

Dolores Huerta: Passionate Defender of La Causa

Essay by Margaret E. Rose, Ph.D.



A passion for justice has been the motivating force behind the long career of Dolores Huerta, co-founder along with César E. Chávez, of the United Farm Workers' union. For over 40 years she has devoted her intellect, energy, and vibrant personality to improving the lives of farm laborers, Mexican Americans, and women. Huerta's single-minded dedication to social change has been commemorated in murals, in songs, in newspaper articles and magazines, and in the hearts and minds of overlapping generations of tens of thousands of union members and supporters. Her determination and unswerving advocacy of the rights of the poor and the disenfranchised have earned her innumerable awards and recognition from labor, community service, Hispanic, religious, political, and women's groups. Still active at age seventy-two, Dolores Huerta is acknowledged as one of the foremost women in the U.S. labor movement and is heralded as an inspiring role model for the youth of today. Although Huerta is sought after as a speaker, her early life, her upbringing, her awakening as a social activist, her relationship with César E. Chávez, her career struggles, and her contribution to the UFW are not well known outside of labor and Mexican American circles.

Early Life

Dolores Fernández Huerta was born in humble surroundings in Dawson, New Mexico, a small mining town in the mountains of the northern part of the state, on April 30, 1930. The words of the *Corrido de Dolores Huerta*, a ballad composed to celebrate her later accomplishments, recounted the inauspicious circumstances of her early life: “no one imagined that she would have gone to lead part of the grand movement.”¹ Huerta was the second child and only daughter of Juan and Alicia (Chávez) Fernández. Her mother’s side of the family had resided in New Mexico for two generations. Her father was born in Dawson soon after his family had immigrated from Mexico. Juan Fernández worked in the area’s mines and as an agricultural laborer. The strains of the Depression economy did not help the young couple’s marriage, which was troubled early on. Her parents soon divorced and Alicia Fernández eventually relocated her three children John, Dolores, and Marshall to Stockton, California, to make a new start for her family.

Employed as a waitress and a cannery worker, Huerta’s mother had a difficult time making ends meet during the Depression decade. Fortunately, she had the support of her father and other relatives to provide child care for her three youngsters. Huerta enjoyed a close relationship with her maternal grandfather, Herculano Chávez, who entertained the children with stories, as well as provided patient supervision and wise counsel. He recognized the intelligence and cleverness of his granddaughter. “My grandfather,” Huerta recalled in an interview with the author, “used to call me seven tongues ... because I always talked so much.”² This verbal dexterity would be an important asset in her adult life. Despite the economic deprivation of the 1930s, Huerta held fond memories of her early upbringing.

As a teenager, her economic circumstances in California improved. Her mother managed a restaurant during and after World War II and then purchased a hotel in the run-down part of town with her second husband, James Richards. Huerta and her brothers, soon joined by a younger stepsister, worked in the establishments after school and during the summers. They thrived in the poor but diverse community that was

home to Mexican, Filipino, African American, Jewish, Japanese and Chinese families. Ambitious for her children, Huerta's mother always pushed them to take music lessons and dance classes, to join school clubs and church organizations, and to participate in the neighborhood life. Her mother's vitality, independence, and entrepreneurial spirit placed strains on her second marriage and it also ended in divorce. Never one to shy away from life, her sociable mother married a third time in the early 1950s to Juan Silva. This contented relationship produced another daughter and endured until her mother's premature death from cancer.³

Although Huerta maintained her closest ties with her mother and the maternal side of her family, she had occasional contact with her father. She shared many of his interests and took pride in his accomplishments. In New Mexico, he became involved in labor activism serving as secretary-treasurer of the union local at the American Metals Company. His election to the New Mexico State Legislature in 1938, representing San Miguel County where he pushed for legislation to improve the lives of workers, naturally impressed the young Huerta. And, finally, his return to school in later life to continue an education cut short by economic adversity revealed perseverance, a trait they had in common.⁴

