Resource ID#: 4498
For a Lifetime of Labor Championing the Rights of Farmworkers

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1998
WOMAN OF THE YEAR: DOLORES HUER'

For a lifetime of labor championing the rights of farmworkers

By Julie Felner

"WHY IS IT THAT FARMWORKERS FEED the nation but they can't get food st...p..." Dolores Huerta, co-founder and secretary-treasurer of the United Farm Workers (UFW), asks an adoring crowd. Huerta has a gift for crafting sound bites of substance, and tonight, like most nights, she is reeling them off, this time before a group celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Chicana/Latina Foundation, a San Francisco-based leadership organization. As Huerta segues from topic to topic-from promoting women's studies to preventing domestic violence to preserving affirmative action-the women feed off her enthusiasm. What started out as a stately affair has become relaxed and interactive, with the well-heeled guests chiming in throughout Huerta's speech. When she says, "I have a T-shirt that says, "Behind every successful woman is herself," California assemblywoman Liz Figueroa, the first Latina in northern California elected by a non-Latino district, shouts out, "Or other Latina women!"

The evening's theme is "Las Generaciones: Our Past, Present, and Future," and perhaps no one embodies the spirit of that theme better than Huerta, the link between the past, present, and future of both the UFW and the Chicano civil rights movement. Thirty-five years ago, Huerta and Cesar Chavez brought the union to life, and quickly transformed it from a hand-to-mouth organization with a staff of five to a powerhouse boasting more than 400 staffers and 70,000 members. Throughout the union's heyday in the late 1960s and 1970s, Huerta was on the front lines and in the back rooms. She wrote up the UFW's first contract and became its foremost and fiercest negotiator. She directed the grape boycott of 1968-70, one of the largest and most successful boycotts in U.S. history, which resulted in the first collective bargaining agreements for California farmworkers. She stayed with the union through a slump in the 1980s when membership fell to about 20,000 and the UFW faced long and expensive legal battles to enforce its contracts. And now, four years after Chavez's death, Huerta is helping to bring the UFW into the 21st century as it mounts its most ambitious campaign in years-organizing the 20,000 workers in California's strawberry industry, many of whom lack the basic rights that Huerta and Chavez

first fought for--a living wage, clean drinking water and toilets in the fields, decent housing, health benefits, and the freedom to work without sexual harassment and assault.

As Huerta's speech comes to a close, she leads the crowd in a rousing round of vivas (long live... and abajos (down with...). "Viva la Latina/Chicana Foundation! Viva the UFW! Abajo Sexism! Racism! Homophobia! Abajo Newt and Wilson!" And then with hands clapping, voices chanting, energy racing, the crowd breaks into a chorus of Si se puede, the UFW's enduring motto: Yes, it can be done. Si-se-pue-de.

This isn't the first time Dolores Huerta has turned a posh affair into a political rally. For Huerta, every moment is an organizing opportunity, every person a potential activist, every minute a chance to change the world. And her schedule reflects this single-minded devotion to social change. During any given week, you'll find the peripatetic 67-year-old flying from Washington state to Washington, D.C., with three or four stops along the way, attending union conferences or political rallies, giving lectures on college campuses or testimony before Senate subcommittees.

EVERY MOMENT IS AN ORGANIZING OPPORTUNITY, EVERY PERSON A POTENTIAL ACTIVIST, EVERY MINUTE A CHANCE TO CHANGE THE WORLD.

Huerta never slows down, never really stops moving. "She's indefatigable," says Eleanor Smeal, president of the Feminist Majority Foundation, where Huerta has served as a board member for ten years. "I don't know of any other leader who has the schedule she has. . . . She'll fly in from South America on the red-eye for a board meeting and she'll stay and participate the whole time. If you say, 'Can you stay another day?,' she will. Huerta spends most of her "downtime" up in the air, reading newspapers and a book or two as she flies to her next destination. "She's like a character on Star Trek. She doesn't really need sleep or food," says her daughter Juanita Chavez, the eighth of Huerta's 11 children.

Huerta's almost superhuman stamina is legendary. This is, after all, a woman who gave birth to her first child at age 20 and her eleventh at 46. And who, ten years later, in 1988, survived a brutal beating at a San Francisco rally, when a six-foot-seven police officer clubbed the five-foot-one Huerta in the back, sending her to the hospital, where she had emergency surgery to remove a ruptured spleen and repair three broken ribs. Huerta, who had been demonstrating against then-presidential candidate George Bush over his position on pesticides, lost so much blood she should have died. Instead she recovered fully and successfully sued the city's police department to change its crowd-control procedures during protests.

