

Unit 11 October

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## "You Can't Scare Me . . ."



Union WAGE  
P.O. Box 40904  
San Francisco, California 94140

**LABOR HEROINES: 1930s - 1980s**  
**A Union WAGE pamphlet**      \$1.50

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I said, "I can't join the union, I don't have any money now." He went in his pocket and pulled out my initiation fee and my first month's dues.

That's how I got into Local 1100. In the end the union got retroactive pay for all those women, bringing them up to union scale, retroactive one year. We were in a membership drive in the union and I marched in with all the women working at Cosgrave's, and I won a prize for being in the most members.

I was pretty soon fighting a battle in the union. When I got there, there were no other Blacks selling on the floor. All the Blacks were working in backroom capacity, working in the toilets as maids, and in the stockrooms doing all the dirty work, while white people were out on the floor. During the late 40s and early 50s we had a drive on all over the city to hire Blacks in the stores as salespeople. We were quite successful, although the union at that time was threatening to throw me out.

The Local was put in receivership by the International. They got rid of Johnny Bliota and put in Barney Columbo. When we had meetings, Barney would attack me, indirectly, talking about people who were supermilitant and were destroying the union.

In my fight against discrimination in the union, I spoke at a membership meeting: "The union is destroying itself," I said, "as long as it practices discrimination and doesn't fight for all of its members to have equal opportunities and upgrading."

Cosgrave's closed in 1951 and I was without work for one year because of the leadership in the union working against me. This went on into 1952; that was when I got involved in working in the Independent Progressive Party. I started working in the office, and from one thing to another, I ended up getting elected state chairperson. That was the beginning of me getting into politics and I got into it feet first. I was the only woman, Black or white, who had ever been State Chair of a political party in the state of California.

It was 1957 when I got back into retailing . . . I got a job at G.E.T. After six months in G.E.T., the members voted unanimously to make me shop steward. From shop steward I got nominated to be on the executive board and won that election. I served on the board until the time I retired in 1977. In 1957, Betsy Blum was on the board and one other Black woman. When I retired we had four Black women, one Black man and one Spanish person, out of eleven members. We became one of the most outstanding fighting unions in the city. To this day I am still involved with Local 1100. I still maintain my delegation to the Labor Council. I guess I will always be involved with my union. . . . Struggles are still going on. It just doesn't end, you have to continue to organize.

## "You Can't Scare Me . . ."

### LABOR HEROINES: 1930s-1980s

Union WAGE  
(Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality)

P.O. Box 40904  
San Francisco, California 94140

"At Cosgrave's, on Post and Powell."

"That store is a headache," he said, "we don't have any members there. If you can bring five members, I'll let you join the union."

I went back wondering, how am I going to get people to join the union? He had furnished me with a little pamphlet, so I read up and then I discovered that all our salaries in the store were way below rates that the union members earned. The next day I got out this little union scale and started showing everybody who worked in the store that we were making less money than everybody else in the city.

So this activity reached the head buyer's ears, and she came down and said, "I want to talk to you." I said okay and she said, "I want to talk to you in the ladies room." She put her hands on me and said, "I understand you're talking union in this store. We don't allow that, we are a happy family!"

I said, "Wait a minute, when I came to work here I didn't sell my soul to the devil so I couldn't talk any more." I told her I would go on talking as long as I was on the job, and she said I would be separated from the job. I shrugged and walked back on the floor. That was Wednesday. On Saturday when I went to get my paycheck, they said, "We are firing you as of tonight because you were off sick too much."

I hadn't been sick! So I went home and called Betsy and said, "Thanks a lot. I've been working at the store a whole year and you come in and tell me about joining the union, and the union tells me I can't join until I bring in five members. So I try to get five members and now I'm fired."

She called me Sunday and told me to go to my job as usual. "We're going to put a picket line around that store. They can't fire you for being sick, the union has a clause about that."

"I don't belong to the union, your dear union did not take me in as a member."

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### Reforming the Union

Monday morning when I got to the store there were about 15 or 20 people picketing. I said, "Doesn't it seem silly you people putting up a picket here in front of the store? It seems to me you should have a picket around the union because the union would not take me in as a member. The union put me on the spot."

These pickets said, "You're right!" We marched down to the union office, up the stairs and when we walked in, Dave Jenkins with his big voice bellowed, "Where's Johnny?" We marched into Johnny Bliota's office and Johnny turned white as a sheet, scared the pants off him.

Johnny turned to me, "You go out there to the desk and join this union."

have done a long time ago and didn't have the nerve, and to think a little shrimp like you had the nerve to do it. If they do anything to you, they are going to have to do it to all of us."

When the Colonel saw all of us, he had a fit. "What are all these people doing here? I just want to talk to Lynn." So he had the guard bring me into his office and shut the door. "What kind of Communist activity are you carrying on there in the hold?" the Colonel asked.

"Communist activity, what's that?" I had never heard the word before.

### "You're a Commie!"

"Yes," he said, "you're a Communist. You're a Commie."

I said, "If being a Communist means protecting old men like that against abuse, then I am sure the biggest Communist that ever lived." I shouted, "I'm a Commie!"

He said, "Sh! Don't say it so loud."

I repeated, "I'm a Commie."

He said again, "Hush, don't talk so loud. Why don't you go back to work?"

"Well, you're the one who called me in," I said, "So what do you want?" "Never mind, you go back to work."

That taught me something quite wonderful. All those years I fought my own battles. I never asked anyone to help me. But I learned if people come with you, you can even force a Colonel to say, "Hush, go back to work."

After the war was over, I walked all over the city to every place that used burners and welders. I loved burning and I would have loved going on the rest of my life doing that kind of work, but they just laughed. "That's a man's job."

I got a job as a stock girl at Cosgrave's, a very exclusive store. They hadn't ever had a Black person in this store. The doorman at the Sir Francis Drake Hotel took me in and introduced me to this Mrs. Van, and she let out a scream.

"Your name is Childs! That's my maiden name, Honey, you got the job."

She started right off to teach me everything about materials and salesmanship. I had worked at Cosgrave's about a year when I met Betsy Blum — she was a member of the retail clerks and asked me if I had joined the union.

I said no, nobody in the store is union. But sure, I'll go and join. The union was just three blocks from the store, so I went down and talked with Johnny Bliota, secretary-treasurer.

He said, "Where did you say you worked?"

# Contents

"You're a Commie!"	
Dolores Huerta	<i>Farmworker Organizer</i>
Ethel Rosenberg	<i>Labor Activist</i>
Mary Imada	<i>Canner Worker</i>
Myra Wolfgang	<i>She Raised Hell</i>
Carmen Lucia	<i>Union Troubleshooter</i>
Elizabeth Nicholas	<i>Rank and File Organizer</i>
Elaine Black Yoneda	<i>People's Advocate</i>
Dorothy Healey	<i>Union Organizer</i>
Frances Albrier	<i>Railroad Maid, Shipyard Welder</i>
Lynn Childs	<i>Life of an Activist</i>



welder or burner, but I had to have special training. I said, "You give me a test and find out if I can burn." My training as a shipfitter had taught me what to tell burners to do, how to cut a pattern and lay out the work. With that experience I tricked them into hiring me as a burner, and in less than half an hour I was promoted from 85¢ to \$1.05!

They turned me over to a leaderman, who helps you get your equipment and get set up for the kind of burning the boss wants you to do. So there was a very nice young man who was my leaderman, and I was scared to death because I didn't know how to burn a thing. I made up my mind to tell him my story and he was shocked. He said, "Well, if you had enough nerve to take that test and come here as a burner with no experience, I'm going to put you in a corner and teach you." He was a white young man, and he was delighted I had pulled this thing over on the Navy. He taught me to use a drag tip for burning a straight line and a flat tip for shell burning and gaggle round tips for pattern burning. I was able to burn many different materials in about one-third the time it took other burners to do the same job. For this reason I got to be the only woman shell burner in the shipyard.

After two years with the Navy I heard that the Army over in San Francisco at Fort Mason was repairing ships damaged in combat and they needed a little tiny person to work in engine room repairs. At that time I was around 98 pounds and I could go into very small areas.

It was at Fort Mason I had the experience of seeing old Filipino men being abused. There was this big six foot white officer about 19 years old, swearing at one old man and kicking him. I turned my torch up so high, with all the oxygen and acetylene pressure at full force, it gave off a flame of at least five feet. Just press the trigger once and you could cut a whole swath out of the side of a room. When I turned it on him it scared him really bad.

*She paused a moment. It scared me really bad, too. He said he had been taught in Marine boot camp that any dark-skinned people were beneath all white people, and he began to cry. We sat down and started to talk, and just at this moment the intercom came alive.*

"Colonel Hickman wants to talk to Lynn Childs! Lynn Childs!"

I said to myself, this is it. Then all these people who had been standing there cringing over what the officer was doing to the Filipinos, and had never said anything, they all got up in a body and started following me off the ship. All the burners, all the welders, all the shipfitters and the fitter helpers, everybody in the bottom of that ship. They all dropped their equipment and followed me.

When I started to go on the gangplank, I asked, "Where do you guys think you are going?" They said they were going with me. "We're going with you because we feel that what you did was something we should

what had happened. She saw the notes — I showed them to her — and she went to the school and demanded I get my diploma. I did get the diploma and went to Los Angeles where I found a job with a Black insurance company. I worked at that for one year, but I almost flipped my lid because I was not cut out to be a secretary, not cut out to sit in an office eight hours a day.

