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Labor, Migration, and Social Justice in the Age of the Grape Boycott

FOR THE AVERAGE AMERICAN consumer of the 1970s, the grape boycott led by the United Farm Workers Union (UFW) created greater awareness of the plight of farm workers and delivered César Chávez to the world as a leader of Mexican American civil rights. Yet, for rural Mexican and Filipino families living on the frontlines of this battle in Southern California's Coachella Valley, the seventies are remembered as a time of great sacrifice and pain.

Coachella growers had begun signing labor contracts with the United Farm Workers Union in 1970, but cooperation between the groups did not last for long. Just before the 1973 harvest, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) union moved in to negotiate sweetheart contracts, with terms favoring the growers and kickbacks lining the pockets of Teamsters officials. Through outright physical intimidation, the Teamsters attempted, quite literally, to beat UFW challengers into submission. That was the experience of Alicia Uribe, a committed *Chavista* (UFW supporter) who picketed against the hiring of scab workers. Reporting for *Rolling Stone* magazine, activist-journalist David Harris shared Uribe's story:

"Los Teamsters," the woman next to [Alicia] said. As the word jumped from ear to ear, the pickets began shouting and waving their red and black flags... Making a sudden skip on the loose dirt, the car swerved right and one of the [men] in the back window leaned out and laid a pair of brass knuckles along the side of Alicia Uribe's head. Ever since, her face has had a little dent to it. The blow fractured Alicia's cheek, broke her nose and dug a scratch across her right eyeball.¹

Such violence became the norm for local people who struggled to remain peaceful in the face of Teamster provocations. César Chávez used his now-famous hunger strikes to quell the urge for retaliation among his followers and redirected the union's energy away from strikes, toward boycotts and the establishment of the Agricultural Labor Relations Board in California. While Chávez's strategy of nonviolence ultimately succeeded in winning national and

international sympathy for the workers, in the Coachella Valley families endured a decade of trauma and abuse.

Even though these struggles took place in the context of food production, and despite the fact that the success of the farm workers hinged, in part, on the United Farm Workers' ability to draw attention to their plight through a grape boycott, the world of the worker or farm-labor activist rarely surfaces in writings about food and agriculture. Studies of labor and social justice movements similarly ignore food and its importance to these struggles. However, the process of food production not only grounded social inequality in rural California but also dictated the course of the farm workers' struggle by defining when and where the strikes occurred.

The case of grapes is telling. Although grapes were grown throughout California, the table-grape vineyards of Coachella represented an important strategic battleground due to the convergence of geography, climate, labor, and the market. A desert landscape made to bloom by the redirection of Colorado River water in the late 1940s, Coachella provides the first and arguably most important table-grape harvest of the season. The extreme heat of the Colorado Desert ripens the grapes earlier there than in any other location in the state, making Coachella grapes the first to hit the market in April and May before workers move north, following the harvest. The intense heat of the desert also produces sweeter, higher quality grapes that command the highest prices, especially since they are the first to arrive on the market after a long winter. Unionists and growers alike in the 1970s believed that if the terms of production could be established first in Coachella, the conditions of labor for the rest of the season would follow elsewhere.

César Chávez frequently inspired farm workers and activists to think beyond the constraints of the seasons, encouraging them to organize for social change because "the wheels of justice do not move as fast as nature grows grapes." His idea that justice moves more slowly than the speed at which grapes grow is useful for understanding why the union placed so much importance on controlling the

TEAMSTERS



hiring process. By the time pickers organized in a given region, the grape harvest had already moved on to another location, which allowed growers (and their foremen) to dictate who would work, and under what conditions. The United Farm Workers Union wanted to create an infrastructure for choosing and placing workers that would lead to a more dependable and just system of employment. In the wake of their 1970 victories, they established hiring halls in the hope that this system would end the cycle of migration that challenged workers' abilities to sink roots into local communities and develop the kind of year-round networks necessary for strengthening the hand of labor at harvest time across multiple growing regions of the state. The union officials believed that under the hiring hall system grapes could grow at any rate dictated by nature and modern agricultural science, but the workers would be organized and ready to deal with the harvest on their own terms.