"I imagine that if I had known Emma Goldman, she would have been something like Dolores," says Gloria Steinem, who has known Huerta for three decades. "She's not a person whose life is divided into public and private, work and

play--it's all of a piece." Huerta's approach to mothering was equally undivided. Rather than choose between being with her children and going to work, she brought her children to work (and, as they became adults, put them to work). In the early days of the union, Huerta, then a twice-divorced single mother raising seven children, would nurse the youngest between meetings, pack them all in the car at night and on weekends as she drove around the state visiting migrant labor camps, move them from Chicago to New York to Los Angeles as she led the grape boycotts in those cities. Her children grew up on the picket lines, and they have inherited Huerta's sense of civic duty (among them are a doctor, a lawyer, a massage therapist, a teacher, a budding public health specialist, an aspiring film maker, a poet).

BUT BOTH HUERTA AND HER CHILDREN ADMIT THAT THERE were a lot of sacrifices along the way. There were her long absences when the children would stay with family members or union supporters, countless missed birthdays and school events. Huerta was earning between $5 and $35 a week, whatever money the union had left after paying all the hills, and the family often lived on donated food and clothing. "Like most working women, you have these guilt complexes, especially in my case because we lived in poverty and my kids didn't have the proper care they needed," she says. "But when people ask, 'How could you do it?' Well, you do it without thinking about it, because if you think about it, you can't do it."

The union always came first, says Huerta's 45-year-old daughter Lori de Le6n-before the children and before her long-distance companion of more than 25 years, Richard Chavez, Cesar's brother and the father of Huerta's four youngest children. "I remember, as a child, one time talking to her about my sadness that she wasn't going to be with me on my birthday," recalls Lori. "And she said that the sacrifices we as her children make would help hundreds of other children in the future. How can you argue with something like that?"

But Lori also emphasizes that her mother has always managed to let her children know how important they are to her: "It never fails to amaze me that each time I was in the hospital having a baby . . . and I was there lying on the table and my mom's supposed to be 2,000 or 3,000 miles away, she shows up at the foot of the bed saying, 'O.K., push.'

Twenty-six year-old Juanita says that her mother is without question her hero. "But what I love about my hero is that she doesn't try to be perfect. She will be the first to admit her faults." Indeed, Huerta readily fesses up that the woman responsible for winning some of the labor movement's most decisive battles is equally good at losing things-wallets, papers, keys, clothing, a computer. Once she even managed to misplace a piano. Lori affectionately calls her mother "the disorganized organizer." Friends and family members note that Huerta often shows up at the airport without ID, without luggage, without a plane ticket even, but she always manages to get where she needs to be.

Huerta's assistant has taken to buying replacement reading glasses by the cartonful. Thankfully, Huerta, who manages to go through two pairs of glasses a week, has never lost her true vision. It is a vision of social change she's had since she was a teenager growing up in Stockton, a port town at the tip of the San Joaquin Valley, California's agricultural center.

Huerta was born in 1930 in Dawson, New Mexico. Her parents divorced when she was five, and her mother, Alicia, moved Dolores and her siblings to Stockton, where Alicia worked as a waitress and cook and eventually opened a hotel in a neighborhood of Latino, black, Italian, Japanese, and Native American families. Dolores inherited a passion for justice (and a commitment to farmworkers' rights) from her mother, who would often let indigent farmworkers stay for free at the hotel."She absolutely got her feminism from our mother," says Alicia Arong, Dolores' younger sister. "Mom was a women's libber before her time. She felt very strongly that women should get out and work and participate in the community."

SO IT IS NO SURPRISE THAT IN 1955, WHEN A YOUNG ANGLO organizer named Fred Ross wanted to form a Stockton chapter of the Community Service Organization, a Mexican American rights group he had started a few years earlier in the barrios of L.A., both mother and daughter signed on Huerta was working as an elementary school teacher at the time, but something clicked when she met Ross. "When I saw all these things they were able to do-bring in health clinics, fight the police-it was like a revelation," she says. Soon Huerta was working as a full-time activist, leading voter registration drives and storming the welfare department to demand public assistance for farmworkers.

