

A LIFETIME OF LABOR ACTIVISM: DOLORES HUERTA AND THE UNITED
FARM WORKERS

by

MARGARET JEAN PENA HARDEN

(Under the Direction of Bryant Simon)

ABSTRACT

Biographical perspective of Dolores Huerta, cofounder and first vice president of the United Farm Workers (UFW). Unlike her compatriot César Chávez, Huerta has received scant attention for her work on behalf of farm workers. What has been written tends to portray her as one dimensional and does not adequately address her leadership role within the union. To rectify these omissions, this thesis focuses on Huerta's contributions to the union in light of her life experiences as whole. It briefly covers her childhood and young adulthood, 1930-1950, then moves on to her life as a political and social activist in the 1950s and 1960s. Huerta contributed a tremendous amount to the UFW. She was extremely devoted and intimately involved in everything from membership recruitment to political lobbying. Her life experiences are critical to understanding her work and provide an important perspective in evaluating the decisions she made as a leader.

INDEX WORDS: César Chávez, Chicano, Dolores Huerta, United Farm Workers, Mexican-American, Unionization of Agricultural Workers in California

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
INTRODUCTION	1
1 PREFACE TO A LIFE OF LABOR	11
2 DOLORES HUERTA AND THE UFW	31
CONCLUSION	57
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	68

INTRODUCTION

In 1964 political activist and labor organizer Dolores Huerta wrote to one potential volunteer, “I believe we are all . . . ‘hijos de la mal vida,’ . . . we like to suffer thatis [*sic*] why we cling to lost causes and make the[m] victorias [*sic*].”¹ At the time Huerta had been involved in community and civic activism for more than seven years. Yet she was barely beginning what would become a lifetime commitment to the unionization of farm workers. Although the general tone of the letter was upbeat, it was hardly encouraging. Huerta was realistic in her depiction of the infant Farm Workers Association (FWA) that she and the illustrious César Chávez had founded scarcely two years before.² She called their organization “the poverty club” and warned “Our work here is not glamorous and it is just that ‘work.’”³ At the same time she expressed her own strong commitment and belief that they would indeed be victorious.

¹Dolores Huerta to Eugene Nelson, 15 Dec. 1964, National Farm Workers Association Collection (hereafter NFWA), box 1, folder 2, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit MI (hereafter ALUA).

²The union now known as the United Farm Workers (UFW) has changed its name four times since its inception in 1962: from 1962 to 1964 it was the Farm Workers Association (FWA) or, as it was known to most of its constituents, *Asociación de Trabajadores Campesinos*; 1964 to 1966, the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA); 1966-1972, the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC); post 1972 United Farm Workers (UFW). Throughout this paper I will use the designation UFW except when in reference to specific historical circumstances. Similarly, I will refer to Dolores Huerta by the surname of her second husband, Ventura Huerta. This is the name that she has used continuously since this marriage and the name by which she is most well known. Prior to this marriage she was Dolores Fernández except for a brief period, 1950-1953, during her first marriage to Ralph Head.

³Dolores Huerta to Eugene Nelson, 15 Dec. 1964, NFWA, box 1, folder 2, ALUA.

Huerta was not being quixotic. In an arena where women, minorities, and agricultural workers are most notable for their absence, Huerta, Chávez, and the many others that would eventually join the United Farm Workers (UFW), as it would later be known, managed to organize all three. They did what neither the 1940s era National Farm Labor Union (NFLU), nor their own contemporary the AFL-CIO's Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) could do. They successfully organized many of the more than 400,000 migrant farm workers in California.⁴ Through a combination of overt political engagement such as strikes, boycotts, and lobbying, and community services like credit unions and car insurance, the union altered the conditions under which migrant farm laborers both lived and worked, changing their political consciousness and more widely that of the Mexican-American community in the southwest.⁵ Although the union's long term success is questionable, by the end of the 1960s, after less than ten years of organizing, the UFW had clearly become a catalyst for change and a symbol of La Raza, the then emergent overtly political Chicano movement in the United States. Chávez

⁴For a clear and succinct catalogue of all the agricultural workers' unions in California in the 20th century see Marshall Ganz "Resources and Resourcefulness: Strategic Capacity in the Unionization of California Agriculture: 1959-1966," *American Journal of Sociology* 105, 4 (Jan. 2000): 1003-1004. Ganz's primary concern is with the success of the UFW as compared to the failure of the AWOC in particular. For a rather vivid description of the IWW's struggles in this regard see Greg Hall, *Harvest Wobblies: The Industrial Workers of the World and Agricultural Laborers in the American West, 1905-1930* (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 2001), and Jacques Levy *Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1975), 153. The story of the NFLU's struggle is told in J. Craig Jenkins *The Politics of Insurgency: The Farm Worker Movement in the 1960s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 86-113.

⁵This impact has been noted widely in Chicano literature, see for example: Ramon A. Gutierrez, "Community, Patriarchy and Individualism: The Politics of Chicano History and the Dream of Equality," *American Quarterly* 45, 1 (Mar. 1993): 45; and Josephine Mendez-Negrete, "Awareness, Consciousness, and Resistance: Raced, Classed, and Gendered Leadership Interactions in Milagro County, California," *Frontiers* 20, 1 (1999): 25-26.

specifically would be credited with raising the political consciousness of Mexican-Americans in California and throughout the southwestern United States.

Marshall Ganz, an informed sociologist and one time UFW staffer, has argued that the UFW was successful because of its “leaders’ access to salient information . . . heuristic use of this information, and their motivation.” This is all in turn a product of their “life experience, networks, and repertoires of collective action.”⁶ In other words, the success of the UFW cannot be understood without understanding its leadership and their life experiences. Chávez himself echoed Ganz’s analysis albeit more broadly. He claimed that the UFW succeeded because the individuals involved, in all levels of the organization, brought a range of critical perspectives to organizing.⁷ Any text that attempts to explain the trajectory and the success of the UFW must focus on the contributions of all of its leaders as well as the membership.

In this respect, Huerta can provide important insights into the union because she has continuously been a critical part of the UFW’s leadership while maintaining close ties to its constituency. She was, after all, involved in the union from day one and her contributions as a leader were often decisive in determining strategy. As Chávez himself would say “Dolores and I were the architects” of the UFW.⁸ Huerta did everything from the basics of canvassing for members and writing bylaws to lobbying and organizing key boycott efforts. She was an effective and influential, albeit seldom publicly recognized, leader who brought considerable skills and expertise to the union. Huerta was always

⁶Ganz, 1005.

⁷César Chávez qt. in Levy, 197.

⁸Levy, 166.

involved in key decision making and strategizing sessions. As the UFW's chief contract negotiator she drew up and arranged the first multi-year union contract to cover California farm workers. She was also an adept, practiced and well-connected organizer. As a result of her work with the Agricultural Workers Association (AWA), the Community Service Organization (CSO) and the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) in the 1950s, Huerta had acquired experience as well as personal contacts and political resources at local, state, and even national levels. She was also an important figure in the eyes of the union's membership, frequently taking a leading role as the main speaker at rallies and general meetings. At the same time, while Chávez became increasingly removed from the membership, Huerta stayed intimately involved. She had a very personal perspective because even as the UFW grew she continued to deal with members individually, helping them apply for welfare benefits and depending on them for her own child care needs.

It was not just these concrete skills and connections that made Huerta valuable to the union. One of her most important assets, and sometimes Achilles' heel, was her religiously inspired zeal and devotion to *La Causa*. Once she started organizing, she gave up a steady well paying job, a stable home and family to put in eighteen hour days and subsist on hand-me-downs, canned food, and a \$5.00 per week stipend.⁹ She was unflagging despite overwhelmingly adverse circumstances. Huerta could do this in part because of her own sense of mission and religiosity. She had a certain religious fatalism, believing that she was put on this earth to help farm workers. At the same time, it should be noted that for her the union became a catalyst for and an escape from a sometimes turbulent and unfulfilling personal life.

⁹Jean Murphy, "Unsung Heroine of La Causa," *Regeneración* 1, 10 (1971), 20.

Despite all of this, Huerta has received scant attention for her efforts. The extensive literature available on the UFW tends to treat Huerta only briefly, focusing instead on either the dynamic leadership of Chávez or the success of the union in the light of previous failures to organize migrant labor.¹⁰ Even Marshall Ganz, mentioned above in relation to his theory on the UFW's success, who emphasizes the importance of "the interaction" among leaders in their "formulation" of strategy and eventual success, fails to adequately evaluate the specific contributions that Huerta and other leaders made.¹¹ The little written about Huerta is from either the popular press, magazine articles and even a children's book, or it is unpublished.¹² In both these accounts there is an understandable

¹⁰This emphasis is due in part to the fact that the literature of the UFW as a whole is dominated by sociological texts, hence the focus on success, and those done by journalists, hence the focus on Chávez. For texts that tend to focus on Chávez see Mark Day *Forty Acres: Cesar Chavez and the Farm Workers*, w/ an intro. by Cesar Chavez (New York: Preager Publishers, 1971); John Gregory Dunne *Delano*, revised and updated, w/ photographs by Ted Streshinsky (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1971); Susan Ferris and Ricardo Sandoval, *The Fight in the Fields: Cesar Chavez and the Farmworkers Movement*, Diana Hembree ed., & Michele McKenzie Photo. ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1997); Paul Fusco and George D. Horowitz, *La Causa: The California Grape Strike* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1970); Levy *Cesar Chavez*; Joan London and Henry Anderson, *So Shall Ye Reap* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1970); Peter Mathiessen *Sal Si Puedes: Cesar Chavez and the New American Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1969); Ronald B. Taylor, *Chavez and the Farm Workers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975). For those that focus more on the relative success of the UFW see Ganz "Resources and Resourcefulness," Jenkins *Politics of Insurgency*; Linda C. Majka & Theo J. Majka *Farm Workers, Agribusiness, and the State* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1982); Dick Meister and Anne Loftis *A Long Time Coming: The Struggle to unionize America's Farm Workers* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1977).

¹¹Ganz, "Resources and Resourcefulness . . .," 1015.

¹²For a more complete list see the selected bibliography. Some of the more notable pieces on Huerta are Julie Felner, "January/February Women of the Year: Dolores Huerta, For a lifetime of labor championing the rights of farmworkers." *Ms.* [online version] available through the UFW web site <<http://ufw.org/ms.htm>> (accessed 26 Feb. 2002); Frank Perez, *Dolores Huerta*. Contemporary Hispanic Americans series (Austin, TX: Raintree Steck-Vaughn Publishers, 1996); Nannette Stephanie Romero, "The Ballad of Dolores Huerta: Heroine of La Causa," (M.A. thesis, Sarah Lawrence University, 1977); Margaret Rose, "Women in the United Farm Workers: A Study of Chicana and Mexicana Participation in a labor union 1950-1980," (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Los Angeles, 1983); Rose, "Dolores Huerta (1930-): Labor Leader, Social Activist," *Notable Hispanic American Women*, Diane Telgen and Jim Kemp, eds., w/ forward by Graciela Beecher (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1993): 210-214; Rose, Rose, "César Chávez and Dolores Huerta: Partners in 'La Causa,'" *César Chávez: A Brief Biography with Documents* ed. w/ an intro. by Richard W. Etulain (Boston & New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2002): 95-106; *Women of Hope: Latinas Abriendo Camino: 12 groundbreaking women*. 29 min. film (Princeton, NJ: Bread and Roses (continued...))

tendency to depict Huerta as purely exceptional. After all, individuals are usually singled out for accolades not for their uniformity, but their singularity. Huerta is repeatedly portrayed as “groundbreaking” and “valiant” where most Mexican-American women are timid traditionalists.¹³ This is especially true of the work done by Margaret Rose, the “leading authority” on women in the farm workers movement and the only academic to write extensively about Huerta.¹⁴ Rose views Huerta as a proto-feminist, an exception to the rule in terms of the way in which women participated in the UFW. Huerta is the radical Chicana in contrast to the larger more conservative body of Mexicana participants. Rose specifically compares Huerta to Chávez’s wife Helen. Helen Chávez took primary care of her and Chávez’s children, ran their household, and even worked in the fields to support him while he organized. Unlike Huerta, Helen did not want to be actively involved in the union. Nannette Romero’s more hagiographic account of Huerta’s life, a master’s thesis, is quite similar.¹⁵ Huerta is seen as breaking the mold, moving into traditional male spheres of power and transforming them, doing things that Mexican-American Women simply did not do.

There is little denying the uniqueness of Huerta as a powerful and effective figure in a culture where women were relatively unknown for their strength within the public

¹²(...continued)

Project, Films for the Humanities, 1996).

¹³Miguel Francisco Barragon, “Mujeres Valientes/Valient [*sic*] Women,” *Si Se Puede*, compact disc. (Bronze Artists Music [ASCAP], 1976); Murphy, “Unsung Heroine of La Causa,” 20; Romero, “The Ballad of Dolores Huerta,” **PAGE #**, *Women of Hope*

¹⁴qt. fr. Richard W. Etulain ed., *César Chávez: A Brief Biography with Documents* ed. w/ an intro. by Richard W. Etulain (Boston & New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2002), 95; Rose, “Women in the UFW;” Rose, “Dolores Huerta (1930-);” Rose, “Traditional and Nontraditional”; Rose, “César Chávez and Dolores Huerta.”