I went into working in restaurants as a waitress. But the depression was upon us — there were thousands, even millions of unemployed and breadlines everywhere. I worked for \$3.00 a week and tips. You can imagine the tips in that period, sometimes a guy would leave you a nickel. I went into domestic work, which I hated. I am a very good cook and because of that I was able to get jobs cooking at \$15.00 a month. I went from one of those kinds of jobs to another, I was always dissatisfied, discrimination was really bad.

Then a friend suggested I go to the studios and apply for a studio maid job to work with some movie star. My duties would be to sit on the set with the star's make-up kit, and take shorthand notes of how she appeared in all the different shots. I was lucky to start work for a wonderful British young woman, Wendy Barrie. This job paid me \$25.00 a week, that was terrific, imagine going from \$15.00 a month to \$25.00 a week. We became good friends, we liked to sit in her dressing room and listen to the fights together.

I worked that job three years, but then I got in a fight with her mother, a very prejudiced British woman, who said to Wendy, "Why don't you get rid of that scullery maid, she should go into the kitchen where she belongs." Wendy went away one weekend and as soon as she was out of the house, this lady came up and grabbed me from behind and said, "You go clean that upstairs bathroom." I said I didn't clean bathrooms. She said, "You're going to do it now, she's not here and I'll show you." We ended up having a big battle; I jumped on the woman. My husband had to come and get me off her. So we left the job. Wendy came back and tried to find me.

## DOLORES HUERTA

### Farmworker Organizer

By Joyce Maupin

*This article was first published in 1974, during the height of the Farmworkers' organizing campaign in California and nationwide boycotts in support of their efforts.*

Dolores Huerta has been organizing for twenty years, since she first attended a meeting of the Community Service Organization in Stockton. Now she is first Vice President of the United Farmworkers and its leading negotiator and lobbyist. To some it may seem strange that this deeply religious Mexican-American, the mother of ten children, a woman raised in a culture generally dominated by men, is the most remarkable woman unionist in the United States today.

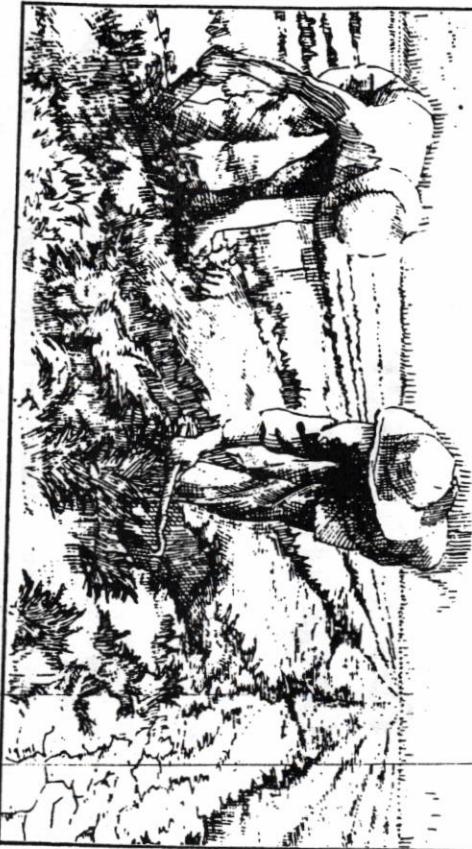
She is not unique; many other women are playing a vital part in the leadership of the farmworkers union. This reflects a contradiction in the position of women in the Chicano community. In a formal sense women are subordinate to men, but the reality of their economic contribution to the family's survival gives them power in decision-making, a power indicated by their activity and influence in the union. If the wife is for the union, Huerta says, the husband will be, too. If she is too afraid or too attached to her home, the family will stay out or break up. When families live near the starvation level, there is no time for discussion about where a woman belongs. The wife works in the fields

### Trades Open Up in San Francisco

About that time the war came along and we learned about all of the things opening up in San Francisco. Jobs were plentiful, schools were opening up for us to learn trades in. So my husband and I came to San Francisco, and he took up shipping and got into Moore's shipyard right away. I took up shipfitting and was sent to Moore's for a job, and once more I faced discrimination. They hired the white women who went with me but told me there was a clean-up gang I could get into, women who were sweeping up the slag around the yard. Or I could go in as a

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beside her husband, they do the same kind of work and endure the same hardships. "Excluding women," Huerta concludes, "protecting them, keeping women at home, that's the middle-class way. Poor people's movements have always had whole families on the line, ready to move at a moment's notice, with more courage because that's all we had. It's a class — not an ethnic — thing."



## LYNN CHILDS

### Life of an Activist

As told to Joyce Maupin

*Many thanks to Lynn Childs for this interview. Ms. Childs is now 72, and living in San Francisco. Her story is featured in the film *Rosie the Riveter*, which includes this narrative about Ms. Childs standing up to a white officer who was abusing a Filipino worker.*

"If you lift one foot again," she said, turning her torch on the husky young officer, "I'm going to blow your guts out."

It seems, Lynn Childs explained, like anywhere I ever worked during this period I was having fights to get some kind of conditions changed. But up to that point I had always been fighting alone. I felt I was the person who could handle all of my own problems.

*One of her early battles was with a high school principal. Believe it or not, she said laughing, I had aspirations to be a secretary. I got into San Diego Trade High School — they guaranteed you a job after you got out of school and I took the secretarial thing — business English, bookkeeping, shorthand, the works. Three months before time to graduate, the principal and the teacher started writing me nasty notes in shorthand. They couldn't get a Black girl a job as a secretary (this was in 1927), so they said I should get out of secretarial and go into domestic work. I got so angry I blew my stack and had a terrific argument with the principal. They threw me out of school. However, there was a wonderful woman, a white woman, sort of a philanthropist, who was furious at*

**Problem Not to Feel Guilty**

Huerta was criticized by her family when she drove around with six young children, a seventh on the way, organizing, negotiating, speaking. Nevertheless she was accepted and admired as a leader. She herself went through periods of conflict, especially when the children were small. "My biggest problem," she said, "was not to feel guilty about it.... I had no way of knowing what the effect on my kids would be. Now, ten years later, I can look back and see it's O.K. The kids are fine."

Women in the farmworkers union have made great sacrifices. Last summer over a hundred women, from teenagers to great-grandmothers, spent weeks in jail for violating anti-picket injunctions. Others packed up on only a week's notice, leaving their homes in Delano and travelling to the large cities of the midwest, the north and the south to set up picket lines and spread the word of the boycott. The men sacrifice, too. Everyone who works for the union gets the same pay, expenses and \$5 a week. "When one of our supporters came to take my

daughter to buy new clothes in New York, she was really embarrassed," Huerta said. "We never buy new clothes, you know, we get everything out of donations.... She came home with a couple of little things to please the lady."

Huerta says that she believes in what feminists stand for and thinks there is still an undercurrent of discrimination in the union. "This time no married man went out on the boycott unless he took his wife. We find day care in the cities so the women can be on the picket line with the men.... Of course, we take it for granted now that women will want to be as involved as men. But in the beginning, at the first meetings, there were only men. And a certain discrimination still exists."

Like other farmworker leaders, Huerta had to teach herself the skills she needed to become an organizer and a negotiator. When she was put in charge of negotiations, "I had never seen a contract before. I got copies of contracts and studied them for a week and a half, so I knew something when I came to the workers. Cesar almost fell over because I had my first contract all written and all the workers had voted for my proposals. He thought we ought to have an attorney, but really it was better to put the contracts in a simple language.... I think women are particularly good negotiators because we have a lot of patience, and no big ego trips to overcome. Women are more tenacious and that helps a great deal. It unmerves the growers to negotiate with us."

#### Bitter Fight Ahead

This is the second summer of the farmworkers' struggle to survive the combined attack of the growers and the Teamsters. The outlook for the future is grave. Dolores Huerta is facing these new dangers with the same courage and commitment which led her to start organizing twenty years ago. A slim, small woman with long dark hair, who looks frail but has shown extraordinary endurance, she symbolizes the farmworkers' cause, the dedication and strength which have made "Huelga!" a part of the language and spirit of the working-class movement of our country. "One of the reasons the growers are fighting us so hard," she says, "is that they realize we are changing people, not just getting them a pay-check."

*Statements by Dolores Huerta excerpted from The Women of the Boycott by Barbara L. Baer and Glenna Matthews, The Nation, February 23, 1974.*





"Support from other union members meant so much in the struggle against discrimination and unfair treatment. They weren't only discriminating against Black people, they also had discriminating policies against white people with their little rules and their little cliques. So it was just something that you had to work on and fight."

Frances Albrier has seen great changes in her lifetime. In 1926 when she was employed in the Pullman cars, she could not ride in these cars. "When we passed the southern line, all of the Blacks had to get in the chair cars; we could not ride in the cars with the whites. We could not eat in the dining room with the whites; we had to eat behind a curtain. When I went back to Alabama in 1969, I saw no curtains; I saw Black and white in the Pullman cars. The Blacks didn't have to get out of the Pullman into a chair car. To me that was a big thing.

"One of the discriminations we still have to fight is discrimination against women. We haven't gotten women out of bondage yet. I believe that women should organize, and they should take time and go to their union meetings and women's clubs and organize in order to better their conditions, so they can be treated fairly as women and as human beings in this nation and eventually in the world. Emancipation of all women should be a dream of every woman in every country. We cannot have freedom until women in every country are free. A few cannot be free and the others slave. Women who participate in their unions can be a great force in obtaining this freedom. It is a worthwhile goal."

"I said thank you, and I went on up to Kaiser shipyard 1 and told the lady at the desk that I wanted to see the president. So she wanted to know why, what was so important that I had to see the president?

"'Because you are discriminating against me. I can't be a welder here.'

