBSITES:

No biography has yet been written about Dolores Huerta. To learn more about her life and read interviews with her and an assortment of other primary sources about her life, see A Dolores Huerta Reader, ed., Mario T. Garcia, Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2008.
Appendix A:
Potential slides for introducing Dolores Huerta to students

Si, Se Puede: The Life and Activism of Dolores Huerta

![Image of Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez]

Dolores Huerta wrote... “Cesar’s life is the lighth, the light that provides vision to our path, with the glow of energy generated by the struggle.”

Cesar Chavez once described Huerta’s character as “totally fearless, both mentally and physically.”

¡VIVA CESAR!

¡VIVA DOLORES!
Who Is Dolores Huerta?

• An activist who initially organized racially and ethnically diverse farm workers and now works for immigrants, laborers, women and the environment.
• A pro-choice Catholic
• A twice married women who is the mother of 11 children with 3 different men.
Huerta’s Origins

• Born in NM, April 10, 1930
• Parents divorced when she was young and moved to Stockton, CA
• Married HS sweetheart and had 2 children
• Divorced
Huerta’s Early Activism

- Acquired Associates and Teachers Certificate and briefly taught
- 1955 Joined the Community Service Organization (CSO)
  - Met Cesar Chavez
  - Led voter registration drives
  - Worked for better public services
  - Fought for anti-discrimination legislation
  - Sought anti-police brutality policies
- Huerta married again and had 4 more children.
  - She divorced again while pregnant with her 7th child.

Mentor Fred Ross relaxes with Manuel Chavez and Dolores Huerta at 1962 NWFA founding convention, PBS, “The Fight in the Fields: Cesar Chavez and the Farm Workers’ Struggle,”
On the Personal Front

- Huerta formed a life partnership with Richard Chavez, Cesar’s brother.
- They had 4 more children together.
- All but one of her children worked for the union at one point or another.
- They became teachers, lawyers, doctors, filmmakers, and musicians.
- Huerta continues with her activism to this day...
Appendix B:

Cards with information about each role for the role play.

**Dolores Huerta:** In 1966, Huerta wanted to move to Delano, CA (3 hours and 15 minutes south from Stockton, CA, where she was living at the time) with Cesar Chavez to create the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) and build a movement of farm workers. She thought that it would hamper the movement if she remained in Stockton working at the Community Service Organization (CSO). Yet, as a recently divorced, pregnant, mother of six, with no other means of support, Huerta knew that she needed at least a modest income to survive, which the CSO provided. Should she stay at an organization that wouldn’t allow her to do the type of community organizing she saw as crucial in order to support her family, or should she go with Chavez to Delano? And if she stayed in Stockton at the CSO, how long should she remain? At what point should she throw herself fully into the movement – or shouldn’t she because of her domestic and family responsibilities? Discuss these questions among yourself. Prepare an opening statement explaining that you have invited these guests to your dinner table to discuss whether or not you should move to Delano, CA with Chavez to build the NFWA. Clarify your thinking on the matter.

**Alicia Chavez Fernandez (Huerta’s Mother):** Like her daughter, Alicia Chavez Fernandez was a complicated woman. Her parents were born in New Mexico, yet she married a Mexican immigrant. Their relationship was difficult, and they divorced when Huerta was a toddler. With the help of her father, Fernandez moved Huerta and her two brothers first to Las Vegas, NM and then to a working class, racially integrated neighborhood in Stockton, CA, where they had family. Fernandez raised her children as a single mother in an egalitarian home. Initially, she made ends meet by waitressing and working in a cannery, but later owned and managed a restaurant and a hotel. She re-married three times, with the last marriage lasting until her death. Huerta and she were close as adults, both were committed to social activism, and she helped her daughter to care for her children when Huerta went to school and worked. How would she have advised her daughter?

**Juan Fernandez (Huerta’s Father):** Juan Fernandez, Huerta’s father, shared his daughter’s commitment to social justice. After he and his wife divorced when Huerta was a toddler, Juan Fernandez remained in New Mexico where he struggled to make a living as a migrant laborer and coal miner. He went on to become an influential labor leader and, eventually, to serve in the New Mexico state legislature. Huerta maintained a relationship with her father, although they only saw one another occasionally, and he blamed her for the failures of her two marriages and for not caring appropriately for her children. Would he have encouraged his daughter to throw
herself fully into la causa, the cause, or told her to keep her focus on her growing family, while building the NFWA on the side?

A farm worker living in Stockton, CA: Imagine that this farm worker, let’s call him Jose, first met Dolores Huerta when one of his children briefly had her as a teacher in 1955. Five years later the two reconnected when Jose began registering voters in Stockton’s Chicano community with an eye toward the election of Senator John F. Kennedy to the presidency. Since then, in addition to his responsibilities as a father of six children and as a farm laborer, Jose has actively participated in the Community Service Organization (CSO), working alongside Huerta, Cesar Chavez, and Fred Ross to fight for better work conditions for farm laborers, including higher pay, shorter hours, and better living conditions in migrant camps. He has also worked with local officials to create laws that would counter discrimination in restaurants and movie theaters and also to counter police brutality. Would Jose encourage Huerta to stay in Stockton to continue working for the local community, while building the NFWA on the side, or would he try to convince her to take on the broader issue of building a diverse alliance among farm workers?

Cesar Chavez (co-founder of the NFWA): Chavez was a Mexican-American farm worker, labor organizer, and civil rights activist. In 1927, he was born in San Louis, Arizona where his parents owned a farm and a store. They lost both in the Great Depression, and, like many of his peers, Chavez moved west to California to support his family as a farm laborer. Like Huerta, Chavez was drawn into the (Community Service Organization (CSO) and community organizing by Fred Ross. He met Huerta through his work there, and they became longstanding allies in a struggle to build a farm workers union. Chavez, however, became frustrated with Ross and the CSO because of their hesitation to take on a struggle that would pit illegal immigrants, non-English speakers from a range of countries, and migrant workers whom employers could easily replace against the Goliath of the agricultural industries. Chavez, who also had a large family (he would eventually have eight children) chose to uproot his family, forego the modest salary he was earning at CSO to move to Delano and build the NFWA. If you were Chavez, would you try to convince Huerta to go with you immediately to Delano to build the movement, or would you encourage her to stay in Stockton with CSO? If you tried to convince her of the latter, for how long would you say she should stay?