¹⁵Romero.

sphere. Although Mexican-American women are noted for joining unions and being activists, this activism was usually tightly circumscribed. One telling example relates an incident in 1970 where women had taken over the leadership of the campus Chicano student group at San Diego State University. As they prepared for a visit by the national Chicano leader Corky Gonzalez, they decided that as it would be “improper and embarrassing” for him to see that “the leadership was female . . . only males would be the visible representatives for the occasion.”¹⁶ A contemporary editorial noted that there were “too few organizations in the Mexican Communities in which women play a significant role” and that in “too many” organizations “they are the unsung unrecognized workhorses who provide cohesion . . . while the men parade their ‘leadership.’”¹⁷ Accordingly it is not that Huerta’s contemporaries were not taking on positions of leadership and activism inasmuch as they simply remained in the shadows. One historian has attributed this to the fact that Mexican-American women tend to exercise leadership in the realm of “culture and domestic everyday activities” where they tend to be neither “recognized nor valued.”¹⁸ And it is true that Mexican-American women are historically more evenly represented in community and social service organizations and activities than overtly political ones.

In contrast Huerta does appear to “break the mold” and move out of the shadows.

However, accounts such as Rose’s and Romero’s that focus exclusively on the exceptional

¹⁶Adelaida R. del Castillo, “Mexican Women in Organization,” in *Mexican Women in the United States*, eds. Magdalena Mora and Adelaida R. del Castillo (Los Angeles, 1980): 7-16, quote fr. 8, quoted in Ramon A. Gutierrez, “Community, Patriarchy and Individualism: The Politics of Chicano History and the Dream of Equality,” *American Quarterly* 45, 1 (Mar. 1993): 44-67, quote fr. 47-48.

¹⁷(editorial) *Regeneracion* 1, 10 (1971), i.

¹⁸Mendez-Negrete, 25.

nature of Huerta's life do so at the expense of both the conventional and the everyday. They fail to address the many ways in which her life paralleled that of other female Mexican-American activists. After all, Huerta, like so many others, has received short shrift for her efforts. Further, it was largely due to Huerta's experiences in social and community services that she was such a valuable asset to the UFW. On the personal side Huerta could be steadfastly traditional. This was in fact an integral part of her character, one that affected the most important facets of her life, from organizing to raising children. One of her contemporaries actually described her as a woman who belonged to "the older generation of Chicanas in her thinking, if not her actual age."¹⁹ Although she made this comment in the context of a discussion of Huerta's refusal to use birth control, it is very revealing. Huerta was intensely Catholic. This is an obvious explanation for the above, but it is also revealed in the multiple ways her faith served as a driving force in her life. She saw her role in the UFW and the farm workers' movement as something that God ordained, and accordingly something to which the people in her life would always have to take a backseat.

Huerta was neither simple nor one sided. Like most people her life was full of inconsistencies, conflicts, and contradictions. Her convictions and her identity have often led her in multiple directions at once. Even in the midst of pressing union activities Huerta found time for the things that she thought were important, arranging for the baptism of her children and being there when her own daughters gave birth to the next generation. Further, she was able to reconcile her faith with multiple marriages, only the first of which

¹⁹Barbara L. Bear, "Stopping Traffic: One Women's Cause," *The Progressive* 39, 9 (Sept. 1975): 38-40, quote fr. 40.

was sanctioned by the Church, one long-term affair, and children from all three. Huerta constructed and managed an identity that was complex and multidimensional, one that could encompass Roman Catholicism, *Mexicanidad*, single motherhood and political activism. It was also an identity that could be both entirely unique without being divorced from the ordinary and the everyday. For her, these were all of one piece. This is important because it affected her leadership as a political activist and founding member of the UFW. Only by analyzing Huerta from a more comprehensive perspective, one that takes into account her life experiences and the networks and repertoires she developed as an activist, can one truly understand her and the decisions that she made as a leader within the UFW.

This thesis will begin to do this. Accordingly, the primary focus will be on Huerta's formative years as a political activist, from the early 1950s through the 1960s. These were years in which her convictions as a political activist were in a formative stage, slowly solidifying such that by the late 1960s she had a clear-cut identity as a leader in the UFW. It was during this point in her life that Huerta seemed to choose which aspects of her culture she could afford, both personally and politically, to discard and, vice versa, which ones she had to keep. It was a time when different traits and strategies were successively tried on and cultivated or discarded in whole or in part, when skills were honed, and thus it is an especially good place to start understanding who Huerta was as a leader, what her contributions were to the UFW and why they were important.

The first chapter of this thesis will give the reader an overview of Huerta's life before 1962, the year in which the UFW was founded. It will briefly cover her childhood, her first experiences as a leader in social and community service organizations, and the

initial transformation she made into the political and consequently public spheres.

Huerta's initial efforts at political activism will be explored. Unlike in later years, Huerta took on roles in civic and community service organizations during this period while at the same time she began to develop a critically important reputation within the activist community in California. It was in large part this reputation that lead her into collusion with Chávez in 1962. A discussion of Huerta's role in the formation of the UFW from 1962 to 1966, spectacularly bad years for both her and the union, therefore forms the majority of the second chapter. 1962 was clearly a turning point in Huerta's life. The death of her mother and the dissolution of her second marriage were especially difficult for her and resulted in an increased devotion to her work as a now professional activist. She used the union to escape her troubled personal life, becoming increasingly active and politically influential at the state and national levels. Although the activist and leader that Huerta would later become are not fully developed during this period, these roles are clearly visible. The conclusion will then attempt to define who Huerta became as a leader and her contributions to the leadership of the UFW. By the 1970s she had constructed a readily identifiable public persona replete with distinct strategies that remained apparent throughout her years as an activist for both farm workers and more generally the underprivileged. Huerta would continue her work into the 1990s even as the playing field changed and other senior members of the UFW dropped from sight.

CHAPTER 1

PREFACE TO A LIFE OF LABOR

When community organizer Fred Ross met Dolores Huerta in Stockton, California, in 1955 she was barely twenty-five years old. Outside observers described her as “small,” and “slender,” “finely built” or “frail,” with an appearance more of “teen-ager [*sic*]” or “girl” than woman, wife, and mother of two young children, much less future Chicano leader and labor activist.¹ Yet it was obvious to him that she was one of those people of “a certain temperament,” those who “cannot live with themselves and see injustice in front of them,” who “go after it whenever they see it, no matter how much time it takes and no matter how many sleepless nights of worry.” Fred Ross was looking for organizers to start a Stockton chapter of the Community Service Organization (CSO) and Huerta seemed to fit the bill. Indeed, Huerta had been involved in various community service type organizations since high school and was ready for a more proactive approach to alleviating the problems of the poor and underprivileged. Three years and three children later, despite ongoing discouragement from both her husband and her priest, Huerta had just begun to prove Ross correct.² In 1958 she helped found the Agricultural Workers

¹Jacques E. Levy, *Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1975), 95. Meister, Dick, and Anne Loftis. *A Long Time Coming: The struggle to unionize America's Farm Workers* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1977, and London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1977); 117, Barbara L. Bear, “Stopping Traffic: One Woman’s Cause” *The Progressive* 39, 9 (Sept. 1975): 38.

²Margaret Rose, “Women in the United Farm Workers: A Study of Chicana and Mexicana (continued...) ”

Association (AWA). Within a year the AWA merged with the newly formed AFL-CIO's Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) and Huerta took on two positions with the union, one elected and one administrative, while at the same time remaining involved on a volunteer basis with Ross's own Community Service Organization (CSO). Although the AWA and the AWOC were more explicitly political than the CSO, all three organizations would be key training grounds for Huerta. She was able to build on previous experiences and skills, learning specific organizing and activist techniques that she would later utilize and refashion in the UFW. For Huerta this was merely the beginning.

Perhaps because Huerta herself has attached so much significance to this moment when Fred Ross entered her life, those that have attempted to narrate her story have done the same thing. Undoubtedly, it was a sort of turning point for her. When Ross explained to her what the CSO had been doing in Los Angeles, how they had "organized," "fought the police," "built health clinics," and "gotten people elected to office," Huerta responded with unequivocal enthusiasm. "I just felt like I had found a pot of gold! If organizing could make this happen, then this is definitely something that I want to be a part of."³ Huerta's experience with Fred Ross and the CSO was not simply a catalyst; it inspired change but it was also, as she would say, "something I had been looking for all my life."⁴

²(...continued)

Participation in a labor union 1950-1980" (Ph.D. diss. Univ. of Los Angeles, 1983), 36. Levy, 145.

³Susan Ferris and Ricardo Sandoval, *The Fight in the Fields: Cesar Chavez and the Farmworkers Movement*, Diana Hembree, ed., Michele McKenzie, photo ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1997), 61

⁴Ibid.

The aspects of her character that drew her to the farm workers' movement and made her such an effective leader were initially cultivated long before this juncture.

Huerta's early life experiences provided her with a specific paradigm through which she viewed the world and her role in it. Huerta was raised in a non-traditional, but strongly Catholic, Mexican-American family. Her mother, married off and on throughout Huerta's childhood, managed to imbue in Huerta a sense of confidence, of activism and most importantly of responsibility to help the underprivileged which was strongly tied to their Catholic faith. Huerta also spent her childhood intimately aware of the problems that farm workers specifically faced. Although it is unlikely that these experiences alone would have driven her into the farm workers' movement, they nevertheless provided an important background for her activism.

Although Huerta was born in Dawson, New Mexico in April of 1930, her mother, Alicia Fernández, moved the family to California after divorcing Huerta's father, Juan Fabián Fernández, in 1933. Like many other migrants, the then pregnant Alicia was drawn by the supposedly greater economic opportunities California had to offer. Stockton was the town of choice primarily because she already had family there.⁵ It also promised the availability of relatively stable work despite the depression. Located to the north of the center of the "agricultural belt" in the San Joaquin Valley, Stockton was surrounded by a variety of agricultural enterprises which provided seasonal work on a rotating basis throughout the year.

⁵Alicia's maiden name was Alicia St. John Chávez, but she kept her first husband's name after their divorce, Rose, "Women in the UFW . . .," 18-21, 23, & 54, n11.

Life was initially difficult. Alicia worked wherever she could, as a waitress, in canneries, occasionally supplementing her income with seasonal farm work. Her father (Huerta's grandfather) stayed home and took care of the kids. However, by the time Huerta was in her early teens her mother had remarried. Alicia's new husband, James Richards, owned a small hotel/ boardinghouse. Although they quickly divorced, Alicia remained in control of the Richards' Hotel and, after 1945 she was able to lease another, the Center Hotel.⁶ The hotels provided the family with economic stability and a relatively middle class existence.

These early experiences form a central part of Huerta's childhood. Although she became part of the emerging middle class Mexican-American community in Stockton, until she was in her early teens poverty was barely a stone's throw away. Even after her family gained some measure of economic stability they continued to live in intimate contact with the impoverished sector of the Stockton community. Alicia's hotels were located next to a multiethnic working class neighborhood that was dominated by farm workers. Further, migrant farm worker families frequently stayed at these hotels because they could get reduced rates for long-term layovers. As a teenager Huerta interacted more closely with female migrant workers during the summer when, like her mother before her, she worked in the traditionally female agricultural enterprises of canning and packing for extra spending money.⁷ Huerta thus initially became acquainted with the problems that farm workers faced through her mother's experiences during the Great Depression, as well as her own interactions with them in her mother's hotels, within the

⁶Ibid., 24-25.

⁷Rose, "Women in the UFW," n29, 58.

neighborhood, and then later through work.⁸ From a very early age Huerta was intimately aware of the plight of farm workers and, as she got older, able to compare it to the relatively affluent existence she herself and the rest of the middle class Mexicano community in Stockton enjoyed.

This also meant that Huerta was just as intimately aware of the sometimes shifting role of women in the migrant workers' community. Although women were routinely paid less and stuck with the more demeaning tasks, their work in the fields, outside of the house and the traditional role of wife and mother, they nevertheless formed a critical part of their families' subsistence. Because migrant families depended on the income of both sexes, childcare became a familial and community concern. Sometimes older children took care of younger ones, or even more frequently relatives or close friends took over childcare duties while the parents worked. Huerta herself experienced this first hand as a child with her own mother who was forced to rely on her family, most often her father, for childcare while she worked. Furthermore, Huerta has claimed that within the Fernández/Richards household there was none of the gendered separation of household chores apparent in "traditional Mexican families." "My mother was a strong woman . . . At home we all shared equally in the household tasks."⁹

Huerta's experiences with her own mother affected her in another way as well. As Huerta advanced into her teens and the family grew more affluent Alicia provided an example of sensitivity and civic activism that she also encouraged Huerta herself to

⁸Bear, "Stopping Traffic," 39; Judith Coburn "Dolores Huerta: La Pasionaria of the Farm Workers" *Ms.* 4, 5 (Nov. 1976), 14.

⁹Barbara L. Baer and Glenna Matthews, "'You Find A Way': The Women of the Boycott," *The Nation* 218, 8 (23 Feb. 1974), 236; Ferriss and Sandoval, 61.

develop.¹⁰ Sometimes when Alicia's boarders were unable to pay for their accommodations she would allow them to stay for free or pay in field crops.¹¹ Alicia also became increasingly involved in "catholic relief work, women's groups, and ethnic organizations."¹² Huerta herself was encouraged to follow her mother's lead. She was told to "get out and work and participate in the community."¹³ In general her mother pushed her to "get involved" in "youth activities," and other social ventures. More importantly Huerta was strongly encouraged to practice the religious ideal of *servicio*, or modest generosity.¹⁴ Despite some of the more none-traditional aspects of Huerta's childhood, she was raised in a distinctly Mexican-American Roman Catholic atmosphere where women could take leading roles in church and humanitarian organizations.¹⁵ This was the basis for much of Alicia's activism.