Influenced by her parents' examples and benefiting from improved economic conditions, Huerta was outgoing and performed well in school. A former classmate at Stockton High School recalled years later, "When we were in school, she was very popular and outspoken. She was already an organizer, but I didn't think she'd get so serious and work for such a cause."⁵ Huerta graduated from high school and continued her education at Stockton College, briefly interrupting her studies with her first marriage in 1950, just shy of her twentieth birthday, to Ralph Head.⁶ The couple had two daughters, Celeste and Lori. After her divorce, she returned to school, pursuing a teaching career and obtaining a provisional teaching credential. Once in the classroom, she found that many of her students came from poor, farm worker families. She became increasingly frustrated with the limitations of the profession. "I realized one day that as a teacher I couldn't do anything for kids who came to school barefoot and

hungry.”⁷ Huerta felt there must be a better way to deal more directly with poverty and inequality.

Finding Social Activism

Growing up in Stockton, Huerta was no stranger to community activism. Her mother provided a clear model of neighborhood involvement, religious philanthropy, and civic responsibility. She was not only spurred on by her mother’s example, but also encouraged by the heightened interest in social issues that swept through the country in the aftermath of World War II. New groups sprang up in cities and towns across the county. Stockton, California, was not unique in this regard in the 1950s. Huerta and her family became increasingly attracted to community and labor issues.

One pivotal group that captivated her was the Community Service Organization (CSO). Founded in Los Angeles, the CSO was dedicated to improving the lives of Mexican Americans living in the cities of the Southwest. The postwar organization would provide her with the opportunity to do something meaningful with her time and change the course of her life. Huerta became involved with the CSO when Fred Ross, an organizer who had established chapters in Los Angeles and other parts of California, arrived in Stockton to set up another branch.⁸ The group believed grassroots organization was the key to improving the conditions of poor and politically disenfranchised barrio residents throughout California.

Fred Ross searched for volunteers to teach citizenship classes and to organize registration drives in the barrios, so that residents could participate more effectively in the democratic system. By building Mexican American voter strength, politicians would be forced to improve services, streets, street lighting, parks, sewage systems, garbage removal, and schools, and to bring about a more responsive police force. Fred Ross identified Dolores Huerta as an ideal candidate to help activate and run the CSO chapter in Stockton. She was outspoken, passionate, and determined, qualities Ross deemed essential in a community organizer.⁹ Although initially skeptical and suspicious of the “outsider” Ross, Huerta gradually realized that he was sincere and interested in helping barrio residents improve their lives.

Huerta became very involved in CSO activities. She helped run its civic and educational programs, assisted in organizing fundraising drives, and prepared for local and regional meetings. She soon became recognized for her drive and dedication and for pressing local government for barrio improvements. As a result of her enthusiasm and skills, she was hired to lobby in Sacramento for the CSO legislative agenda, including the extension of Old Age Security benefits to first-generation Mexican Americans, even if they had not become naturalized citizens, and the expansion of the State Disability Program to agricultural workers. Legislating social and political change proved a long and arduous process.

During this time, she met and married her second husband, Ventura Huerta, who was also a member of CSO. This relationship produced five more children (Fidel, Emilio, Vincent, Alicia, and Angela). Despite increasing domestic demands, Huerta continued her activism in the CSO. Her intense involvement led to strong disagreements with her spouse who wanted her to spend less time on the CSO and more time raising her family and sustaining their home life.¹⁰ Their differences led to a separation and eventual divorce.

In the CSO, Huerta met colleagues who shared her passion for social change. One of these individuals was César E. Chávez, who had been recruited several years earlier when Fred Ross had traveled to San Jose to set up a chapter of the CSO in that community. Huerta had heard Ross speak very highly of Chávez and his abilities. From his comments, Huerta had imagined a dynamic, forceful, and aggressive individual. When they finally met, she was not overly impressed. “[He was] very quiet, humble,” she recalled in an interview. “He never fought for the limelight.”¹¹ In spite of his low-key and mild manner, Huerta soon discovered they had much in common. While very different in personality and temperament, they shared core values, a strong commitment to social change, and a fervent desire for social justice. They also shared an increasing frustration with the CSO’s reluctance to enlarge its social vision beyond its urban roots and to fully embrace the cause of one of society’s most impoverished and marginal groups, farm workers.