"No, that isn't true, Kaiser isn't discriminating against anybody.'

"So she called the president and he asked me to wait a few minutes. He called half an hour later and said, 'Mrs. Albrier, we don't discriminate, it's the union. We have a contract that welders and burners and those crafts have to be verified through the union. If the union sends you, it's O.K. But you go to shipyard number 2 and see the public relations man.'

"So at shipyard 2 the public relations man gave me a piece of paper. Take it over to Local 513. Give it to the president.' I took it to the president of the union and he told me to go over to window 17. And at window 17 they gave me the credentials. I worked for six months at Kaiser as a welder without paying any union dues or being in the union. I got to be journeyman. I got the note on my card that I was to go to the office, I had made journeyman in welding. The young clerk, white girl, said, 'May I have your union card?'

"'Give me your union card,' she said again, 'so I can sign you up.'  
"I don't have any.'

"'Don't tell me you worked six months without a union card!'

"Another lady came out and apologized for her, said she didn't know the setup. So she gave me my card as a journeyman. A month or so after, I received a letter from Local 513 saying arrangements had been made for my participation in the union, come and be initiated. When I got initiated they told me to go... I forgot the name of the street... to the union hall to pay my dues. I found out it was the union hall where all the Blacks had to pay their dues, and I refused to go way over there. I paid my dues in the regular union hall along with the whites."

When the craft unions set up auxiliaries in World War II, Frances Albrier explains, "all it did was give you permission to work. You paid dues but you didn't get any benefits or protection. After the war, you were not considered a union member." In spite of these problems, she has always supported unions. "The thing was to fight discrimination, and I always felt some day I would see it abolished, and see the unions different. The people Black and white needed unions to better their conditions, and the unions were a good thing. That's what most Black people felt, even if they had to have their own little Black union until they could settle it. Because every year at the conventions there was a battle on the floor, resolutions passed chopping away at that discrimination.

## ETHEL ROSENBERG

### Labor Activist

By Nancy Gilmore

*Ethel Rosenberg and her husband Julius were executed as "atom spies" in 1953. The following article describes a little-known aspect of Ethel's life as a teenage organizer and strike leader.*

Poet, musician, union organizer and martyr, Ethel Rosenberg is best remembered as one of the principals of the Rosenberg-Sobell "atom spy" case of the early 1950s. Long on hysteria and short on evidence, it claimed the lives of two young social activists — Ethel and Julius Rosenberg — and imprisoned a third — Morton Sobell — for a 30-year term. Many will recall the courage and grace with which Ethel sweated it out for two years of isolation as the only female prisoner in the women's wing of the Sing Sing deathhouse, refusing, together with her husband, to barter perjured testimony in exchange for her life. Analyzing the motives behind her incarceration in virtual solitary confinement, she said, "They expect me to break under the strain because I am a woman. They think in the deathhouse... alone and without Julie, I will collapse. But I won't." Nor did she.

### Ardent Unionists

There is more to Ethel's history than the case which shortened her multifaceted life. The same determination and social concern she showed

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in prison was earlier expressed in her commitment to the trade union movement starting in the depression years. At a press interview after her husband's arrest, she described them both as "ardent unionists."

Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg was born in 1916 to an impoverished Lower East Side family in New York. Bright and musically gifted, she used music as her first response to the oppression of poverty. From adolescence she worked and sacrificed to pay for the training of her coloratura soprano voice, against the wishes of her family, who considered her artistic vision a frivolity in the stark reality of their world. Her art and her developing political consciousness were never far apart, and music became and remained throughout her life a political as well as an artistic expression. She sang frequently for union benefits and became particularly well known for her vibrant rendition of Ciriibiribin, a Yiddish ode of joy.

### Singing for the People

Later in life she sang when the death sentence was pronounced, and prior to her removal to Sing Sing, she sang to comfort and encourage her sister inmates at the Federal House of Detention for Women in New York. "Rebel Girl" Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, when she was in the same prison, wrote, "The inmates spoke with great feeling of Mrs. Ethel Rosenberg . . . [and] said they would never forget her sweet voice singing 'Goodnight Irene.'"

Ethel was 15 when she completed high school and clerical training. The desperation of the times was quickly brought home to her during her search for employment. She was knocked to the ground by the jet from a police fire hose being used to quell a riot of job applicants in front of a factory which had no more jobs. "Man's inhumanity to man has always made me sick at heart," she wrote later. Eventually she was hired as a clerk at \$7.00 a week for the National New York Packing and Shipping Company, whose work force was composed largely of teenage women like herself.

### There's No Union to Accept Black Women

"My friend went to Moore's, she was already working. But I wanted to see how much I knew and I decided to take the examination in all the shipyards. I went to Moore and I passed Moore and they told me to come back to work in two days. Then I went out to Kaiser and took the test and the person who gave the test said, 'Well, you have to have more than 60 hours to make a bead like that. Go up to the office and come to work.'

"When I got to the office with the paper from the examiner, the clerk in the window said it was closing time, to come back Monday. 'Call me before you come back.'

"Monday I called and told him, I think I know why you wanted me to call back, because I learned that you do not take Black women as welders and burners."

"He said, 'That's right, Mrs. Albrier. I didn't want to embarrass you by having you come out and telling you that. There's no union to accept Black women. At Moore shipyard they have an auxiliary to the union they go through, but at Kaiser we have Boilermakers Local 513, and it doesn't have an auxiliary to accept Black people.'

wages, making union wages, and they were teaching women how to weld and how to burn. So this friend of mine who was a doctor's wife said, 'Let's go out to school and learn how to weld.'

"I said all right, and we took the time that didn't interfere with our housework and our family — from eleven at night to four in the morning. We could sleep and do all our housework and be out to school at 11:00 p.m. This school was developed by the government; it's called Laney College now. There were a lot of women in the school but not many Blacks; I think just three of us Blacks. It was just 60 hours and you were supposed to know how to weld, to make a good bead, and be out into the shipyards. I stayed 120 hours.

"The instructor asked me, 'Why are you staying here so long? You can make a good bead, a perfect bead. They'd have to burn the piece off that you weld on.' I said I was Black, so I had to know 120% more how to weld than a white.

that you were a member of . . . it wasn't a union then, it was a Pullman porters' club, or organization.

"So I joined in New Orleans. There weren't many maids out here that sympathized with the union. They were afraid they would lose their jobs. They didn't have the background I had going to school at Tuskegee and Howard. Our responsibility was trying to educate the Black public and the Black women.

"For years A. Philip Randolph worked and rode the chair cars because they didn't have the money for him to get a Pullman. He organized in many cities and during that struggle quite a few Pullman porters lost their homes, because it was beginning to be the depression. When it was found out they belonged to Randolph's union, for the least complaint they were fired. They weren't able to get other jobs and they lost their homes. They were the men who helped build the union. Porters make top wages now, but it was through the efforts of these men who challenged their treatment in those days and organized a union that porters have what they have today."

Frances Albrier met her second husband on the New Orleans run. He was a lounge man and bartender, and a union man, too. The cooks, waiters and bartenders were organized as Local 456, AFL (now AFL-CIO) as a separate union (there were few whites in this craft.) Mrs. Albrier herself was laid off because the trains managed without maids during the depression. Her husband, she says, was a little old-fashioned and thought wives should stay at home. Staying at home is not exactly what she did in the next few years. She joined the Women's Auxiliary of Local 456, and was soon elected president. As a result of her work in the auxiliary, she joined Labor's Non-Partisan League and served as treasurer in the 17th Assembly District.

She also initiated a successful struggle – it took five years – to get a Black teacher hired in the Berkeley schools. To accomplish this she organized the East Bay Women's Welfare Club, and partly as a means of publicizing their battle with the school board, she decided to run for City Council. It was 1938 and unusual, she points out, for a woman to run for City Council . . . especially a Black woman. Labor's Non-Partisan League did not approve. They had selected a different candidate, a white union man. People in Berkeley, they said, would not vote for a Black or for a woman. They sent a committee which asked her to withdraw because the white man had a better chance. She refused.

World War II brought dramatic changes in the lives of women, including Frances Albrier.

"People went to work in the shipyards, and they started to take on women. Everybody was excited because they were making good

herself able to articulate her co-worker's feelings as well as her own. A strike committee was formed to which Ethel was elected, and eventually union recognition became a strike issue. A city-wide strike by the shipping clerks (mostly men) was under way at this time, and Ethel successfully urged her co-workers to walk out in support.

Once on the picket line, the young women engaged in innovative and sometimes humorous tactics to combat plant owner Andrew Loebel's efforts to break the strike, which included importing scabs from the New Jersey Welfare rolls. Initially, the truck drivers with whom the firm did business were willing to drive cargo across the line, but they met with resistance from the strikers who lay down in the street to prevent the trucks from rolling. Those drivers who did somehow get through were seized by the women, who tore off their shirts and "branded" their chests in lipstick, "I am a scab." Soon no drivers would cross the line, and Loebel resorted to the use of strikebreakers to hand carry his goods. The women met them with razor blades and slashed the twine binding the packages so that merchandise spilled into the street. Teams of strikers, with arms linked, moved up and down the street sweeping it of would-be scabs.

The courage and imagination of the young strikers drew wide press coverage and sympathy from other unions for the shipping clerks' strike as a whole, and within a week of the National Packing and Shipping Company walkout, the garment workers were out in sympathy in numbers estimated from 15,000 (by the press) to 30,000 (by the union), greatly strengthening the shipping clerks' position.

After two weeks Loebel capitulated to some of the demands, specifically those for better pay and hours. Although he did not recognize the union officially, he was now faced with a situation where most of his women employees were affiliated with the Ladies Apparel Shipping Clerks, Local 19953, and he responded by arranging for the election of a second committee, one which he could control.