At least this was the theory. In reality, the UFW approach to labor organizing ran up against deep-rooted and, in some

Above: The conflict between the UFW and the IBT led to the picketing of the Teamsters' western headquarters by a coalition of unions sympathetic to the farm workers' movement, ca. 1972.

UNITED FARM WORKERS COLLECTION, WALTER REUTHER LIBRARY OF LABOR AND URBAN AFFAIRS, WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY, DETROIT, MICHIGAN

cases, culturally bound practices among a significant portion of the work force. These workers had adapted their lives to a cycle of migration that spanned not only the area of the grape harvest in California but in some cases extended across state and national boundaries. The Filipino and Mexican workers dominating the labor pool in the 1970s often had an extensive history of travel over borders and bodies of water. Socorro Gómez came from a family of such laborers. The daughter of a farm worker, she grew up on both sides of the US-Mexican border during the 1950s and 1960s as her parents migrated for agricultural jobs in the Coachella Valley.

[My parents] had developed the plan. My father had come under the bracero program in 1945 and had worked the railroad lines from

Flagstaff, Arizona, to Cajon Pass in San Bernardino, and my father loved the United States and he was a man that always liked to see the fruit of his labor and dollars. And so my father kept urging my mother that they should come north, *a los Estados Unidos. Vamanos al norte*. So when my Tia Petra had already been here, she was somehow making a living in San Diego and she talked my mother into coming with her.²

Although Socorro's mother had been born and educated through the eighth grade in Illinois, she and her family were forced to leave the country, along with over five hundred thousand other Mexicans and Mexican Americans, under the deportations and repatriations of the Great Depression. She did not return to the United States until the 1950s, when her husband became a migrant laborer and she took jobs as a domestic worker.

Filipino laborers had similar stories. Between 1898 and 1934, many workers, mostly male, came to the United States from the northern Ilocos region of Luzon province.³ Many Ilocano men immigrated to the United States to work in fisheries and farm labor, often migrating to Alaska, Hawaii, the Pacific Northwest, and California. Filipino workers depended on family relations and fictive kin throughout the greater Pacific region to make their way to the grape fields of the San Joaquin and Coachella Valleys.⁴

For a time, the United Farm Workers movement successfully spanned several geographic regions and synchronized the activism of workers in the Central Valley with those in the South to follow the grape harvest throughout California. By the early 1970s, however, the rhythms of the harvest had shaped social relations within the movement, producing tension among workers who sought solidarity across cultural divides. Although Mexicans and Filipinos found themselves in a similarly low position in the hierarchy of class and race in California society, they maintained different approaches to organizing labor and migration. These differences threatened their ability to sustain a labor movement.

"The Battle of Coachella Valley," as it was characterized in the pages of *Rolling Stone* on September 13, 1973, proved to be a major turning point in the farm workers' movement and a critical test to the multiethnic coalition politics of the UFW. The conflicts, manifest first in the Imperial and Coachella Valleys, arrived in the form of recent Mexican immigrants and Filipino workers who abandoned UFW contracts for those administered by the Teamsters. The abandonment of the union by Filipino workers initially posed the greatest threat to the cohesiveness of the UFW's core, since from its early days the union had prided itself on attracting a wide array of workers and

contributors to *la causa*, including the mostly Filipino and Mexican workers who had started the movement in the early 1960s; the Arab, Puerto Rican, and white farm workers; and the white (and often Jewish) college-educated staffers and volunteers who provided legal council and the white bodies on the picket lines. Indeed, it was Filipino workers, led by Larry Itliong under the banner of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), who in 1965 began the first grape strike in Delano, California. The departure from the UFW of a significant number of the Filipino workers who had been present at the formation of the union revealed the fragility of this coalition, as well as a weakness in the UFW armor.