Chávez, who had steadily moved up the ranks of the CSO leadership to become General Director, stunned the membership when he resigned over the issue. Huerta supported his position and left the organization soon after to co-found the Farm Workers Association (FWA) with him in 1962.¹² The pair exercised great care in selecting the name for the new group. They chose the word association because they realized growers would react strongly against a union, as would workers who would be reluctant to join out of fear of retribution from their employers.

Discovering Her Life's Work

From the outset of their partnership in the FWA, Huerta and Chávez developed a close working relationship. They secured the articles of incorporation, set the dues, established a credit union, arranged for an insurance program for members, held their first convention, and elected officers. Chávez moved his family to Delano to establish a base in the southern San Joaquin Valley. Huerta remained in Stockton to organize farm workers in the rich agricultural valleys of northern California. Although they vigorously differed, and sometimes vociferously disagreed over which strategies to employ and which priorities to set, they respected each other. Huerta was not shy about stating her views or objections, "I am not the quiet long suffering type," she reminded Chávez in one of her many letters.¹³ Her blunt, no-nonsense approach to problems provided a good sounding board for Chávez, who could always expect a frank appraisal from this articulate colleague.

From the founding of the union, Huerta held decision-making posts and maintained a highly visible profile. "Virtually all observers on the scene at that time," noted one reporter who covered the early years of the group, "were convinced that next to Chávez, Dolores Huerta ... was the top leader of the union."¹⁴ This prominence was a remarkable achievement given the lack of women in labor organizing and the strong pressures for women to remain at home or, if working, to be clustered in jobs considered appropriate for women. As second in command to Chávez, she exerted an important influence on the fortunes of the union. In the 1965 Delano grape strike, that brought national attention to the organizing effort, she devised strategy and led workers

on picket lines. She also endured the first of her more than 20 arrests in support of unionization. Departing from traditional gender expectations, she was the union's first contract negotiator. Although she had no formal background in the complicated and technical area of contract negotiations, she enthusiastically accepted this responsibility.

Her tough stances drew criticism from the lawyers for grape growers and wineries. She even acknowledged that Chávez questioned her tactics until he became involved in the process and experienced first hand the intransigence of agribusiness at the bargaining table. Such charges indicated the extent of her challenges to the political, social, and economic power of corporate agriculture, as well as conventional gender relations.¹⁵ Her dedication and perseverance won major concessions, such as pay raises, paid holidays, vacations, unemployment benefits, sanitary facilities in the fields, clean drinking water, and health benefits.

Despite successful negotiations with some companies, including several major wineries, many table grape growers continued to resist union demands for contracts. In response to this resistance, the union resorted to a boycott to pressure uncooperative grape producers. Huerta became a prominent figure in this strategy when she assumed the directorship of the table grape boycott in New York City, and then as East Coast boycott director. "When we got to New York," she vividly remembered, "it was something like four or five degrees above zero."¹⁶ Determined to challenge corporate agriculture in New York, the primary distribution point for grapes, Huerta and the busload of some 40 farm workers and a small group of students volunteers immediately got to work. Even with the positive influence of the flourishing civil rights movements, at times the task of reaching a significant number of the many residents of New York seemed overwhelming.

Huerta proved an inspiration to the agricultural laborers sent to build the boycott, who were unaccustomed to the harsh East Coast winters and anxious about living in the intense urban cultural center. She also became a model for farm worker women, encouraging them to step out of their family roles and to embrace a more active public profile in appealing to consumers not to buy grapes.¹⁷ This transformation was not

always easy. Not only did women have to overcome their own personal reservations, often they had to confront traditional expectations of fathers or husbands.