### Fired for Organizing

Ethel, speaking at the meeting called by Loebel, correctly interpreted his intentions to her co-workers, vigorously protested Loebel's presence at a union election and urged the election of an autonomous committee. The result was Ethel's election to the second committee, assuring that it would not become a management rubber stamp. It was clear to Loebel that the key organizers would have to go. A month later, when a brother organizer in the shop was fired, Ethel went from worker to worker organizing a work stoppage in protest. After that she herself

was fired. She filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board and in March, 1936, the NLRB held in her favor, finding that she had been discharged for union organizing and awarding her back pay and reinstatement.

Although she did not return to this company, she continued working to support her family during the next three years. In 1939, she married her fellow trade unionist, Julius Rosenberg, and with him became active in the effort to recruit labor support to the growing anti-Fascist movement in this country. Her last effort as an organizer was during World War II, when she worked in civil defense. In 1941, she was the only full-time volunteer for the East Side Crush Hitler Defense Counsel.

### Conscience Not For Sale

In 1950, the government was hunting for left-wing activists to use in the construction of a "spy ring" which would explain to people in the United States why the Soviet Union had the bomb. The truth, that the Soviet Union and most western nations had shared nuclear theory for decades, was neither palatable nor dramatic. It could not be used as a ploy to whip up support for cold war munitions spending. Ethel and Julius, now parents of two small children, were among those arrested and indicted for "conspiracy to commit espionage." Convicted at the height of the McCarthy era, they resisted the pressure to "cooperate" and save themselves by falsely implicating others. The prosecution offered to commute their death sentences if they recanted and became witnesses for the state. They continued to declare their innocence, saying that conscience was "not for sale." For Ethel, it was the second time she defended her own beliefs and the rights of others by putting her body on the line. This time the trucks kept on rolling . . .

"We worked for the Pullman company and we worked the same as the Pullman porters. They were knocked around and buffed around and had to take wages and runs and hours at the whim of the Pullman company. Did you know the porters had to furnish the polish when they polished the passengers' shoes? Sometimes eight to ten pairs of shoes a night! They just didn't get anything much, any privileges much that they should have. And they were fired on a whim. Some boss came along and said, 'You should have been here and opened up the car on time,' and the porter was fired. He had nobody to go to for grievance to listen to his side of the story."

### Organizing the Maids

"The Black workers had no union and they were struggling to organize. They had a great friend who came to organize them and that was A. Philip Randolph. I joined, but I joined in New Orleans because here in the west when A. Philip Randolph came and lectured, the company had spies to report how many employees were going to hear him. It might have been your job if you were reported attending and they learned to her children, "If We Die":

*Work and build, my sons, and  
Build a monument to love and joy,  
To human worth, to faith we kept  
For you, my sons, and yours.*

leaving her with three children to support. She boarded the children with a close friend and went "railroading and organizing the maids."

"They were beginning to put on special deluxe trains, whose customers were very wealthy people who needed care the same as they had in their homes with their maids. So they hired Black women. Later when they hired Asian and white women they called them attendants. You had to learn manicuring, and my knowledge of nursing came in handy because ill people traveled on the trains and needed someone to help and care for them."

# MARY IMADA

## Cannery Worker

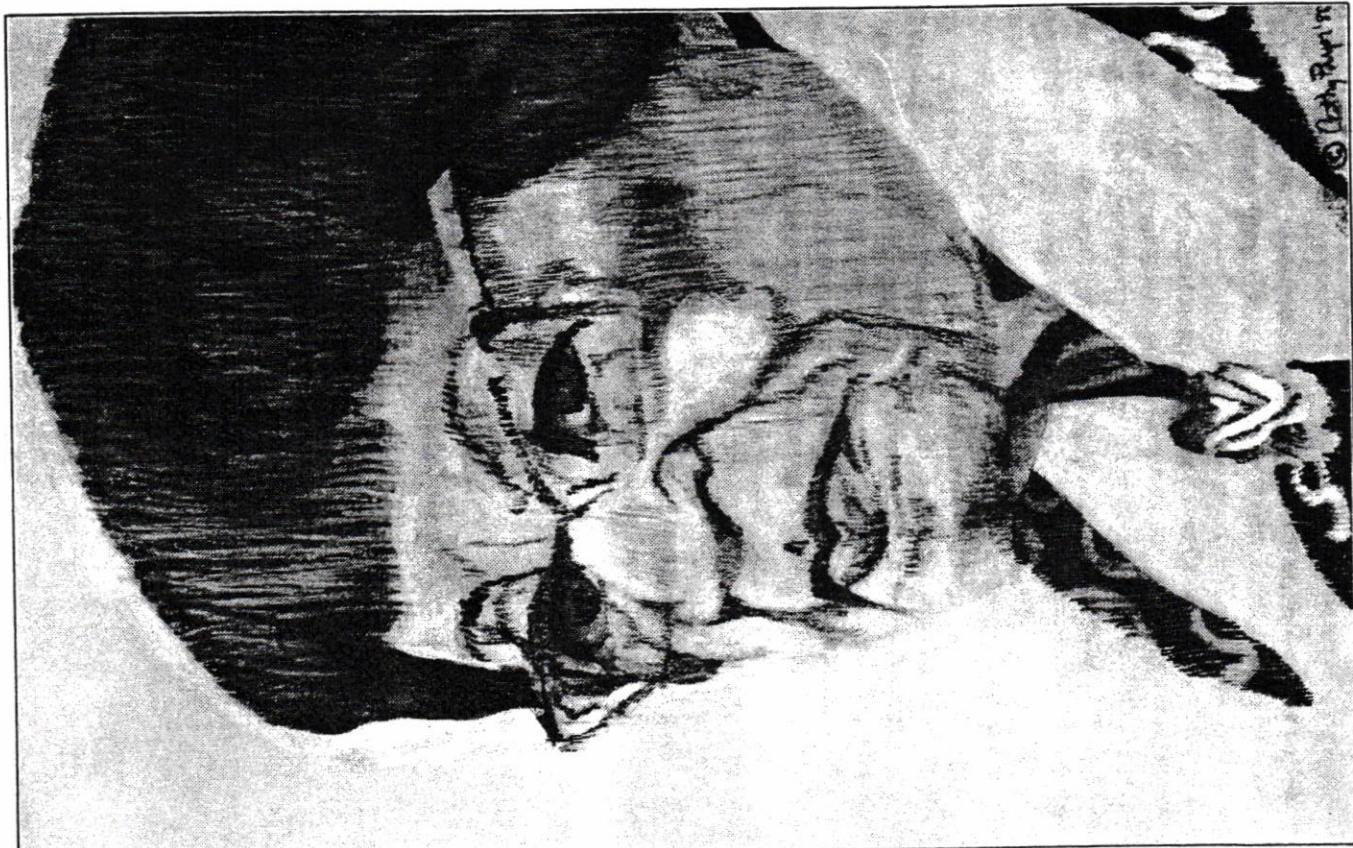
By Joyce Maupin

Mary Imada, born in Hiroshima, came to California in 1926 when she was a young woman of 20. She went to work in a Terminal Island fish cannery. Most Japanese women worked beside their husbands in the fields, or in nearby canneries.

The Japanese were one of many races and nationalities imported by California's agricultural industry. It started in the 19th century with the Chinese. When they were expelled from the mines, and the railroad construction gangs no longer needed them, they turned to the fields. Growers considered them ideal farm workers because they somehow provided their own board, and vanished when the harvest was over. Racist hysteria drove the Chinese from even this sub-subsistence living. In the 1880s, with the full support of the California labor movement, Chinese exclusion acts were passed. Agricultural employers then discovered that the patient, docile "Japs" were perfectly suited to farm labor.

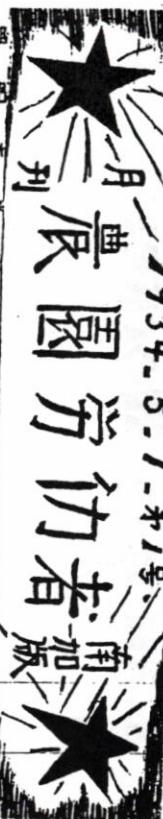
At first no one objected to the Japanese. Later, when they not-so-patiently demanded higher wages, especially at the peak of the harvest season, they became "sneaky" and "cunning."

*Reprinted from Union WAGE, September-October 1977*



### Unions in the Fields

Mary Imada joined other Japanese workers to fight against exploitation in the fields and canneries. She is part of a continuing story which began with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The IWW organized farm workers in the early 1900s but, during World War I, the strength of the organization was destroyed by mass imprisonment and persecution. The years that followed were peaceful for the growers. The American Federation of Labor showed no interest in unionizing a constituency of Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Mexicans and East Indians. Then in 1929 a new Communist-led union, the Agricultural Workers Industrial League, began organizing. The picture changed, and from 1929 through 1935 there was a series of spectacular agricultural strikes.



"Strawberry Season Comes to El Monte. Demands: 25¢ per hour plus meals and board; Pay must be same for men and women; \$1.00 per crate" (prevailing pay was 45¢ per crate and 20¢ per hour.)

Carey McWilliams writes in *Factories in the Fields*, "...the strikes of these years are without precedent in the history of labor in the United States. Never before had farm laborers organized on any such scale and never before had they conducted strikes of such magnitude and such far-reaching social significance."

Mary became a part of this struggle early in 1930 when cannery workers went on strike. On the picket line she learned about labor unions, women's rights, and movements for social change. Later that year she joined the Communist Party. She helped secretly to send revolutionary literature to Japan by contacting Japanese seamen who stopped in the port of San Pedro.