Fred Ross (Huerta’s boss): Ross was born in 1910 in San Francisco and grew up in Los Angeles. He planned to teach, but became a caseworker when he couldn’t find a job because of the Great Depression. He worked at the camp that John Steinbeck used as a model for his Grapes of Wrath encouraging migrant workers to unionize and then helped Japanese-American internees to find jobs and housing after their relocation. He was strongly influenced by Chicago-based activist Saul Alinsky. Using his approach to community activism, Ross founded the Community Service Organization (CSO) and created 22 chapters of the organization throughout California. Along the way, Ross recruited both Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. They led the CSO’s
efforts to organize voter registration drives, advocate for better public services, promote anti-discrimination legislation, and counter police brutality. Ross, however, was hesitant to take on the issue of organizing farm workers. He was concerned about taking on a struggle that would pit illegal immigrants, non-English speakers from a range of countries, and migrant workers whom employers could easily replace against the Goliath of the agricultural industries. Would he try to convince Huerta to stay at the CSO to continue their work together or would he have encouraged her to take a risk for a cause she believed in?

**Huerta’s eldest daughter:** Huerta’s eldest daughter was 10 year old at the time. What would she have wanted for herself, her siblings, her mom, and her broader family? Would she have wanted to stay in Delano where her grandmother, friends, and extended family lived? Would she have been concerned about her mom leaving the family regularly to be in Delano (3 hours and 15 minutes away) for her work there? What would she have thought of the movement to organize farm laborers? Would she have been committed to that cause like her mother, or would she have seen it as an unfair pull on her mother’s time? Might she have been concerned about the financial consequences of this move as well and its family implications?
Appendix C:

Since 1848, people have crossed back and forth over the porous U.S.-Mexico border. Residents from both countries have sought adventure, vacations, and visits with families and friends. The American Southwest has also served as a powerful magnet for Mexican workers headed for the fields and orchards and later the factories and railroads in search of employment. Although intending to stay a short time before returning home, many joined their Mexican American "cousins" and established permanent homes in the United States.

In the nineteenth century the traffic across the border was informal and largely unchecked. Before 1917, Mexican workers entered the United States with little difficulty, and refugees fleeing the political turmoil of the Mexican Revolution sought safety across the border. With laws passed in the early twentieth century, however, border crossings became increasingly more regulated, and an elaborate bureaucracy grew up to monitor comings and goings. The Immigration Act of 1917 instituted requirements of literacy and the payment of a head tax. Growers in the Southwest immediately protested that the new law would cause severe labor shortages.

The involvement of the United States in World War I effectively suspended the enforcement of the act, temporarily permitting the immigration of Mexican workers. After the war the temporary admissions program was extended, and even upon its expiration in 1922 the enforcement of the Immigration Act became so lax that growers' access to Mexican labor was virtually unimpeded. Further encouragement

of Mexican entry for menial labor resulted from the passage of the comprehensive Immigration Act of 1924. Although the act imposed quotas for the first time on certain nationalities, the classification of all Mexicans as "white" circumvented restrictions that prohibited the entry of anyone with "more than 50 percent Indian blood." During the 1920s, estimates of the proportion of Mexican farm laborers in the California agricultural work force of 200,000 ranged from 50 to 75 percent.

In the 1930s, however, when unemployed workers and Dust Bowl migrants sought work in the fields, Mexican and, in some cases, Mexican American workers were herded up and deported by federal officials. Governmental protections of due process were suspended during the Depression decade. Then, during World War II, the government of the United States drew up specific agreements with Mexico to control the importation of workers. The "bracero" program officially began in 1942 as a wartime measure and, although there were protests by Mexican workers and the Mexican government concerning employer violations of the agreement, it continued after the war. Successful lobbying by large-scale growers and their political allies kept the law in place until 1964. It was finally defeated by a coalition of labor, ethnic organizations, Democratic legislators, and church and philanthropic groups.

Throughout the years, workers have ignored authorities and evaded official measures to limit movement across the border. Subject to political uncertainty and shifting economic fortunes, laborers of Mexican heritage, particularly those at the margins of society, have found their working conditions to be precarious. Politically powerful and well-connected growers have been able to keep labor costs down. Consequently, agricultural workers are among the lowest-paid segments of the work force. Attempts to provide them with better wages and protections have ranged from efforts by religious associations, community organizations, and charitable groups to demands for civil rights and unionization. In the first half of the twentieth century, such actions were short-lived and ameliorative. After World War II serious and sustained attempts to organize workers, especially farm laborers or "campesinos," coalesced. For years agribusiness managed to keep wages down and
union organizers out. But in the 1960s, a decade of social and political activism, the founding of the National Farm Workers Association (now known as the United Farm Workers)—precursor of the United Farm Workers—signaled the beginning of many confrontations on behalf of these most marginal of workers.

The lack of legislation covering agricultural labor proved a formidable obstacle to the NFWA, as it had for other union organizers in the twentieth century. Because of the overwhelming influence of large-scale agribusiness, farm laborers had been exempted from the protections provided by both the Wagner Act, a 1935 law that encouraged collective bargaining for industrial and other workers and established the National Labor Relations Board, which supervised elections and adjudicated labor grievances. Consequently, there was no legal mechanism at the federal or state level through which agricultural workers could petition for elections or union recognition. Their only recourse was to strike or boycott.

With no laws to protect them, the working conditions and standard of living of agricultural laborers were among the lowest in the nation. Their wages in the late 1950s and early 1960s ranged from seventy-five cents to $1.00 per hour, forcing most families to live below the poverty level. To make ends meet, many families took their children out of school, thereby contributing to a vicious cycle of poverty. Working conditions in the fields were deplorable. Employers did not provide toilets, hand-washing facilities, or drinking water. During the summer harvests, temperatures in the inland valleys rose to over 100 degrees. Workers were exposed to pesticides without adequate warning or protective coverings. The job-injury rate was three times that of U.S. workers in the nonagricultural sectors. Malnutrition and the poor diet of impoverished field workers had severe health ramifications. The death rate of migrant laborers’ babies and mothers was 125 percent higher than the rate among other Americans. Agricultural workers were twice as likely to get flu or pneumonia and even more likely to suffer from tuberculosis. Their life expectancy was forty-nine years; other Americans lived to the age of seventy on average.

Beginning in the early 1960s the NFWA championed the rights of farmworkers to organize for improved wages and working conditions. The association was very effective at communicating the plight of this
sector of the American economy to the larger population and fought
to represent these laborers in collective bargaining with employers.
At a time when the nation was experiencing the social upheavals of
the civil rights movement, the NFWA was launching its crusade on
behalf of field workers. Increased awareness of inequity and prejudice
directed at African Americans heightened public consciousness of
injustice and racism against Mexican-heritage workers. The strategies
of nonviolence, coalition building, and grassroots protests demon-
strated by such leaders as Martin Luther King Jr. served the farm-
worker cause as well. Leaders and supporters in both camps became
allies in the struggle for civil, economic, and political rights for their
constituencies.

