

Enacting Change for Social Justice in Organizing*

Dolores Huerta†

Thank you, Alegría.¹ Thank you very much. You know, I think that Alegría really typifies something very, very important. As I am going around talking to students, I say to them: “The best inheritance that one can give your family is not money. If you leave money, property, they are going to fight over it, right? So the best thing to do is to leave them the love for justice, and Alegría, I think, is a perfect example of that, being a graduate of Yale University and Boalt Law School, and here she is, working with the farm workers. Thank you, Alegría. I think you really exemplify that.

I want to kind of go back in history a little bit. When we talk about the Central Valley, we know that ultimately, as was said earlier in the labor panel, that one of the final solutions will be when people in the Valley are able to have labor unions. I remember when we first got those contracts in Delano, California, way back in 1970,² after the boycott—I know many of you out there did not eat grapes. Thank you. And you walked picket lines, et cetera. But that first year that we got those contracts, eleven farm worker children went to college for the very first time. One of those young people that went to college is now an M.D., a physician, right? And it just changed people’s lives.

I remember speaking to some of the doctors in Tulare County, who told me that when the United Farm Workers (UFW)³ had those contracts, that we literally changed the health statistics of the entire county; number one, because the workers did not have to work so brutally hard, and then they had their health plan⁴ and it just made all of the difference in the world. So we do know that that is an ultimate goal, to be able to help not only farm workers but all workers unionize so that they can

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1. This speech followed an introduction by Alegría De La Cruz. Alegría de la Cruz is a staff attorney for the California Rural Legal Assistance. Roberto de la Cruz, Alegría de la Cruz’s father, was an organizer for the UFW in the 1970’s. For more information about the CRLA see <http://www.crla.org>.

2. Farmworkers who had successfully struck in other areas in the Central Valley joined the Delano workers. Led by the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), the initial strike began on September 8, 1965. See http://www.ufw.org/_page.php?menu=research&inc=history/03.html (last visited June 12, 2007).

3. The United Farm Workers, whose core values include integrity, *Si Se Puede* attitude, innovation, non-violence, and empowerment, was formed in the summer of 1966 after National Farm Workers Union and the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee merged. See http://www.ufw.org/_page.php?menu=research&inc=_page.php?menu=research&inc=history/01.html (last visited June 12, 2007).

4. In 1966, Dolores Huerta negotiated the first National Farm Workers Union contract with the Schenley Wine Company. In 1967, she continued to successfully negotiate more contracts for farm workers, establishing the first medical and pension benefits for farm workers and safety plans in the history of American agriculture. See http://www.doloreshuerta.org/dolores_huerta_foundation.htm (last visited June 12, 2007).

have the kinds of benefits that they need. Of course you talked about that at the last panel,⁵ and I do not want to repeat that.

But I do want to kind of go back in time a little bit, to show, I guess, how it was that Cesar [Chavez] and myself were able to organize a union initially.⁶ And I do want to say when people say, "Well, what happened to United Farm Workers?" Well, number one, we had this big invasion of the Teamsters in 1973⁷ and then we had sixteen years of Republican governors.⁸ And this is exactly what they're doing. They are organizing, quietly, like when we first started. You know, we organized from 1962 to 1965.⁹

I remember somebody asked me, "Well, you had that strike in Delano that all these farm workers came out on strike. And how did that happen?" Well, you know what? We were organizing three years before the strike. We were organizing from 1962 to 1965, and we had done services with those workers so they could have faith in what we were doing.

So it was not just like that; it was that people were organized to be able to do this. And that is exactly what the United Farm Workers is doing now. They have this program going now, where they are getting people ready. Again, they are back doing really grass-roots organizing.¹⁰

And remember that the United Farm Workers right now represent seventy-five percent of all the mushroom workers in California; they represent about sixty percent of the strawberry workers, so the organizing has had some fruition. They have contracts in Washington State, a contract in Florida, and they are currently working with some of the other farm worker organizations in Oregon and also with Baldemar Velasquez¹¹ and his organization that is in Ohio, and also in South Carolina. They have lent some of their expertise, some of their negotiators, some of their organizers to some of these other organizations that are also organizing right now.¹²

5. Labor, Employment and Labor Organizing panel, moderated by Steven Pitts, Labor Policy Specialist, University of California Center for Labor Research and Education. See http://www.law.berkeley.edu/centers/cslj/symposia/centralvalley/NewFaceAgenda_for_web.pdf (last visited June 12, 2007).