Huerta responded favorably to Alicia's pressures. This was largely due to Huerta's outgoing and unreserved personality. Even as a young child Huerta was confident and engaging, a leader among her peers. One favored story relates how Huerta's grandfather called her "seven tongues" because she was so "gregarious" and

¹⁰"History knows no gender," *Stockton Record* (2 Mar. 1986), C1-C2; Ferriss and Sandoval," 61.

¹¹Ferriss and Sandoval, 61.

¹²Rose, "Women in the UFW," 33-34. "Announcements," *Stockton Record* (20 Apr. 1950), D4.

¹³Baer, "Stopping Traffic," 38-39; Ruth Carranza "From the fields into the History Books," *Intercambios Femeniles* (Winter 1989), 12; "History Knows No Gender," C2; Rose "Women in the UFW," 32-34.

¹⁴Margaret Rose, "Dolores Huerta (1930-): Labor Leader, social activist," *Notable Hispanic Women*, Diane Telgen and Jim Kamp eds., with a forward by Graciela Beecher (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1993), 211; Baer and Matthews, 236; Ferriss and Sandoval, 61.

¹⁵Cathleen Rountree, *On Women Turning 50: Celebrating Mid-Life Discoveries* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 130.

vocal.¹⁶ As her sister-in-law Carmen Fernández later recalled “she was [a] very popular and outspoken” young woman, traits she would later be well known for in the UFW.¹⁷ Chávez biographer Jacques E. Levy described the young Huerta as a girl whose “tongue moved as swiftly as her mind, and both left most other mortals in their wake.”¹⁸ Huerta was also a very active child. With her mother’s support she took piano, violin, and dancing lessons.¹⁹ She was part of the church choir and belonged to the church youth organization, as well as being an active Girl Scout, and, in highschool, a part of the school orchestra and a majorette.²⁰ Although who Huerta already was lead her into these activities, her participation also enhanced certain aspects of her character, her sense of self and her confidence in her abilities.

As Huerta got older her pastimes centered more on civic service activities and less on social ones. This was largely due to her mother’s influence, her own character and an increased awareness of the plight of the underprivileged members of the Stockton community. Although her own family’s circumstances improved during this period, those of many of the families around her’s did not. At the same time, going to high school put Huerta in contact with an entirely new set of peers. Although Huerta herself was well liked, the integrated Stockton high was not a place of unquestioning acceptance for many of her Mexican-American student contemporaries. Both poor whites, who Huerta herself identified as “Oakies,” and Hispanics were regularly derided by the rest of the white

¹⁶Rose, “Dolores Huerta (1930-),” 210-211.

¹⁷Carmen Fernandez qtd. in “History Knows No Gender,” C2.

¹⁸Levy, *Cesar Chavez* . . . , 95.

¹⁹Rose, “Dolores Huerta,” 211; Rose “Women in the UFW,” 26-27.

²⁰Ibid.

student population.²¹ As Huerta would later recall “The rich kids always got special treatment.”²² Huerta was aware of and sensitive to the circumstances of the underprivileged. Although she did not personally experience the brunt of racism and poverty she lived in intimate contact with their consequences and became active in trying to help the underprivileged. While she was still in highschool she even set up an after-school program for teenagers so that they would have somewhere to go besides the streets. She convinced local business to donate space, a jukebox and ping pong tables to this endeavor.²³

Huerta and her mother also became increasingly influenced by their parish priest Father Thomas McCullough. Father McCullough had started working in Stockton in 1947, the same year Huerta graduated from High School. As Huerta moved on, like many of her female classmates, into typically feminine jobs doing clerical and sometimes cannery work, Father McCullough was transforming the Catholic community in Stockton.²⁴ In seminary Father McCullough was taught that workers had not only a right but a “moral duty” to form unions and associations according to Natural Law. As he became involved with the agricultural community in Stockton, he became convinced that it was his responsibility to help farm workers carry out this precept.²⁵ In 1949 Father McCullough,

²¹Coburn, 12; “History Knows No Gender,” C2; Rose, “Women in the UFW,” 27; *Women of Hope: Latinas Abriendo Camino: 12 Groundbreaking Women* 29 min. film (Princeton, NJ: Bread and Roses Project, films for the Humanities, 1996).

²²Ferriss and Sandoval, 61.

²³Ferriss and Sandoval, 61.

²⁴Rose, “Women in the UFW,” 27, 29; Father McCullough is another underappreciated figure in the farm worker movement for this period, for the most extensive academic writing done to date on McCullough see Joan London and Henry Anderson, *So Shall Ye Reap* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1970), 79-98.

²⁵London and Anderson, 81, 83.

as part of a small group of other young activist priests, formed the Missionary Apostolate to serve the rural poor, primarily farm workers.²⁶ He took his job seriously, spending most of his energy ministering to migrant and resident farm workers around Stockton, and encouraging the members of his church to do the same.²⁷

Consequently, Huerta did indeed follow her mother into Catholic charity work and ethnic associations, becoming increasingly devoted to helping the poor and disadvantaged members of the Stockton community. Even as her personal life became more complicated, Huerta's commitment to community service work remained. It was as a young adult that Huerta first gained experience in organizing. As a member of societies like the *Club Azul y Oro* and the *Comité Honorífico* Huerta helped arrange fund-raisers and events to benefit local charities.²⁸ She regularly helped put on the Mexican Independence Day Fiesta and gathered food for the needy.²⁹ In the late 1940s and early 1950s, as Huerta matured from teenager to young woman, wife, and mother, she simultaneously became an increasingly valuable and effective part of community service organizations in Stockton.

In 1949, Huerta enrolled in Stockton Junior College. Eventually she would decide that she wanted to become a teacher so that she could change peoples lives and ameliorate their ills through education.³⁰ Although this was a two-year program, Huerta would not

²⁶London and Anderson, 83; Taylor, 81.

²⁷London and Anderson, 81-91.

²⁸Rose, "Women in the UFW," 33-34.

²⁹Ferriss and Sandoval, 61.

³⁰"History Knows No Gender," C2; Rose, "Women in the UFW," 27; *Women of Hope*. . .

be able to finish her degree until 1952.³¹ She was sidetracked by her 1950 marriage to Ralph Head. Although they were married in a traditional Catholic ceremony, their relationship was something of a rebellion for Huerta as Head was neither Catholic nor Hispanic.³² Their wedding announcement, which appeared in the Stockton newspaper a few days after the ceremony, made mention of Huerta's activities in both religious and ethnic societies as well as her charity work.³³ In 1951 she gave birth to her first child, Celest.³⁴ By 1952 she had a second child, Lori and her marriage was breaking up. Due to "cultural and religious" clashes, Huerta and Head split up and she refocused her attention on finishing her teaching certificate as well as getting involved in community service work again.³⁵ During this time Huerta relied increasingly on both her mother, Alicia, and her mother's third husband, Juan Silva, both for general economic support and childcare.³⁶ Although Huerta would not remarry again until 1955, the same year she met Fred Ross and César Chávez, she also became friends with her second husband to be during this period. Ventura Huerta, whom she had previously met through a local ethnic organization they both worked in, was also attending Stockton College.³⁷ As a first generation Mexican-American and ex-marine who shared her enthusiasm for community activism and her deep Catholic faith, Ventura was a stark contrast to her first husband.³⁸

³¹*Who's in Labor* (New York: Arno Press, 1976), p. 283.

³²Rose, "Women in the UFW," 29.

³³"Announcements," D4.

³⁴Rose, "Women in the UFW," 29.

³⁵Rose, "Women in the UFW," 29.

³⁶Baer and Matthews, 236.

³⁷Rose, "Women in the UFW," 30.

³⁸Rose, "Women in the UFW," 30.

This emergent commitment to community activism, a commitment that would sustain Huerta throughout her life, came from a complex amalgam of sources. On the one hand she was undoubtedly moved by the plight of the disadvantaged members of the Stockton community. At the same time Huerta was being influenced by both her family and her church. She was also, in her own way, a deeply religious woman. It is clear that one of the main reasons she remained so committed to the farm worker's movement in the long run was a deep-seated belief that she was doing the work of God. As she told one reporter "I've been very fortunate. God has put me in this position and provided the opportunities to get things done."³⁹ At the same time there was another side to the religious issue. Huerta's commitment to community activism came at a time in her personal life when her own faith was being tested. When she actually decided to be a teacher in the early 1950s and renewed her commitment to both her own education and community service her first marriage was failing. As a devoted Catholic this was deeply troubling and she turned toward helping others in part to assuage the guilt over what she felt to be her personal failures. As she would later admit, she plunged into work, both as a teacher and as an activist, in search of "salvation."⁴⁰

Father McCullough was also becoming increasingly committed to the organization of farm workers during the early 1950s. As a priest, he had originally limited his activities to the Missionary Apostolate, simply providing religious services to poor farm workers who were without a resident priest either because they were migrants or they lived in small communities on land usually owned by local agribusiness operations. In 1951 a new law

³⁹Carranza, 12.

⁴⁰Baer, "Stopping Traffic, 39; Baer, "'You find a way': The Women of the Boycott," *The Nation* 218, 8 (23 Feb. 1974): 232-38, qt. 233; Rose "Women in the UFW," 33-36.

in California allowed the increased importation of braceros, Mexican contract workers, who accordingly took up a larger part of his time and energy. The more he interacted with these workers the more convinced he became that all of the farm workers in California needed some type of a union. He saw both sides of the bracero system. On the one hand, it deprived local workers of jobs and consequently the ability to make a living and support their family. On the other hand, it was extremely exploitative to the braceros themselves, not merely because of the conditions under which they worked, but also because it deprived them of their “natural right” to have a family under “God’s law.”⁴¹ Consequently he and fellow priest Father Donald McDonnell unsuccessfully started putting pressure on various well-established unions to organize farm workers.⁴²

Although the unions did not immediately take notice, in 1955 Fred Ross and the Community Service Organization (CSO) did. Father McDonnell had been working in a neighborhood in San Jose called *Sal Si Puedes* (Escape if you can), where, through the efforts of then resident César Chávez, the CSO had become very active.⁴³ The CSO was constantly looking to expand and Father McCullough’s rather active body of constituents in Stockton seemed like fertile ground. Although the CSO did not want to get involved specifically in union activities, the organization did see an opportunity for community activism, especially in terms of protecting the civil rights of farm workers in the area.

By this time Huerta was well known in Stockton. Part of the reason that Fred Ross looked her up was that she had developed a reputation among clerics, like Fathers

⁴¹ Father Thomas McCullough, qt. in London and Anderson, 85.

⁴²See London and Anderson, 79-91, for a more detailed version of McCullough’s work. He is also discussed in London and Anderson, 79-98, and 104-105..

⁴³Taylor, 81.

McCullough and McDonnell, and community leaders for her civic and social activism.⁴⁴

Frustrated with teaching and eager to take on more confrontational measures, she embraced Ross and the CSO.⁴⁵ Huerta was not alone. Her mother, Alicia, aunt Jenny, brother Marshall, and new husband Ventura, all got involved.⁴⁶ At this point in time Huerta was behaving with the active support of her family and peers. During this period, under the tutelage of Father McCullough and Fred Ross, Huerta became an increasingly skilled organizer devoted to the specific plight of farm workers. She performed multiple tasks for the CSO; assisting with voter registration drives and campaigning for such various issues as a Spanish-speaking staff in local hospitals and more sidewalks in poor neighborhoods.

As an outgrowth to these activities Huerta became involved in the campaign to protect the civil rights of migrant farm workers and in 1958, she helped found the Agricultural Workers Association (AWA) with Father McCullough and Father McDonnell.⁴⁷ At first the AWA had no set agenda. As Father McCullough would later explain, the “important thing” was “to find out the interests and problems” of the farm workers from the farm workers.⁴⁸ Two of the things the AWA adamantly avoided were the terms “strike” and “union” which they felt would have “either scared people off or raised false expectations.”⁴⁹ In order to recruit members and find out what they wanted

⁴⁴Ferriss and Sandoval, 61.

⁴⁵Murphy, 20.

⁴⁶Rose, “Women in the UFW,” 34.

⁴⁷Rose, “Women in the UFW,” 34-35; Levy, 145-146; Baer, “Stopping Traffic,” 39.

⁴⁸Father Thomas McCullough, qt. London and Anderson, 92.

⁴⁹Ibid.

the AWA set up “house meetings.” This was a routine CSO tactic whereby the organization would find one individual willing to hold a meeting in their house, then at that meeting they would attempt to recruit at least two more people to do the same. It was a sort of “growth by cellular division,” which proved to be highly effective. In November of 1958 house meetings were held every night of the week in the Stockton area.⁵⁰ By the early part of 1959 the AWA had set up an acting board of directors, with various committees, an official constitution, and a dues structure.⁵¹ Further, the AWA’s initial planning was fairly innovative, envisioning such things as the cooperative buying of food and clothing, and what would later be described as “reverse strikes,” the visible performance of good works, to dramatize the plight of native farm workers unable to find work because of the braceros.⁵²

Huerta was extremely active in all of these activities. However, unlike in her earlier activities with the CSO she received a lot of criticism for her involvement with the AWA. Father McCullough himself told her that he did not want her involved because “farm labor organizing was no place for a woman.”⁵³ These activities would also eventually create a rift with her own husband that could not be healed. Although Ventura shared Huerta’s commitment to the AWA, he wanted her to stay home and take care of their growing family. Despite this, Huerta took a leading role in the AWA steering committee and pressured her family to help carry out the work of the association.⁵⁴ Alicia

⁵⁰London and Anderson, 91.