In New York, Huerta also came into closer contact with the power of the growing feminist movement, through interactions with Gloria Steinem and other women's activists who had rallied behind the farm workers' cause. As a labor activist, Huerta had dismissed the 1960s women's liberation movement as a middle-class phenomenon. For years she had ignored inappropriate comments and gender discrimination directed at her and other women by male colleagues and critics as an inevitable part of the job. Traveling across the country, she increasingly became sensitized to the sexism in her own organization. Her consciousness raised, she began to directly challenge offensive remarks and stereotypes. Consequently, she began to voice her concerns regarding the absence of women from leadership positions. She further asserted that women's opinions and issues, such as childcare and sexual harassment, should be given serious consideration by the union. Other women in addition to Gloria Steinem influenced her. "[I really admire] Eleanor Smeal, head of the Feminist Majority, whom I consider the César Chávez of the feminist movement," she noted in an interview. "She's a visionary, a very innovative person."¹⁸ Inspired by these and other women, Huerta incorporated a feminist strand into her human rights' philosophy.

Huerta's critical leadership and numerous contacts in the "Big Apple" contributed to the success of the national boycott effort in mobilizing unions, political organizations, Hispanic associations, community groups, religious denominations, student associations, and consumer groups. Acquiring valuable experience and confidence in New York City, participants in the initial contingent sent out from California spread out to other major cities across the East Coast and the nation. After five years, the growing power of this grassroots coalition finally compelled the Delano and Coachella grape producers to negotiate the historic contract of 1970.¹⁹

The dispute with the entrenched power of agribusiness was not over. Before the union could fully enjoy its victory, it confronted the lettuce, Gallo wine, and table grape boycotts of the 1970s. It was during this decade that the union name was changed to

the United Farm Workers, or UFW. As in earlier unionization campaigns, Huerta's energy, charisma, organizing abilities, and legendary speaking talents advanced "La Causa." She returned to the East Coast to renew the New York effort. Again, farm worker families left the fields to staff various boycott offices.²⁰ Local volunteers also rallied to the union's cause to offer their support, time, and money. The reactivation of the cross-class and cross-cultural cooperation from coast to coast helped lead to the passage of the *Agricultural Labor Relations Act* (ALRA) in 1975, the first law to recognize the collective bargaining rights of farm laborers in California.²¹ Expectations were high that after years of turmoil between the UFW and agribusiness, the two rivals would come to terms. Huerta returned to California to participate in organizing campaigns and to engage in the contract negotiations.

Throughout all her years with the union, Huerta juggled her family and union responsibilities. Whether it was picket line duty, protracted and intense negotiating sessions, or managing a boycott office across the country, she put the union first. At times, she would take some of her children with her to picket or to live in New York. At other times, her children would stay with relatives or with supporters in the union family. Long absences required sacrifice and hardship for her large family. Although her male colleagues were not asked about their family arrangements or enforced separations from children, Huerta faced repeated inquiries and even criticism about her domestic choices. "Like most working women, you have guilt complexes," she related in an interview. "You do it without thinking about it, because if you think about it, you can't do it."²²

Although her children questioned these priorities and often felt resentful about her decisions, they recognized her dedication to the cause. While missing many school events and birthdays, she continually reminded them of her love and concern for them. Looking back over her long career, she took great pride in the achievements of her children, who in spite of obstacles became successful and well-adjusted adults. For Huerta the union's motto, "Sí, se puede," (yes, you can do it) not only applied to her work, but to her children as well.

Huerta's personal and family life grew even more demanding during the early 1970s when she began a third relationship with Richard Chávez, César's brother. Richard and Dolores had 4 children, bringing the total number of her children to 11. The births of Juanita, María Elena, Ricky, and Camilla did little to slow her down. She persisted in her single-minded devotion to improving the lives of farm workers. She maintained a heavy speaking schedule, traveled to all parts of the country, negotiated contracts, lobbied politicians, and testified before Congress. Her life was placed at the disposal of the UFW.