6. It was through her work with the Stockton Chapter of the Community Service Organization, a grass roots organizations started by Fred Ross, that Dolores met Cesar Chavez. See http://www.doloreshuerta.org/dolores_huerta_foundation.htm (last visited June 12, 2007).

7. *Id.*

8. There were three Republicans, Ronald Reagan, George Deukmejian, and Pete Wilson, and one Democrat, Jerry Brown, from 1967 through 1999. See <http://www.californiagovernors.ca.gov/h/biography/index.html> (last visited June 12, 2007).

9. In 1962, Huerta lobbied in Washington D.C. for an end to the Bracero program. In 1963, she secured Aid for Dependant Families for the unemployed and underemployed. In 1965, Huerta and Chavez organized workers throughout the San Joaquin Valley. See http://www.doloreshuerta.org/dolores_huerta_foundation.htm (last visited June 12, 2007).

10. United Farm Workers' current contract with C.K. Mondavi and Charles Krug, for example, has expired and there is a call for a nationwide boycott of those labels. See http://www.ufw.org/_board.php?mode=view&b_code=org_key&b_no=2030&page=1&field=&key=&n=7 (last visited June 12, 2007).

11. Baldemar Velasquez is the founder and President of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) which began its operations in northwest Ohio in the mid 1960's. See <http://www.floc.com/> (last visited June 12, 2007).

12. The Farm Labor Organizing Committee is currently working on a new campaign to

Now, I think the other great thing about the community service organization that we learned, Cesar and myself, and that we passed on in terms of the union work is that you have to tie in the organizing with the politics. It has to go together. Some of the groups out there—they are going to organize, but they do not want to lose their non-profit status, so they do not want to get involved on the political level. But that is the only way we can get the law and we have gotten the laws for farm workers, like legalization that we got—you know, we got 1.4 million farm workers legalized in the Immigration Reform Act of 1985.¹³ It is by getting people registered to vote, by getting them out to vote, by supporting candidates that will pass laws for farm workers; that is how we are able to get that kind of political support.

Now, the farm workers that have gone out there to knock on doors and to get people out to vote and to get people registered to vote—hey, they are not citizens. A lot of them say, well, they cannot do it because they are not citizens. They can do it. You do not have to be a citizen to knock on a door or to make a phone call on a phone bank; you can be an undocumented worker, you can be a green carder. What we need is the bodies, right? The same kind of bodies that marched to Sacramento, and the bodies that went to the capital with their flags to fight for legislation. Those same bodies can go out there and knock on doors.

And we have to tell our immigrant communities: The fact that you are not a citizen does not mean that you are not contributing to this society. First of all, they contribute with their sweat, right? And the work that they do. And they contribute with their taxes because every time that they buy something, they are paying taxes. So they have a right to get out there and to participate in politics. I am not saying for them to vote.¹⁴ We know they cannot vote. But they can certainly get out there and motivate the people that *are* the voters to vote.

I will give you one really good example. There is a great woman who was elected to the U.S. Congress named Hilda Solis.¹⁵ She ran against another Democrat.¹⁶ She got no support from the congressional delegation because, you know, she was running against one of their colleagues. But it is okay. Farm workers went from Fresno, California, all the way to Los Angeles. They came from Blythe, which is near the Arizona border, all the way to Los Angeles. It was pouring down rain, because it was during the primaries, and she won by thirty points, right?¹⁷ And it was the working people that got Hilda Solis elected. And, of course, she is a very

extend the rights and benefits of union protection for farmworkers in North Carolina. See <http://www.floc.com/documents/New%20Campaign.pdf> (last visited June 12, 2007).

13. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, Pub. L. No. 99-603, 100 Stat 3359 (1986), was signed by President Ronald Reagan and it established a one-year amnesty program for immigrants to apply for regularization of status. See <http://www.oig.lsc.gov/legis/irca86.htm> (last visited June 12, 2007).

14. U.S. CONST. amend. XV, § 1.

15. Representative Hilda Solis was first elected to Congress in November of 2000 and represents California's 32nd Congressional District, comprised of East Los Angeles and the San Gabriel Valley. See <http://solis.house.gov/> (last visited June 12, 2007).

16. Solis joined the House by defeating 18-year veteran Republican Matthew Martinez, 62 percent to 28 percent. Since then, she has easily won re-election in her strongly Democratic district. See http://www.house.gov/apps/list/press/ca32_solis/morenews4/natljournal91605.html (last visited June 12, 2007).