Filipinos and the Union

In his published oral history, Philip Vera Cruz, a Filipino farm-labor activist and second vice-president of the UFW from 1966 to 1977, acknowledged the struggle for the hearts and minds of the Filipino workers within the larger farm workers' movement: "The Filipinos have been used and pulled back and forth by the UFW, the Teamsters, and the growers for many years."⁵ To his dismay, Vera Cruz witnessed the departure from the organization of several Filipino leaders, including Ben Gines. Vera Cruz himself eventually left the union, discouraged by Chávez's failure to address issues of the rank and file.

Ben Gines had belonged to AWOC, which in 1966 merged with the mostly Mexican National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) to create the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC). Vera Cruz recalled: "At the time of the merger, I counted about seven Filipinos who went with Ben [Gines] over to the Teamsters. Of course, it was like the tip of an iceberg. You see, later on, when the UFW made mistakes in the hiring hall about dispatching jobs, and some Filipinos felt they weren't being treated fairly, many of them switched over to the Teamsters."⁶ (Gines ultimately did not find the Teamsters compatible with his approach and philosophy, either, and he left union organizing altogether to pursue a career in repairing watches.)

The resignation of Larry Itliong on October 15, 1971, was perhaps the most important Filipino defection from the UFW, given Itliong's timing and position in the union. Itliong had served as the leader of the original 1965 AWOC strike in Delano and maintained the closest contact with the AFL-CIO representative, Al Green, who advised the farm workers up through the Delano strike. Perhaps the most experienced and radical unionist among all the leaders, Itliong conceded

the leadership of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee to Chávez largely because the majority of the farm workers were Mexican. He assumed the position of assistant director of UFW but never settled comfortably into that role. During his tenure, Itliong offered his resignation or threatened to resign several times over disputes concerning the union's failure to reimburse his expenses; the growing distance between UFW leaders and the rank and file; and the union's unwillingness to address issues related to Filipinos, especially the lack of support for aging Filipino farm workers.⁷ Itliong explained his decision to resign to his friend and fellow UFW organizer, Bill Kircher:

I left at my own accord because of many reasons. But my biggest disappointment is that the Organization I participated in to fight for Justice and Dignity is not turning out as planned. So I had to go in order to save my reputation (insignificant as it may [be]) and my conscience. Do you know that since my leaving the Delano office has lost its appeal . . . its liveliness and that people working in the offices seem to be doing their work only because they are told that's what they should do and not because they wanted to do it . . . many of the workers around here Filipinos and Chicanos, are very unhappy on how the Union is being operated.⁸

Vera Cruz and Itliong disagreed privately on the issue of strategy, and their relationship throughout their union years together was tense.⁹ Yet, for all their differences during the 1970s, they shared many of the same concerns. Both worried about the aging population of Filipino workers and where these men would live once their time as farm workers had passed. They both vigorously advocated for the construction of Agabayani Village, a retirement home for UFW workers, and Itliong worked with the Filipino American Political Association, a bipartisan organization created to lobby on behalf of Filipinos among lawmakers in California and the United States Congress. Both men also felt the sting of being a minority within a union run by minorities and faulted Chávez for ignoring the needs of Filipinos.¹⁰

The complaints of Mexican dominance and nationalism, however, constituted just one of many factors that shaped the Filipino defections. When evaluated from the perspective of the workers as opposed to the organizers, the issues of contract management and fairness in work assignments loomed large. For their part, Vera Cruz, Itliong, and Gines all commented on problems of managing the contracts, with Vera Cruz specifically citing problems with the hiring halls. The transition from a movement to a bona fide union with a structure to serve its dues-paying members proved a major challenge for the United Farm Workers

Union after its success in 1970. A view from below, at the level of the worker, provides some explanation for why a significant number of Filipinos (and others) in the rank and file voted to leave the union in 1973.

