

Strike Leader

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The Catholic Worker, January 1969, pp. 1,7

Summary: Details the efforts of the farm workers to unionize and the grape boycott. Compares Cesar Chavez to other non-violent leaders and says they are the word made flesh. Digresses about hospitality as following "Him who came not to be served but to serve." (DDLW #892).

Dolores Huerta is one of the heroines of the by now famous grape strike which began in Delano, California, in September 1965 and which is still going on in the form of a boycott, from one crisis to another. There are many leaders of the farm workers all over the country, and I wish I could interview them all, in California, in Texas, in New Mexico, in the thirty cities of the United States where the weapon of the boycott is being used.

Cesar Chavez, head of the union, has been ill for some time and had to withdraw from active participation. He has been given worldwide recognition, and I would place him with the late Martin Luther King, and with Danilo Dolci and Vinoba Bhave, as an outstanding example of a nonviolent leader. We like to write about individuals in these movements for social justice, because, in a way, they are the word made flesh. We talk about what ought to be done, and here are the people doing it, putting flesh on the dry bones of principles and ideals. There must be the **idea**, the theory of the personalist and communitarian revolution, but the idea must be clothed with flesh and blood.

Dolores Huerta, who came from Delano, is a young, strong, and beautiful woman, mother of seven children, and the leader of the grape boycott in the Manhattan area. A big job. A year ago five or six pickets began the work, going from store to store, up and down the streets of Manhattan, to the big Hunts Point Market, to the chain stores, to the boats that were bringing grapes from the West Coast, telling of the injustices done the farm workers, the conditions under which they had to live, their struggles for better housing, wages and hours, and demanding that they be included with other workers under the National Labor Relations Act, from the benefits of which they have been excluded from the time the law first went into effect. Our friends, Filipino and Mexican picketers, who shared our poverty in a flat on Kenmare Street last year, went back to their families in Delano for Christmas in 1967 and returned with a score or more of other workers, driving in a donated unheated bus to begin their Northeastern campaign in earnest. It is this group that Dolores leads.

One of the great things accomplished by the Farm Workers Union was the awakening of conscience among other unionists. The United Automobile Workers had been helping them from the beginning. For a time they were in conflict with the Teamsters, who controlled the hiring of workers in the packing sheds but this has been resolved. The taxi drivers union helped them valiantly, and other unions have contributed. But a most outstanding gift in the way of hospitality was from the Seafarers International Union, which gave them board and lodging at the union headquarters at 182 21st St., Brooklyn, where they have stayed for over a year.

The first contract won as a result of the strike was with the Di Giorgio Corporation, and the most recent setback is a result of the fact that Di Giorgio has sold his lands. Di Giorgio holdings had far exceeded the 160-acre limitation that was designed to help the small farmers irrigate their lands and limit the amount of free or government-subsidized water provided to large growers. Di Giorgio made an agreement with the Federal government under which he would receive unlimited water subsidies for a ten-year period, after which he would sell off his "excess lands."

Dolores is presently living at the Seafarers' headquarters with three of her seven children; a sixteen-year-old girl who is in high school and two boys, ten and eleven. The girl is helping her both on the picket line and in speaking to groups. She doesn't like the school, she says, because tickets are required for admission to the cafeteria and because Negroes are bullied. The boys dislike their school, complaining of the long hours, eight to three-thirty, and the lack of physical training. It must be hard indeed after southern California. And it must be hard on Dolores.

"But we have gotten eighteen chain stores to take grapes out of their markets, and only Gristede's in Manhattan is holding out. Two hundred and fifty A and P stores have responded to the boycott, and now we are going after the independent fruit stores: This is an even harder job."

"We have a lot of good help," she told me, "young people who have worked in Vista and are experienced in reaching people. One of them was present in Birmingham, Alabama, when the explosion killed four children in the Baptist church. Another is a Provo who has worked in Holland."

They were planning, she said, to call a conference for all the workers from the thirty cities involved and I suggested that she telephone Father Jeremiah Kelliker, head of the Graymoor Fathers, who offered his facilities at Garrison, New York, to the Peacemakers when they visited him a year and a half ago. The Christian Brothers at Barrytown, New York, gave us hospitality during our PAX conference last summer and were able to put up forty people. The Christian Brothers and the Jesuits in Baltimore gave hospitality to many of the young students who came from all over the country for the recent trial of the "Catonsville nine" who had napalmed draft records.

The closing of many seminaries and high schools run by religious orders may

be a matter of great concern to churchmen but it also may mean that doors must be opened for many other kinds of work. There is a great debate going on now as to the relevance of the parochial-school system.. It is hard to reconcile oneself to the loss of priests, through lack or loss of vocations, but Cardinal Newman foretold much when he spoke of the development of doctrine and the consulting of the laity. We can go back to St. Peter himself, recalling the phrase “the priesthood of the laity.” The old-fashioned doctrine of abandonment to divine providence should make one accept the changes, which are taking place with peace of heart. “All things work for good to those who love God,” and “Eye hath not seen nor ear heard what God hath prepared for those who love Him,” may apply not just to a future life, but to this world in which we live. I do not feel that I am digressing when I bring this in, because hospitality is a theme dear to the hearts of the Catholic Workers. To us it means a development of love, and a casting out of fear—the stripping ourselves to share with others, walking as new men, in a new way. It is also “hoping against hope.” It is acting “as if” all men believed they were brothers. It is fundamental to any work we undertake in the social order with Mexicans, Filipinos, Indians and, above all, Negroes. How the church needs to **know** them, to love them and to serve them!

God help us all to grow in this knowledge and love and service, following Him who came not to be served but to serve.