17. *Id.*

strong advocate for labor, a very strong advocate for immigrants, a very strong advocate for women's rights, and a very strong advocate for environmental rights.¹⁸

And this is what we have to do, and really put the heat on some of our friends. I am going to name one in particular, not because we all know him, and I will invite you to put the heat on him, okay? That is our former supervisor here. You know, we had a big demonstration here trying to get his vote to give the home healthcare workers health benefits. Isn't that, like, a no-brainer? The people who are taking care of sick people—should they not also have health benefits? And we had to put a lot of heat on him.

And then I was up in Sacramento just recently on the gay marriage bill¹⁹ and he would not give a vote on the gay marriage bill. I mean, really, if Thelma and Louise get married, does that affect your paycheck? It does not, does it? And his excuse was, his staff told me, because he used to be an altar boy. That would seem more reason, right? But we have got to put some spine in some of these people, right? We should let them know: If you cannot be courageous enough to represent us, then you have no business being there. You have no business being there. Even if they are our friends, even if they are our friends.

So we have got to really tie the political—and, you know, I know a lot of people work for agencies, and you cannot do political work, but you know what? The people that you are working with, your clients—they can do it, right? We have to let them know that they can do it, that they can get out there and they can do that voter registration, do the voter education to let people know what the issues are.

And we also have to let our people know—all these people that are attacking immigrants, they are also the same people that are attacking the women's right to choose, right? They are also the same people that are attacking gays and lesbians. And they do this—they attack immigrants and gays and women's right to choose because they want to distract the public, because the real issues are: What is happening with our tax dollars? You know, the war in Iraq, right? You know, are monies going to the green corporations? Are tax dollars going to them?

So we also kind of have to come together. We have all of these segregated movements. The environmental movement is over here, civil rights movement over here, women's movement over here, the workers are over here. We have got to bring all these together, and we need to do that.

I am from the San Joaquin Valley.²⁰ I was raised in Stockton, California.²¹ I remember once going to a forum where they said the only way you can get ahead is

18. *Id.*

19. The Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Protection Act (AB 849), also known as the Gay Marriage Bill was passed by the California Senate on September 1, 2005. Available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/01/AR2005090102086.html> (last visited June 12, 2007).

20. The San Joaquin Valley Bioregion in the heart of California is the state's top agricultural producing region, sometimes called the "nation's salad bowl" for the great array of fruits and vegetables grown there. See http://www.ceres.ca.gov/geo_area/bioregions/San_Joaquin_Valley/about.html (last visited June 12, 2007).

21. Stockton is the seat of San Joaquin Valley (the 5th agricultural county in the United States). According to 2005 estimates, Stockton has a population of approximately 300,000 and is the 13th largest city in California. It was founded in 1849. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stockton,_California (last visited June 12, 2007).

to leave the Valley. Well, I do not believe that. I think that we have stayed in the Valley because we know that there is a future here for everybody, and we just have to make it happen. And it is not like we have to reinvent the wheel. We all know what has to be done. But we have to get the people together and get resources for that.

With our foundation right now, the organizing that we are doing; let me tell you, it has been difficult because all those foundations out there—they do not like to or they do not really understand organizing. God knows, the Democratic Party does not understand organizing, right? So it is very difficult to get money to just do that basic grass-roots organizing, to set up what John Sweeney²² called a union city, because you would have one person in that household who maybe works as a home healthcare worker; the other one is out there working as a farm worker; the other one is maybe working as a janitor. So if we could organize our communities to be a union—give them that consciousness and even let them know what a union is, because a lot of times people do not know what a union is. It is an organization of workers; that is all. It is an organization of workers.

We have to become those advocates, and people will follow. People will respond. It is not, as they say, it is not rocket science. People will understand, and they will come together. We have enough elements in the Valley that we can really make the changes. I think we are in the position to do this right now.

Sometimes when things get so bad, that is the best time to organize, right? And now we have, of course, the University of California at Merced,²³ which is going to be very big, because hopefully we will have that type of scholastic support that we need to support the programs that we are going to be doing here. And it is okay to bring in other industries. I do not think anybody is against that. But we do have to remember one thing: The San Joaquin Valley feeds the nation,²⁴ right?

