One Life: Dolores Huerta

Don’t be a marshmallow. Walk the street with us into history. Get off the sidewalk. Work for justice!

Dolores Huerta, 1975

The farm workers’ movement in California was one of the civil rights campaigns of the 1960s that made the country acutely aware of the inequalities undermining its constitutional promise of freedom and dignity for all members of society. A crucial yet lesser-known figure in this struggle is Dolores Huerta (born 1930). Along with César Chávez, Huerta brought the conditions of field laborers to public attention—including below-poverty-level wages for long days of backbreaking work and precarious living conditions—galvanizing national solidarity on their behalf.

Huerta was the pragmatic counterpart to the charismatic Chávez, and the pair cofounded the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) in 1962. It became the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC) in 1966 and eventually the United Farm Workers (UFW). At a time when men dominated organized labor and Mexican American women were expected to dedicate themselves to family, Huerta advanced new models of womanhood as an energetic picket captain, a persuasive lobbyist on the state and national level, and an unyielding contract negotiator. She spearheaded and served as the main strategist for the 1965 national campaign that by 1967 had called on international consumers to boycott table grapes from growers who refused to negotiate with the union. Fearless, eloquent, and passionate for social justice, Huerta ushered through her vision of landmark improvements for farm workers, from higher wages to worker’s compensation and the right to collective bargaining.
Connect with us about “One Life: Dolores Huerta” using #VivaHuerta on our social media sites. (symbols for Facebook, Instagram and Twitter).

Curatorial Statement

The civil rights movement of the 1960s awakened an awareness of social injustice that fueled empowerment struggles among other marginalized groups, including farm workers. In 1965 Mexican American and Filipino grape pickers walked out of the fields in Delano, California, triggering a battle that culminated a decade later in the signing of the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act. This exhibition commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of this momentous strike and Dolores Huerta’s fight for the rights of agricultural workers.

Taína Caragol, Curator for Latino Art and History

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DH01 (hallway image)

Dolores Huerta, Delano, California, grape strike, September 24, 1965

Harvey Wilson Richards (1912–2001)

Reproduction courtesy Harvey Richards Media Archive
Born on April 10, 1930, in Dawson, New Mexico, Dolores Fernández was the second of the three children of Juan Fernández and Alicia Chávez. Dolores was two years old when the marriage ended. Alicia Chávez moved with her children to Stockton, California, an agricultural center with a community of Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Jewish, and Mexican families.

Chávez worked as a waitress during the day and at the canneries at night to provide her family with a middle-class upbringing. During World War II she was able to buy a lunch counter and a seventy-room hotel. She frequently gave free lodging to dispossessed migrant farm workers. Huerta had limited contact with her father, but she was proud of his union activity as a miner and of his work in the beet fields.
Dolores Huerta as a majorette, c. 1946

Dolores Huerta’s mother instilled in her a strong sense of security, independence, and gender equality. According to Huerta, “At home, we all shared equally in the household tasks. I never had to cook for my brothers or do their clothes like many traditional Mexican families.” This upbringing proved to be vital when Huerta became an organizer in the male-dominated world of labor unions.

A bright, hard-working student, Dolores Huerta also took music and dance lessons, sang in the church choir, and joined the majorette team and the Girl Scouts. After graduating from high school, she studied education at a community college, no small feat for a Mexican American woman at that time. Her intelligence and academic background made her a valuable asset to the farm workers’ movement.

Lori Huerta de León's Family Photos
Huerta’s commitment to social justice was accompanied by her challenge to conventional models of womanhood. In addition to being a pioneering labor leader, she reared eleven children from three different partners. Celeste and Lori were born from Huerta’s brief marriage to her high school sweetheart, Ralph Head. A few years later, in the 1950s, she married fellow farm-labor activist Ventura Huerta. They had five children: Fidel, Emilio, Vincent, Alicia, and Angela. They divorced because Ventura thought Dolores spent too much time at the Community Service Organization in Stockton and not enough on domestic chores. Huerta had four more children from her relationship with Richard Chávez, César’s brother, which lasted four decades. When Huerta cofounded the NFWA with César Chávez, she had seven children and relied on a salary of five dollars a week and donations of food and clothing.