One leader in this daunting challenge to the combined power of
agricultural employers and their political allies is Dolores Huerta—
sometimes referred to as Dolores “Huelga” (strike)—the most promi-
nent Chicana labor leader of her generation in the United States. For
more than forty years she has dedicated her life to the struggle for
justice, dignity, and a decent standard of living for one of the coun-
try’s most exploited groups: the women and men who toil in the
fields. Proud of her Latina heritage, Huerta is an admirable repre-
sentative of an ethnic, female, and working-class tradition of protest. As
a middle-class Chicana and mother of eleven children, however, she
does not neatly fit the typical mold of a labor organizer. Resisting mid-
twentieth-century ideals of female behavior, she chafed against the
conventions for Mexican American women coming of age in the 1950s.
Surmounting ethnic, gender, and class expectations, she brought her
considerable skills as an organizer, picket captain, union official, con-
tract negotiator, boycott leader, and spokeswoman to the campaign
to unionize farmworkers. Historians, perhaps misled by the focus on
César Chávez in early accounts of the union, have missed the impor-
tance of the Huerta-Chávez collaboration.

“Abajo con opresión! Down with oppression! Abajo con rac-
ismo! Down with racism! Abajo con sexismo! Down with sexism!”
At the conclusion of her speeches, Dolores Huerta invited her audi-
ences to join her in these exhortations on behalf of the farmworkers’
the union! Long live the cause!” While addressing field workers,
religious groups, political gatherings, ethnic assemblies, unionists, students, antiwar activists, or women's groups, the diminutive, energetic, and charismatic Huerta was a compelling and fiery advocate whose passion won many adherents for the UFWA's battle against the entrenched interests of agribusiness.

Huerta developed a social conscience as a teenager but gravitated toward activism as a young mother in her late twenties. A native of New Mexico, she had moved as a youngster to California with her mother and two brothers. A bright, articulate, and active child, she did not seem destined to become a highly regarded social reformer and labor leader. Although sharing an ethnic background, culture, and religion with the campesinos whose cause she so eloquently and ardently championed, Huerta differed from them in significant ways. She was bilingual; she graduated from high school and attended college. With only limited experience in field labor, she had career options unavailable to farmworkers. Although raised a Catholic, she married and divorced several times. She enjoyed motherhood but adamantly rejected the restrictions that idealized the role of woman as a homemaker. Defying conventional attitudes, she invaded the male-dominated arena of union organizing. Her association with the union provided an affirmation of her "own life's worth... Before I joined the union," she related in an interview, "I was having a hard time really swallowing that I would be a teacher living in a suburb... My longings for my own life were answered by being able to participate in the building of the union."2

Despite her youth and feminine appearance, when she dedicated herself to "la causa" in the early 1960s, Huerta earned the respect of union rank-and-file members because of her unrelenting dedication to farmworkers. Some may have expressed reservations about her casual attitude toward her family and her personal life-style, but they admired her for her all-consuming commitment, picket-line work, personal sacrifices, arrests, and the life-threatening injury she endured in her work for the union. She was also a very effective advocate for the cause in her frequent travels and appearances across the nation on behalf of "el movimiento." Her middle-class upbringing gave her the ability to appeal to mainstream America and to engage consumers, largely women, in supporting the union's powerful boycott
strategy. Her advocacy of farmworkers’ rights also earned her the wrath of opponents of unionization. Reacting to her uncompromising and forceful manner, one grower exclaimed, “Dolores Huerta is crazy. She is a violent woman, where women, especially Mexican women, are usually peaceful and calm.” High-spirited, tough, and outspoken, she confronted gender and ethnic stereotyping in improving the lives of farmworkers.

Although she is celebrated in the Mexican American community, in labor halls, and in feminist circles, Huerta’s early history—her family life and transformation to labor activist—is little known. What in her background foreshadowed the emergence of an important labor leader? How did she possess the fortitude to disdain sentimental motherhood and domestic responsibility at a time when the proper role for a middle-class mother was in the home?

Huerta’s story began in the small mining town of Dawson in the mountains of northern New Mexico where she was born on April 10, 1930. Dolores Fernández was the second child and only daughter of Juan and Alicia (Chávez) Fernández. On the maternal side of her family, Huerta was a third-generation New Mexican. Her father was also born in Dawson but to a Mexican immigrant family. Their couple’s marriage was troubled early on, and when Huerta was a toddler, her parents divorced. Determined to start her life anew, her mother moved her three children—John, Dolores, and Marshall—first to Las Vegas, New Mexico, and then to Stockton, California, where the family had relatives.

As a single parent in Depression-era California, Alicia Chávez Fernández endured hardships to support her young family. To make ends meet, she labored at a cannery at night and as a waitress during the day. “My mother was very quiet,” Huerta recalled, “and she was very effective at whatever she did, and very ambitious.” For child care, Alicia Fernández relied on her father, Herculano Chávez, who had followed her to Stockton. “My grandfather,” Huerta noted, “kind of raised us. My grandfather’s influence was really the male influence in my family.” The outgoing Dolores enjoyed this warm relationship in a contented childhood with attentive supervision, respect for one’s elders, Mexican corridos (ballads), and Rosary recitations. Judging herself a dutiful but playful child, Huerta reminisced, “My grandfather
used to call me Seven Tongues . . . because I always talked so much." Verbal dexterity would serve her well in later life.5

The family's economic circumstances improved during the war years. Alicia Fernández managed a restaurant and then acquired a hotel in Stockton with her second husband, James Richards, with whom she had another daughter. During the summers, Dolores and her siblings helped run these businesses located on the edges of skid row, catering to multicultural urban working-class and farmworker patrons. Huerta relished the exposure to the vibrant cultural mix of Chinese restaurants, Filipino pool halls, and Mexican bakeries. Her home life, however, was disrupted when her mother's second marriage ended in divorce.

The postwar years proved more satisfying. In the early 1950s her mother married for a third time. This happy union with Juan Silva produced another daughter and endured until her mother's death. Huerta looked back fondly on her mother's energy and expectations for her children. "My mother was always pushing me to get involved in all these youth activities. . . . We took violin lessons. I took piano lessons. I took dancing lessons. I belonged to the church choir . . . And I was a very active Girl Scout from the time I was eight to the time I was eighteen."6 As a youngster growing up in Stockton and especially after her mother's improved financial outlook and remarriage, Huerta experienced a more middle-class upbringing. After graduation from Stockton High School, she continued her education at Stockton College with her mother's support. Following a not uncommon period of teenage rebellion, mother and daughter shared a caring relationship that extended into Huerta's adult years.