There are many fertile areas in the whole state of California in terms of the earth, the dirt that is there. And now we are paving over, you know, the Central Valley. And some of these agricultural companies—I am going to name one in particular, Dole—you know, Dole? They have all this agricultural land. Do they care about food? No. They divided the company into two. There is Dole and then there is Castle & Cook,²⁵ and they do not care about the workers. They do not care about feeding people. What they want to do is hold onto this land for development.

22. John J. Sweeney was elected president of the AFL-CIO in October 1995 and has been re-elected three times ever since. See <http://www.aflcio.org/aboutus/thisistheafcio/leaders/officers.cfm> (last visited June 12, 2007).

23. UC Merced opened September 5, 2005, as the tenth campus of the University of California system, and the first American research university to be built in the 21st century. See http://www.ucmerced.edu/about_ucmerced/ (last visited June 12, 2007).

24. The San Joaquin Valley is California's leading agricultural bioregion, and five of its counties rank among the state's top ten counties in farm production values. See http://www.ceres.ca.gov/geo_area/bioregions/San_Joaquin_Valley/about.html (last visited June 12, 2007).

25. Castle & Cooke, Inc. and Dole Food Company, Inc. are privately held companies owned by David H. Murdock, chairman and chief executive officer of both companies since 1985. Formerly listed on the New York Stock Exchange, Castle & Cooke and Dole Food Company were acquired by Mr. Murdock in 2000 and 2003, respectively. Castle & Cook is primarily involved in real estate development and ownership, transportation equipment leasing, and other investments. See <http://www.castlecooke.net/article.asp?id=1783> (last visited June 12, 2007).

They need to hold onto this land for development. And I think that is something that we have to be conscious of.

The other issue is water. You know, water is going to be a very big issue in the future. There is always talk about what do we do with the delta,²⁶ and we have been trying to get a hold of that water for a long time, right? So those are other issues that we have to look at.

There was just recently an article in the *L.A. Times* that a lot of these not-for-profit water companies are selling these not-for-profit water companies to for-profit water companies.²⁷ I mean, what does *that* mean? We know what happened to oil, right? So these are things that we really have to pay attention to.

Another thing I want to mention is we have in the Valley, especially in Tulare County; we have some of this in Kern County—we have what they call special districts.²⁸ It organized in Lamont. The people in Arvin and Lamont have had their swimming pools closed now. You know, we had this big heat wave. We had thirty-five days with temperatures over 100 degrees. And when we tried to see how much money it would take to fix that swimming pool for these farm worker kids, first they said \$80,000. Then they gave us a proposal: \$500,000 to fix the swimming pool. Do you believe that?

And you know what? The Board of Supervisors cannot do anything about that recreation district because they have a special recreation district, so they can deal directly with the feds or with the state, and they do not have to go through the Board of Supervisors. Well, you have got that in Kern County. We had to raise the money to send some of the kids there because they qualified for the finals on track and field, and they did not have the money [to attend]. We had to raise the money to send them to Indiana for those finals.

And they have the same thing in housing. And if that is bad, in Kern County—well, in most of Kern County—the little towns are already incorporated as cities, right? But Lamont is not.²⁹ If you come out to Tulare County it is even worse, because there were some areas in Tulare County where people do not even have drinking water. So there is much work that needs to be done here, but I know that people in this room not only have the willingness, they have the capacity, and we are going to figure out the way to do it. But we do have to work together to

26. The San Joaquin-Sacramento River Delta is an expansive inland river delta in northern California. "It is formed at the western edge of the Central Valley by the Sacramento River at its confluence with the San Joaquin River just east of where the river enters Suisun Bay (an upper arm of San Francisco Bay)." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacramento_River_Delta (last visited June 12, 2007).

27. Claudia H. Deutsch, *As water grows scarce, corporations see profit*, N.Y. TIMES, August 10, 2006, available at <http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/08/09/business/water.php> (last visited June 12, 2007). Deutsch explains that, in the United States, most analysts expect the water market to be worth at least \$150 billion by 2010.

28. The Kern County Water Agency, for instance, is a special district form of local government created by the California state legislature, with the consent of Kern County voters, in 1961. The Agency serves as the contractor for the County's State Water Project water supply. See <http://www.kcwa.com/> (last visited June 12, 2007).

29. Lamont is a census-designated place (CDP), an area identified by the United States Census Bureau for statistical reporting and often informally called "unincorporated towns," in Kern County, California. The population was over 13,000 at the 2000 census. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lamont,_California (last visited June 12, 2007).

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make this happen. We know that we can be successful. I do not know if we have to do another boycott. Who knows? But we *can* do it.

