

Dolores Huerta

Dolores Huerta, cofounder of the United Farmworkers of America with Cesar Chavez, was born in 1930 in New Mexico. Her parents were both activists—her father a union activist, her mother a community organizer. Dolores first job after college was teaching in an elementary school. She left teaching to work with Community Service Organization. She said “I couldn’t stand seeing kids come to class hungry and needing shoes. I thought I could do more by organizing farm workers than by trying to teach their hungry children.”

At CSO, she worked on voter registration, issues of racism and of police brutality. That was where she first met Chavez. CSO was unwilling to take on their union organizing project, so Dolores and Cesar left CSO to found the National Farm Workers Association, predecessor to the United Farm Worker’s Union. By 1963, they joined with the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (started by Filipino farmworkers) to form the UFW.

Huerta had experience as a lobbyist with the California State Legislature. The negotiating skills she developed there helped her to negotiate the first collective bargaining agreement for farmworkers in the history of the United States. She continued both lobbying for changes in laws regarding farmworker’s rights and negotiating contracts, as well as organizing consumer boycotts, which turned out to be key to the success of UFW.

It was when striking farm workers were attacked and some were killed that the union turned to consumer boycotts. The grape boycott lasted six years. But eventually they won pensions, health benefits, and even fresh water to drink and toilets in the fields. In her work with the farmworkers Dolores became aware to the exposure to chemical pesticide being used and from which the workers had little protection. This is where she first understood the connection between low wage workers and environmental issues.

Huerta didn’t see herself as a feminist and regarded the feminist movement of a middle class project. It was after she met Gloria Steinem and realized the support of the feminist movement for her work that she began to consciously challenge gender discrimination within the farmworkers’ organization.

UFW was committed to nonviolence. That did not stop those who opposed the movement. Dolores was arrested many times, the worst of which was at the hands and baton of a San Francisco police officer. The national outrage after her life-threatening injuries led to policy changes for crowd control and police discipline in San Francisco. Moments before his death, Robert Kennedy was thanking Dolores Huerta for her work in his successful primary campaign.

For more information: Google *Dolores Huerta*, *United Farm Workers*, or *The Grape Boycott*