⁵¹London and Anderson, 93-94.

⁵²London and Anderson, 94.

⁵³Levy, 145.

⁵⁴London and Anderson, 93.

would recruit farm workers from her boarders and send them to the union in search of aid while Ventura and Marshall did more of the everyday work of running the union, organizing house meetings and attempting to get the word out.⁵⁵ As Huerta later related,

I made my husband Ventura quit his job to work for the AWA. Then my brother quit his job, and both worked full time without pay to organize the union . . . I worked undercover, doing the work through my husband and my brother . . . It was difficult for us, too, to work for nothing, because I was having a baby every year.⁵⁶

In February of 1959, partly as a response to the success of the AWA and the CSO's increased involvement in the lives of migrant workers, the AFL-CIO established the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) with its headquarters in Stockton.⁵⁷ Although the exact timing of this decision was due to the internal political structure of the AFL-CIO, public pressure had been mounting for years.⁵⁸ Father McCullough himself had been asking the AFL-CIO to get involved in organizing farm workers since at least 1950 and for him this seemed like "the breakthrough" for which he had been working.⁵⁹ He even participated in the AWOC's initial planning sessions and has been largely credited with their decision to locate AWOC's headquarters in Stockton. By June of 1959 the AWOC had established offices in Stockton and the AWA voted to "dissolve in favor of the AWOC."⁶⁰

⁵⁵J. Craig Jenkins, *The Politics of Insurgency: The Farm Worker Movement in the 1960s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 119.

⁵⁶Levy, 145-146.

⁵⁷Ibid.; Ronald B. Taylor, *Chavez and the Farm Workers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 97-101, 103; Jenkins, 114-115.

⁵⁸For a brief explanation of the AFL-CIO's providential decision to start the AWOC in 1959 see Meister and Loftis, 92-95.

⁵⁹London and Anderson, 95.

⁶⁰London and Anderson, 95; Meister and Loftis 94-95.

Huerta was immediately hired on as an administrative staffer, partly in response to Father McCullough's prodding, and later won election as secretary-treasurer of the local union branch.⁶¹ In these positions Huerta primarily did conventionally female secretarial sort of work. Huerta's stint with the AWOC was exceedingly brief. Officially she left the union to give birth to her sixth child, Alicia. However, she would later confess that she felt disillusioned and defeated over the AWOC's organizing tactics.⁶² Perhaps she also found her position within the union particularly unfulfilling. Despite the union's best intentions and an initial strategic plan that closely resembled the AWA's, the AWOC failed to organize the majority of farm workers. The sole AWOC chapter that eventually managed to retain a steady membership was located in Delano and was dominated by Filipino migrant workers who had a strong allegiance to the local director, Larry Itliong. By the fall of 1960 Huerta had returned to the CSO as a full time paid staff member.⁶³

During this period Stockton was becoming a hotbed of activism on behalf of farm workers and Huerta's reputation as an organizer and activist was definitely growing. While Huerta officially took almost a year off to have a baby, she remained active in the CSO and when the AWOC recommended her for an appointment to the California state Industrial Welfare Commission's Wage Board for Agricultural Occupations, she took it.⁶⁴ Though this was not the most glamorous appointment, it is an indication of Huerta's early

⁶¹Norman Smith to Don Vial, 13 Jul. 1959, Agricultural Workers' Organizing Committee Collection (hereafter AWOC), box 2, folder 7, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit MI (hereafter ALUA); Jenkins, 119.

⁶²Norman Smith, "Activity Report - AFL-CIO," 11 Sept. 1959, AWOC, box 4, folder 27, ALUA; Rose, "Women in the UFW," 31, 37; Levy, 146-147.

⁶³"Community Service Organization, Inc. Mailing Directory," 12 Oct. 1960, AWOC, box 2, folder 19, ALUA.

⁶⁴Norman Smith to Don Vial, 7 Mar. 1960, AWOC, box 2, folder 8, ALUA.

reputation as an experienced and knowledgeable advocate for the rights of farm workers. As an appointee, Huerta was active, especially in defense of workers' rights to a living wage.⁶⁵ Huerta's growing reputation is also evident from her position with the CSO. In 1959 the California Migrant Ministry (CMM), expanded its activities to "community-development projects" and started using the CSO as a training ground for their activists.⁶⁶ As priests were recruited into the CMM they were assigned to work under leaders in the CSO, one of which was Mrs. Dolores Huerta.⁶⁷

The first years of the new decade proved especially trying for Huerta. Unable to reconcile her devotion to work with a husband and family, her second marriage eventually failed. Although Ventura was committed to the farm worker movement, he was not committed to his wife being consumed by it.⁶⁸ Huerta explained her marital problems this way,

I knew I wasn't comfortable in a wife's role . . . 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.⁶⁹

Although Huerta and Ventura would not divorce until 1962, they officially separated in 1961, after six years of marriage and four children. Ventura was unhappy with Huerta's continued activism, her "philosophy of childcare," and her unwillingness to use birth

⁶⁵"Transcript of Wage Board for Agricultural Occupations," 12-13 Sept. 1960, AWOC, box 6, folder 12, ALUA.

⁶⁶Taylor, 102.

⁶⁷Taylor, 103.

⁶⁸Rose, "Women in the UFW," 31.

⁶⁹Bear, "Stopping Traffic," 39.

control.⁷⁰ At the same time Huerta was dealing with her mother's death and the CSO was making increasing demands on her time.⁷¹ Huerta again threw herself into her work. Racked with guilt over her separation, in grief over her mother's death, and worried about the security of her brood of seven, she made a sort of bargain with God, what she called a "religious cop-out": she told herself that if her work bore "fruit" then she would be "justified in leaving her children to be taken care of by others or to fend for themselves."⁷² "I went into a church and prayed. I took confession . . . When I left the church, I felt my way was clear to work . . . God would take care of the rest."⁷³ In 1961 Huerta left Ventura and took her children with her to Sacramento so that she could work as a lobbyist for the CSO.⁷⁴ It was here that Huerta's skill as an organizer would finally be tested and she would first gain recognition from the wider public.

In the years prior to 1961 Huerta had little chance to either implement her own ideas in community organizing or otherwise take on a position of significant leadership. It was with the advent of her post as a CSO lobbyist that she started to come into her own. Although Huerta had to answer to the CSO's Executive Director, Chávez, and the Board of Directors, she was largely independent in many ways. For the first time as an activist Huerta was asked what she thought and the CSO board actually listened. Huerta was responsible for working out a legislative strategy for the organization. She consulted with

⁷⁰Dolores Huerta, qt. in Rose, "Women in the UFW," 31.

⁷¹Rose, "Women in the UFW," n49, 64.

⁷²Baer, "Stopping Traffic," 39; Baer, "'You Find A Way'," 234.

⁷³Ibid; Julie Felner, "January/February 1998 Woman of the Year: Dolores Huerta, For a Lifetime of Labor Championing the Rights of Farmworkers," *Ms.* [online version], available through the UFW website <<http://www.ufw.org/ms.htm>> accessed 26 feb. 2002.

⁷⁴Baer, "Stopping Traffic," 39; Felner; Rose, "Women in the UFW," 46; Meister and Loftis, 117.

Chávez and the Board, but it was her responsibility to analyze bills in relation to the goals of the CSO, decide on which representatives to lobby, and figure out who they should ask to introduce a bill they wanted to support.⁷⁵ These were tasks that Huerta did remarkably well.

During this time period Huerta also became a well-known and well-liked part of the political and activist communities in California, as well as at the national level. As Chávez commented in a letter to Fred Ross at the beginning of one legislative season “It seems that everyone is awaiting the arrival of Adelita (Dolores) . . . everyone knows her and the usual remark is that she is a fighter”⁷⁶ Her opinion on farm workers, welfare, poverty and civil rights issues were frequently sought after. She testified in front of the California Senate Fact-Finding Committee on Labor and Welfare and was appointed to the state welfare commission.⁷⁷ Huerta’s opinion was also sought in the crafting of legislation. She worked on measures dealing with the rights of low-income home owners, fair employment practices, the bracero program, and unemployment insurance for farm workers. She was also flying back and forth to Washington, “being courted for her advice on poverty and ethnic problems,” and was appointed to a national AFL-CIO advisory committee on farm workers.⁷⁸

⁷⁵César Chávez to Fred Ross, 11 Jan. 1961, Fred Ross Collection, box 3, folder 4, ALUA; César Chávez to Fred Ross, 8 Jun. 1961, Fred Ross Collection, box 3, folder 4, ALUA; César Chávez, 14 Jul. 1961. Fred Ross Collection, box 3, folder 4, ALUA.

⁷⁶César Chávez to Fred Ross, 14 Dec. 1962, Fred Ross Collection, box 3, folder 10, ALUA

⁷⁷Rose, “Women in the UFW,” 39; Taylor, 111.

⁷⁸César Chávez to Fred Ross, 11 Jan. 1961, box 3, folder 4, ALUA; César Chávez to Fred Ross, 8 June 1961, Fred Ross Collection, box 3, folder 4, ALUA; César Chávez to Fred Ross, 14 July 1961, box 3, folder 4, ALUA; Rose, “Women in the UFW,” 39; Taylor, 111.

For Huerta this was the beginning of life of activism. In many ways Huerta's early life is not particularly extraordinary. She worked primarily within the bounds that her family, her friends, and her church thought appropriate. It was only after her mother's death and her separation from her second husband that Huerta started to move beyond these boundaries without apology or collusion. This does not mean that these experiences were unimportant. Huerta's relationship with her mother and her experiences as a child and young adult supplied her with an important base of information, about her own capabilities and motivations as well as the lives of farm workers and the working poor more generally. Her participation in the AWA, the AWOC, and the CSO provided her with key training grounds for later activism. She learned a lot from these organizations. She started to accumulate her own repertoire of organizing tactics and political activism, as well as developing an important reputation as an activist. Through her position as CSO lobbyist she would also start developing what would become a critically important network of individuals within the activist community in California.

CHAPTER 2

DOLORES HUERTA AND THE UFW

In the Spring of 1962 Chávez officially resigned from the CSO and asked Huerta to help him start a farm workers' union.¹ For Huerta, this was not simply the beginning of a new project, but also a new period in her life. In the words of one contemporary, "the organization of farm workers became the focus of her life."² Over the past year she had grown increasingly committed to her community service work with the CSO and confident in her own abilities as a leader. With the UFW Huerta would finally be able to help build an organization from the ground up. The skills and knowledge that she had acquired through her experiences with the CSO, the AWA, and the AWOC, as well as in her life more generally, would be put to use as she made critical decisions about the tactics, strategies and future of the union, transforming herself as a person and a leader.

During this time Huerta's contributions to the union were an important complement to those of Chávez. By the time Chávez asked Huerta to join him in 1962 she was a well-known and well-liked member of the activist community in California. She had spent one valuable and productive year as a lobbyist for the CSO and she had many more

¹Chávez probably asked Huerta in April of 1962. In several letters written to Fred Ross, although Chávez does not mention Huerta's involvement until May 2, he indicates in April that the CSO might need a new lobbyist. See César Chávez to Fred Ross, 26 April 1962, Fred Ross Collection, box 3, folder 5, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit MI (hereafter ALUA); César Chávez to Fred Ross, 2 May 1962, Fred Ross Collection, box 3, folder 6, ALUA.

²Ronald B. Taylor, *Chavez and the Farm Workers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 87.

years behind her working with the AWA and AWOC in grassroots organizing campaigns. She was obviously a well skilled and highly motivated activist. She had direct experience with the problems that the farm workers faced and earlier attempts at organizing them. Yet, unlike Chávez, she was also well educated and increasingly well connected due to her work with the legislature and state agencies. Where Chávez had spent his early career as an activist exclusively within the CSO concentrating on organizing people from the ground up, Huerta had a more diverse set of experiences from which to draw. She had worked on efforts that organized from the ground up, like the AWA and in the beginning with the CSO, but she had also worked at changing things from the top down, in the AWOC and as a lobbyist for the CSO. She had experienced and witnessed some of the hardships of farm workers' lives, but thus far she had been privileged to escape them. Although Huerta was still growing and developing as a leader, she brought a lot to the UFW in 1962. She brought invaluable knowledge, experience and motivation, all of which would have an important effect on the choices that she made as a leader.

From 1962 to 1966 Huerta transformed herself and moved from the hand-shaking soft sale of the capital and house to house recruiting, to become a tough-talking picket line leader and hard-nosed negotiator. As Huerta became more practiced in union business and gained in confidence, some patterns began to emerge. Huerta's very vocal, gregarious nature asserted itself and she involved herself, almost pathologically at times, in every facet of the union's business, usually according to her own priorities and determinations. Despite her frequently expressed frustration that she was not getting enough done due to time and resource constraints, she was constantly asking Chávez if she could do more and pushing the union to grow, both in terms of membership and services. Huerta worked

exceedingly long hours despite poor health and few resources. With the absence of her husband and the eventual loss of her position within the CSO, Huerta often had to make some tough decisions regarding the welfare of her seven children and her work with UFW. Invariably she walked a tightrope between the two, relying on family, friends, and even union members, or working for pay just long enough to subsidize her work with the UFW. The line between Huerta's private life and her very public participation within the UFW slowly faded. In 1962 Huerta went into the union as a very committed activist with limited, albeit important, experiences as a labor organizer. She had acquired many of the skills that she would need as a leader, but she had not yet used them. As she and Chávez built the union she was able to test her skills and by 1966 Huerta emerged with a definite set of tactics and strategies that would serve her and the union for years to come.