Victor Alemán (born 1946)

Lori Huerta de León's Family Photos
Fred Ross and Dolores Huerta

Huerta’s life took a decisive turn toward activism when she met Fred Ross (1910–1992), founder of the Community Service Organization (CSO) in California. CSO was one of the country’s first self-help advocacy organizations for Mexican Americans. It promoted civic participation among Spanish-speaking communities through voter drives and naturalization and citizenship courses; it also pressured public officials for improvements to public services. When Ross arrived in Stockton in 1955 to establish a CSO chapter, Huerta joined as a volunteer and found her life purpose. Her dedication and skill led to her appointment as CSO’s lobbyist in Sacramento. She reported to Executive Director César Chávez, who had worked for the organization since 1952. Both Huerta and Chávez considered Ross a mentor. When they cofounded the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) in 1962, Ross remained close to them, serving as a consultant to the organization.

Cathy E. Murphy (born 1943)

Digital print from scan of original negative, 1975 (printed 2014)

Cathy Murphy Photographer
Exploitation, child labor, pesticides, and living quarters

Through the twentieth century, U.S. agriculture relied heavily on immigrants and other disempowered Americans to cultivate and harvest produce for consumers around the nation. Starting in 1942, farm workers were imported from Mexico on temporary contracts through the federally established Bracero (“day laborer”) Program to make up for the workforce shortage during World War II. The end of the war generated a surplus of workers, enabling growers to offer them below-poverty wages.

Subject to seasonal harvest cycles, field workers lived precariously, without job stability or health insurance. They inhabited derelict housing, and their wages ranged from seventy-five cents to one dollar per hour. Child labor was common, fields had no drinking water or toilets, and workers were regularly exposed to harmful pesticides. All of these conditions, along with malnutrition, contributed to their poor health and a life expectancy of forty-nine years when the national average was seventy.

DH06

A lone man working a tilled field, 1966

Jon Lewis (1938–2009)

Reproduction courtesy Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut
DH07
Child harvesting onions, 1962
Harvey Wilson Richards (1912–2001)
Reproduction courtesy Harvey Richards Media Archive

DH08
Farm worker housing, Arizona, 1960s
Unidentified photographer
Reproduction courtesy Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan

DH09
Airplane spraying pesticides over fields, 1974
Unidentified photographer
Reproduction courtesy Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan
The National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) championed workers’ rights and advocated for fair wages. Its founders deliberately avoided the word “union” so that even those who were fearful of their employers’ retaliation might join. During its first year, NFWA emphasized get-out-the-vote campaigns throughout the San Joaquin Valley in Fresno, California.

César Chávez abruptly resigned from the CSO in 1962 to start the NFWA. He persuaded Huerta to remain where she was, aware of the economic uncertainty in establishing the NFWA as a solid union. Huerta was in her early thirties, estranged from her second husband, and had six children, with a seventh on the way. From Stockton, she was instrumental in cofounding the NFWA, holding house meetings to recruit members and building local support. In 1964 she became a vice president of the NFWA.

Joseph Francis Gunterman (1913–2014)

Gelatin silver print, 1962

Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan
DH11

The founding convention of the National Farm Workers Association, Fresno, California, with Tony Ríos, Dolores Huerta, Tony Orendain, and César Chávez

While working together at the CSO, César Chávez and Dolores Huerta discovered a common interest in organizing farm workers. Chávez’s family had been forced into migrant work in the 1930s after losing their Arizona farm during the Great Depression. He was unable to finish school because of his family’s nomadic life. Huerta knew the plight of farm workers from her father’s work in the fields and his union activity. Prior to working at the CSO, she had taught English to the barefoot and hungry children of farm workers.