After her parents' divorce, Huerta had only sporadic contacts with her father. Nevertheless, his work history and activities influenced her. Like most people in Dawson, Juan Fernández worked in the coal mines and, to augment his wages there, joined the migrant labor force, traveling to Colorado, Nebraska, and Wyoming for the beet harvests. Outraged over inferior working conditions, frequent accidents, and meager wages, Fernández became interested in labor issues. Leaving Dawson after the disintegration of his marriage, he continued his labor activism by becoming secretary-treasurer of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) local at the Terrero Camp of
the American Metals Company in Las Vegas. Using this predominantly Hispanic local union as a springboard, he won election to the New Mexico state legislature in 1938, representing San Miguel County. He worked with like-minded colleagues to pass a labor program, including New Mexico's "Little Wagner Act" and a wages-and-hours bill to empower industrial workers and improve their lives. Yet because of his outspoken demeanor and intemperate personality, he served only one term in the statehouse. Although their relationship remained distant until the end of his life, Huerta was proud of her father's union activism and political achievements. Always supportive of her union organizing, he was less approving of her disordered personal life and failed marriages.

Huerta did not marry as young as many Chicanas of her generation but temporarily interrupted her college studies when she wed her high-school sweetheart, Ralph Head, in an elaborate church ceremony. The marriage lasted only a few years. After her divorce she held a number of clerical and secretarial positions. Then, with the financial and emotional support of her mother in rearing her two daughters, Celeste and Lori, she returned to school to pursue a career in teaching and earned an A.A. degree.

Huerta's plans for a conventional life and comfortable career in education changed when she got caught up in the wave of civic activism that swept through Mexican American communities after World War II. Earlier involved in Catholic relief activities and in the Club Azul y Oro, a Latina women's social group, she was politicized by the establishment of a chapter of the Community Service Organization (CSO) in Stockton in the mid-1950s. The original association, a Mexican American self-help group, had emerged under the auspices of the Industrial Areas Foundation located in Chicago and headed by Saul Alinsky. The aim of the CSO was to promote increased civic participation by the Spanish speaking community. The group focused on the political concerns and social problems of working-class Mexican American families in urban areas, principally in California and Arizona. Achieving success in Los Angeles, where the CSO was instrumental in electing Edward Roybal (the first Hispanic member of the Los Angeles City Council in the twentieth century), West Coast organizer Fred Ross took his recruiting efforts to other parts of California.
and the Southwest. In Stockton, Huerta, along with her mother and aunt, became active in the program. The thrust of the women's activities consisted of registering voters in the barrio, teaching citizenship and naturalization classes, pressuring for neighborhood improvements such as better streets, lighting, parks, and playgrounds, and engaging in the typical behind-the-scenes tasks of preparation for local and regional CSO meetings.

During this time, Huerta married her second husband, Ventura Huerta, also a CSO member. This union ultimately produced five more children: Fidel, Emilio, Vincent, Alicia, and Angela. Their mother's zeal for community activism caused problems at home, and her marriage began to deteriorate when her husband objected to the increasing intrusion of CSO work into their home life. "I knew I wasn't comfortable in a wife's role," she acknowledged, "but I wasn't clearly facing the issue. I hedged, I made excuses, I didn't come out and tell my husband that I cared more about helping other people than cleaning our house and doing my hair." Despite the growing domestic tensions, Huerta deepened her commitment to the CSO. Her interests also expanded when several of her Stockton CSO colleagues formed the Agricultural Workers' Association (AWA) in 1958. These socially conscious citizens advocated a separate effort to deal with the abject poverty and exploitation of local farmworkers, as distinct from the problems faced by Mexican American families in the cities. This local interest group dissolved when the AFL-CIO-sponsored Agricultural Workers' Organizing Committee (AWOC) emerged a year later. Former AWA members enlisted in the campaign, and Huerta became secretary-treasurer. However, the AWOC officials, veteran organizers who had earned their experience with industrial workers, were entirely unfamiliar with agriculture and with the ethnic workers who toiled in the fields. She soon grew disenchanted with the group's leadership, direction, and top-down policies and resigned.

By the late 1950s, Huerta had completely abandoned the ranks of female volunteers and emerged as a political activist. Her intense dedication and abilities had attracted the attention of CSO associates, who offered her the position of lobbyist, traditionally a post held only by men. Responsible to the general director of the organization, César Chávez, she worked at the Los Angeles CSO headquarters
and in Sacramento during the legislative session. Chávez had gained a reputation as a masterful organizer; Huerta’s recognition derived from her skills as a forceful and articulate communicator and advocate. "Everyone knows her," observed Chávez following a trip to the state capital in the early 1960s, “and the usual remark is that she is a fighter.”

Huerta’s absorption in social activism had contributed to trial separations from her husband, and their alienation intensified when she weighed an invitation by Chávez to commit herself exclusively to the farmworker cause. United by a common outrage at the exploitation and poverty of farm laborers, Huerta and Chávez shared profound disappointment over the CSO’s decision not to support a proposed campaign of improving their conditions. The CSO was reluctant to embrace the risky proposition of fighting for a marginal group—some of whom were not U.S. citizens, some who were in the country illegally, some who were non-English speakers, some who annually migrated from farm to farm following the crops—against a Goliath of agricultural corporations. Agonizing over this rejection, Chávez dramatically resigned his position in 1962 and asked Huerta to join him in launching the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA). With her characteristic optimism, Huerta enthusiastically embraced the challenge to unionize California’s agricultural workers.

Aware of the financial strain and emotional stress that establishing an independent organization would entail, Chávez persuaded Huerta to remain on the CSO payroll until the prospects of the NFWA improved. As the group was getting off the ground, Huerta lived and worked in Stockton while Chávez was setting up the headquarters in Delano, California. From 1962 until 1964 the two communicated frequently by mail. Their letters indicate Huerta’s central role in the founding and management of the organization. While discussing goals, strategies, obstacles, disagreements, and family concerns, they continually commiserated over their limited resources and lack of funds to do the job adequately.

In her thirties, with six children and a seventh on the way and an estranged second husband (whom she later divorced), Huerta juggled a considerable financial and domestic burden. She harbored serious reservations about Chávez’s plans for her continued employment at
the CSO, given his own disagreement with and sudden departure from
the organization. "I feel there will be a lot of criticism," she explained
to him frankly. "If I did not have to work for the CSO, but could have
an independent income, then no one could say anything about what
I do." Coaxed by Chávez, she endured as long as she could her "killer
schedule" of working in the office during the day and organizing at
night. But her initial misgivings proved justified, and she was eventu-
ally terminated for her overriding interest in farmworker organizing
over CSO business.