The Hiring Halls

Having come from the Community Service Organization, César Chávez had little experience in running a union, and the mismanagement of the hiring halls, in particular, became an issue not only among growers who scrutinized every move of the young union, but also among some of the rank and file who expected improvements and fairness in work assignments. Doug Adair, a longtime UFW farm worker who worked at the Freeman and Tenneco plantations in Coachella, recalled the mismanagement: "The first contracts, we didn't know what we were doing. We'd never been there before. We had no idea."¹¹ Although the management of the hiring halls appears to be a mundane issue that is not highlighted by most chroniclers of the farm workers movement, it became the Achilles heel of the UFW when the union tried to fend off the Teamsters.

UFW organizer-cum-field manager Reymundo Huerta arrived in Coachella in 1971 from the frontlines of the grape boycott in Los Angeles amid disputes regarding work assignments and the management of the local grape contracts. A small but vocal minority sought to establish local control over the new hiring system, whereby workers would show up at the tiny hiring hall in Coachella to receive their work dispatches. Chávez reassigned Huerta to assist Marshall Ganz, one of the union's main labor organizers during the early seventies, who was trying unsuccessfully to quash the rebellion and shore up local support for the union. Although Huerta arrived thinking he would serve Ganz for a "few days," he soon discovered that he, not Ganz, would remain in Coachella to manage the halls.¹²

Conflict developed when the workers themselves resisted the UFW organizers. According to Huerta, "We had to enforce the contracts not only with the companies, but also with the workers because they didn't know too much about contracts either." These efforts included tutorials on the requirements of the contract and translation of documents into Spanish. Although these measures helped educate and allay the concerns of many Mexican workers, Filipino workers continued to show resistance to the new UFW system. Referring to these workers as "disgruntled," Huerta explained the Filipino reaction: "In the process of us enforcing the contracts, a lot of the Filipino workers were offended because they didn't hold any seats of power

in the union although there were Filipinos in the union. There was a whole bunch of them. These guys didn't want to accept that, a lot of them. So they kind of resisted."¹³ According to Doug Adair, a coworker of many Filipinos, the union elections, which eventually took place in the mid-1970s, proved the Filipino dissatisfaction with the UFW: "...The Filipinos began peeling off. And then I think in the elections here, probably 70 to 80 percent of the Filipinos voted against [the UFW], but there was always a core of Filipinos who supported it."¹⁴ The Filipino sense of losing ground within a union dominated by Mexican workers contributed to their discontent. In Huerta's opinion, these conditions made Filipinos predisposed to supporting Teamster overtures, which, in turn, led to their defections from the UFW.

Adair believes that the radical decline in the Filipinos' working and living conditions under UFW contracts accounted for much of their dissatisfaction, more than the loss of power at the upper echelons of the union. Under AWOC in the 1960s, before the formation of the UFW, foremen controlled the hiring of their pickers, and some, especially Filipino foremen, managed their crews like a family. Adair recalls the conditions under the first contracts: "In the first contracts, the Filipino foreman was part of the unit. Many of these crews were very tight around the foreman. They were relatives. They were from his province. They were like his family. They moved from the grapes to the asparagus and from here to there as a unit. And the foreman would loan them money."¹⁵ Prior to 1970 workers had to pay dues year round because the union paid insurance annually. Consequently, workers would accumulate substantial debts in the off-season as a result of unpaid dues, which some foreman covered for their employees when the workers traveled back home or moved on to work in other regions or even in new industries. Filipino workers, for example, frequently traveled to the Seattle area to work on the docks, in the fishing industry, or on farms near where family and friends had settled.¹⁶ Mexican workers traveled in all directions, including east to Texas and south to Mexico for work or to visit family. In either case, a good relationship with the foreman allowed for a degree of job security. Adair recalls: "The foreman, if he was a good foreman, gave them a little bit of benefits that they could be sure of. If they'd gone to Seattle or somewhere and they got back a little late, he made sure there was a bed in the camp for them. He got them into the crew."¹⁷

The UFW, however, insisted on the formation of hiring halls as an equitable solution to a system that frequently favored the growers over the workers. For the Filipinos, an

aging, mostly male, "minority" population in a labor pool dominated by Mexicans, the loss of power among the foremen was a cause for concern. Adair observes:

[With] the hiring hall, it wasn't that it discriminated against the Filipinos, but they lost their little privileged position that they had before. To get their jobs, instead of going to Don José or Felipe, who ever had given them a job before, they had to go to the union and stand in line with all the Mexicans and they finally get to the window and there aren't any jobs, or not at *that* company. And, they got a job at somewhere else, and you don't know the foreman and you've never worked there before... So there were reasons—good reasons—why they preferred the Teamsters' system.