When the UFW emerged in 1962 the environment in which it found itself was less than favorable. While there was a center left government at the national level with Kennedy's administration, as well as an increase in political turmoil and Chicano activism, beyond this the UFW faced some very real problems. As a farm workers' union, the UFW's most obvious problem was the migratory nature of their membership, which made it difficult to, for example, organize or collect dues. In addition, not only would they have to deal with overt hostility from the growers, which sometimes turned violent, but they also faced hostility from the communities in which they worked and the workers they were trying to help. People in small farm towns like Delano, where the UFW was founded, were hostile to farm workers because they were often perceived exclusively as migrants who strained community resources, such as policing, while adding nothing to revenues

because they did not own taxable property. The repercussions faced due to the failure of unions like the National Farm Laborers Union (NFLU), and even the AWA and the AWOC, had made workers themselves leery of organizing. The initial distrust that many migrant farmers felt toward unions is evident in one episode Huerta related to Chávez's wife, Helen, after the establishment of the UFW's credit union:

one of the members got all shook up when he got his letter . . . because it said Credit Union, he said he did not know he had joined a Union . . . I told him that . . . we did have a Union, maybe he will quit, No?³

Further, the few workers that were not averse were already affiliated with the now three-year-old AWOC.

Although Huerta and Chávez imagined the UFW as a union, they initially adopted the name Farm Workers Association (FWA) or *Asociación de Trabajadores Campesinos*. Avoiding the word "union," they promoted the FWA as a cooperative service organization.⁴ This decision was based on Chávez's experience organizing farm workers in Oxnard with the CSO and Huerta's experience in Stockton with Father McCullough in the AWA.⁵ Both of them were acutely aware of the hostility that a union would face and the more accepted practice of forming cooperative service organizations within the Mexican-American segment of the farm worker community.

³Dolores Huerta to Helen [Chávez], n.d. National Farm Workers Association Collection (hereafter NFWA), series 1, box 2, folder 14, ALUA.

⁴César Chávez to Fred Ross, 2 May 1962, Fred Ross Collection, box 3, folder 6, ALUA; Taylor, 111; Dick Meister and Ann Loftis, *A Long Time Coming: The Struggle to Unionize America's Farm Workers* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., & London: Collier MacMillan Publishers, 1977), 119.

⁵For a "first hand" account of Chávez's experiences in Oxnard, "the first successful attempt to organize farm workers" see Fred Ross, *Conquering Goliath: Cesar Chavez at the Beginning* w/ forward by Senator Edward M. Kennedy (Keene, CA: El Taller Grafico, United Farm Workers of America, 1989).

The initial organizing efforts of the FWA were hence remarkably similar to those of the AWA. During these first few years the union depended overwhelmingly on Chávez and Huerta's ability to transmit their vision to their constituency on a face-to-face basis. Together they drew up a list of towns to work in and started recruiting members by canvassing the agricultural areas and setting up "house meetings." Chávez and Huerta visited migrant workers in the fields and in their homes, asking them what they wanted and then organizing around the felt needs of the workers.⁶ This was one of the tactics that Huerta and Father McCullough had used in the AWA and then urged upon the AWOC to little effect. Accordingly, some of the FWA's first initiatives involved obtaining burial and car insurance for their members as well as attempting to put together a co-op and a credit union.⁷ Again, like the AWA, there was also a strong Mexican and Catholic flavor to the organization. A black Aztec eagle became their emblem and they designated the Virgin de Guadalupe as their patron saint.⁸ When possible, they used Catholic churches for union meetings, capitalizing on the established constituency of the Church and their association with cooperative service organizations.⁹

⁶César Chávez to Fred Ross, 2 May 1962, Fred Ross Collection, box 3, folder 6, ALUA; César Chávez to Fred Ross, 10 May 1962, Fred Ross Collection, box 3, folder 6, ALUA; Rose, "Women in the UFW," 44. Huerta's correspondence from 1962 to 1964 also reflects this, see NFWA, series 1, box 2, folders 11-14.

⁷César Chávez to Fred Ross, 21 May 1964, Fred Ross Collection, box 3, folder 12, ALUA.

⁸In almost all the literature on the union these symbols are frequently mentioned, for one specific reference see Meister and Loftis, 122.

⁹Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 14, ALUA.

At first Huerta continued to work for the CSO.¹⁰ Although there was some talk between her and Chávez that she might leave, it was quickly dismissed as financially untenable.¹¹ The union could not support both her and Chávez and she certainly did not have the resources to survive without some source of steady income. Despite this, for Huerta the choice to continue working for the CSO was not an easy one. She was concerned that it would either not allow her enough time to devote to the new organization or that she would be unable to fulfill her responsibilities to the CSO. In turn she was also anxious over the criticism that she might receive if unable to perform adequately for both organizations. Soon after she agreed to work with Chávez on “the farm worker project” she wrote to him,

I just don't feel this is right. I feel that there will be a lot of criticisms first of myself and the Stockton group here . . . If I did not have to work for the CSO . . . then no one could say anything about what I do.¹²

Her concerns remained unabated for some time. As the 1962 legislative session progressed she again wrote to Chávez that given the time she was having to devote to the union, she was concerned over whether or not it would be “a good session and that the expense” of her salary would “be worth it” to the CSO.¹³ In the same breath she wrote, “You can imagine the criticisms I will receive.”¹⁴ In October of 1962 she wrote to Chávez “Cesar [*sic*], there is a good possibility the local chapter ma[y] start giving me [a] bad time

¹⁰It is unclear precisely when Huerta left the CSO. Although one letter from 1962 seems to indicate that she was supposed to be terminated in April of 1962 (Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 14, ALUA), later correspondence indicates that she was still involved. She probably continued to represent the CSO through the end of the 1962 legislative season.

¹¹César Chávez to Fred Ross, 26 Apr. 1962, Fred Ross Collection, box 3, folder 5, ALUA.

¹²Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 13, ALUA.

¹³Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 14, ALUA

¹⁴Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 14, ALUA

soon.”¹⁵ In an effort to alleviate her concerns Huerta attempted to limit her obligations to the CSO. Not wanting to entirely give up her position nor her salary she proposed that the CSO “pay just for two days a week lobbying, instead of a weekly salary.”¹⁶ Chávez seems to have convinced her that this was not the best option. Eventually they came to an agreement with Fred Ross and the CSO Board of Directors that allowed her to spend “from 8 am to 3 pm” in the office working for the CSO and the late afternoons and evenings working on “the farm worker project.”¹⁷ She represented both organizations as a lobbyist in the 1962 legislative season and frequently had to travel from Sacramento to Los Angeles, to Sacramento, to Delano, to Stockton, attempting to fulfill her myriad obligations.¹⁸ Huerta’s work as a lobbyist was an important experience for her and the union. Not only did she learn a lot about things like politics, negotiating difficult issues, and networking, she also introduced the UFW onto the political scene in California.

When Huerta discontinued her work with the CSO, she moved back to Stockton where she remained until 1964. It is clear that this situation was primarily a condition of circumstance. During the first few years there was simply not enough money in the UFW coffer to support Huerta and her children. Of course, there was not enough to support Chávez either. However, unlike Chávez, who had a wife, as well as her extended family, and a brother in Delano who were willing to help support him and his children while he organized, Huerta had considerably fewer resources. Separated from her second husband, but not yet officially divorced, Huerta could count on Ventura for little more than the

¹⁵Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, 3 Oct. 1962, NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 11, ALUA.

¹⁶Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 14, ALUA

¹⁷Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 14, ALUA.

¹⁸Rose, “Women in the UFW,” n59, 65.

occasional childcare he sometimes provided and her first ex-husband, Ralph Head, only occasionally sent a desperately needed child support check.

In addition to different resources, Huerta and Chávez had different priorities. Chávez's primary objective during the initial organizing effort was to develop a membership. Delano was a particularly good spot for this because it had a relatively stable population of farm workers. Although Huerta was also doing the grassroots organizing, her overall position within the union was much more ambiguous. In agreeing to work with Chávez in the first place, Huerta's position was never clearly defined. This meant that Huerta set her own goals and developed her own strategies and objectives for the union. This is quite apparent from an early letter she wrote to Chávez in which she expressed her frustration over his ire at the amount of time she spent lobbying on behalf of the union versus holding house meetings and collecting dues.¹⁹

What few resources and connections Huerta did have were in Stockton and Sacramento. Here she had some support and she could more easily pursue the lobbying and networking she felt were more important. She had some family and, perhaps more significantly a well developed network of friends that provided both financial and emotional support for her as well critical affiliations for the union. Indeed Huerta leaned on what little family she had a lot during these years. She depended on her goddaughter, her sister, and the occasional friend or union member to help her with childcare and housework.²⁰ Her third stepfather, lately widowed, also proved exceedingly helpful,

¹⁹Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 14, ALUA

²⁰Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 14, ALUA. There are a few references interspersed in different letters within this folder.

loaning her money, free rent and the occasional borrowed car.²¹ Perhaps more importantly in terms of her work for the UFW were the connections that Huerta had made as lobbyist. Stockton was closer to Sacramento than Delano and, in terms of information and political resources, it was important that Huerta remain close by. Certainly, Huerta's initiative with the UFW's Articles of Incorporation, co-op, newspaper, car insurance program and political agenda were very much facilitated by her access to Sacramento.

Huerta played an extensive role in the UFW during this period. She involved herself in almost every aspect of the organization and development of the union, from the initial naming and membership recruitment to the development of a newspaper and a co-op. However, she clearly valued some duties more than others and consequently gave them priority. Accordingly, Huerta responsibly collected dues, went to house meetings, and mimeographed cards and flyers for the UFW. Indeed, rarely did one of her letters reach Chávez without dues or some note as to new members enclosed. She also acted as a sort of personal social services case worker for members and potential members, taking them to the welfare department, acting as a mediator between them and debt collection agencies, and locating sources of general financial aid.²² These were largely duties that Chávez specifically requested of her.

At the same time Huerta actively pushed to expand her responsibilities and stimulate the union's growth. She took the initiative in finding a lawyer to work pro bono

²¹Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 14, ALUA.

²²Some good examples appear in the following letters: Joseph M. Papo to César Chávez, 25 Feb. 1964, NFWA, series 1, box 1, folder 2, ALUA; Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, 24 Feb. 1964, NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 11, ALUA; Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, 4 Aug. 1964, NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 11, ALUA; Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 14 (1st line of letter reads "I'm goinf [*sic*] to write you a short note to let you know . . ."); Dolores Huerta to Helen Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 14, ALUA.

drafting the union's Articles of Incorporation and then helped him write the document.²³

Moreover, she launched the union's newspaper, locating individuals who could provide information on starting it up, deciding on layout, determining advertising prices and sales, and getting journalists to contribute.²⁴ Sometimes Huerta's interests were more directly related to her own experiences. For example, as she was preparing to move to Delano in 1964 she was particularly concerned about plans to start a child care center. "If we can get [*sic*] the child care center going," she told Chávez, "I can stick all the kids except the baby there."²⁵ Childcare was a particular problem for Huerta in her efforts to organize.

Huerta was perhaps most consistently enthusiastic about her work as a lobbyist even though Chávez questioned the relative importance of this work. She continued to shake hands at the Capital, "cultivating" friends for the UFW both in the legislature and the various administrative departments while pushing for legislation she thought would help the membership.²⁶ In addition to legislation dealing with a minimum wage and general rights for farm workers, of particular concern to her were welfare and immigration laws. She was continually defending her own choice to concentrate on these matters and pressuring Chávez to pay them more attention, telling him,

I have been working like mad on the Aid to dependent children bill. I know you do not think any of this is important any more, but 1st let me remind you that at least the workers we are trying to reprresent [*sic*] will

²³César Chávez to Fred Ross, 18 Oct. 1962, Fred Ross Collection, box 3, folder 10, ALUA; Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 11, ALUA.

²⁴Dolores Huerta to Eugene Nelson, 28 Nov. 1964 & 15 Dec. 1964, NFWA, series 1, box 1, folder 2, ALUA.