With no regular salary and with her unemployment checks soon
exhausted, Huerta survived with temporary translation assignments,
substitute teaching, and even a brief backbreaking stint in the onion
harvest, in addition to her work for the NFWA. Support from her two
former husbands was not reliable and inadequate when paid, barely
enough to keep her in groceries and utilities. "Any help I get from my
two exes has to go for grub for my seven hungry mouths," she bluntly
wrote Chávez, "and I am keeping one jump ahead of PG and B [Pacific
Gas & Electric] and the Water Dragons who close off water for nonpay-
ment." Her mother, other relatives, and friends helped from time to
time, and an anonymous donation of food appeared on her doorstep
when funds were particularly low, but during those struggles of the
early years, Huerta recollected, "we really operated totally on faith."

The only other source of income came from union dues. Huerta
labored long days and nights publicizing the new organization, set-
ting up meetings, calling on workers in their homes, and visiting labor
camps in farmworker towns such as Acampo, Woodbridge, Manteca,
Victor, Linden, and Lodi as well as Stockton. She recognized that the
$3.50 monthly fee was not easy for workers to commit to, given their
meager wages, their fear of employers' retaliation, competition from
other unions, the unpredictable nature of agricultural employment,
unexpected illness, or family emergencies. "I have been rustling
dues," Huerta repeatedly conveyed in her letters from 1962 to 1964.
Normally, the totals ranged from $10 to $30. Huerta and Chávez
shared the slender proceeds. "César was very fair about that," she
forthrightly asserted.

The lack of simple organizer's tools—a functioning car, gas money,
and a working telephone—further complicated dues collection and
organizing. “It makes me sick of the time I have lost because of my junkie cars,” she once noted, “yet I hate to get in debt for a better car when I am not sure where my next month’s check is coming from.”

Chávez readily sympathized; he too, had experienced setbacks and delays on account of car troubles. She was equally exasperated by canceled meetings and worker apathy, sometimes caused by resistance to female organizers. Workers were unaccustomed to an assertive woman labor leader who often traveled alone and called evening meetings. In Stockton she had outlasted this reluctance, but the issue reappeared when she targeted new areas. She recounted incidents when meetings, attended primarily by men, were abruptly canceled when she arrived at the appointed hour. Still, dismissing such opposition as routine for a professional organizer, she persisted in her efforts. Although women’s issues were gaining attention in the 1960s, gender consciousness was not as widespread as it would later become. Huerta herself only gradually became aware of this additional barrier that female labor activists faced.

Huerta coped with an ever greater obstacle in her work with the NFWA: as a divorced, full-time working mother, she had family obligations that exceeded those of men. It was not the customary organizer’s challenges but child care that habitually impeded her progress. To deal with her irregular night and weekend schedule, Huerta relied on her mother for assistance and then, after Alicia’s death, on a steady succession of relatives and live-in help. Although she took great pride in her large family, the continual juggling frequently exasperated her and forced her to cancel, reorganize, and postpone plans. “So help me, César, without someone to watch my kids,” she lamented, “I just can’t find enough time to work, especially in the evenings when it counts.”

Arranging for child care caused her considerable stress throughout her long career.

Despite her difficult balancing act, Huerta persisted in her commitment to the NFWA. She and Chávez collaborated on its incorporation, constitution, organizing strategies, group insurance plan, credit union, fund-raising, and political tactics. Repeatedly, Huerta sought advice from her networks of contacts in northern California and conveyed information and made recommendations to Chávez. She regularly traveled to Delano for board meetings.
Huerta and Chávez had developed a dynamic partnership. Although disagreements arose, they had a comfortable working relationship, displayed mutual respect, and shared an unshakable commitment to unionizing farmworkers. Over the three years that Huerta remained in Stockton, from time to time Chávez broached the subject of her relocation to Delano to work with him, Manuel Chávez, Gilbert Padilla, Anthony Orendain, and others. Initially resisting, she finally agreed that the union's success required a more intensive effort in the southern San Joaquin Valley. Huerta waited until summer. Even then she found it difficult to leave her extended family and social network in Stockton to start the search for housing and child care and to resettle her children. The family lived temporarily in the crowded Chávez household until she found her own accommodations.

With the shift to Delano promising greater efficiency, direction, and focus for building the NFWA, Chávez and Huerta and a small core of loyal supporters prepared to launch a coordinated drive to change the lives of farmworkers—a moment that arrived much sooner than they had dreamed possible. The turning point came when the rival AFL-CIO-sponsored AWOC, recently established in California with a predominantly Filipino membership, went on strike and asked the NFWA to honor its actions. The consequent cooperation resulted in the now famous Delano grape strike of 1965, the subsequent creation of the United Farm Workers' Organizing Committee, and the beginning of new era in the life of Dolores Huerta.

Her years of work had prepared Huerta to assume a highly visible role in the farmworkers' struggle. "Virtually all observers on the scene at that time," wrote a news reporter who followed events, "were convinced that next to Chávez, Dolores Huerta... was the top leader of the union." As vice president of the organization and the only female elected official, she participated in all policymaking and strategy sessions and also helped to implement decisions. Her talents and energy and the critical need for leadership, as the fledgling union was thrust into national headlines, outweighed conventional gender expectations.

With apparent disregard for personal comfort and for the impact of her absences on her family, she plunged into a whirlwind of activities organizing workers, leading picket lines, participating in marches,
and undergoing arrest (not only in 1965 but during more than a decade of the social upheavals of the civil rights era). Along with these activities, Huerta kept the grape strike before a public increasingly receptive to the message of social justice and reform. Her heavy speaking schedule necessitated frequent separations from her children, whom she left with family, friends, or union supporters—usually without advance notice. Like Chávez, she was in constant demand as a speaker. Her facility with language, fast talking, and quick thinking made her a natural choice. Her uniqueness as a Mexican American woman in a male-dominated movement attracted additional public attention from the press—a case where gender operated to her advantage. The photogenic Huerta, with her dynamic and intense personality, recruited many dedicated supporters for the union and generated needed funds for the strained union budget.

When months of picketing resulted in recognition of the union by one local grower, Huerta assumed an additional responsibility. While the strike continued against the majority of grape ranches, Huerta engaged in the collective bargaining process. Contemporary observers on the scene noted that Chávez left the negotiations to her. A protracted and grueling process, contract deliberations required her to put in long hours hammering out agreements with the highly experienced lawyers employed by agribusiness. As the union’s first contract negotiator, founder of that department, and director in its early years, Huerta left a lasting contribution at a critical juncture in the union’s history.