During the late 1970s, Huerta concentrated on pressing "La Causa" in the political sphere, an activity she clearly relished. She assumed the directorship of the Union's Citizenship Participation Day Department (CPD), the newly established political arm of the UFW. In the 1980s, she was active in another path-breaking enterprise, the founding of Radio Campesina, the union's radio station (KUFW). For the first time, the UFW had a means to reach its members and supporters in an immediate way, unimaginable 20 years earlier. This communication would be more vital as the union faced a political challenge from the more conservative Republican administrations at both state and national levels.

Like other unions during this decade who also confronted a more unfavorable political environment, the UFW lost hard-won contracts and experienced declining membership. Faced with a rather bleak political environment, Huerta's activities did not diminish. Her schedule was filled with speaking engagements, fund raising, and publicizing the renewed boycotts of the 1980s. Appearing before state and congressional committees, she passionately testified on a variety of issues including pesticide use, the health problems of field workers, Hispanic issues, and immigration policy. Her energy and dedication seemed limitless.

In 1988, at age fifty-eight, when many people after a long, strenuous career of picketing, boycotting, negotiating, lobbying, public speaking, and serving on the Executive Board of the UFW might begin thinking about cutting back, Huerta was as active as ever. In that year, while protesting at a peaceful demonstration against the

policies of then Presidential candidate George Bush in San Francisco, she suffered a life-threatening injury. After a clubbing inflicted by a baton-wielding police officer, Huerta collapsed on the picket line and was rushed to the hospital. She underwent emergency surgery and her spleen was removed. After a long hospital stay, she slowly recovered from the operation and several broken ribs. After litigation, the San Francisco police department changed its rules dealing with crowd control and police discipline. In 1991, she was awarded a record financial settlement as a consequence of the personal injury.²³

Later Life

After convalescing, Huerta took a leave of absence from the UFW to concentrate on women's rights issues. "In the '60s and '70s, many of us were working hard for La Raza, not for women. We should have been doing more for women at the same time," she reflected. "We've had to do a lot of catching up."²⁴ During this time, she spoke on sexual harassment issues, lobbied for state and federal legislation regarding welfare, and participated in anti-discrimination campaigns. For two years, she dedicated her time to the Feminist Majority Feminization of Power Campaign. She crisscrossed the country recruiting and encouraging Latinas to run for office.

In 1993, Huerta abruptly interrupted her feminist work when she learned of the unexpected death of her long-time collaborator and friend, César E. Chávez, while testifying in a labor suit filed in Arizona. His premature death from a heart attack shocked union members, supporters, and consumers who had been touched by the union campaigns through its many boycotts. Vowing that his death would not signal the end of the farm workers' movement, Huerta returned to more active participation in the union to help smooth the transition to the next generation of leadership in the UFW.

After Chávez's death, Huerta served as the movement's esteemed elder. In demand as a speaker, she addressed a wide variety of labor, women's, political, and community groups, always turning over her honorariums to the union. Furthermore, she contributed to organizing campaigns, and returned to the bargaining table to pressure the strawberry, tomato, and mushroom growers. She kept herself on the front lines of

labor organizing, still aware of the odds the union faced. “The persistent disappointment is that employers are living with a mind-set of the last century,” she told an interviewer, “Racism and sexism are just as strong today in the field.”²⁵ The difficulties workers confronted compelled her to remain at the forefront of her mission to improve the conditions of agricultural labor, poor pay, substandard housing, inadequate health care, and exploitation.

A great-grandmother at age seventy, Huerta reluctantly decided to cut back on her union activities. In 2000, she chose not to seek re-election to the union’s Executive Board as Secretary-Treasurer. Her “retirement,” however, did not mean leaving behind the social and political commitments she thrived on. She worked on political issues including Al Gore’s presidential campaign.²⁶ Not long after stepping down from her active role with the union and in the midst of the presidential effort, she was stricken with a relatively rare disease (aortic duodenal fistula), underwent surgery, and remained in critical condition for several weeks. Surrounded by her children during this medical crisis, they remarked that the same “fighting spirit” she brought to the union helped her to recover from this life-threatening condition.²⁷

Now forced to work at a slower pace, Huerta persisted in her optimism, idealism, and commitment to social justice. “We should not be afraid of struggle and sacrifice,” she urged in her farewell remarks as she stepped down from the UFW Executive Board.²⁸ Her example continues to inspire.