She had an innate political savvy, and politicians began to take notice. One was Phil Burton, then an unabashedly liberal state assemblyman, who encouraged Huerta to begin lobbying for farmworkers' rights in Sacramento, the state capital. From 1960 to 1962, Huerta successfully lobbied for 15 bills, including landmark legislation that allowed farmworkers to receive public assistance, retirement benefits, and disability and unemployment insurance, regardless of whether they were U.S. citizens.

It was through the CSO that Huerta first met another of Ross's star recruits, Cesar Chavez. Though the shy and unassuming Chavez didn't make much of an impression on her at first, they were both drawn to the plight of the farmworkers and began to work closely together. Huerta and Chavez became like brother and sister--throughout their lives, they would fight bitterly over strategy but always remained fiercely loyal to one another.

Farmworkers have historically been excluded from federal labor laws that guarantee the right to picket and form unions. Back then, a combination of racism and apathy had led the largely white leadership of mainstream unions to dismiss the idea of organizing farmworkers--a migrant workforce mostly made up of Filipinos and Latinos, many of whom were undocumented. In 1962, Chavez

said to Huerta, "You know, there's never going to be a farmworkers' union unless we start it."

And so they formed the National Farm Workers Association, the precursor to the UFW, with Chavez as president and Huerta as second in command. The first few years were frustrating; Huerta was daunted by the slow and arduous task of building a membership. But things picked up in 1965, when the NFWA joined up with the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, a small group of striking Filipino grape workers. Years before, Huerta had also helped start the AWOC; now the two groups came together to organize the Delano Grape Strike, an event that catapulted them into the national spotlight. After their victory in Delano, the NFWA and AWOC merged to become the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, which later became the United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO.

And the rest is history. Or at least it should be. Perhaps the greatest irony of Huerta's career is that you're more likely to find a detailed report of her activities in FBI files and police records (she's been arrested more than 20 times) than in the pages of history books. At the height of the Delano strike, an FBI report called Huerta "the driving force on the picket lines of Delano and Tulare County," but in John Gregory Dunne's popular chronicle of the events, Delano: The Story of the California Grape Strike, Huerta gets merely one passing mention. While volumes have been devoted to Chavez's life, a search through the library for articles about Huerta yields little more than a smattering in progressive magazines.

Much of why Huerta was never given her proper due is pure and simple sexism. She went up against growers who had never before dealt directly with a Chicano, much less a Chicana. Though some refused at first to work with her, growers eventually came to begrudgingly respect this forthright woman who, in one grower's words, "had balls." But Huerta also had to confront sexism within the union's own ranks. Though the UFW had always made a point of aiming for gender equity and supporting women's rights, the culture inside the union was still rife with sexism. "For a long time I was the only woman on the executive board," she remembers. "And the men would come out and say their stupid little jokes about women. So I started keeping a record. At the end of the meeting, I'd say, 'During the course of this meeting you men have made 58 sexist remarks.' Pretty soon I got them down to 25, then ten, and then five."

Huerta acknowledges that when the union first started, she wasn't really thinking about the rights of women. "In the sixties and seventies, many of us were working hard to get justice for la raza, not for women. We should have been doing more for women at the same time. We've had to do a lot of catching up," she says.

These days Huerta is making up for lost time. She has made sexual harassment a centerpiece of the strawberry workers' campaign. She has fought vigorously

against state and federal legislation that takes away women's rights-from the Welfare Reform Act to California's anti-affirmative action Proposition 209. And she has pushed to get women into leadership positions inside and outside the union. From 1991 until Chavez's death in 1993, Huerta took a leave from the UFW to work on the Feminist Majority's Feminization of Power campaign, traveling around the U.S. encouraging Latinas to run for office. Friends and family believe that one of her dreams for the future is to create a grassroots Latina leadership organization.

As the Chicana/Latina Foundation banquet winds to a close, a small group is out on the dance floor. It is midnight, and in a few hours' time Huerta will arrive at her daughter Camila's place in Oakland, catch some sleep, and leave at the crack of dawn (without her wallet) to join Jesse Jackson for an anti-209 rally in Sacramento. But right now all Huerta wants to do is dance. She has always loved dancing-everything from ballroom to the Macarena. As Huerta joins friends on the dance floor, the band starts to play an unintentional, though fitting tribute: Gloria Gaynor's classic feminist anthem "I Will Survive."

Julie Felner is a writer and editor living in San Francisco.