Frustrated with CSO’s urban focus and resistance to entering the arena of labor organizing, Chávez left the organization in 1962 and asked Huerta to join him in launching an agricultural union. The National Farm Workers Association was born in 1962 in Fresno.

Joseph Francis Gunterman (1913–2014)

Gelatin silver print, 1962

Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan
The great strides for social equality made by the African American civil rights movement inspired other oppressed groups to fight for their rights, among them farm workers. A strong believer in the peaceful resistance tactics of Mahatma Gandhi and the Reverend Martin Luther King, César Chávez made nonviolent civil disobedience the backbone of the farm workers’ movement. In 1965, California table grapes became symbolic of the struggle when grape-pickers from the area around Delano walked off the fields and refused to collect the ripening fruit to protest their poor wages and working conditions. The strike lasted five years and was supported by a four-year international consumer boycott that gained momentum as the call not to buy grapes spread to other unions, churches, students, activists, and people from all walks of life. The pressure exerted through these strategies resulted in the signing of landmark contracts by the major grape growers with the United Farm Workers.

George Rodríguez (born 1937)

Gelatin silver print, 1969

George Rodríguez
The United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC) emerged in 1966 from the consolidation of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, led by Filipino Larry Itliong, and Chávez’s National Farm Workers Association. The new union kept the prominent graphics of the original flag conceived for the NFWA, replacing its old acronym and adding its affiliation to the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO).

Evoking the Mexican roots of the NFWA and the UFWOC’s main constituency, the red and white flag featured at its center the schematic silhouette of a black eagle, an important animal in Aztec mythology. The word “Huelga” on top is Spanish and Filipino for strike. Huelga! Que viva la huelga! (Long live the strike!) became the battle cry of farm workers demanding fair wages and treatment in the fields.

Flag design by Richard Chávez; unidentified maker

Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History
Unions used strikes as fundamental pressure tactics against employers. In September 1965, several months after a successful grape strike in the Coachella Valley had granted grape-pickers an increase in salaries within a week, the mostly Filipino Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) decided to strike for higher wages in the town of Delano. There, growers seemed less likely to give in quickly, as the harvest lasted longer in the San Joaquin Valley. Also, many of the workers in the valley were affiliated with the primarily Mexican NFWA instead of the AWOC. Looking for strength in numbers, Larry Itliong, president of the AWOC, asked César Chávez and the National Farm Workers Association to collaborate. On September 16, Mexican Independence Day, the NFWA voted unanimously to strike with the AWOC. The ensuing group was ethnically and culturally diverse, also including African American, Puerto Rican, and Arab farm workers. The strike lasted five years.

George Ballis (1925–2010)
Gelatin silver print, 1966
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution
DH15s

Reverend Jim Drake, Vincent Huerta, Julio Hernández, Angela Huerta, Dolores Huerta, and Emilio Huerta at UFW Hall, 1966

This photograph shows Dolores Huerta in a human chain with three of her eleven children, singing the traditional Mexican folk song “De colores” at the end of a meeting in Delano. Evoking the movement’s spirit of nonviolence and optimism in the face of social injustice, this unofficial UFW anthem describes a colorful world where the beauty of nature inspires the love of mankind.

Huerta’s family life permeated her work as an organizer at the UFW. She saw family engagement and women’s involvement as natural to the movement, once declaring: “People are poor so the whole family works together and the whole family strikes together and pickets together. . . . We are nonviolent, and the women bring a lot of dignity to our movement.”

George Ballis (1925–2010)

Courtesy George Ballis/Take Stock/The Image Works
DH16–1

National Farm Workers Association march, 1966

Jon Lewis (1938–2009)

Courtesy Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library,
Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut
On March 17, 1966, César Chávez and approximately 100 individuals set off on a march from the town of Delano and onto Highway 99. Hundreds of supporters gathered along the way through the farmland of California’s Central Valley. Twenty-five days later, when the procession arrived in Sacramento on Easter Sunday, the crowd had increased to 10,000, making this the largest demonstration of farm workers to date in the history of California.