²⁵Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 14, ALUA

²⁶Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 14, ALUA; Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 12, ALUA.

have bread in the winter months. . . If they have bread in the winter months, they will be able to pay their dues, ha, ha.²⁷

Sometimes her prodding was a little bit more gentle: “I hoped we could wage some abattle [*sic*] on the welfare front,”²⁸ she wrote wistfully, or “Cesar [*sic*], please take note of this, . . . I know all of . . . our members are intensely interested in immigration . . . I do not think we should ignore this interest.”²⁹

Huerta saw these efforts as part and parcel of the farm worker movement. For her, there was a direct connection between the two. A higher minimum wage and extra welfare benefits for families with children, mandated by law, would mean that farm workers could afford to pay their union dues and contribute to the cause. She also saw her lobbying efforts as an important part of what the UFW specifically could visibly offer the membership. When the legislature passed one particularly important welfare bill that she lobbied for she asked Chávez if the union couldn’t use it as an “organizational gimmick.” She wanted UFW representatives to take members and potential members down to local welfare offices to apply for the new aid. In this way the workers would associate the aid with the union. At the same time, the welfare offices would know that they had to abide by the new law because they would be aware that the union was “watching to see how they will treat the recipients [*sic*].”³⁰

Huerta was especially sensitive to these matters because they had such a profound effect on her own ability to organize. Her plan, mentioned above, was a direct response to

²⁷Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 14, ALUA

²⁸Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 14, ALUA

²⁹Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 14, ALUA

³⁰Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, Dec. 196[3], series 1, box 2, folder 12, ALUA.

her own experiences taking members to the welfare office in Sacramento and Stockton, trying to get them aid. She understood how important issues of medical care, welfare, and immigration were to the UFW's constituency because of the almost continuous case work she did for them and through her own efforts at dues collecting. One of her most frequent problems in dues collecting was simply that the farm workers in her area were working too much to qualify for state sponsored aid, but not enough to have any extra income.

Huerta's interest in these issues is even more understandable when one considers her own personal experience trying to support her family, deal with her ever-present health problems, and organize for the UFW without a reliable source of income. Between 1962 and 1964 she routinely expressed a specific litany of problems to Chávez. Broadly speaking, Huerta simply did not have the resources to do her union work. Her most frequent complaints revolved around child care and transportation. She once told Chávez, "I do need financial aid for my babysitting and I have to get a car, even if it is just a \$50.00 model. Then I guess I can go full speed ahead."³¹ These were fairly serious problems for Huerta, especially in terms of the dues collection and membership recruitment duties that Chávez gave such primacy. As she explained to him rather frankly, "I am having a hard time trying to get [*sic*] out because of my car not moving."³² Another letter reads "My baby sitter went home for the weekend . . . I find I am absolutely grounded."³³ It also interfered with her ability to take part in the union's activities outside of Stockton. "I did

³¹Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 13., ALUA.

³²Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d.[Jan./Feb. 1964], NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 12, ALUA, also see Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 12., ALUA; Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, 3 Oct. 1962, NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 11, ALUA; and Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 14, ALUA.

³³Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, 29 Feb. 1964, NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 11, ALUA, also see Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 14, ALUA.

not make it to the meeting Saturday because my starter on my car busted . . . and wouldn't you know it I did not have one red cent on me to catch the bus.”³⁴

Lack of either childcare or transportation were, at heart, financial problems. If Huerta had had more money she could have paid for a steady babysitter and car repairs, rather than relying on other people's good graces. Despite her frustration over her inability to do more for the union she vacillated in dealing with these problems, one moment going into debt to pay for a car and the next firing her babysitter in order to cut her living expenses.³⁵ Huerta's financial situation as a whole was a incessant strain on her and she was constantly trying to improve it, primarily so that she could continue her work with the union. She explained her quandary in more detail in one letter from early in 1964:

I am going to apply for my U[nemployment] I[nurance] next week, and will be hoping and praying they don't send me out to work . . . I have not paid my rent for six months, and also have many bills all piled up around me, so I have to move. . .

If I do have to go to work, it will be justlong enough [*sic*] to get me out of debt. It may be that my performance for FWaA [*sic*] will be better, if I am not bogged down with financial problames [*sic*].³⁶

Huerta had to work outside of the union on more than one occasion, sometimes joining UFW members in the fields. After taking a job picking onions she told Chávez, “Man I was sore for 5 days.”³⁷

³⁴Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 14, ALUA

³⁵Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 12., ALUA; Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, 3 Oct. 1962, NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 11, ALUA; Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 14, ALUA.

³⁶Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, [Nov. 1963], series 1, box 2, folder 11, ALUA.

³⁷Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 12, ALUA.

Poor health compounded Huerta's personal and financial troubles. In just two years, from 1962 to 1964, she was twice hospitalized. The first time she ended up in the hospital, she had developed tumors on her ovaries which were causing her terrible pain.³⁸ After being released from the hospital she wrote to Chávez, "My health, plus no b[a]by sitter is one of the reasons things hav[e] not been moving, so help me Cesar [*sic*], . . . i just can't find enough time to work."³⁹ She was hospitalized again for an undiagnosed, although obviously serious illness. She had to receive a transfusion and remained heavily medicated "on shots and pills," as she put it, for several days.⁴⁰ Given her later propensity to suffer from attacks of exhaustion, it is likely that this was part of what was going on here.⁴¹ This was a matter of intense frustration for her as it interfered not only with her ability to work and provide for her family, but more importantly to aid Chávez with the union. While in the hospital she remained especially concerned with the case work she had been doing and asked Chávez to check on one individual in particular for her.⁴²

These troubles ultimately brought her closer to the unions membership. Unlike Chávez she had not grown up in a family of migrant farm workers. She had not followed the crops as a child, but had seen this life from a safe distance, concerned yet removed. During this period the membership became Huerta's surrogate family. When her own family was unable to help, she turned to union members with car trouble and babysitting needs. She also became familiar with the intimate details of their lives through her

³⁸Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 14, ALUA

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, 4 Aug. 1964, NFWA, box 2, folder 11, ALUA.

⁴¹Levy, 265.

⁴²Ibid.

experience working in the fields next to them, visiting their homes for union meetings, and helping them apply for welfare or get back repossessed cars.⁴³

Despite Huerta's difficulties, her work started to pay off by 1964. The union had grown fairly quickly, with about a thousand members divided among fifty different local chapters in seven counties by this time.⁴⁴ They had several local service centers, burial and car insurance programs, as well as a credit union. They were also working to establish a food co-op and newspaper.⁴⁵ These developments had two important consequences for both Chávez and Huerta. First and foremost their workload greatly increased. On a more positive note, the association essentially became self-supporting. Because of this particular combination of affairs Chávez started talking about moving Huerta to the newly and ambitiously baptized National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) headquarters in Delano.⁴⁶ Although Huerta was at first hesitant to uproot her kids and take off, once she was persuaded, in typical fashion she plunged herself wholly into the endeavor.

With Huerta's move to Delano in the summer of 1964 she redoubled her efforts. She no longer worked part time at odd jobs for a subsistence wage to subsidize her work with the union, she now depended on the UFW for one. As she would later admit, "I felt I had to be there working every minute."⁴⁷ Not surprisingly, this came at the same time as she was again undergoing considerable personal strain. At the end of 1963 she had given

⁴³See Huerta's correspondence from 1962 to 1964, NFWA, series 1, box 2, folders 11-14, ALUA.

⁴⁴Joan London and Henry Anderson, *So Shall Ye Reap* (New York: Thomas Y Crowell Co., 1970), 149.

⁴⁵London and Anderson, 149; Linda C. Majka and Theo J. Majka, *Farm Workers, Agribusiness and the State* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1982), 171.

⁴⁶César Chávez to Fred Ross, 21 May 1964, Fred Ross Collection, box 3, folder 12, ALUA; Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, 1964, NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 13, ALUA.

⁴⁷Levy, 265.

birth to her seventh child, Angela, while her separation from Ventura was becoming official.⁴⁸ The divorce was bitter. Ventura accused Huerta of neglecting her children and tried, unsuccessfully, to have all of them taken away. Huerta would later admit that the UFW became a sort of escape. “I was able to go through a lot of very serious personal problems because I had [the union] to think about,” she told one reporter in 1974.⁴⁹ Chávez’s invitation was opportune. It enabled her to put some distance between herself and Ventura, both physically and mentally.

Events moved quickly for the UFW during the later half of the 1960s. Barely a year after Huerta moved to Delano the union declared its first strike. The AWOC had struck against a wage reduction that many Delano wine grape growers were trying to enforce and the UFW decided to support them. With the two unions working together this quickly turned into one of the largest farm worker strikes since the 1930s, attracting reporters from all over California. Responding to grower charges of communism, the FBI got involved, opening a file on Chávez and the UFW. As the strike wore on national attention became focused on Delano. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) sent in volunteers and the United Auto Workers (UAW) lent their support in the sum of \$5,000 per month to each union.

Early in 1966 the UFW announced what would later become one of its most successful tactics. The union declared a boycott against two major wineries, Schenley Industries and Di Giorgio, and sent UFW staff to thirteen major cities across the United States. That spring both the state and national government got involved. First came the

⁴⁸Rose, “Women in the UFW,” 31.

⁴⁹Barbara Baer and Glenna Mathews, “‘You Find A Way’: The Women of the Boycott,” *The Nation* 218, 8 (23 Feb. 1974): 232-38, qt. 233.

California State Senate Fact Finding Committee on Un-American activities, responding to the same accusations of communism that the FBI was investigating, and then the United States Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor. As the US Senate hearings were underway the UFW decided to stage a *peregrinación*, a religiously inspired march of “pilgrimage and penitence,” to dramatize their plight, publicize their boycott, and bring farm workers outside of the union into the strike. On April 6, while the *peregrinación* was still underway, the UFW received it’s first taste of victory. Schenley Industries agreed to recognize the union and negotiate a contract. Di Giorgio would not be so easy. They had decided to deal with the Teamsters in an effort to get around the UFW. After one illegal union election, violence, increased boycott efforts, the merger of the UFW with the AWOC to form the National Farm Workers Organizing Committee (NFWOC), and a state mandated, independently supervised union election, Di Giorgio finally capitulated. During 1967 and 1968 the UFWOC’s success with Schenley and Di Giorgio would be replicated in numerous contracts with other wineries throughout California.

Huerta performed several important duties for the UFW/UFWOC during this period. First and foremost she was an essential part of the leadership team and as such she was instrumental in developing and implementing union tactics. In this respect her most important role was as the union’s chief contract negotiator. As such she both drew up and ironed out some of the most important labor contracts in United States history, guaranteeing agricultural laborers rights they never had before.⁵⁰ She also played an important public role for the union’s membership. In one memo the FBI called her “the

⁵⁰Huerta’s correspondence, contract proposals, negotiation notes, arbitration proceedings and exhibits are located in UFW Central Admin., box 17, ALUA.

driving force on the picket lines,” and she was the principal speaker at the rally that ended the *peregrinación*.⁵¹ At the same time she continued much of the work she had been doing before. Her case work continued, helping members with things like credit problems and welfare issues. She also remained responsible for the union newspaper and dealt with much of Chávez’s correspondence.⁵² Huerta hence remained personally involved with many of the UFW’s members despite the unions growth and her own increased workload. Huerta also remained politically active. She continued to cultivate political ties with people at the state and national level and remained an important resource for the UFW in its lobbying efforts. When the union needed political pressure exerted on the growers, Huerta was the one to rally the troops. During the critical fight with Di Giorgio she was sent to ask the Mexican-American Political Association to “put pressure” on then Governor Pat Brown for supervised elections.⁵³

The only way that Huerta was able to do so much during these years was to devote herself entirely to the cause. This she did unequivocally and consequently her life and that of those closest to her became entirely encompassed by the union. When Huerta initially moved to Delano in 1964 she arranged for her seven children to stay with “various assorted relatives” while she tried to “make it” financially.⁵⁴ Although the union was self-

⁵¹Qt. in Susan Ferriss and Ricardo Sandoval, *The Fight in the Fields: Cesar Chavez and the Farmworkers Movement*, ed. Diana Hembree, photo. ed. Michele McKenzie (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1997), 105; Taylor, 179.

⁵²Huerta’s UFWOC files from 1966 to 1968 (UFWOC, box 6, folders 18-19, ALUA) indicate that Huerta was still helping members with things like credit problems, repossessed cars, as well as dealing with the UFW newspaper’s publishing opportunities and advertising sales. She also took over dealing some of Chávez’s correspondence and continued contract negotiating, and dealing with complaints of breach of contract etc. Her correspondence files during this period are VERY full and VERY diverse.

⁵³Levy, 231.

⁵⁴Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, 1964, NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 13, ALUA; Dolores
(continued...)

supporting, finances were still touch and go, and Chávez was concerned that he might not be able to continue to pay her on a regular basis.⁵⁵ These types of arrangements would quickly become a permanent feature of her and ergo their lives. For most of the 1960s and 1970s she and her children were without a stable place to live. More often than not they, both as a family or individually, stayed with relatives or union supporters.⁵⁶ Huerta claimed that she felt guilty about leaving her children in the care of others or having the older ones look after the younger, but that it was necessary, something she felt she had to do for the larger good of the union.⁵⁷ As she explained to her daughter Lori, she thought that the sacrifices that they made would help improve the lives of hundreds of other people.⁵⁸ When she was able to have her kids with her, the union became their lives as much as it was her own. She took them on trips across California organizing and politicking. She took them to house meetings and picket lines.⁵⁹ At the age of nine her son Emilio was trespassing on grower property, leafleting Mexican nationals that had been brought in as scabs to break a UFW strike.⁶⁰ When she had to go to New York in 1968 to lead the boycott efforts there, her kids came with her.⁶¹ Huerta's own guilt compounded

⁵⁴(...continued)

Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 13, ALUA; Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 14, ALUA.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Barbara Baer, "Stopping Traffic: One Woman's Cause," *The Progressive* 39, 9 (Sept. 1975): 38-40, qt. 40; Baer and Mathews, 234; Rose "Women in the UFW," 57-58, 96-97.

⁵⁷Dolores Huerta, qt. in Rountree, 129.