Against seemingly insurmountable odds, the NFWA had succeeded in bringing together in a union what some had considered an “unorganizable” work force. Such solidarity was especially astonishing because agricultural producers had often used racial and ethnic tensions to divide the Mexican American, Mexican-born, Filipino, Yemeni, and black workers who regularly traveled up and down the state following the harvest. Without the additional cooperation of socially conscious middle-class white supporters, to whom union leaders such as Huerta appealed, the political and economic power of growers might have thwarted this unionization effort.

Growers fought back, enlisting the support of federal and state governments to protect their interests. They employed high-priced
lawyers to argue for injunctions against the union and limitations on picketing. To undermine the union's position further, they set up company unions and negotiated sweetheart contracts with the Teamsters. Union leaders and workers were not easily intimidated by growers' tactics, however.

The social movement origins of the NFWA in the 1960s and its cross-cultural, cross-race coalition set it apart from earlier, failed collective bargaining campaigns. The show of solidarity lent the union's cause important strength and visibility outside of California. As workers demonstrated growing confidence in the ability of the union to deliver on its promises by joining the effort, union contracts significantly altered the balance of power between agribusiness and agricultural labor. In addition to wage increases and the establishment of a seniority system, workers now received vacation, health, and pension benefits. The union health plan was named after the slain civil rights hero, Martin Luther King Jr.

Still, despite successful negotiations with some companies, including major wineries, many grape growers continued to resist union demands for contracts. To counter this intransigence, the union resorted to the boycott to pressure uncooperative producers. Huerta became a prominent player in this strategy when she assumed the directorship of the table-grape boycott in New York City, and then a position as the East Coast boycott coordinator. "When we got to New York," she vividly remembered, "it was something like four or five degrees above zero." Undeterred, she and the busload of some forty farmworkers and a small group of student volunteers accustomed to the mild California climate immediately got to work. As Huerta delivered speeches to labor, church, student, civic, consumer, African American, Puerto Rican, and women's organizations, her colleagues passed around lists to recruit picketers and collected contributions. Gaining experience and confidence in the Big Apple, members of the initial contingent fanned out to other major cities across the East Coast and the nation.

In New York, Huerta also became increasingly aware of the power of the growing feminist movement through her contacts with Gloria Steinem and other activists who endorsed the farmworkers' cause. For years she had dismissed the women's liberation movement as a
middle-class phenomenon. She had ignored comments and gender bias directed at her and other women by male colleagues. Increasingly, though, she became sensitized to the sexism in her own organization and directly challenged inappropriate remarks and stereotypes. She also began to voice her concerns regarding the absence of women from leadership positions in the organization and, further, questioned the clustering of women in traditional union work such as service centers and administration. She argued that women’s opinions and issues, such as child care and sexual harassment, should be taken seriously by the union. Under the influence of feminist leaders, Huerta began to incorporate a feminist strand into her human rights philosophy.

Through Huerta’s and her colleagues’ work with women’s groups, civil rights volunteers, ethnic organizations, church supporters, students, environmentalists, antiwar activists, and the labor community, the recognition of the farmworkers’ movement grew. Five years after the Delano strike began, the power of this grassroots, cross-class, and cross-cultural coalition across the nation finally compelled the Delano and Coachella grape growers to negotiate the historic contracts of 1970. But the struggle against the entrenched power of agriculture was not over. Before the union could fully savor its accomplishment, it had to go through the lettuce, Gallo wine, and table-grape boycotts of the 1970s. Huerta’s energy, organizing expertise, and legendary speaking abilities advanced the cause of the union (now officially known as the United Farm Workers of America—the UFW) when she returned to the East Coast to oversee the New York effort. The pressure of the renewed cross-class and cross-cultural cooperation in New York and in other major cities across the United States facilitated the passage of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act (ALRA) in 1975, the first law to recognize the collective bargaining rights of farm laborers in California. It was during this decade that the UFW reached its highest level of union membership. According to union estimates, 100,000 workers became members.

In the midst of the boycott, the political campaign for the ALRA, a heavy travel itinerary, and an ambitious speaking schedule, Huerta began a relationship with Richard Chávez, César’s brother. This liaison produced four more children—Juanita, María Elena, Ricky, and Camilla—bringing the total number of her children to eleven. Huerta
not only faced criticism for her casual attitudes toward child-rearing but also for her unorthodox cohabitation arrangement with Richard. “I think had it not been for the women’s movement,” she conceded, “I never would have had the courage to do what I did to get involved with him.” Although family, friends, and union officials frowned on this unconventional relationship, it persisted.

Not even her new domestic responsibilities slowed Huerta down. During the late 1970s she accepted the directorship of the Citizenship Participation Day Department, the political arm of the UFW, and spearheaded the union’s drive to protect the new farm labor law in the legislative arena in Sacramento. In the 1980s the UFW became even more involved in California politics when Republican governorn George Deukmejian won election with the backing of corporate agriculture. During these difficult years, Huerta began devoting time to another ambitious UFW overture: the founding of Radio Campesina, the union's radio station, KUFW. But declining membership, a problem that the UFW shared with other unions in the antiumion environment of the Reagan era, frustrated leaders and supporters alike. Huerta maintained her ambitious schedule and accommodated numerous speaking engagements, fund-raising activities, publicity for the renewed grape boycott, and testimony before state and Congressional committees on a wide range of matters including pesticides, wages, benefits, the health problems of agricultural workers, Mexican American political issues, and immigration policy.

Huerta’s dedication to the UFW exacted a personal price. Not only was she arrested more than twenty times but she also suffered a life threatening injury in a 1988 peaceful demonstration against the priorities of presidential candidate George H. W. Bush, who was campaigning in San Francisco. Rushed to a local hospital after an assault by baton-wielding police officers, Huerta underwent emergency surgery in which her spleen was removed, then endured a protracted hospital stay recovering from the operation and six broken ribs. As reported in a 1991 story in the Los Angeles Times, the incident forced the police department to revise its rules regarding crowd control and police discipline. Another repercussion was the $825,000 financial settlement to Huerta as a consequence of the personal harm she sustained.
Slowly recuperating from this serious impairment to her health, Huerta took a leave from the UFW to work on the Feminist Majority's Feminization of Power campaign. For two years she traveled around the United States encouraging Latinas to run for office, fulfilling a long delayed desire to increase ethnic women's visibility and representation in the political system. Though stunned by the premature death of César Chávez in 1993, she jumped back into union organizing. In addition to campaigning for California's strawberry workers, she resumed an active schedule of lecturing on college campuses, attending union conferences, participating in political rallies, and testifying before congressional committees.