This photograph was taken during Chávez’s address to the ecstatic audience. The movement had achieved its first victory a few days before the end of the pilgrimage when, afraid of bad publicity, Schenley Industries signed a contract with the National Farm Workers Association recognizing the union’s demands. In solidarity, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee served as the signatory witness.

Ernest Lowe (born 1934)

Gelatin silver print, 1966

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution
Huelga! The First Hundred Days of the Great Delano Grape Strike, 1969

Published six times between 1966 and 1969 by the UFW’s Farm Worker Press, Eugene Nelson’s *Huelga! The First Hundred Days of the Great Delano Grape Strike* offered an insider’s perspective on the chronic destitution of farm workers. In a journalistic style, Nelson recounted the factors that pushed farm workers to mobilize and the methods of intimidation—including death threats—that growers and local authorities used on the workers. This cover, by photographer Harvey Richards, constitutes one of the most iconic images of the movement and of Dolores Huerta. In the book, Nelson referred to Huerta as “our fiery vice president.”

Collection of Taína Caragol and Marc Neumann
César Chávez made the cover of *Time* magazine on July 4, 1969. According to the magazine, the issue of whether or not a household should boycott grapes had “divided husband and wife . . . and engendered public controversy from coast to coast.” *Time*’s journalists interviewed hundreds of people—farm workers, growers, government officials, urban supporters and detractors of the movement, and Chávez himself, connecting the struggle to the John Steinbeck’s Depression-era book *The Grapes of Wrath*. *Time*’s cover story recognized the broader meaning of *La causa* as it grew from its focus on farm workers to a movement for the empowerment of all Mexican Americans, or Chicanos.

Cover image by Manuel Acosta (1921–1989)

Collection of Taína Caragol and Marc Neumann
Senator Robert F. Kennedy and Dolores Huerta at end of César Chávez’s twenty-five-day fast

The grape strike was long and arduous, and its progress was not always evident. An endless supply of non-UFW replacements, often organized by the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, seemed ready to doom the effort to failure. The Teamsters, a union of produce packers and truckers, had changed allegiances from the farm workers to the growers in 1966.

By October 1967, two years into the strike, seven wineries had signed contracts with the UFW. Many were still left, however, and the piecemeal approach was exhausting. In addition, strikers suffered constant intimidation from middlemen and sheriffs, which tested the limits of their peaceful tactics. As farm workers became impatient, Chávez began fasting to emphasize the nonviolent aspect of the movement. New York senator Robert F. Kennedy, a strong supporter of the UFW, helped Chávez break his twenty-five-day fast at a Catholic Mass broadcast on national media on March 10, 1968.

Richard Darby (lifedates unknown)

Gelatin silver print, 1968

Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan
Senator Robert Kennedy declared his support of the UFW in 1967, when he served as one of the members of the Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor in Delano. After listening to the Kern County sheriff relate how his deputies arrested peaceful picketers, Kennedy said: “Can I suggest in the interim … that the sheriff and district attorney read the Constitution of the United States?”

In 1968, at the end of César Chávez’s fast, Kennedy addressed the press with Dolores Huerta by his side. He expressed the need to pass legislation recognizing the right of farm workers to unionize and bargain collectively with their employers, a right that industrial workers had gained with the passage of the National Labor Relations Act in 1935. Kennedy’s support of the UFW earned him its endorsement in his presidential campaign, which ended tragically with his murder.

Richard Darby (lifedates unknown)

Gelatin silver print, 1968

Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan
Join the Boycott! Don’t Buy Gallo Wines

In July 1970, five years after the beginning of the grape strike, the UFW reached a landmark achievement when it signed contracts with twenty-three companies, including the extensive landowners Giumarra. Eighty-five percent of all table-grape growers in California were now under a union contract. The victory was short-lived, however, as the opposing Teamsters union started competing with the UFW in Salinas. Without the approval of its Salinas members, the Teamsters leadership signed contracts that favored the growers by granting small raises, but no fringe benefits, to the workers. As a result, the UFW revived the intensity of its boycott, launching new strikes. Relations between the unions grew tenser as the Teamsters hired strongmen to intimidate UFW picketers. In 1973, the Modesto-based Gallo Winery, the nation’s largest vintner and one of the first to have signed with the UFW in 1967, saw its contract expire and signed instead with the Teamsters. Chávez responded with a boycott of Gallo Wines.