⁵⁸Dolores Huerta, qt. in Rountree, 129-130; Julie Felner, "January/February Woman of the Year: Dolores Huerta, For a Lifetime of Labor Championing the Rights of Farmworkers," *Ms.* [online version] available through the UFW website <<http://ufw.org/ms.htm>>, accessed 26 Feb. 2002.

⁵⁹Dolores Huerta, qt. in Rountree, 129-130.

⁶⁰Levy, 225.

⁶¹Levy, 267; Rountree, 129-130.

by the criticism of others made her particularly defensive of the involvement of her children in the union. Although it was “rough on them” she felt like their experiences with the union, with her own self-imposed poverty and the not infrequent separations, taught them important lessons about life and their place in the world.⁶²

Huerta’s friends and family criticized her the most over these matters, especially in relation to both her refusal to limit the size of her family and the manner in which she took care of her children. Huerta’s mother, Alicia, was very critical of Huerta’s choice to continue having children.⁶³ Huerta’s extended family as a whole “were the hardest” on her. “Everybody used to lay these guilt trips on me, about what a bad mother I was, neglecting my children,” Huerta later recalled.⁶⁴ Although Chávez needed Huerta and depended on her unfailing activism, he too disapproved of the way that she ran her life and took care of her children. Chávez pressured Huerta to spend more time with her kids, often getting upset with her when he would find her working on the weekends and at night. He would give Huerta “gentle” and “sometimes not so gentle” hints to go home.⁶⁵ “He’d really get shook if he’d come into the office at midnight or 1:00 in the morning, and I’d be doing some work,” Huerta told Chávez’s biographer.⁶⁶ Perhaps what bothered Chávez the most about Huerta’s treatment of her children was that it so closely resembled that of the farm workers themselves. By necessity they too frequently took their children to work with them or left them scattered with relatives and family friends. This had

⁶²Dolores Huerta, qt. Rountree, 129-130; Baer and Matthews, 234.

⁶³Rountree, 130.

⁶⁴Dolores Huerta, qt. in Baer and Matthews, 233.

⁶⁵Levy, 265.

⁶⁶Ibid..

happened to Chávez himself as a child and it was a situation that he was then trying to rectify with the union.

Personal issues were not the only things that Huerta and Chávez did not agree upon. Huerta's relationship with Chávez was notoriously contentious. Explaining their relationship to one reporter in the early 1970s Huerta said rather comically, "When he first asked me to help him organize farm workers I was really honored . . . , but ever since then he has been fighting with me."⁶⁷ Huerta and Chávez's differences were important. Huerta pushed the union in directions that Chávez might not have gone. Unlike many others within the union, who tended to take Chávez's word as absolute, Huerta was not afraid to tell Chávez when she disagreed with him about virtually anything: "When I think he is wrong, or when I think my way is better, I fight with him."⁶⁸ Although Huerta would later claim that it was not until her move to Delano that "that Cesar [*sic*] became very quarrelsome," they do seem to have clashed from the beginning of their partnership.⁶⁹ Their correspondence from 1962 to 1964 reveals a variety of disagreements. Everything from membership card size and whether or not Huerta should take the minutes at union meetings, to strategies for recruiting members and implementing services, was debated, sometimes heatedly.⁷⁰ Huerta could be bitingly sarcastic. "Just overjoyed at your change in card size after I mimeoed 1000 of the others. But then, I am not getting paid to ask

⁶⁷Taylor, 111.

⁶⁸Taylor, 186.

⁶⁹Levy, 265.

⁷⁰Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 12, ALUA; Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, 1964, NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 13, ALUA; Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, 29 Feb. 1964, NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 11, ALUA; Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 14, ALUA.

questions” she wrote in 1962, just after the union had started.⁷¹ One letter from Huerta that ably reveals the persistent nature of their disputes reads,

I received you [*sic*] penitent letter, much to my surprise. . . I think I am still ahead when it comes to losing tempers . . . you will further blow your top with the following. . .⁷²

Huerta concluded with a list of recent stumbling blocks pertaining to UFW business.

Perhaps Huerta’s perception that she and Chávez fought more after she moved to Delano comes from the fact that after this point she seemed to exhibit an increased commitment to the union and an unwillingness to back down from her ideas. She explained Chávez’s attitude towards her as something that was related to her intense commitment. She compared herself to Chávez’s wife and brother, saying, he “uses me to let off steam . . . He knows I might get angry or feel bad about it, but I’m not going to leave the union.”⁷³ Neither would she relent when she felt her ideas were important or the welfare of the union was involved. Huerta and Chávez were inherently different people with different ideas on where the union should go and how it would get there. UFW board meetings would become famous for lasting “far into the night” as “Dolores and Cesar [*sic*] fought, frequently yelling at each other.”⁷⁴ Huerta was unwilling to follow Chávez’s lead when she felt that her position was more propitious. During the 1967 Guimarra strike another company, Di Giorgio, balked, refusing to adhere to the UFW contract it had signed. Chávez ordered Huerta not to go into arbitration with them but Huerta was “utterly confident” that the union would “win the arbitration and get an

⁷¹Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 14, ALUA.

⁷²Dolores Huerta to César Chávez, 29 Feb. 1964, NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 11, ALUA.

⁷³Levy, 265.

⁷⁴Taylor, 186.

immediate decision.” She asked two volunteers, Mack Lyons and Marshall Ganz, to come with her. They went into arbitration proceedings despite Chávez’s ire and the matter was decided in the UFW’s favor.⁷⁵

Chávez was not the only one that Huerta fought with. She was notorious within the UFW for her combativeness and willingness to do whatever she felt necessary to get results.⁷⁶ She herself has confessed that she was well known in the union for having a “sharp tongue” and others have described her as something of a shouter.⁷⁷ Huerta was not afraid to confront UFW staff and even members when she felt something was wrong. One well-known story has Huerta parking a truck in front of one union member’s driveway to prevent him from going to work after a strike had been called.⁷⁸ Huerta’s persistent combativeness was even more intense when she was dealing with those she felt might be against the union. When the UFW merged with the AWOC in 1966 she was at the forefront of negotiations “educating” the AWOC’s senior staff to make sure that the AWA’s mistake seven years earlier would not be repeated.⁷⁹ This time the union that she had helped found would not be subsumed by the AWOC. Huerta was determined that the structure and the strategies of the UFW would take precedence.

Huerta’s tactics on picket lines and at the negotiating table with growers were similarly intense. She had a keen sense of spectacle and performance. One reporter wrote that she “shouted and cried easily . . . , fought with insults, tears, and individual’s

⁷⁵Dolores Huerta, qt. in Levy, 265.

⁷⁶Judith Coburn, “Dolores Huerta: La Pasionaria of the Farm Workers,” *Ms.* 4, 5 (Nov. 1976):11-16, qt. 12.

⁷⁷Baer and Matthews, 233.

⁷⁸Levy, 231.

⁷⁹Levy, 239.

testimony . . .”⁸⁰ She placed women and children in the front of picket lines when violence was threatened, hoping to either avoid a confrontation or create a tragic picture for the press.⁸¹ A church official, Monsignor George Higgins, who was brought in to help mediate between the union and several growers described Huerta in the midst of negotiations this way:

She’s tough. Relentless. . . Dolores would bring in an entourage of 10 to 15 workers, and this distressed the growers. . . Dolores would aggravate the growers by calling a recess right in the room and then turn to the workers and talk to them in Spanish . . . I never knew if it was an act or not . . . The growers tried to be adamant, . . . but in the end they gave in . . . they had no other choice.⁸²

Huerta’s tactics were unconventional. She did whatever she thought it would take. She was known to bring the unions theatrical group, *El Teatro Campesino*, into sessions in order to dramatize the worker’s points and frequently encouraged “spontaneous political demonstrations . . . as the grievances were shouted out.” Bargaining rooms were “filled” with farm workers “chanting and waving UFW banners.”⁸³ Huerta actually preferred taking women and children into bargaining because she thought they created a more sympathetic picture.⁸⁴ Huerta knew what she was doing. She had experience as a negotiator, confronting people and making them do what she wanted, from both her lobbying efforts and her case work. As a lobbyist she was known for being emotional and

⁸⁰Baer, “Stopping Traffic,” 39.

⁸¹Baer, “Stopping Traffic,” 39.

⁸²George Higgins, qt. in Taylor, 245.

⁸³Baer, “Stopping Traffic,” 39.

⁸⁴Baer, “Stopping Traffic,” 40.

demanding, letting out a few tears, then taking a moment to compose herself.⁸⁵ She created spectacles because she felt that it would benefit the union.⁸⁶

Despite Huerta's aggressive nature, within the union itself and the liberal political community more widely, she was well liked. One female union staffer credited her own activism to Huerta's example.⁸⁷ While she was lobbying in Sacramento in 1965 another staff member writing to her about general union issues, signed off, "I miss you around here, it certainly is a duller place without you."⁸⁸ As a public figure within the union and the Mexican-American community in California, Huerta could also be very popular. Her presence became increasingly more requested at rallies, conferences, and even on local television shows dealing with everything from the boycott and the UFW to civil rights issues.⁸⁹ In one letter to Chávez requesting advice and the names of any individuals who might be able to help her with a welfare rights organization, Judith S. Graham wrote "Just one like Dolores Huerta would do fine!"⁹⁰

⁸⁵Levy, 448.

⁸⁶Baer, "Stopping Traffic," 40; also see Levy, 239, and Taylor, 217 for Huerta's own description of her efforts and her willingness to sometimes "go too far."

⁸⁷Baer and Matthews, 235.

⁸⁸Joe [?] to Dolores Huerta, 4 Feb. 1965, NFWA, series 1, box 1, folder 3, ALUA.

⁸⁹Helen Serda to Irene Terrazas, n.d., UFW Central Admin., box 16, folder 18, ALUA; Claire Randall to Dolores Huerta, n.d., NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 3, ALUA; Rev. Eugene J. Boyle and John F. Delvry to Dolores Huerta, 2 May 1966, NFWA, series 1, box 2, folder 10, ALUA; Bud Simonson to Dolores Huerta, 22 Apr. 1966, NFWA, series 1, box 1, folder 11, ALUA; Kerry Napuk to César Chávez, 28 Apr. 1966, NFWA, series 1, box 1, folder 11, ALUA.

⁹⁰Judith S. Graham to César Chávez, 22 Nov. 1965, NFWA, series 1, box 1, folder 5, ALUA.

Huerta's role in the UFW was her attempt, as she would later explain to one potential volunteer, to "live" her ideas.⁹¹ She had come to the union in 1962 as an emerging professional organizer as well as social and political activist. Acting out of a sense of calling and a need to escape troubled personal affairs she had plunged wholly into the business of building a union. During this period she developed as a leader and activist, building on previous experiences and expanding her repertoire of techniques and strategies. For example, Huerta learned the importance of grassroots organizing in the AWA and the CSO. In the UFW she developed her own strategies for this, expanding on the house meetings and using her case work to expand the membership. As Huerta became more dependent on the services that the union provided and more familiar with the circumstances of their constituency, she took a keener interest in developing the social services within the union and within the legislature. In the late 1960s she would emerge not necessarily a seasoned veteran, but certainly a more fully developed activist and organizer. As she continued to work for the union into the 1970s and 1980s, the methods and priorities that she developed during these formative years would be utilized routinely. She remained committed and combative. She continued to expect her family to cope with her frenetic pace and join in her union activities or be left behind. More importantly, she drew on her experiences and her network of contacts to help bring public and political attention to and pressure on the local agricultural scene in California, one of the UFW's most successful tactics.

⁹¹Dolores Huerta to Eugene Nelson, 15 Dec, 1964, NFWA, series 1, box 1, folder 2, ALUA.

CONCLUSION

Many years ago I organized the first grape boycott, but nobody ever says I did. Then I came back and wrote and negotiated the contracts. Later, some lawyers came in to change the history to his-story. . . you don't necessarily want credit or to have your name mentioned— that's not why you do the work. Still, it's a shock when you see the reverse happening.¹

Although the literature available on the United Farm Workers tends to focus on César Chávez, the dramatic growth and success of the union cannot be adequately explained without also including the many other leaders and members who made it possible. In this vein, Dolores Huerta is an especially important starting point. Huerta was a significant part of the union at its inception in 1962, during its formative years, through first strikes and boycotts in the late 1960s, and into the 1970s and 1980s as it continued to grow despite numerous obstacles. She helped develop many of the strategies that made the union effective as both a representative and a support institution for its membership. Although one can easily catalogue these contributions, Huerta's decisions as a leader, why she chose certain strategies over others and her abject devotion, are best understood in light of her life as a whole.

Huerta's reasons for becoming an activist and union organizer were complex. On the one hand she had an innate propensity for leadership. As a child she was described as a

¹Dolores Huerta, qt. in Cathleen Rountree, *On Women Turning 50: Celebrating Mid-Life Discoveries* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 130-131.

natural leader among her peers. She was also very much aware of and sympathetic to the plight of farm workers and other disadvantaged members of the Stockton community. As a good Catholic she felt it was her duty to help them. At the same time, Huerta's family did not discourage this disposition, but rather attempted to channel it into activities appropriate to her position as a middle class Mexican-American women. She was thus encouraged to take on leadership positions within her church as well as in charity and civic service organizations. Huerta clearly found satisfaction in this work and returned to it again and again, in progressively more nontraditional and less acceptable ways.