### The "Red Peril"

We have no record of her activities in the organizing drives of the early 1930s. As strikes spread throughout the California Valley, the vigilantes armed. The "yellow peril" in the fields was quickly transformed into a "red peril." Strikers were dragged out of their homes and savagely beaten; some were killed. Meeting halls were wrecked and leaders ar-

## FRANCES ALBRIER

### Railroad Maid, Shipyard Welder

By Joyce Maupin

*Thanks to Mrs. Frances Albrier for the interview on which this article is based. Mrs. Albrier, now in her eighties, is at the Berkeley Senior Center as a Senior Center assistant, and is a member of Social Services Union Local 535.*

"You are somebody," my grandmother said. "You are not to be a slave. You are not to be in bondage. You are somebody."

The grandmother who raised Frances Albrier and her sister after their mother's death was herself born in slavery, freed at the age of eighteen by the Emancipation Proclamation. Her strong and independent spirit inspired her granddaughters, and Frances Albrier's long life has been an unremitting struggle against race discrimination in every form, especially in employment.

Frances grew up in Alabama and went to high school at Tuskegee Institute. Later she attended Howard University where she trained in nursing and social work, but her training was not very helpful when she moved to Berkeley, California in 1920. "We just don't hire Negro nurses," the hospitals said. They did not hire Negro social workers either. The stores did not hire Negro salesclerks. She had a number of odd jobs including housework before she was employed as a nurse by a Black doctor.

She married and had three children but the marriage was not happy. Her husband moved to the east coast where he died a few years later,

summer, who gave us the names and addresses of workers so that we could visit them in their homes. Again, the same kind of conditions existed in this plant as in all of the unorganized plants. We concentrated first on getting all the membership cards signed of the workers who were the natural leaders inside the plant and whom other workers respected and would follow. Then we turned to workers in the key departments so that if one department shut down the whole cannery would shut down.

Well, Shapiro wouldn't negotiate with us. We had gone to the National Labor Relations Board - the NLRB, at that point, still had a lot of very thoughtful, honorable human beings who were as concerned with organizing the unorganized as we were. They really did think of all the ways they could help us with employers like Shapiro and, later, with the California Walnut Packing Corporation. But, in the process of trying to speed up the pressure on Shapiro to negotiate, the women in the plant proposed - and again these were mainly Mexicana women - that we organize a picket line in front of Shapiro's home in Beverly Hills. They brought all their children to the picket line and the children marched around saying, *Mr. Shapiro lives here in wealth while we go without milk!* and *Call up Mr. Shapiro and tell him to recognize my mummy's union!* *Call up Mr. Shapiro and tell him to pay my mummy a living wage!* This lasted only 24 hours, when Mr. Shapiro phoned the union office and said, "Call off those children of those women. I'll negotiate!" We won that strike, but I can't say we won an extraordinary amount. But at least for the first time we got a union inside the cannery.

SKOTNES: Over the period of years, in all your union organizing, what would you say was the most important development you witnessed among the workers?

HEALEY: I would say that in every strike the one most important development was this transformation of human beings in the process of struggle, as long as there was a channel like the union through which that transformation could take place.

I think probably one reason I have stayed a revolutionary all my life is that I have seen what that potential can be when it does finally express itself. And I didn't need to read it in books or have lectures given to me. I watched it happen!

Carey McWilliams, *The Long Road to Delano* by Sam Kushner. The Grapes of Wrath and Cannery Row by John Steinbeck.

rested. John Steinbeck says in his book *In Dubious Battle*, "Anyone seeking five cents an hour more in wages was a Communist." In 1935 eight union leaders were jailed and convicted under California's Criminal Syndicalism Law. The union was crippled and the wave of strikes subsided.

But not for long. Within a year Japanese workers in Los Angeles formed an independent Japanese Agricultural Workers Union. The 800 members included women, and Mary Imada became one of the activists in this union.

Japanese, Mexican and Filipino workers, organized into their own unions, attempted unsuccessfully to interest the American Federation of Labor in building a national union. But soon the rise of the CIO brought hope to these scattered groups, and in 1937 the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers held its founding convention. Two years later, with 125,000 members and 300 locals, it was the seventh largest CIO union.

### CIO Organizer

Now Mary Imada had an opportunity to use the skills she first learned on the cannery workers' picket line seven years earlier. She became a CIO organizer, and helped to bring more than 1,000 Japanese women into the cannery workers' union.

We know very little about her as an individual. She married a Filipino unionist and had one child. The marriage was unhappy because her husband strenuously objected to her organizing activities. (Women organizers today who find that few men can accept a work schedule that takes a woman out at night and on weekends, constantly attending meetings and travelling, will identify with her problem.) During World War II, she was sent to the infamous camps for Japanese citizens. She died shortly after her release at the age of 42.

Because we know her name and these scant facts about her life, Mary Imada symbolizes the thousands of unknown women who battled the giant agricultural interests of California, facing bombs and blackjack, bullets, tear gas and arrest, to struggle against wage cuts which meant starvation and dehumanizing living conditions. Their indomitable spirit links the past to the present and is part of the strength of the United Farmworkers Union.

Thanks to Karl Yoneda, who participated in these battles in the California fields, for the organizing flyers and information about Mary Imada, first published in *The Unquiet Issei Women*, The New York Nichibei, 1973.

would be spent. As far as cleanliness was concerned, to put out five cents for a bar of soap might mean that you didn't buy a bottle of milk for your child. The terrible living conditions and the terrible housing conditions all produced an environment that was heart-breaking to witness and to live in.

## MYRA WOLFGANG

### She Raised Hell

By Joyce Maupin

Myra Wolfgang went to work for Local 705 of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees and Bartenders International Union in 1932, when she was 18 years old. During the 40 years that she organized restaurant workers, she was called a storm center, a tough woman who said what she thought in remarkably blunt language, a dedicated worker. Edwin Lathey, a newsman, said, "...so long as one bean picker in Western Michigan or one bus boy on Woodward Avenue is getting a short deal, Mrs. Wolfgang is ready for the picket line."

She used colorful and innovative tactics; for example, picketing a yacht club by boat. One time she placed lookouts in the woods and caught Sammy Kaye's orchestra trying, under cover of darkness, to sneak past the picket line into a private club. She fought for workers, particularly women, in low paid service jobs, seeking to unionize them, to raise minimum wages and to strengthen and extend protective laws. She pioneered within her union, too. In 1934 she was the youngest woman, and one of the first women, to be elected delegate to the national convention of the American Federation of Labor. By 1937 she was writing a regular article for the *Hotel and Restaurant Review*, and also testifying before the State Senate on minimum wage and maximum hours. Fifteen years later she became vice president of the International Union.

SKOTNES: You lived right along with these workers. Would you talk a little about some of your experiences?

HEALEY: One experience that linked up this question of sanitation has stayed in my mind. There was a \$10,000 reward out for the arrest of my co-organizer, Stanley Hancock, and myself. We were staying in the Mexican colony of Frawley and at least five or six hundred Mexican workers every day knew where we were and who we were. We were the only two Anglos in the camp, and we stood out like sore thumbs. None of the Mexicanos ever turned us in for that \$10,000. It took an Anglo stool pigeon from Los Angeles to do that. He pretended to be a newspaper man and arranged interviews for us. The day we were finally arrested, we were staying in one of the colony tents and the youngster of the family came rushing in shouting, "The police are coming! The police are coming!"

Stanley and I looked out of the tent and we could see the State Highway Patrol just combing the colony of tents, one by one, looking for us. We didn't want to be caught inside the tent because that would then endanger the family with whom we were staying, for shielding known criminals. So, we ran out to try to get away. Stanley had much longer legs than I and made it down to a tent at the end of the row. I got only as far as the privy and I stayed in there for about four or five minutes; then I decided that with that horrible smell, it was better to go to jail than to wait even one minute more, so I made a wild dash to get down to the tent where Stanley had already taken refuge. We might have gotten away and not been arrested that day if it hadn't been for the fact that the sun was casting our shadow upon the sides of the tent. Huddled down on the ground, the first thing we knew we heard shaky, trembly voices saying, "Stand up or well shoot! Stand up or well shoot!" We looked up and we were surrounded by these State Highway Patrolmen with submachine guns pointed at us. It was a day that stayed in my memory!

There were two other places we organized in Los Angeles, one of which I think had some long-range significance. The California Sanitary Canning Company on Long Beach Boulevard was owned by a man named Shapiro. The workers, again, were mostly women. In this case, we were aided by a number of UCLA students, working there for the

In the late 30s, I was in the CIO in the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America - UCAPAWA. That was one of the unions in the CIO that probably had the largest number of women both in the leadership and in the membership - most particularly in the leadership.

I will admit that I wasn't enormously sensitive on questions of feminism in that period. As a matter of fact I remember being resentful when I was nominated for the International Executive board of UCAPAWA because I was a woman. They said that women had to be represented. I was indignant! I thought, "What do you mean. Am I not as good an organizer as any man? That's the judgment!" Now, I would have a slightly different reaction to that. But as I have said, I have no memory of any significant expression of male supremacy on picket lines, at union meetings, or in the union itself, not even the response on the part of men workers. I organized plants that were predominantly men and never found any great rejection - just simply "Do you know your job? Do you know what you are doing? Can you give some leadership?" I remember when I was elected an international vice president in 1938, there were really some outstanding women who were participating - a significant number.