Seeking to undermine the United Farm Workers, the Teamsters exploited this tension by imposing a system that returned power to the foremen. While this system served as a divide-and-conquer tactic, it in fact appealed to some of the rank and file in the union because it restored hiring and firing privileges to the foremen, thereby reestablishing a sense of continuity for mobile workers from one season to the next. The hiring halls, by contrast, tended to benefit the local, sedentary populations of workers, a fact that did not sit well with more itinerant laborers. Adair explains:

...the way the hiring hall worked, it was more of a benefit for local people because you were here. You had a friend of your neighbor, a cousin of your *compadre*, and the word would get around: "There's going to be dispatches tomorrow." You are here. You are local. You are there in line; you get them. And the guys from Texas come in and [the hiring hall worker would say]: "No, you're a day late. We gave that to the dispatches yesterday." It was much more beneficial to the local workers.

For many migrant workers who lived hand to mouth and perhaps traveled with a family, the irregularity of the dispatches made it impossible to pay rent and wait around for the next assignment. The growers and foremen complained because they had grown accustomed to hiring workers as they needed them, with no regard for union structure. Foremen demonstrated an immediate preference for the Teamsters model and shared this sentiment with migrant workers dissatisfied with the new system. Adair again: "The worker would go in and if he didn't get the job, then the foreman would say: 'I would have hired you but the union doesn't [allow it].' So it was real rough." In addition to Filipinos, a significant number of Mexicans traveling from Texas opposed the system because they, too, found it difficult to negotiate work assignments in California from a distance.¹⁸ Although these problems cut across racial lines, because of the unique



relationship many Filipinos had with Filipino foremen and the fact that Filipinos constituted a minority within the union, union organizers and historians have viewed their defections primarily as a product of racial discord.

The Seeds of Future Discontent

The management of work dispatches in favor of more rooted Mexican Americans seems to have played a significant role in shaping attitudes toward the UFW among workers who moved long distances from one job to another, from one season to the next. Filipino farm workers, a group that traditionally traveled the length of the West Coast doing a range of jobs, no longer found foremen in place to hold their positions in the fields of Southern and Central California. As Adair's comments reveal, the Filipinos were not alone in experiencing this anxiety; Mexicans who traveled from Texas and, increasingly, Mexico also expressed frustration with the UFW system of hiring, and they too voted against UFW contracts in 1973.¹⁹ In the years that followed the Filipino defections, Mexican immigrant laborers supplanted Filipinos as a group whose lives and migrations most challenged hiring hall practices favored by the union.

As this episode in the farm workers' struggle illustrates, the social inequalities created by food production and the

Above: A young woman organizer representing the United Farm Workers speaks at a community meeting in the Coachella Valley, ca. 1972.

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resulting tensions among workers cannot be alleviated without a consideration of culture, nature, and, increasingly, citizenship. The question for unions has been not only how to overcome the overwhelming power of the state and the employer to shape farm workers' lives, but also how to produce a more cohesive movement within the context of the seasonal nature of food production and the traditions of workers. One of those traditions has been mobility, an essential aspect of the grape-growing process in California and a notorious obstacle to attempts to control the hiring process by national labor unions.²⁰ Additionally, since the 1970s the tremendously uneven economic development of the United States vis-à-vis Mexico has contributed numerous Mexican immigrant workers to the US labor pool. Like Filipinos, their mobility makes them more invested in alternative, ethnic-bound networks in the United States for the purpose of securing employment. Their desperation and vulnerability is increased by the intensification of border controls and draconian immigration laws that have made the process of attaining citizenship much more difficult.