Women Farmworkers Stand Up to Bias

By Elizabeth Kadetsky

The dark soil of Salinas Berry Farms' strawberry fields extends across 500 acres of the Salinas Valley floor, beneath the dust brown foothills of the San Joaquin Mountains. A warm autumn has extended a strawberry harvest that threatened to close as early as September; instead, in October, Angelita Melgoza and the 35 members of her cuadrilla, or crew, are still pushing three-legged wheelbarrows up and down furrows of bushy foot-high strawberry plants, stooping as they break off berries the perfect size and shape, arranging them in casks of green plastic netting. Here in the fields, the loamy smell of dirt mixes with the fruit-sweet air, creating an impression of an idyll that belies the backbreaking character of California's approximately $600-million-a-year strawberry venture. Today it is hot and dry, but Melgoza has also labored through recent rains. "We end up wet to the knees and up our arms," she says. "They give us green garbage bags to cover the berries and the cart so the berries don't touch the ground and the boxes don't soak through. The berries stay dry. We get wet."

SHE HAD BEEN GIVEN THE BURN'S RUSH TOO MANY YEARS IN A ROW TO CONSIDER

Despite the conditions, this is work that Melgoza and the others in her cuadrilla need to support their families. Yet it is work that's all too hard to come by if you're a woman. In a class action suit filed last April by Melgoza with the help of the United Farm Workers (UFW), she alleges that Salinas Berry Farms practices widespread sex discrimination in its seasonal hiring practices. The suit contends that the company, a grower for Driscoll Strawberry Associates, the region's largest and most reputable shipper of strawberries, has a policy of using female laborers only to fill out the workforce once the season has begun, rather than allowing them to do preseason work, which begins in March. The suit also contends that workers are rehired each season on the basis of favoritism rather than seniority, leaving the male foremen free to hire other men rather than women.

Although migrant farmworkers are at the bottom of the United States' pay scale, the conditions, these women face are typical of the barriers to women nearly everywhere in the job market. "There's the impression that women are secondary contributors to family income," says Leo Chavez, an anthropologist at the University of California at Irvine who specializes in immigration to California. "That's a classic gendered attitude vou find in all sectors in the U.S. economy. We have the impression that women are only contributing, and that rationalizes a callback pattern where men get work first.' There are some activists in the labor movement who believe that forcing strawberry growers to break this pattern can have a ripple effect throughout the economy, putting employers everywhere on notice that sex discrimination leaves them open to expensive lawsuits.

Melgoza, 31, generally worked alongside her husband, Arturo, 33, but was never able to spend as much time in the fields as he did. For example, in February of 1996 Salinas Berry Farms hired Arturo to spray and cover the fields and weed the nascent crop, but did not offer Angelita a job. She regularly asked for work, but says that the foreman "kept telling me, 'Ma¤ana. Later, later.' They kept ignoring me." She didn't secure her first day's work until June, four months after her husband started working. Although Melgoza brought the Suit, it was filed on behalf of at least 100 other women believed to be affected by the same policies at the company.

Strawberry picking, like most seasonal farm work, is extremely difficult Here in Salinas, workers call the strawberry la fruta del diablo ("the fruit of the devil"). The fragile crop demands delicate and precise labor, which is entirely unmechanized. During harvest season, which can run from March to November, workers stoop over berries for up to 11 hours a day. Because the work is physically taxing as well as competitive, four out of five workers are under 30, and most work no longer than four years, according to the UFW. Despite the demand for skill and speed, strawberry pickers' average wage of $6.44 an hour is less than that of most other California farmworkers. The average strawberry picker makes about $8,500 a season, a decline in real wages of roughly 25

percent over the past 20 years. The Melgozas, while barely able to make ends meet, actually do better than the average strawberry worker. The two of them combined bring in about $24,000 a year--including what they glean from unemployment insurance--to support themselves and their three sons. But Angelita Melgoza averages around $8,500 a season compared to her husband's $11,500. The extra months' work would help a great deal.

Women's shorter work year has ramifications beyond the fields: since unemployment payments for agricultural workers are determined by cumulative pay, women who work fewer hours get less than men. For instance, over the 1996-1997 winter, Angelita Melgoza received only $100 a week in benefits, while her husband got nearly twice that. Salinas Berry Farms also offers a bonus program that rewards workers in proportion to their gross annual wages and the number of hours they have worked during a year. Because Melgoza did not begin the 1996 season until June, she received no bonus for the year.