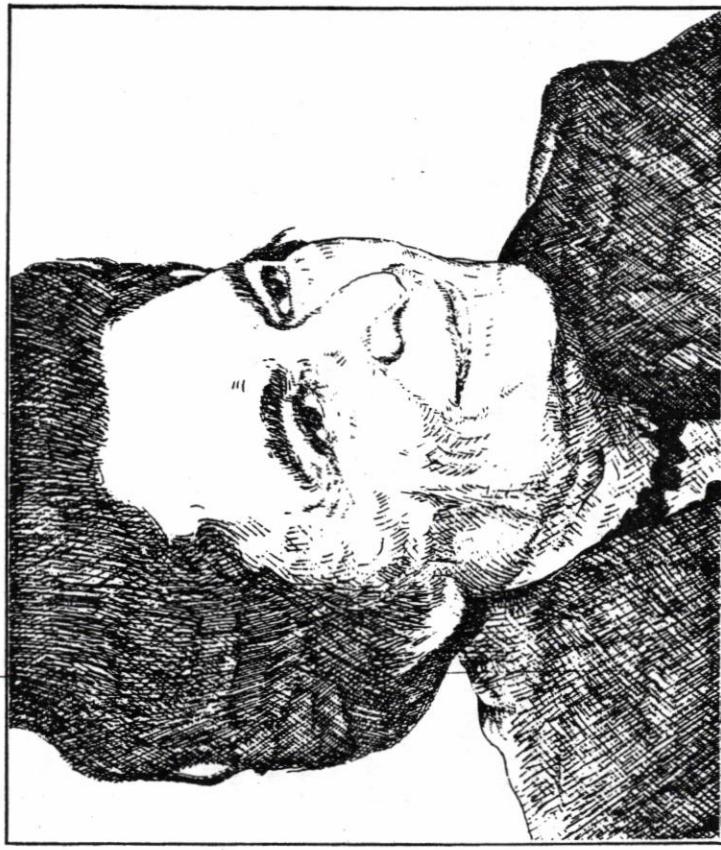
**SKOTNES:** The living conditions under which most of the agricultural workers existed were very bad. How did you assist in bettering these conditions?

**HEALEY:** The only real change that ever took place was in the late 30s when the Farm Security Administration, one of the New Deal agencies, established camps in parts of California. Those were as different as night and day as far as living conditions were concerned. Ordinarily, particularly in the agricultural fields, the workers either lived in encampments on the farmer's property - despicable hovels - where they were working, or they would camp on the sides of the roads. What we were up against was that local enforcement of decent living conditions depended on the local county, and, in all cases, the county administration was simply another name for the growers.

I don't mean small farmers. I'm talking about the agribusiness that had already started in California. As far as the Mexican workers were concerned, there was one difference - in many of the areas they had their own colonies. These were nothing spectacular but, at least, they were clean, more stable, and their own housing. I stayed both in Santa Ana and in the Imperial Valley in those colonies. But there was never any running water; toilets were the old privies - a complete lack of any sanitation. In addition, you had to make decisions on where the pennies

### Sit Down

When the great wave of sit-down strikes engulfed U.S. factories, stores and restaurants, Myra was there. "You'd be sitting in the office any March day of 1937," she said, "and the phone would ring and the voice at the other end would say, 'My name is Mary Jones; I'm a soda clerk at Liggett's, we've thrown the manager out and we've got the keys. What do we do now?' And you'd hurry over to the company to negotiate and over there they'd say, 'I think it's the height of irresponsibility to call a strike before you've ever asked for a contract,' and all you could answer was, 'You're so right.'"



Myra first made national headlines in 1937 when she organized an eight-day sit-down of 120 employees at Woolworth's in downtown Detroit. Workers took over the store while she negotiated a contract. Although only two stores went out on strike, wage increases of five cents an hour and time and a half after 48 hours were won for 1400 workers in 40 Woolworth stores. The agreement included furnishing and laundering of uniforms, and *half pay for the period when the two stores were out on strike*. After the settlement, women workers marched

down Woodward Avenue for a victory meeting at the Barlum Hotel, "cheered and congratulated by spectators and passers-by."

Many years later Myra engaged in an even more spectacular battle to organize the Playboy Clubs. In order to prove that the Detroit Club paid no wages to Bunnies, she sent her 17-year-old daughter to apply for a job. Although it was illegal for anybody under 21 to work in this kind of establishment, her daughter was hired and told that she would make \$250 a week — in tips. Nothing else, except for the Bunny uniform.

So the union set up a picket line. A very dramatic one, Myra said, to stress the evils of working for no wages. "Sodom and Gomorrah, hell on earth. It got very Biblical." Testifying before Congress, she called the Playboy attitude "a gross perpetuation of the idea that women should be obscene and not heard."

### The ERA

In the early 70s Myra took the unpopular stand of opposing the Equal Rights Amendment. It was not equality she opposed; she saw the amendment as a threat to minimum labor standards. Many of these standards applied only to women and could be set aside as discriminatory if the ERA became law. (Her point of view on protective laws is similar to that of Union WAGE, except that WAGE adopted a position of conditional support of the ERA, at the same time calling for the extension of protective legislation to men.)

"My concern," she said, "is for the widowed or divorced mother of children who is head of her family and earns less than \$3500 a year working as a maid, laundry worker, hospital cleaner or dishwasher. There are millions of such women in the work force.... The contention of the proponents of the Equal Rights Amendment that the vulnerable women down at the bottom of the ladder will in the long run be pulled up by the Equal Rights Amendment is outrageously optimistic. Unfortunately, the only way to go is not up. Far more likely, a good many women would be forced off the job ladder altogether, preferring the purgatory of existence on Aid to Dependent Children to the hell of back-breaking, home-wrecking compulsory overtime — overtime that would be required if state protective legislation is abolished.

"It is legislation and labor unions," she continued, "and not any notable improvement in employer morality that has created better working conditions today than we had a century ago."

As a preview of what could happen, she gave the example of Michigan temporarily suspending the 54-hour a week law for women in the fall and winter of 1967-68. The Chrysler Corporation immediately ini-

James Park, the only place large enough and open to us. Vivid still in my mind is the attack by the police on the workers in that park. I remember particularly that they threw tear gas bombs and one of them deliberately aimed at Minnie Carson, who was there from San Francisco as one of the union organizers. It struck her on the cheek and all the rest of her life she bore a scar. Ultimately the strike was defeated. We could not find a way to offset the terror created by the police and the cannery bosses.

The next strike I was involved in was in El Monte in Los Angeles County in 1933 — a berry strike. In January of 1934 I had to go to the Imperial Valley, where there were two major strikes: one was the lettuce strike, and the other the pea strike.

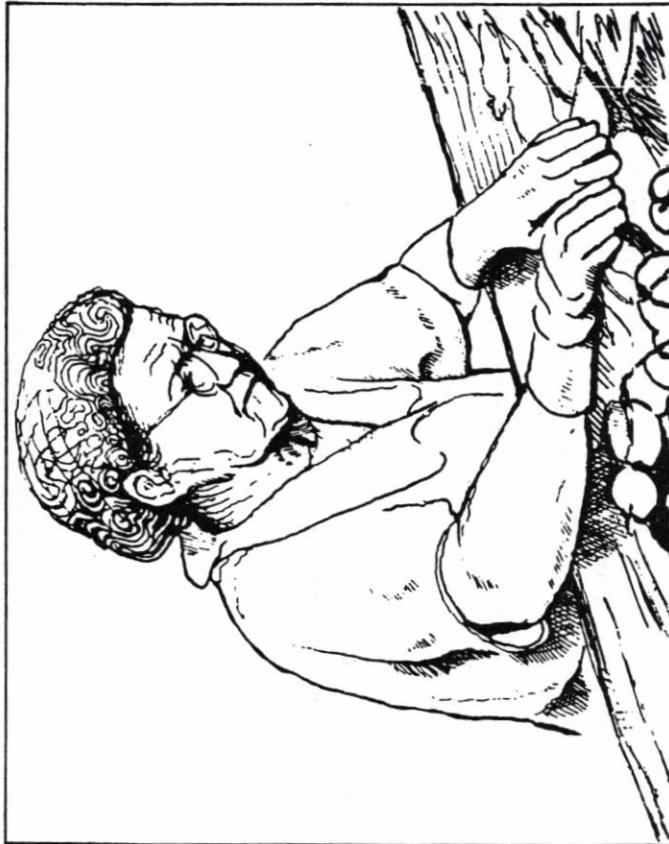
SKOTNES: During the lettuce strike, you worked with the Mexican workers and the Mexican unions, even going back and forth across the border.

HEALEY: We would go across from Calexico into Mexicali, and as I remember nobody paid any attention to the border going in either direction. However, in the pea strike, there were not only Mexicano workers, there was a large number of men and women who came in from Oklahoma, Arkansas and Texas. This was not so true with the lettuce strike. That was, I would say, two-thirds Mexicano.

What stands out so much in all of these strikes — and this is true of all of the 30s — is that there was no distinction made with regard to male/female roles. First of all, there was no distinction made in the fields themselves and certainly not as far as the strikes and the union were concerned. The first thing one did during a strike was to set up rank and file committees for negotiating, for going around to collect food, operating the food kitchen, for being in charge of a picket line, for preparing the strike bulletins — just a dozen different committees for which the workers would volunteer. These committees were both men and women. What one witnessed as a result of these committees was the channel through which all of the latent talents that the workers had could really flower. The transformation of people was one of the things that has stayed with me all my life — seeing the capacity for developing new talents, the overcoming of such things as racism. Most particularly was this true of the workers coming in from the dust bowl.