George Ballis (1925–2010)

Photolithographic poster, c. 1973

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution
In 1962, when César Chávez and Dolores Huerta cofounded the National Farm Workers Association, they agreed that he would be the public face of the union and she would handle the logistics. Chávez became the charismatic president of the union, the figure on whom the media and, ultimately, history focused. Huerta was highly visible as well, although clearly in a vice-presidential capacity. An articulate and energetic speaker, Huerta led the union’s public relations efforts, conveying the movement’s values and aims to the larger public in print, radio, and television. She was also instrumental in bolstering the morale of workers on the picket line. Her cry to arms, ¡Sí se puede! (Yes we can!), evinced her faith in social change and her determination to empower farm workers.
Subsisting and feeding a large family on the meager salary of a union organizer, Huerta often dressed herself and her children in donated clothes. This hand-knit sweater emblazoned with the black eagle of the UFW was given to her by a sympathizer of the movement. As seen in a nearby photograph, she often wore it to public engagements as an easily readable symbol of her cause.

Dolores C. Huerta
**Boycott Grapes**

The impact of the farm workers’ movement went rapidly beyond the fields, fueling a social and cultural revolution in Latino communities on the West Coast and in the Southwest. The Chicano Movement, as it came to be known, advanced the social, cultural, and political empowerment of Mexican Americans and had its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s. Chicanos had endured second-class citizenship status since 1848, when Mexico’s northern half was incorporated into the United States with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The new movement gave new meaning to the slang word “Chicano,” which had been used pejoratively in the Southwest to describe Mexicans born north of the Rio Grande. Chicanos now wore the name like a badge of honor and as a sign of kinship with their Mexican roots.

*La causa,* the cause for the dignity of farm workers, became that of all Chicanos. This poster by Xavier Viramontes is one of the most iconic Chicano artworks in support of the UFW.

Xavier Viramontes (born 1947)

Offset lithograph, 1973

Gilberto Cardenas Latino Art Collection
Most of the farm workers’ movement revolved around grape-picking, but it also involved other produce that the UFW boycotted in the early 1970s, including lettuce, dates, lemons, and strawberries.

César Chávez named Dolores Huerta the UFW’s chief contract negotiator. In 1966, as the first grape companies buckled under the nascent movement, she became the first woman in American history to negotiate a labor contract with growers. She recalls that she had never seen a contract before but spent one week studying different examples and had written her own for the meeting. To Chávez’s surprise, every demand had been consulted with and voted on by the workers. For her unyielding character at the bargaining table, growers referred to Huerta as the “Dragon Lady.” One Delano grower remarked: “Dolores Huerta is crazy. She is a violent woman, where women, especially Mexican women, are usually peaceful and calm.”

Unidentified photographer
Gelatin silver print, 1972
Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan
Dolores Huerta speaking to a group

One of Dolores Huerta’s most valuable contributions to the farm workers’ movement was her feminist stance. Many Mexican American wives of farm workers were active in the fields, but their family responsibilities were of prime importance. Huerta, the mother of eleven children, challenged this paradigm by putting her family responsibilities second to labor organizing and inspiring other women to become involved in the movement. She advocated passionately for all farm workers but demanded that issues affecting women—including sexism, child care, and sexual harassment—be taken seriously. This earned Huerta the admiration of Chicanas and renowned feminists such as Gloria Steinem. On the role of women in the UFW, Huerta said in a 1974 interview: “One of the reasons why our movement is nonviolent is that we want our women and children involved, and we stay nonviolent because of the women and children.”