Such challenges have forced labor unions today to think beyond the narrow goals of controlling the hiring process to finding ways to organize workers regardless of their documented status. In the present climate, the liberalization of immigration policies is emerging as a core issue. ❷

NOTES

1. "The Battle of Coachella Valley," *Rolling Stone*, 13 September 1973.
2. Socorro Gómez-Potter, interviewed by the author, 13 February 2004. See www.brown.edu/coachella.
3. The Philippines ceased to be a colonial possession in 1934, when the United States passed the Tydings-McDuffie Act granting the island nation its independence. This new political relationship made Filipino migrants subject to restriction under immigration law.
4. Dorothy B. Fujita-Rony, *American Workers, Colonial Power: Philippine Seattle and the Transpacific West, 1919–1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 40–41.
5. Craig Scharlin and Lilia V. Villanueva, *Philip Vera Cruz: A Personal History of Filipino Immigrants and the Farm Workers Movement* (Los Angeles: UCLA Labor Center, Institute of Industrial Relations and UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1994), 31.
6. *Ibid.*, 49.
7. Ron Taylor, "Chavez Aide Quits, Raps 'Brain Trust,'" *Fresno Bee*, 15 October 1971, Larry Itliong Papers, Box 1, Folder 12; Letter to Larry from Bill Kircher; 15 November 1971, Larry Itliong Papers, Box 1, Folder 12. Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.
8. Letter to Bill Kircher from Larry Itliong, 30 March 1972, Itliong Papers, Box 1, Folder 12.
9. Letter to Sid Valledor from Larry Itliong, 20 December 1971, Itliong Papers, Box 1, Folder 2. Itliong wrote: "Brother Philip and I have never hit it right although God knows I try my best to adjust myself to gain his trust and confidence...when I said I will quit UFWOC, because I felt that our *cababayans* [fellow Filipinos] were not being given a fair shake in the Union, do you know that brother Philip, said in that meeting 'good riddance.'" Itliong's defection did not sit well with Vera Cruz, nor did his support of the Teamsters in the mid-1970s or his support for the Marcos regime in the Philippines.
10. Vera Cruz commented, "The union wanted the Filipinos there—their membership, their presence, looked good for the union... But Cesar and the others weren't willing to put the same time and money into organizing the Filipinos as they did with the Mexicans." Scharlin and Villanueva, *Philip Vera Cruz*, 91–92.
11. Doug Adair, interviewed by the author, 10 January 2006, Coachella, California.
12. Rey Huerta, interviewed by the author, 6 January 2006, Coachella, California.
13. Rey Huerta, interviewed by the author, 6 January 2006.
14. Doug Adair, interviewed by the author, 10 January 2006.
15. Doug Adair, interviewed by the author, 10 January 2006, Coachella California.
16. Fujita-Rony, *American Workers, Colonial Power*, 40–41.
17. Doug Adair, interviewed by the author, 10 January 2006, Coachella, California.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Many Filipinos who expressed discontent with the UFW also voiced their opposition to the Teamsters. In 1974 Lemuel F. Ignacio, a Filipino farm worker organizer, wrote to Reverend Phil Park, who had reiterated the popular perception that the Filipinos preferred the IBT over UFW. Copying the letter to his friend Larry Itliong, Ignacio wrote: "Your statement [that] 'most of the Pilipino farm workers are now a part of [the] teamsters is gravely wrong. Pilipino farm workers believe in the union but are presently lukewarm to both the UFWA and the teamsters. The concept of organizing is very real and rich in their history in this country. In the 1930s there was an independent union of Pilipino agricultural workers.'" Letter to Rev. Phil Park from Lemuel F. Ignacio (Larry cc'd), 31 October 1974, Larry Itliong Papers, Box 1, Folder 4.
20. California agribusiness has been most successful in thwarting the growth of unions through the exploitation of patrimonial relationships in the harvesting team system based on seasonal mobility. See William Friedland, et. al., *Manufacturing Green Gold: Capital, Labor, and Technology in the Lettuce Industry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).