Not until 2000, after nearly four decades of activism, did the 70-year old Huerta begin to moderate her intense involvement. She continued to speak on behalf of farm laborers, worked in the presidential campaign of Al Gore, and steadfastly advocated for women's needs, but she chose not to seek reelection as the UFW secretary-treasurer. Not long after making this decision, she was hospitalized in critical condition, diagnosed with an abdominal aneurysm that required massive blood transfusions. She underwent emergency surgery and was later transferred to Los Angeles for additional treatment. Her family cited her "fighting spirit" as a reason for her recovery.

Huerta's lifelong dedication to social change has earned her many tributes and awards from labor, women's, Hispanic, and political groups. She was named Outstanding Labor Leader by the California state senate in 1984. In 1998 she was celebrated as one of Ms. Magazine's "Women of the Year" and one of the Ladies' Home Journal's "100 Most Important Women of the 20th Century." Huerta received the prestigious Hispanic Heritage Award in 2000, and President Bill Clinton bestowed on her the Eleanor Roosevelt Award for Human Rights.

Always outspoken and frequently criticized for her unorthodox personal life, Huerta has left an indelible and complicated legacy to the farmworkers' movement. Often stung by Huerta's reproaches for gender bias, UFW leaders have nevertheless praised her single-minded devotion to social and economic change and hailed her as a model for others. "While few, if any, can fill her shoes," noted Paul Chávez, son of the late organizer, "many will follow in her footsteps." For women,
particularly Chicanas and Mexicanas in the union, Huerta has left a powerful example. "It was Dolores who showed us not to be afraid to fight for a better life for ourselves and our children," noted one farm-worker woman in her fitting tribute to the retiring labor activist, "and she did it at a time when women didn't have a voice."26

Notes

1. Dolores Huerta, speech delivered at the University of California, Los Angeles, February 11, 1978, text held at the school's Chicano Studies Center.


5. Ibid.


7. Quoted in Baer, 39.


11. Ibid.


16. Ibid.

Appendix D:


16 April 1963
My Dear Fellow Clergymen:
While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.

I think I should indicate why I am here in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the view which argues against "outsiders coming in." I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some eighty five affiliated organizations across the South, and one of them is the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Frequently we share staff, educational and financial resources with our affiliates. Several months ago the affiliate here in Birmingham asked us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily consented, and when the hour came we lived up to our promise. So I, along with several members of my staff, am here because I was invited here. I am here because I have organizational ties here.

But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.

You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes. It is unfortunate that
demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative.

In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self purification; and direct action. We have gone through all these steps in Birmingham. There can be no gainsaying the fact that racial injustice engulfs this community. Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of brutality is widely known. Negroes have experienced grossly unjust treatment in the courts. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in the nation. These are the hard, brutal facts of the case. On the basis of these conditions, Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But the latter consistently refused to engage in good faith negotiation.

You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension." I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. The purpose of our direct action program is to create a situation so crisis packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. I therefore concur with you in your call for negotiation. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue.

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was "well timed" in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old
daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five year old son who is asking: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"--then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience. You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, at first glance it may seem rather paradoxical for us consciously to break laws. One may well ask: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "an unjust law is no law at all."

Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. Segregation, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, substitutes an "I it" relationship for an "I thou" relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. Hence segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and sinful. Paul Tillich has said that sin is separation. Is not segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation, his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? Thus it is that I can urge men to obey the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court, for it is morally right; and I can urge them to disobey segregation ordinances, for they are morally wrong.

Let us consider a more concrete example of just and unjust laws. An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself. This is difference made legal. By the same token, a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow and that it is willing to follow itself. This is sameness made legal. Let me give another explanation. A law is unjust if it is inflicted on a minority that, as a result of
being denied the right to vote, had no part in enacting or devising the law. Who can say that the legislature of Alabama which set up that state's segregation laws was democratically elected? Throughout Alabama all sorts of devious methods are used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters, and there are some counties in which, even though Negroes constitute a majority of the population, not a single Negro is registered. Can any law enacted under such circumstances be considered democratically structured?

Sometimes a law is just on its face and unjust in its application. For instance, I have been arrested on a charge of parading without a permit. Now, there is nothing wrong in having an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade. But such an ordinance becomes unjust when it is used to maintain segregation and to deny citizens the First-Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and protest.

I hope you are able to see the distinction I am trying to point out. In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law, as would the rabid segregationist. That would lead to anarchy. One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.

Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was evidenced sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar, on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree, academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience. In our own nation, the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience.

We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal." It was "illegal" to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany. Even so, I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers. If today I lived in a Communist country where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I would openly advocate disobeying that country's antireligious laws.

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute
misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension in the South is a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, in which the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substantive and positive peace, in which all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.

In your statement you assert that our actions, even though peaceful, must be condemned because they precipitate violence. But is this a logical assertion? Isn't this like condemning a robbed man because his possession of money precipitated the evil act of robbery? Isn't this like condemning Socrates because his unswerving commitment to truth and his philosophical inquiries precipitated the act by the misguided populace in which they made him drink hemlock? Isn't this like condemning Jesus because his unique God consciousness and never ceasing devotion to God's will precipitated the evil act of crucifixion? We must come to see that, as the federal courts have consistently affirmed, it is wrong to urge an individual to cease his efforts to gain his basic constitutional rights because the quest may precipitate violence. Society must protect the robbed and punish the robber. I had also hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth concerning time in relation to the struggle for freedom. I have just received a letter from a white brother in Texas. He writes: "All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity almost two thousand years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth." Such an attitude stems from a tragic misconception of time, from the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time itself is neutral; it can be used either destructively or constructively. More and more I feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than have the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity….

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself, and that is what has happened to the American Negro. Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom, and something without has reminded him that it can
be gained. Consciously or unconsciously, he has been caught up by the Zeitgeist, and with his black brothers of Africa and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America and the Caribbean, the United States Negro is moving with a sense of great urgency toward the promised land of racial justice. If one recognizes this vital urge that has engulfed the Negro community, one should readily understand why public demonstrations are taking place. The Negro has many pent up resentments and latent frustrations, and he must release them. So let him march; let him make prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; let him go on freedom rides—and try to understand why he must do so. If his repressed emotions are not released in nonviolent ways, they will seek expression through violence; this is not a threat but a fact of history. So I have not said to my people: "Get rid of your discontent." Rather, I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channeled into the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action. And now this approach is being termed extremist. But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God." And John Bunyan: "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." And Abraham Lincoln: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." And Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal . . ." So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime—the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