Unidentified photographer

Gelatin silver print, 1972

Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan
DH28
Dolores Huerta at Gallo negotiations

E. & J. Gallo Winery, the country’s largest vintner, was one of the first corporations to sign a contract with the UFW, in 1967. In April 1973 Gallo and the UFW began to discuss renewing the contract. Negotiations came to a halt in June, however, because of disagreements about the UFW’s “hiring halls.” Designed a few years earlier to replace the growers’ practice of hiring middlemen to staff the fields, the hiring hall ensured the union’s control over the workforce and reinforced the concept of fair pay. But problems occurred among the workers as the union tried to standardize entrenched practices for acquiring labor among the different cultural groups. Instead of signing with the UFW, Gallo signed with its competitor, the Teamsters union. In response, César Chávez launched a boycott in sixty-four cities of stores that carried Gallo wines, as well as lettuce and grapes picked by the Teamsters.

Unidentified photographer

Gelatin silver print, c. 1973

Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan
Dolores Huerta wearing a “There is blood on those grapes” shirt

To supplement the strike, farm workers launched a grape boycott in 1966. Union members and supporters followed truckloads of grapes and prevented them from being unloaded. They also picketed urban storefronts, asking consumers not to buy grapes, and eventually lettuce. Secondary boycotts were also launched in which the union requested consumers to refrain from buying at chain stores that carried fruit without the union seal. Huerta was a main strategist in this effort, which became a popular international benchmark of social justice. Far from the California fields, in cities like Chicago, Boston, Montreal, and London, people stopped buying grapes. Heading New York City’s boycott office in 1968, Huerta built a coalition of church, labor, student, and other liberal groups and picketed A&P, the biggest chain in the city. Thousands of shoppers turned away until A&P’s stores stopped carrying grapes. Huerta then tackled the independent stores to the same effect.

Chris Sánchez (lifedates unknown)

Gelatin silver print, 1973

Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan
Dolores Huerta at a Farm Bureau national convention

While Huerta embraced pacifism as intrinsic to her Catholic faith and an essential value of the movement, she championed debate as an instrument to denounce injustice and oppressive conditions and stir social change. In this photograph Huerta is speaking to a crowd of UFW supporters outside the 1972 annual national convention of the American Farm Bureau Federation. To the right, a sign in Spanish reads “Down with the Farm Bureau,” mockingly replacing the word “bureau” with burro, or donkey.

The federation was the nation’s most powerful agribusiness organization. The keynote speaker that year was Frank Fitzsimmons, president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and a friend of President Richard Nixon. In a 1972 speech, Fitzsimmons attacked the UFW as a “revolutionary movement that is perpetrating a fraud on the American public,” and he called on the growers to build an alliance with the Teamsters.

Unidentified artist

Gelatin silver print, 1972

Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan
DH 31

Dolores Huerta at California demonstrations

A common key aspect of the African American civil rights movement and the farm workers’ movement was the emphasis on the body as a tool for social change. Marches, pickets, boycotts, and sit-ins were all physical activities that could be performed by destitute individuals to call attention to social injustice and demand their rights. In a 1978 speech at UCLA, Huerta elaborated on the achievements of the movement: “A lot of the work that was done was done by picketing. And what is picketing? That is just marching, it’s just walking up and down in the front of a store asking people not to buy grapes, or not to buy lettuce or not to buy—whatever it is we happen to be boycotting. . . . Now, that doesn’t seem like it could be powerful. But it is! . . . It’s your own body, your own person; this is what counts more than anything else.”

Unidentified photographer

Gelatin silver print, c. 1970

Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan
César Chávez sitting with Dolores Huerta in the hospital

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During her life of nonviolent activism, Huerta has been arrested two dozen times. She has also been a victim of violence from police authorities. In 1988 baton-wielding police in San Francisco severely beat Huerta while she took part in a peaceful demonstration by farm workers outside of an event that featured presidential candidate George H. W. Bush.

The assault, caught on camera, left the fifty-eight-year-old Huerta in the hospital with critical injuries, including a ruptured spleen and fractured ribs. The incident led to a rewriting of the San Francisco Police Department’s policies of crowd control and discipline. Huerta also received an $825,000 legal settlement from the city.