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- ¹ Excerpt from “Corrido de Dolores Huerta #39,” from the Album *Si, Se Puede!*, Words and Music: Carmen Moreno. Los Morenos Music (ASCAP), 1976
- ² Margaret Rose, “Dolores Huerta: Labor Leader, Social Activist,” in Diane Telgen and Jim Kemp, eds., *Notable Hispanic Women*, Detroit: Gale Publishing, 1993, 211
- ³ Margaret Eleanor Rose, “*Women in the United Farm Workers: A Study of Chicana and Mexicana Participation in a Labor Union, 1950-1980* (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1988), 24-25
- ⁴ *Albuquerque Journal*, November 10, 1938. *Las Vegas [New Mexico] Daily Optic*, January 11, 1939.
- ⁵ *Stockton Record*, March 2, 1986
- ⁶ *Stockton Record*, April 20, 1950
- ⁷ Jean Murphy, “Unsung Heroine of La Causa,” *Regeneración*, volume 1, no 11, 1971, 20
- ⁸ Joan London and Henry Anderson, “*So Shall Ye Reap: The Story of César Chávez & the Farm Workers* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1970), 91 and 144-147
- ⁹ For an example of other Chicana activists in the CSO see, Margaret Rose, “Gender and Civic Activism in Mexican American Barrios in California: The Community Service Organization, 1947-1962,” in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 177-200
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- ¹¹ Susan Samuels Drake, *Progressive*, September 2000, 2
- ¹² Dick Meister and Anne Loftis, *A Long Time Coming: The Struggle to Unionize America’s Farm Workers* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc, 1977), 118-119, 122
- ¹³ Rose, “*Women in the United Farm Workers*, 15
- ¹⁴ Quoted in Sam Kushner, *Long Road to Delano* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 157
- ¹⁵ Margaret Rose, “Traditional and Nontraditional patterns of Female Activism in the United Farm Workers of America, 1962 to 1980,” *Frontiers* 11:1, 1990, 26-32
- ¹⁶ Quoted in Jacques E. Levy, *César Chávez: Autobiography of La Causa* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1975), 267
- ¹⁷ Margaret Rose, “‘Woman Power Will Stop Those Grapes’: Chicana Organizers and Middle-Class Female Supporters in the Farm Workers’ Grape Boycott in Philadelphia, 1969-1970,” *Journal of Women’s History* (Winter 1995), 6-36
- ¹⁸ Susan Samuels Drake, *Progressive*, September 2000, 5
- ¹⁹ J. Craig Jenkins, *The Politics of Insurgency: The Farm Workers Movement in the 1960s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 162-172
- ²⁰ Margaret Rose, “‘From the Fields to the Picket Line:’ Huelga Women and the Boycott, 1965-1975,” *Labor History* 31, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 271-293
- ²¹ Linda C. Majka and Theo J. Majka, *Farm Workers, Agribusiness, and the State* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 237, 239, 242
- ²² Julie Felner, “Woman of the Year: Dolores Huerta—For a Lifetime of Championing the Rights of Farmworkers,” *MS Magazine*, January-February, 1988, 2
- ²³ *Bakersfield Californian*, January 25, 1991, 1-2
- ²⁴ Felner, “Woman of the Year,” *MS Magazine*, January-February, 1988, 7
- ²⁵ Drake, *Progressive*, September 2002, 2
- ²⁶ *Fresno Bee*, September 3, 2000
- ²⁷ *Bakersfield Californian*, November 9, 2000
- ²⁸ *Fresno Bee*, September 3, 2000