In the late 30s, during the period of the CIO, it was a very significant thing that the auxiliaries were called "women's auxiliaries" and not "ladies auxiliaries" — they were never just what the word would indicate, an auxiliary to the male-dominated unions. They were active participants in every organizing campaign, in all union meetings.

immediate superior who is, in turn, responsive to a boss. There is no way to have any power in this type of situation. So the first thing that struck me was the total powerlessness of the workers to influence either their wages or their working conditions. As I recall, the wages at that time were around twenty to twenty five cents an hour. The second thing was the overall sanitary condition. I am not talking now about the sanitary conditions as far as the women workers themselves, but about the product that was being canned. I guess the sharpest memory that has stayed with me all these years is the "pie box." In preparing the peaches for canning, there was one box called the "pie box" that was for the rotten fruit and the fruit that had fallen to the floor and been stepped on. Knowing what this "pie box" represented, in all my life I have never eaten a piece of peach pie.



iated excessive overtime for women — a 69-hour week — which resulted in some women literally dropping from exhaustion and having to be carried out on stretchers.

The ERA, she contended, would not bring about equal pay for equal work, nor guarantee job promotion free from sex discrimination. She thought a more effective approach would be to have "specific bills for specific ills."

She pointed out that equality is not necessarily achieved through identity. For example, only 9 percent of the doctors in this country are women, while in the Soviet Union 78 percent of the doctors are women. This was achieved by legislation designed for women which gave them special benefits. When a woman is studying to become a doctor, the hospital cannot let her work on Sundays, holidays, or any day when her children are not in school. Legislation like this would be outlawed by the ERA.

### Organizing Today

During the last years of Myra's life she was deeply concerned about the failure of her union to organize the giant restaurant chains like Stouffer's, McDonald's, and Big Boy Hamburgers. She saw it as a national problem which required organizing on a national scale. In the past it had been possible to win local organizing drives because, with Teamster support, no deliveries were made. Now the chains make their own deliveries, and have their own merchandise in frozen food plants. New tactics are needed.

She also thought that the craft setup no longer worked in the big chains, where the so-called crafts are not clearly differentiated. "Who works solely as a cook in Big Boy Hamburger?" It is difficult today, she said, to give workers reasons to join the union. Organizers are out of touch with the younger workers. They approach women who work part time because it fits into their child care and housework schedule, telling them that with the union they will get seniority and be able to work eight hours. They talk about pensions to teenagers who are working just long enough to buy a car or take a trip to Europe. She concluded that those who do join are not so much interested in seniority and vacations and pensions, but "they would like to have someone around who can call the boss an s.o.b. They are going to the unions because they want someone like me to raise hell."

Myra Wolfgang died in April 1976. She was a working class woman who maintained her integrity and fighting spirit throughout a lifetime of raising hell and working hard for the women and men she represented.

SKOTNES: From this you went on to further union organizing?

HEALEY: Yes! There was a big strike in the canneries in San Jose. It was the first cannery strike in California since 1918 or 1919. The Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union of the Trade Union Unity League was the primary organizer. One memory I have of that strike is the total impossibility we experienced of renting any large hall for the workers to meet when the strike took place. We used to meet in St.

# CARMEN LUCIA

## DOROTHY HEALEY

### Union Troubleshooter

### Union Organizer

By Joyce Maupin

Carmen Lucia walked the picket line with her father when she was ten years old. She recalls tremendous crowds gathering around the factories, particularly one where the employer was very hostile. She saw a face in the second story window and suddenly heard a shot. A few feet away from her, a young girl fell. They went home carrying the body of an 18-year-old striker. That was the beginning of Carmen's lifelong involvement in the labor movement.

She was born in Italy; her family came to the United States when she was two years old. Her father found work in a garment factory in Rochester, New York. One of 14 children, she remembers a five-room home where three or four of them slept in one bed. "But we didn't mind — in winter."

She left school at 12 because her parents could not afford to pay for the books. As soon as she was legally old enough to work, on her 14th birthday, she got a job as a machine operator at \$3.50 a week. Amalgamated Clothing Workers was organizing in that area and her shop went on strike shortly after she was hired. "Remembering the death of that girl, I became very active."

The employer did not want to take her back when the strike was settled. The union, anxious to settle, sacrificed her. In spite of her anger,

Interviewed by Pearl Skotnes

*Dorothy Healey, long-time political activist, was interviewed by Pearl Skotnes in connection with the documentary California Union Maids, aired in Los Angeles on Pacifica Radio KPFK. Dorothy Healey was an organizer for the Cannery and Agricultural Industrial Union in the early 30s, then later for the CIO.*

SKOTNES: I understand, Dorothy, that you started union organizing activities during the 30s when you were still in high school.

HEALEY: Actually I dropped out of high school when I was sixteen, before I graduated, to go to work in a cannery in San Jose at the request of the Young Communist League.

SKOTNES: What were the working conditions like when you first went to work in the cannery?

HEALEY: This was 1931. The canneries were totally unorganized and the workers were predominantly women. To understand this situation one has to recognize what happens when workers have no collective bargaining and are subject solely to the discretion and judgment of an

as little as one-sixteenth Japanese from the paternal side!) Naturally, she did not want to be separated from them and literally fought her way into Manzanar on April 1, 1942.

Elaine and Karl became involved in fighting for better conditions within the camps, and in requesting union wages, which were never granted. The pay scale was \$12, \$16 and \$19 per month for a 48-hour week, paid to unskilled, semi and professionals respectively. They also petitioned for the right of Japanese-Americans to serve in the U.S. Armed Services to help defeat fascism.

Only now, almost 40 years later, are the Japanese-Americans who were incarcerated in the camps starting to ask for redress/reparations from the U.S. government. They lost all they could not carry with them into the camps.

#### Later Years

After the war was over, they moved to the countryside where Karl could recover from the toll of the war. They raised money to help with the court costs of comrades forced to defend themselves against the anti-communist Smith Act of the McCarthy Era.

Finding country life economically unfeasible, Elaine and Karl returned in the 60s to their former jobs in San Francisco, she to clerical work and he to the docks as a longshoreman. In addition to their work in the Communist Party and unions, they became involved in anti-war activities.

In 1971 Elaine joined the founding members of Union WAGE to fight to have protective legislation covering women and children extended to men.

That Elaine is a feminist I have no doubt, but I know that feminism was never a central issue in her struggles. She viewed sexism, like racism, as a tool of capitalism to degrade and dehumanize people for its own purposes. Her vision is of people starting to believe in themselves and fighting for their rights, then standing together and fighting off our common oppressor.

But it won't be an easy fight, just ask Elaine.

she worked for the union again when she got another job in an unorganized plant. This time they signed up without a strike. She became "chairlady" - that's what they called a shop steward - handling the grievances of 250 workers. Soon she was elected to the executive board of her local. She remained with Amalgamated for 12 years, the last five of them working as a secretary in the union office.



#### New Haven

The Necktie Workers Union first hired her as an organizer in 1930. She was "planted" in a New Haven shop where most of the workers were Italian. She succeeded in her assignment, which was to become a company stooge. When the employer wanted to find out anything about the other workers, he called on her.

"Every time I give you a signal, I want you to go to the ladies room and listen to the people's conversation, and come back and tell me who's for the union."

"I said I would be glad to . . . I told him the reverse. Those that were

very anti-union, I told him they were pro-union." As a result, the employer hounded and harassed the anti-union workers. "Then I would notify the organizers outside that they were ripe for organization."

The union got a majority but the employer refused to negotiate, and a strike was called. Scabs were hired, pickets — including Carmen — were arrested. Police threw the book at them for disturbing the peace, assault and battery, inciting to riot. So Rose Sullivan, a Boston organizer, came to New Haven to seek support from the "nice" women in the community. "The well-to-do," Carmen explains.

"So she had a tea to which she invited all the prominent women, and we had our Exhibit A... a little wizened girl who looked like she never had a meal in her life. She told how the whole family worked on ties at night, the children included." The nice women agreed to help.

The wife of the president of the Chamber of Commerce was picketing one night when a fight broke out and pickets were hauled in by the police. They did not know her so she, too, was arrested and sent to jail. She was very, very indignant. The following day her husband resigned as president of the Chamber of Commerce.

### Chicago

Next the union sent Carmen to Chicago to help in a neckwear workers strike. On her first day she saw that the pickets were not walking the line, but stood on a corner with their signs. They said the police sergeant on duty was very disagreeable.

"I told them they had a constitutional right to picket. I decided that if I took a sign and went, to show I wasn't afraid, they might follow."

The sergeant said he wanted to talk to her, pulled her into an alley, and banged her head again and again against the stone wall. When she fell, almost unconscious, he kicked her savagely. Her arm was pulled out of its socket, her wrist dislocated. Broken and bleeding, she was dragged to a patrol wagon, thrown in and taken to jail where she was charged with assault and battery. The officer was not cited.

While she was in the hospital, where her injuries shocked attendants, representatives of the millinery workers visited her and asked her to work for them. Later she was interviewed by Max Zaritsky, president of the Millinery Workers International Union. He discussed a report from Amalgamated which suggested she had a Red tinge.

Carmen explained that while she disagreed with some of the things the Communists did, she would not speak against good ideas just because Communists proposed them. "So sometimes I suppose it sounded ... I got the stigma of being a Red."

She was critical of the union leadership and defended members who

1936 that she earned the title "Tiger Woman." She had come to the Salinas jail to bail out some strikers. After she announced who she was, six deputy sheriffs pulled guns on her. In her own words:

"They pointed these guns at me and I just stood there. I was trembling, I must say, and I just looked at them. 'What is going on here?' I asked, 'I have come here to place a bond on someone whom you arrested. I come here for her constitutional rights and every kind of rights she has in this country. You're pointing guns at me? What do you think I have?' And I had my purse on top of the counter."