Huerta's work as an activist eventually became both a catalyst for and an escape from her personal problems. One key example of this was the break-up of Huerta's second marriage to Ventura Huerta. In this case her work with the CSO and the AWA was clearly part of their marital difficulties. Her unwillingness to stay home, to take on the role of wife and mother above all else, was a continual source of conflict that contributed heavily to their eventual divorce. At the same time, this second failure as a wife precipitated Huerta's total commitment to political activism and the organization of farm workers. She used the UFW as an escape. Not only did the union give her something else to think about, it also assuaged her feelings of guilt. Huerta rationalized her work with the union, helping others at the expense of her own family, as a justification for what she considered her personal failings. As a good Catholic she was supposed to be a wife and mother first and foremost. So she went into a church and prayed, bargaining with God,

asking for forgiveness as long as her work bore “fruit.”² In the end, she thought she was given absolution from marriage and traditional motherhood so that she could help others.

It is in this light that Huerta’s unfailing devotion to the UFW, her intensity and willingness to use almost any tactic to achieve results, is best understood. Failure in this endeavor was not really an option. Huerta could not admit defeat or she would not be forgiven, her failures as a wife and mother would not be justified. This was in many ways Huerta’s biggest asset. Not only did it mean that she was highly motivated, it also contributed to her flexibility and willingness to be unconventional in her tactics. She was not bound by tradition to demure to Chávez, to abstain from overtly political activities, or to stand aside as men lead the picket lines, formulated strategy and negotiated contracts. Rather, she was bound to actively contribute to the union which meant that she influenced it profoundly from its inception.

Of course, Huerta’s specific contributions as a leader and strategist must also be considered in light of her life as a whole. Her experiences, in general and as an activist and organizer, played a large part in the decisions she made in the UFW. For example, Huerta’s early familiarity with the lives of farm workers guided her in the founding of the AWA with Father McCullough. In turn, her experiences with the AWA, and then the AWOC, profoundly effected her contributions to UFW strategic planning. Thus, the UFW’s initial structure and organizing efforts strongly resembled the AWA’s. Similarly, Huerta’s later contributions at the negotiating table were based on the tactics that she developed as the CSO and then UFW lobbyist in the early 1960s. Her high level of

²Barbara L. Baer, “Stopping Traffic: One Women’s Cause,” *The Progressive* 39, 9 (Sept. 1975): 38-40, qt. 39; Baer, ““You Find A Way”: The Women of the Boycott,” *The Nation* 218, 8 (23 Feb. 1974): 232-38, qt. 234.

motivation was thus complemented by her experience and access to salient information. This would continue to be the case throughout the 1970s and beyond, as the union matured, and Huerta's position became more clearly defined.

Throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, Huerta remained a critical member of the UFW's leadership team. She helped formulate strategy and continued as an important public figure at union and promotional events, as well as on the political scene in both Washington and Sacramento. Her contributions during the unions 1968-1970 struggle with table grape growers, and then again in the ensuing boycotts throughout the 1970s, were critically important and are a prime example of her significant contributions as a leader in the UFW and how these contributions were effected by her wider experiences. During the boycott she was again unfailing in her persistence and proved to be a key strategist for the union, utilizing salient knowledge gained from previous experiences to mobilize support on a number of levels.

While the union was fighting wine grape growers in the mid-1960s, table grape growers were consolidating their opposition and developing strategies of resistance. Di Giorgio's example of collusion with the Teamsters was expanded to include widespread collusion within the industry and increased reliance on anti-unionization government support. Although the UFW initially defeated Giumarra in 1970, these tactics would be used to the UFW's detriment as the era wore on. When the UFW tried to unionize the workers at Giumarra Vineyards in the summer of 1967 they unknowingly undertook their toughest fight yet.

The initial salvos of the UFW-Giumarra dispute were fairly standard. Giumarra refused to recognize the union and the union called a strike. Although the strike

immediately reduced the company's workforce it was quickly replenished with undocumented Mexican workers and those with temporary visas. In addition Giumarra petitioned for and received injunctions against the UFW which forced the union to severely limit picketing. The strike was consequently stymied. In turn the UFW declared a boycott on Giumarra and began to call on UFW supporters throughout the country for aid. Huerta left Delano to head the boycott effort in New York, but was quickly called back as more problems emerged.³ Within two months, as the boycott took effect, Giumarra received permission from other growers to start shipping its produce under their labels. The boycott began to lose momentum since Giumarra grapes could no longer be readily identified. Huerta was instrumental in overcoming this obstacle and getting the boycott back off the ground. At a meeting with Chávez, Huerta and Fred Ross came up with the idea to boycott all California grapes.⁴ If the entire industry was going to support Giumarra and work against the UFW, then the UFW would have to treat them all the same and make the grapes themselves the label.⁵ Huerta and Ross, having worked in the forefront of both the picket lines and the boycott organizing efforts since the mid-1960s, had a very clear idea of the importance of what they were proposing. They had firsthand experience with the ineffectual nature of a strike where substitute labor was readily available and they also understood the importance of an easily identifiable product or label for any boycott. Although Chávez did not like the idea of boycotting growers whose

³Jacques E. Levy, *Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1975), 266-267.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

workers were not yet unionized, he was forced to accept the idea as the unions sole recourse.

Huerta was also responsible for other UFW strategies that proved critical in the ensuing boycott and in the years to come. First, she pushed the union to expand it's efforts to as many cities as possible, not just the most populous ones or those that bought the greatest number of grapes. Although she understood that this would stretch union resources, she thought that broad public appeals were important for putting pressure on public officials to support the boycott.⁶ More importantly, she was adamant that the UFW involve "labor unions and other groups" to support boycott efforts⁷. These groups could provide material support for the UFW while its resources were stretched thin. For example, when she returned to New York to head the boycott there, she started with the well entrenched organized labor forces in the city. She courted their support on multiple levels, the least of which was asking their members to abstain from the purchase of grapes. For example, she asked local labor unions to house UFW staff and volunteers, as well to hinder the shipping and selling of grapes in the city. This was a very effective strategy. By June and July of 1968 "only 91 carlots of grapes reached their New York destination," in comparison to over 400 the year before.⁸ Huerta also used UFW friends at the national level to put pressure on local politicians and government agencies to, if not support the boycott, then at the very least not hinder it.⁹ All of these tactics involved networking on

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Margaret Rose, "Women in the United Farm Workers: A Study of Chicana and Mexican Participation in a Labor Union 1950-1980," (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Los Angeles, 1983), 79-82.

⁹William F. Ryan to Dolores Huerta, 11 March 1968, United Farm Workers Organizing
(continued...)

one level or another; a strategy that Huerta had been using for her own survival and that of the union for some time. The UFW's eventual success in bringing table grape growers into negotiations during the summer of 1970 is largely credited to this strategy of "mobilizing external resources to pressure growers."¹⁰

For the UFW and Huerta this was actually the beginning of yet another long cycle of struggle. The same year that the table grape industry was forced to sign contracts, the lettuce industry introduced the Teamsters back into the fields in a deliberate effort to thwart UFW organizing. Throughout the early 1970s the conflict between the UFW and the growers escalated. Workers were upset with Teamster-grower collusion and flocked to the UFW by the thousands. By 1973 violence against UFW supporters was becoming routine. Teamster "guards" assaulted picketers and drive by shootings had injured several UFW supporters. That summer two UFW organizers were killed in separate incidents. The young Naji Daifullah died shortly after being assaulted by a police officer in the streets of Delano while sixty year old Juan de la Cruz was shot coming off a picket line. The entire agricultural industry in California seemed to mobilize against the UFW at the same time. As many of the UFW's early contracts began to expire, grower after grower signed on with the Teamsters despite workers' continued protests. The UFW fought back initially using the same strategy it had employed in 1968. Huerta was again sent to New York, but this time she was organizing a boycott against grapes, wine, and lettuce.

⁹(...continued)

Committee Collection (hereafter UFWOC), box 6, folder 18, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State Univ., Detroit, MI (hereafter ALUA).

¹⁰Linda C. Majka and Theo J. Majka, *Farm Workers, Agribusiness, and the State*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 187.

During this second large scale boycott Huerta's contributions were again critical. She became more visible to a wider public. She added to her standard repertoire of lobbying unions, civic and community groups, and politicians by appealing directly to the wider public. The seeds of this strategy can be seen in Huerta's earlier efforts to bring the 1968 table grape boycott to as many cities as possible. Huerta did several interviews for national magazines in an attempt to gain sympathy for the union's efforts.¹¹ This was explicitly related to wider UFW strategy. As the union became increasingly incapacitated in the fields, UFW leadership made a clear turn towards public appeals and accordingly, using the press as a vehicle to gain support.¹² Where once the press had courted the union, the union now actively courted the press. Public appeals were important for two reasons. On the one hand the UFW wanted support for the boycott in order to hurt the growers and force them to negotiate. At the same time the union also turned towards the government for support and needed the public to put pressure on elected officials. Over ten years after Chávez convinced Huerta that field work was more important than lobbying, he decided that the union could not win anything for farm workers without it. In 1974, the union made lobbying for legislation dealing with agricultural workers one of its top priorities. Huerta was at the forefront of these efforts, drawing on previous experiences and tapping her network of contacts at the state and national level. Huerta

¹¹Baer, "Stopping Traffic," 38-40; Barbara Baer and Glenna Matthews, "'You Find a Way': The Women of the Boycott," *The Nation* 218, 8 (23 Feb. 1974), 232-238; Judith Coburn "Dolores Huerta: La Pasionaria of the Farm Workers," *Ms.* 4, 5 (Nov. 1976): 11-16.

¹²Linda Irwin Moore, "The Rhetorical Substance and Strategies in the Dispute Between California Table Grape Vineyard Owners and the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee," (Ph.D. diss., Kent State University, 1973), 172-175.

used the swift tongue that her own grandfather had identified to convince the public to support the UFW.

In 1975 this type of pressure resulted in the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act (ALRA). This was the first law in United States history to guarantee collective bargaining rights for farm workers. It set up an Agricultural Labor Relations Board (ALRB) to enforce the provisions of the act and deal with grower/worker disputes. In the later half of the 1970s the ALRA and the ALRB were largely effective. The UFW grew substantially during this time and was able to sign contracts with multiple growers following state supervised elections. However, with the election of conservative George Deukmejian as Governor of California in 1980, the union again faced stiff opposition. Deukmejian appointed anti-union, pro-grower representatives to the ALRB and refused to enforce the ALRA's provisions for collective bargaining.

However, while the union lost some ground during the 1980s, and certainly as late as the mid-1990s journalists were uncovering horrific stories of farm workers' living conditions, the lives of many more had substantially improved since the inception of the UFW. In 1974 Huerta told one reporter that the UFW would win because it was "changing people, not just getting a paycheck."¹³ Indeed the union changed the very constituency from which it grew. It created a network of services that changed the lives of farm workers, making them more politically active and less dependent on growers.

From the mid 1970s on the tactics of the UFW and Huerta's role within the union have largely stayed the same. The union has continued to use strikes, boycotts, and lobbying efforts to mobilize external resources to pressure both growers and government

¹³Baer, "'You Find a Way'," 237.

officials. Huerta has continued to make the union her life. Despite many difficulties she has remained devoted and unfailing in her energy as the unions vice president. In the late 1970s, the UFW lost most of its senior staff members due to internal disputes about strategy and the allocation of union resources. Throughout this upheaval, Huerta stayed with Chávez and helped train new union leaders. In 1988 Huerta was brutally beaten by a Los Angeles police officer while protesting a rally for then-presidential candidate George Bush. Huerta suffered a ruptured spleen, several broken ribs and almost died from blood loss. As soon as she was back on her feet she got back to work, sued the police department which eventually settled for \$825,000. She donated this money to groups organizing women and plunged back into the UFW.¹⁴ Even after Chávez's unexpected death in 1992, Huerta continued her work with the union. During the 1990s Huerta played an important role in the unions campaign for the rights of strawberry workers, strategizing with UFW president Arturo Rodriguez, flying back and forth across the country, giving speeches, motivating farm workers and lobbying politicians.¹⁵ As Huerta once told César Chávez "you haven't seen anything yet, I'm going to get worse." Because from now on I'm going to fight really, really hard when I believe something."¹⁶ This seems to be a constant refrain.¹⁷ Huerta's motivation has indeed remained high. Although she became more critical of organized religion in her later years, she continued

¹⁴ Julie Felner, "January/February Woman of the Year: Dolores Huerta, For a Lifetime of Labor Championing the Rights of Farmworkers," *Ms.* [online version] available through the UFW website <<http://ufw.org/ms.htm>>, accessed 26 Feb. 2002; Susan Ferriss and Ricardo Sandoval, *The Fight in the Fields: Cesar Chavez and the Farmworkers Movement*, ed. Diana Hembree, photo. ed. Michele McKenzie (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1997), 257.

¹⁵Ruth Carranza, "From the Fields into the History Books," *Intercambios Femeniles* 3, 3 (Winter 1989), 12; Felner.

¹⁶Baer, "'You Find A Way'," 235.

¹⁷Felner.

to self-identify as a Catholic and to believe that she was “put in this life to make things happen.”¹⁸ In 1993, a 63 year old Huerta told an interviewer,

I know that I will have to slow down some day . . . Right now I’m blessed to be able to sustain my pace and continue to do what I am doing. I’ll just keep going as long as I can and die with my boots on, I hope.¹⁹

¹⁸Rountree, 129.

¹⁹Rountree, 133.

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