Length of work isn't the only issue in the suit. It also charges that women are shut out from the higher-paying positions of foreman, truck or tractor driver, irrigator, and stacker. "They have ideas about what women can do," says Jo Anne Howlett, an attorney, who has been working with the UFW to develop legal recourses for farmworkers. "There is an entrenched gender stratification in terms of better positions. The well-paid positions just never go to women, and they rarely post openings. They handpick people, and they always pick men."

Howlett first met Melgoza when she began visiting women workers in their homes. She and others in the UFW were trying to make sure that women were included in the unions effort to organize strawberry workers. One organizer said that when she approached the members of Melgoza's cuadrilla and asked why they didn't come to meetings, the typical response was, I can't because my husband gets home at such-and-such an hour and I have to be there." Even Melgoza first told the organizer, "Women have their work in the home."

Diego Andrade , a strawberry picker at Salinas has been trying to get coworkers to wear union buttons and attend meetings, says it's not just traditionalism that keeps women away. Even some union members make it difficult for women to feel comfortable at meetings. "It's harder for women," says Andrade, "If they speak out they get harassed and feel embarrassed. They're trying to keep quiet." The union has recently set out to women into the fold and to comfortable by using more women organizers.

By the time Howlett approached her at home, Melgoza was tired of keeping quiet. She had gotten the bum's rush from Salinas Berry Farms foremen too many years in a row to consider the company's callback policy anything other than routine and discriminatory. Howlett explained to her that the alleged hireback policy violated Title VII of the federal Civil Rights Act as well as the California Fair Employment and Housing Act. Melgoza was eager to put her

name to a suit.

At the time, Howlett worked for the UFW's law firm, Marcos Camacho. Once Melgoza agreed to sue, Marcos Camacho referred the case to the Chicago-based Miner, Barnhill & Galland law firm, whose dossier includes many prominent employee rights cases, including a major sexual harassment case against Mitsubishi Motors. The firm filed the Melgoza class-action suit in April of 1997, on the same day another federal class action suit was filed by three strawberry workers-also with the help of the UFW-against Salinas Berry Farms. In that suit, the workers demanded back pay for unacknowledged overtime work. The sex discrimination case is currently in settlement negotiations; at press time, there was no settlement, although many expect Salinas Berry Farms will reach an agreement rather than go to court.

"IT'S HARD BECAUSE THE WOMEN DON'T WANT TO LOOSE THEIR JOBS. BUT THAT'S WHY WE NEED LAWS, AND I'M NOT AFRAID ANYMORE TO FIGHT FOR THEM."

Such an agreement will likely help even those women who are not affected by discriminatory hiring practices. Maria Anna Castro, who has picked for Salinas Berry Farms since 1983, and generally works the full season because her husband has been among the company's "favorites," nevertheless worries that if Salinas' hiring policies remain unchecked, the company will ultimately trade her in for younger, more robust newcomers and those willing to play favoritism games with the foremen. "People bring little gifts from Mexico, blankets, bottles, or they invite them over for carne asada. How can I do that?" she asks. "I barely have enough for me.',

Castro has taken the efforts of women like Melgoza as inspiration. She and several coworkers are currently investigating possible workers' compensation claims against the company. Three of them, including Castro, have also filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission challenging the company's policy of treating pregnancy leaves as breaches in seniority.

"There are so many things we're fighting about," says Castro, "but I can only see that things have to be improved, because there are so many ways for it to get better. There have got to be laws. It's hard, because the women don't want to lose their jobs. But that's why we need laws, and I'm not afraid anymore to fight for them."

There is no easy or simple ending to a farmworkers' story. Melgoza's suit may have an impact, and the UFW's organizing efforts, led by Dolores Huerta, secretary-treasurer and co founder of the union (see page 46), and UFW president Arturo Rodriguez, have definitely brought about an improvement in conditions. Wages have gone up for the first time in 15 years--Coastal Berry, the region's largest direct employer of strawberry workers, boosted the hourly wage for pickers from $5.75 to $6.50 last January, which helped push wages up at other farms. Several companies have implemented medical plans.

But $6.50 an hour still leaves most strawberry workers and their families well below the poverty line. Even if women work a full season, they will likely not be able to provide enough to alleviate the squalid conditions many farmworkers and migrants have to live in. But the women persevere. They believe that even a little more money amounts to hope for their children, if not for themselves. "I want to give the kids a foundation," says Angelita Melgoza, "so they can have good work."

Elizabeth Kadetsky is a freelance journalist and teaches writing at the University of California at Irvine.