Victor Alemán (born 1946)

Gelatin silver print, 1988

Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan
DH33

Dolores Huerta

Through her example as a labor and civil rights leader, and her challenge to norms that restrict women’s role in society, Huerta became an early symbol of female power for the Chicano and feminist movements.

Chicana artist Barbara Carrasco made this portrait in homage to Huerta. Carrasco became a supporter of the farm workers’ movement in the 1970s and served for decades as a volunteer staff artist for the UFW. Carrasco, who considers Huerta her mentor and a close friend, explained her motivations for this portrait: “There are so many icons of men, and icons of women painted by men, that I wanted (as a woman) to create an iconic image of Huerta to recognize her as an equal of César Chávez and, historically, the most important negotiator for the United Farm Workers.”

Barbara Carrasco (born 1955)
Silkscreen, 1999

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; acquisition made possible through the support of the Latino Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center
DH34

Dolores Huerta receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom

On May 29, 2012, Dolores Huerta received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama for her work in leading the farm workers’ movement with César Chávez. In an interview with the White House, Huerta who is still a major force in human rights, summarized her belief in the absolute need of organizing: “If you don’t have organization, then you don’t have a democracy. . . . That’s what keeps our country a democratic institution. I think a lot of times people feel like they don’t have any value, that their involvement doesn’t mean anything. But if you look at the history, what we see is that all of the changes that have been made have always been from the bottom up, with the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, the labor movement, the LGBT movement, the environmental movement. It’s people organizing from the bottom that make the changes that we need in our society.”

Lawrence Jackson (born 1969)

Digital photograph, 2012 (printed 2015)

Official White House Photograph
DH35

Presidential Medal of Freedom awarded to Dolores Huerta, 2012

Dolores C. Huerta
The UFW used two types of boycotts to pressure growers into providing better working conditions during the grape strike. The first stage called for consumers not to buy produce without the union seal; the second stage added pressure by calling on consumers to stop shopping at stores that carried nonunion produce. Through flyers, the UFW conveyed the reality of farm workers’ misery to urban consumers and called on their support.

Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan
United Farm Workers pins

Pins, posters, and flyers were used to display support and spread the message of the farm workers’ movement. This multilingual collection of buttons speaks to the resonance of *La causa*, whose boycott transcended national shores to thrive in English and French Canada, Great Britain, and Sweden, among other places. The pins also mirror the multiethnic composition of the farm workers’ movement, which in addition to its primarily Mexican American and Filipino constituencies, represented African American, Anglo American, Puerto Rican, and Yemeni workers.

All: Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History
DH39-1 and DH39-2 <case>

Statement of Dolores Huerta against the Department of Defense’s purchase of nonunion grapes, 1969

Huerta cut her teeth as a lobbyist while working for the Community Service Organization in the mid-1950s. Having no legal training, she relied on her exceptional argumentative skills and persuasiveness. Her early legislative activity resulted in the passing of bills that included pension and unemployment compensation for immigrants, as well as mandating that the state of California issue voting ballots and driver’s license tests in Spanish.

Huerta presented this speech to the Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor in Washington on July 15, 1969, requesting the removal of federally imposed obstacles to the success of the UFWOC’s international grapes boycott. The boycott had already led to negotiations with major California grape growers under the auspices of the Federal Mediation Service. Despite this progress, the government was undercutting UFWOC’s efforts by doubling its yearly purchase of nonunion-produced table grapes for the armed forces in Vietnam.

Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan
Quotes:

*Teach your children values, teach them to fight for others, for justice, to help with causes.*

Dolores Huerta, Latina Women’s Business Luncheon, 2003

*I would like to be remembered as a woman who cares for fellow humans. We must use our lives to make the world a better place to live, not just acquire things. That is what we are put on earth for.*

Dolores Huerta, 2004

*Dolores is absolutely fearless, physically and spiritually.*

César Chávez, 1976