The next day the local paper and *San Francisco Call Bulletin* (*The Bull*) — a Hearst evening paper — called this four foot eleven inch woman "Tiger Woman."

Of her other name, "Red Angel," Elaine said, "The Red Angel came about through a policeman, believe it or not, when there were some arrests around the 1934 Maritime Strike. Some maritime workers and other unemployed workers were brought in under arrest and he said, 'Oh, don't worry. The Red Angel will be here. She'll get to you!' Some of the seamen reported that to me and the *Western Worker* picked it up and carried that."

### Family

Both of Elaine's parents were rebellious participants in the anti-Czar underground pre-1905 Bund, in a small town in Russia in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Although they left Russia long before the 1917 revolution, they remained sympathetic and involved in that struggle first through the Socialist Party and later as charter members of the CPUSA in 1919. Apparently, Elaine never knew of their involvement until years after she herself had joined the Communist Party. Yet something of their spirit certainly must have influenced her, for though she may be a woman approaching her 73rd birthday, age can't mask the dynamic energy and determination of this woman! She is a person who knows what she thinks and thinks she can help make a difference!

The principles which guided Elaine's life made her totally out of step with the mores of her time. She lived with her lover without marrying him. But when they decided their not being married hindered their cause, they had to leave the state to marry, since interracial marriage was illegal in California.

After Pearl Harbor, Elaine shared the fate of her husband Karl, her three-year-old son, and over 110,000 persons of Japanese ancestry herded into ten U.S.-style concentration camps. (Although her son was only half Japanese, he had to go to the camp along with all persons who were

Police "Red Squad" of being a Communist and even receiving money from Moscow! (In fact, she did not join the Communist Party until October, 1931.) Thus began Elaine's career as advocate for people's rights as guaranteed to us under the Constitution of the United States.

### Years of Intense Struggle

The 30s were years of intense struggle for the most basic human needs. There were 17 million unemployed, many of them homeless as well. Most existing labor unions were stymied in racist (Jim Crow locals), sexist craft organizations with bought-out, conservative leadership. With every strike or demonstration, many people were carted off to jail on trumped-up charges, \$1000 Vagrancy being the most common in San Francisco. Constitutional rights to assemble, to speak publicly, to leaflet, and to march were constantly being denied through police harassment. In many cities "Intelligence" units (commonly called "Red Squads") within police departments existed, whose sole purpose was to discredit and demoralize any attempts to organize, demonstrate, etc.

As well as being involved in the protests themselves, Elaine became active in the ILD, an organization that supplied attorneys, leafleted calling on people to pack the courtroom during trials, sent prison relief to political and labor prisoners, collected money on street corners, from rich liberals or wherever they could, and kept a revolving fund for the purpose of bailing out people who were arrested for any form of protesting, leafleting, public speaking, etc. As ILD district secretary, she carried large sums of money to courthouses to bail people out, often dangerous work.

Elaine was arrested four times during the 1934 Maritime and General strike, on charges of \$1000 Vagrancy, disturbing the peace, inciting to riot, etc. While in city prison, she participated in a hunger strike begun by 32 men arrested at the Unemployed Council lot and held on high bail. Her bail was \$4000. Elaine acted as her own attorney in all cases where she was a defendant.

With the full emergence, in 1936, of the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO) in many industries and the passage of the Wagner Act, union organizing took on new dimensions. Employer sabotage and police frame-ups continued, but unions began setting up their own defense committees (the ILD ceased to function in 1943.)

### Tiger Woman and the Red Angel

Elaine was also involved in many of the agricultural strikes which took place all over California during the 30s. It was in the Salinas Strike of

were penalized for their differences. "Anyone who differed with the Amalgamated administration in those days would be not only deprived of a voice, but deprived of a vote, or a job, sometimes."

So she told Zaritsky, "If you are going to do the same thing as Amalgamated and the Neckwear Workers did, I will do the very same thing . . . I have certain convictions and I don't want to be stifled in my opinions." She got up, assuming that this was the end of the interview. But Zaritsky said he liked a rebel, and hired her.

Carmen says little about her own life, so we only know that she married, had a daughter and got divorced. An article in *The Hat Worker* comments on her personal reticence: "She states the record and drops it. You have a feeling that in a moment of justified anger she might shoot a man, but she'd never say anything unkind about him."

The need to provide a home for her daughter, and the difficulties of raising her alone, gave Carmen a deeper understanding of the problems that women face as workers, and identify with the women she organized.

### San Francisco

In 1945 the Milliners sent her to the West Coast. It took her just one year to organize all three branches of the trade in San Francisco.

"We only had a four-day strike. I pulled the key people out the day after Labor Day and we paralyzed all the shops. We were able to get an agreement in no time at all."

Then, she says, she had time on her hands. So she helped to organize a department store union, the Retail Clerks Protective Association.

"Some girls came to see me from the 5&10 and asked if I would help. They had been victimized as the result of refusing to cross the warehousemen's picket lines. They had gone to the San Francisco Labor Council for help, but everybody had the attitude in 1936 that they couldn't organize clerks."

Carmen pitched in and they passed out leaflets announcing a meeting. Two hundred workers attended. Then it mushroomed . . . soon there were six or seven thousand. They were offered a contract but not a closed shop. Carmen fought vigorously for a closed shop contract.

Jack Shelley, president of the Labor Council, opposed her because he thought she would jeopardize the workers by striking over this issue. The Retail Clerks Association, he said, was not very aggressive and had no funds. The two of them debated at an open meeting whether or not to go out on strike. Shelley won.

"But I decided the 5&10 cent kids, who were my babies, were a separate unit. They were not part of the Association. We did have a strike. We had a four-day strike and we won; we got the closed shop."

fast as I could in another direction because I was near the wall and if they hit you with that water, they can kill you."

Frightened by the savage attack, most of the workers went back to work the next day.

### Organizing the Unorganized

Elizabeth Nicholas came to California in 1922 at the age of 17. Her mother was dead and her father died in 1929, leaving her with the responsibility of caring for six younger brothers and sisters. She worked with them, cutting fruit in the summer and picking prunes in the fall. As soon as they were old enough to go out independently on these picking expeditions, she got work in the canneries. It was never year round; a cannery worker averaged six months a year. "The rest of the year we stayed home and hoped to survive the winter."

Before she was 20, Elizabeth joined the Communist Party and dedicated her life to organizing the unorganized. Until she was blacklisted in 1938, she worked to build a union in the Santa Clara canneries.

Many of the cannery workers came from Europe... Spain, Portugal, Italy... and brought with them a tradition of militant struggle. They were interested in organization, but the American Federation of Labor was not interested in them... workers who worked only part of the year, most of them women. The majority were married women with large families... six, seven, eight. Except for a short-lived kindergarten at Shuckles, there was no child care.

"You hoped your children would take care of themselves. Mama would leave the house at 6:30 a.m. You really put everything that was in you into the canneries, especially if you were doing piecework. And then to get home and hope to take care of your family! It was a burden that fell on the oldest child in the family. Mama couldn't go shopping. At that time they only had the stores open from 8:00 to 6:00. So the child would go out and shop. They matured very early those days."

### The Small Cherries

While there was no union, spontaneous action on the job sometimes proved effective. Elizabeth recalls one day that they were pitting cherries. "Maraschino cherries. They bleach them in a sulphur solution, they would be gray-white." We had great big disbpans, I think they held 25 or 30 pounds of cherries, and you pitted each one individually. You got so much for a pan... 25¢ a pan. This day we never, never finished, it just went on forever and I don't think we were making 15¢ an hour. There were 25 of us around the table, all except myself were Spanish

women. They were grumbling in Spanish, so I said, 'Well, shall we ask for more money?'

"You know what they'll say. Go home and well get somebody else.' "Supposing I ask for more money because they are giving us the small cherries to pit?"

"Finally, when the head forelady came, I said, 'We are very, very dissatisfied. We want the manager to come up and we want to talk to him about getting more money for these cherries.'

"He did come and he said, 'Well, what seems to be troubling you, Mrs. Nicholas?'

"'It isn't me; it's 25 of us. We're only making about 15¢ an hour.'

"'Can't you work faster?'

"'No, we're working as fast as we can. We are all very slow because the cherries are small.'

"'I can't do a thing about it. If you don't like it, you can go home.'

"'Well,' I said, 'if we don't get a raise in the morning, there's going to be trouble.'

"This is what the stinker did. The next morning they brought big cherries, great big ones, only half as many in a pan. 'We're going to raise it 5¢ a pan more,' he said. 'Mrs. Nicholas, you can go home. You can come back next spring when the season starts.' He didn't say I was fired."

### Why Do You Want To Sit?

Seats were another grievance. "When I was at Shuckles, I brought it up that we didn't have stools to sit on. I found out that was what the state laws said... that you are supposed to have stools. So I told the forelady I wanted to see the manager.

"'What do you want to see him for?'

"'We're asking for stools to sit on.'

"'Why do you want to sit?'

"I guess because we get tired standing," I said. He came and I explained to him that this was the state law. He said he would get them.

"'When? If we don't have them Monday morning, we're not going to work.' So Monday morning there was this tense feeling and all of a sudden I passed the word around from table to table, there were 110 tables. 'Are you willing to stop working? Stop working right here. Just don't work on your fruit!'

"Out of 110 tables, everyone agreed they would stop working for one hour, to impress the company that we wanted stools. And we did. We waited, we stayed there. And you know, they had gotten the stools in over the weekend, but didn't put them in until they saw we were determined."