I had hoped that the white moderate would see this need. Perhaps I was too optimistic; perhaps I expected too much. I suppose I should have realized that few members of the oppressor race can understand the deep groans and passionate yearnings of the oppressed race, and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action. I am thankful, however, that some of our white brothers in the South have grasped the meaning of this social revolution and committed themselves to it. They are still all too few in quantity, but they are big in quality. Some—such as Ralph McGill, Lillian Smith, Harry Golden, James McBride Dabbs, Ann Braden and Sarah Patton Boyle—have written about our struggle in eloquent and prophetic terms. Others have marched with us down nameless streets of the South. They have languished in filthy, roach infested jails, suffering the abuse and brutality of policemen who view them as "dirty nigger-lovers." Unlike so many of their moderate brothers and sisters, they have recognized the urgency of the moment and sensed the need for powerful "action" antidotes to combat the disease of segregation. Let me take note of my other major disappointment. I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership. Of course, there are some notable exceptions. I am not unmindful of the fact that each of you has taken some significant stands on this issue. I commend you, Reverend Stallings, for your
Christian stand on this past Sunday, in welcoming Negroes to your worship service on a nonsegregated basis. I commend the Catholic leaders of this state for integrating Spring Hill College several years ago.…

Never before have I written so long a letter. I'm afraid it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else can one do when he is alone in a narrow jail cell, other than write long letters, think long thoughts and pray long prayers?

If I have said anything in this letter that overstates the truth and indicates an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything that understates the truth and indicates my having a patience that allows me to settle for anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me.

I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil-rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood, Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Appendix E:


Good Friday 1969.
E. L. Barr, Jr., President
California Grape and Tree Fruit League
717 Market St.
San Francisco, California

Dear Mr. Barr:
I am sad to hear about your accusations in the press that our union movement and table grape boycott have been successful because we have used violence and terror tactics. If what you say is true, I have been a failure and should withdraw from the struggle; but you are left with the awesome moral responsibility, before God and man, to come forward with whatever information you have so that corrective action can begin at once. If for any reason you fail to come forth to substantiate your charges, then you must be held responsible for committing violence against us, albeit violence of the tongue. I am convinced that you as a human being did not mean what you said but rather acted hastily under pressure from the public relations firm that has been hired to try to counteract the tremendous moral force of our movement. How many times we ourselves have felt the need to lash out in anger and bitterness.

Today on Good Friday 1969 we remember the life and the sacrifice of Martin Luther King, Jr., who gave himself totally to the nonviolent struggle for peace and justice. In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” Dr. King describes better than I could our hopes for the strike and boycott: “Injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.” For our part I admit that we have seized upon every tactic and strategy consistent with the morality of our cause to expose that injustice and thus to heighten the sensitivity of the American conscience so that farm workers will have without bloodshed their own union and the dignity of bargaining with their agribusiness employers. By lying about the nature of our movement, Mr. Barr, you are working against nonviolent social change. Unwittingly perhaps, you may unleash that other force which our union by discipline and deed, censure and education has sought to avoid, that panacean shortcut: that senseless violence which honors no color, class or neighborhood.

You must understand—I must make you understand—that our membership and the hopes and aspirations of the hundreds of thousands of the poor and dispossessed that have been raised on our account are, above all, human beings, no better and no worse than any other cross-section of human society; we are not saints because we are poor, but by the same measure neither are we immoral. We are men and women who have suffered and endured much, and not only because of our abject poverty but because we have been kept poor. The colors of our skins, the languages of our cultural and native origins, the lack of formal education, the exclusion from the democratic process, the numbers of our slain in recent wars—all these burdens generation after generation have sought to demoralize us, to break our human spirit. But God knows that we are not beasts of burden, agricultural implements or rented slaves; we are men. And mark this well, Mr. Barr, we
are men locked in a death struggle against man’s inhumanity to man in the industry that you represent. And this struggle itself gives meaning to our life and ennobles our dying.

As your industry has experienced, our strikers here in Delano and those who represent us throughout the world are well trained for this struggle. They have been under the gun, they have been kicked and beaten and herded by dogs, they have been cursed and ridiculed, they have been stripped and chained and jailed, they have been sprayed with the poisons used in the vineyards; but they have been taught not to lie down and die nor to flee in shame, but to resist with every ounce of human endurance and spirit. To resist not with retaliation in kind but to overcome with love and compassion, with ingenuity and creativity, with hard work and longer hours, with stamina and patient tenacity, with truth and public appeal, with friends and allies, with mobility and discipline, with politics and law, and with prayer and fasting. They were not trained in a month or even a year; after all, this new harvest season will mark our fourth full year of strike and even now we continue to plan and prepare for the years to come. Time accomplishes for the poor what money does for the rich.

This is not to pretend that we have everywhere been successful enough or that we have not made mistakes. And while we do not belittle or underestimate our adversaries—for they are the rich and the powerful and they possess the land—we are not afraid nor do we cringe from the confrontation. We welcome it! We have planned for it. We know that our cause is just, that history is a story of social revolution, and that the poor shall inherit the land.

Once again, I appeal to you as the representative of your industry and as a man. I ask you to recognize and bargain with our union before the economic pressure of the boycott and strike takes an irrevocable toll; but if not, I ask you to at least sit down with us to discuss the safeguards necessary to keep our historical struggle free of violence. I make this appeal because as one of the leaders of our nonviolent movement, I know and accept my responsibility for preventing, if possible, the destruction of human life and property. For these reasons and knowing of Gandhi’s admonition that fasting is the last resort in place of the sword, during a most critical time in our movement last February 1968 I undertook a 25-day fast. I repeat to you the principle enunciated to the membership at the start of the fast: if to build our union required the deliberate taking of life, either the life of a grower or his child, or the life of a farm worker or his child, then I choose not to see the union built.

Mr. Barr, let me be painfully honest with you. You must understand these things. We advocate militant nonviolence as our means for social revolution and to achieve justice for our people, but we are not blind or deaf to the desperate and moody winds of human frustration, impatience and rage that blow among us. Gandhi himself admitted that if his only choice were cowardice or violence, he would choose violence. Men are not angels, and time and tide wait for no man. Precisely because of these powerful human emotions, we have tried to involve masses of people in their own struggle. Participation and self-determination remain the best experience of freedom, and free men instinctively prefer democratic change and even protect the rights guaranteed to seek it. Only the enslaved in despair have need of violent overthrow.

This letter does not express all that is in my heart, Mr. Barr. But if it says nothing else it says that we do not hate you or rejoice to see your industry destroyed; we hate the agribusiness system that seeks to keep us enslaved, and we shall overcome and change it not by retaliation or
bloodshed but by a determined nonviolent struggle carried on by those masses of farm workers who intend to be free and human.

Sincerely yours,
Cesar E. Chavez
United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, A.F.L.-C.I.O.
Delano, California.