

A Fight For Migrant Worker Rights

For over a century, Mexican migrant workers have been making their way across the border into the United States. These workers are drawn by economic opportunities and travel, following seasonal crops, to ensure they have year-round employment. However, before the 1960's, the conditions they had to work in were appalling. Workers were deprived of basic human rights and paid very little for terrible conditions. This changed because Dolores Huerta united workers and led them in a movement to fight for their rights. Huerta led boycotts, formed unions, and created organizations that focused on improving working conditions for migrant workers. Her contributions to this cause are still in place. The inhumane conditions migrant workers experienced inspired Dolores Huerta's activism, and she addressed immigrant injustices that we should continue fighting for today.

Before Huerta started organizing and demanding basic human rights for migrant workers, they were working in alarming conditions. According to a NAACP flyer supporting the Delano Grape Strike, "California table grapes were picked by people working ten hours a day with no breaks and no toilets" ("A NAACP Flyer Calling for Support for the Grape Boycott, 1965"). These workers were also exposed to many toxic pesticides in the fields with no resources to wash them off. Activist Dolores Huerta told NPR that "the farmworkers were only earning about 70 cents an hour at that time — 90 cents was the highest wage that they were earning" (Godoy). This inadequate pay was not enough for the workers to afford housing, so most of them lived in houses made up of "scrap wood, cardboard, canvas, or tin cans" with their families (McBirney). There were no support systems in place to ensure migrant workers had basic human rights and healthy working conditions. As Dolores Huerta said in a speech given on April 10th, 1966 during

a National Farm Workers Association rally, the workers had to “realize that no one was going to win their battle for them. That their conditions could be changed by only one group of people, themselves” (“NFWA March and Rally - April 10, 1966”). Huerta saw what the power of a united group could do and led them through their fight for civil rights.

Although Dolores Huerta was not an immigrant herself, she dedicated her life to fighting for humane working conditions for migrant workers. Huerta was raised in Stockton, California by her single-mother and grandfather. Her mother raised her to believe in equal rights and opportunities for all, including migrant workers. She was no stranger to adversity; in elementary school she faced prejudice for being a Latina girl. One of her teachers “accused Huerta of cheating because her papers were too well-written” (“Dolores Huerta”, Women’s History). This discrimination drove her fight for equal rights. Huerta went on to get an associates degree in teaching from the University of the Pacific. After college, she tried teaching but quit because “seeing so many hungry farm children coming to school” disturbed her, and “she thought she could do more to help them” (“Dolores Huerta”, Women’s History).

Dolores Huerta started out by co-founding the Stockton Community Service Organization, “a grassroots group that worked to end segregation, discrimination, and police brutality and improve social and economic conditions of farm workers” (“Dolores Huerta”, Biography). After that, she began the Agricultural Workers Association (AWA). This organization worked to include a translated Spanish version of important documents such as voter ballots and drive tests. She met Cesar Chavez through the AWA, and the two of them bonded through their mutual desire to improve the lives of migrant workers. Since the AWA “focused on urban issues”, they could not pursue their goal through this particular organization

(“Dolores Huerta”, Biography). Instead, Huerta and Chavez left the AWA and created the National Farm Workers Association: a union that fought for better wages and working conditions for migrant workers. This association would later become what is now known as the United Farm Workers Union.

One of their most impactful accomplishments was the Delano Grape Strike, where five thousand grape workers went on strike demanding better working conditions and increased pay. Based on the pressure this strike created, an agreement, which Huerta assisted in writing, was made and signed by twenty-six grape growers that “improved working conditions for farm workers, including reducing the use of harmful pesticides and initiating unemployment and healthcare benefits” (“Dolores Huerta”, Biography). Huerta did not stop there. She continued organizing movements such as the National Lettuce Strike and another consumer boycott of grapes. This boycott led to the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act of 1975, which “allowed farm workers to form unions and bargain for better wages and conditions” (“Dolores Huerta”, Women’s History). Eventually, Huerta founded the Dolores Huerta Foundation. This group worked to “inspire and organize communities to build volunteer organizations empowered to pursue social justice” (“About the Dolores Huerta Foundation”). In 1993, she was inducted into the National Women’s Hall of Fame. For her never-ending battle for social justice, she received a Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2012 from President Obama, the same award Minoru Yasui received in 2015. Even today, at age ninety, Huerta continues to attend civil rights protests and participates in many activist groups.

Dolores Huerta and Minoru Yasui both spent their entire lives fighting for societal change and civil rights. They built bridges which still grant modern immigrant groups more freedoms

and rights, but the fight is not over. Immigrants still face extreme hate, disadvantages, and lack of resources in the United States. I live in Hood River County, a county full of migrant workers who come to work in the orchards every year. In the Columbia Plateau alone, there are “3,584 farms” that make “1.3 billion dollars” in agricultural products annually (The Oregon State Board of Agriculture). This massive agricultural industry relies on the much-needed assistance of migrant workers. Since our economy heavily depends on the help of these hard-working immigrants, our community should be providing support systems to make their adjustment easier.

Small steps can be taken to support immigrant groups. One easy way to get involved is by putting pressure on the governmental officials in power. If enough people write letters to our Governor and Senators demanding equal rights for immigrants, they will listen and join the movement. Informing them and requesting their support is a good way to start. Since Yasui and Huerta both valued and practiced non-violent protesting, we can also get involved by attending pro-immigration protests as a peaceful way to show our support and stand up to the injustices migrant workers face. Another powerful tool to continue this fight is by spreading awareness. We can publicize stories of immigrants who were treated inhumanely. When enough people hear about it and politicians get involved, they can demand social justice. Yasui purposely got arrested and eventually took his case to the Supreme Court. Even though he didn't win, it was a powerful statement, one that got people's attention. Through this act, people developed a stronger awareness of the discrimination immigrants face. We can continue doing acts like this as a way to educate the ignorant and recruit supporters.

We should also put in place a “welcome to the U.S.” organization for immigrants. This organization would include housing for the first couple months, a food stamps system, access to medical attention, job counselors, and education for the children of these families. It would be a safe space where families have protection from deportation. Being part of this group will help them slowly ease their way into American life. Through this organization, people will be walked through how to join the United Farm Workers Union. This is so they’ll be connected with another support system that ensures that they know their rights to safe working conditions and livable wages. Similar to Minoru Yasui taking part in founding the Japanese Americans Citizens League’s chapter in Oregon, we would be creating an organization that also upholds human and civil rights.

Huerta and Yasui both committed their lives to fighting for civil rights, and we should continue their legacies. As Americans, it is our job to ensure all people who come here are treated with respect and given basic human rights. Migrant workers now have humane working conditions and a union that ensures they remain that way thanks to Dolores Huerta. We can continue the fights Huerta and Yasui took part in by getting involved in immigrant issues and not accepting the disadvantages they have to endure. We must come together as a united country and stand up for the people who do not have a voice.

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