

Birth of a Movement

FARM WORKER ADVOCATES have often contrasted visions of rural California as the land of milk and honey with the gritty reality of farm workers' lives. This, in part, was the approach that novelist John Steinbeck, photographer Dorothea Lange, and other agrarian partisans used in the 1930s to arouse the nation's appetite for reform. Their ability to undermine growers' idyllic impressions of the California countryside led to the creation of programs that brought temporary relief to field hands. Although the New Deal ultimately fell short, artists and union organizers proved that they could counter advertisements celebrating the bounty of nature and, for a time, shift the balance of power in favor of workers in the long struggle to end rural poverty in the Golden State.

Such a tactic was at the heart of a 1948 film, *Poverty in the Valley of Plenty*. A coproduction of the National Farm Labor Union and Hollywood filmmakers, the film drew attention to the anti-union practices of the DiGiorgio Fruit Company located in the lower San Joaquin Valley. An Italian immigrant, Giuseppe "Joseph" DiGiorgio, began modestly, growing fruit on 5,845 acres in 1919. By 1946 he had expanded production on thirty-three square miles worth \$18.2 million, becoming the largest grape, plum, and pear grower in the world.¹ According to NFLU organizers, much of this wealth had been built on the backs of laborers who lived in substandard housing. With the film and their activism, they sought to make the DiGiorgio Fruit Company more accountable to its employees.

In 1947 union organizers at DiGiorgio petitioned for a 10 cents per hour raise, seniority rights, and a grievance procedure. The company promptly responded by expelling striking workers and replacing them with several hundred Filipinos, undocumented workers, Tejano recruits, and 130 Mexi-

can guest workers, known as braceros. The employment of the last group violated the agreement between Mexico and the United States that stipulated no foreign workers would be used during labor disputes. Members of the Hollywood film unions regarded DiGiorgio's reaction as so hostile that they waived all wage and pay contracts to get the film made.²

The collaboration between the NFLU and filmmakers marked a new phase in the evolution of farm worker activism. Besides evoking the contrast between growers' wealth and farm workers' poverty in the title, they portrayed the stark differences between the natural beauty of the fields and the ramshackle homes of employees. The first thirty-seven of fifty-seven scenes accentuate this contrast, offering viewers a visual context for the last portion of the film, which is focused on the DiGiorgio strike. In terms of activism, the union paired *Poverty in the Valley of Plenty* with highly public appeals to consumers across the nation not to buy DiGiorgio's products. The first large-scale consumer boycott of its kind, the strategy worked, cutting deeply into the company's profits and provoking angry clashes between loyal employees and strikers on the farm.³

If the NFLU's film and boycott signaled a new level of sophistication among farm worker activists, it also demonstrated the resolve of DiGiorgio to maintain the status quo. In addition to hiring a photographer and filmmaker to produce a visual counter to *Poverty in the Valley of Plenty*, the company unleashed a legal torrent on the NFLU, suing them for libel and fighting to suppress any further screenings of the film. Although an independent investigation by CBS News and Congresswoman Helen Gahagan Douglas revealed the company's version to be false and the repression of workers to be real, DiGiorgio simply overwhelmed its opposition with images and lawsuits. Unable to match the wealth and power of the company in the courts, the NFLU agreed to destroy all copies of *Poverty in the Valley of Plenty* and end the strike and boycott in exchange for DiGiorgio's dropping charges against the union leaders. The settlement brought an end to the NFLU, which ceased to exist by the summer of 1950.⁴

DiGiorgio achieved its intended goal of destroying the NFLU and ending the circulation of the film, but the episode signaled a core truth about agriculture: consumer opinion matters. The union's ability to engineer a boycott demonstrated to both sides that the conflict extended well beyond the fields, and that simply replacing workers at the point of production could not solve the conflict. Indeed, DiGiorgio's suppression of *Poverty in the Valley of Plenty*, even at the expense of free speech, demonstrated how seriously

the company took this challenge. Although DiGiorgio won this battle, growers remained susceptible to such campaigns as long as they refused to take responsibility for solving the problem of rural poverty.

It took time for activists to recover from the collapse of the NFLU. Although Ernesto Galarza, a labor intellectual and the former director of education and research for the union, reconstituted the NFLU as the National Agricultural Workers Union (NAWU), the new union struggled as a consequence of the *bracero* program. Throughout the 1950s, the single goal of ending the program consumed farm worker advocates, delaying the use of tactics briefly employed by the NFLU. By the beginning of the 1960s, however, new voices emerged that revived some of the hope in the fields, where conditions remained as difficult, if not worse than they had been in the 1940s. Armed with new research and imbued with a sense of purpose, these grassroots activists hit the countryside intent on making a difference.

RURAL CALIFORNIA AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Those wishing to tackle the thorny issue of rural poverty have often begun their fight in the Imperial Valley. Its location in the most southern portion of the state made it the first destination for desperate Mexican immigrants crossing the border to apply their substantial knowledge to the state's massive agricultural economy. The tumult of the Mexican Revolution and the recruitment of Mexican workers by labor contractors during the first three decades of the twentieth century made Mexicans the preferred group in a racial-caste system that remained in flux until World War II.⁵ The flood of Mexican workers generated a surplus of labor that facilitated competition among a diverse population segmented by race and enabled growers to pay their employees below subsistence wages. As the first to employ farm workers for the season, Imperial growers often established the going rate for many crops in the state. The desert climate aided this process. An inversion of the typical North American growing season from a spring-to-summer to a winter-to-spring trajectory meant that Imperial growers could deliver warm-weather, drought-tolerant crops such as cotton, peas, melons, and lettuce to the market at a time of the year when such products were rare. When cultivation moved northward, so did wage levels and workers.

A researcher studying social stratification across agricultural sections of the United States in 1959 found that the Imperial Valley had a two-class

system: a few farm managers in the middle class and a mass of laborers, mostly Mexican, in the lower class. These conditions strongly resembled those in the Deep South, where white landholding elites and farm managers profited from the labor of African Americans. In Tunica County, Mississippi, and West Baton Rouge County, Louisiana, for example, “lower class farm personnel,” defined as “all those who perform only the labor function on the farms, plantations, and ranches in the United States,” constituted approximately 80 percent of the workforce. By comparison, Imperial Valley farms employed 87 percent of their laborers at this level. Moreover, while all three counties employed a small middle- and lower-middle-managerial class, in the Imperial Valley these managers constituted a much smaller portion of the total population than in Mississippi or Louisiana. Such numbers suggest that the rural Southwest was a world as deeply southern as the South itself.⁶

After World War II, many farm worker advocates accused the federal government of exacerbating the problem with the importation of Mexican guest workers. Begun in 1942, the bilateral agreement between Mexico and the United States known as the *bracero* program delivered Mexican nationals to rural California to harvest crops and maintain railroads. Although initially meant to be temporary, the program continued well beyond World War II. In 1951, agricultural lobbyists convinced Congress to pass Public Law 78, formalizing the *bracero* program, by making spurious claims that the Korean War had compromised the agricultural labor force and threatened domestic production.⁷

Many scholars have documented the detrimental effect the *bracero* program had on farm wages and the employment of local workers. During the initial years of the program, between 1943 and 1947, California employed 54 percent of the Mexican nationals who came to the United States; however, by the late 1950s, most worked in Texas. Growers invested heavily in the program to take advantage of the discrepancies between the wages Mexican nationals would accept and what local workers needed to survive. Although the bilateral agreement required employers to pay *braceros* at or above the standard wage in a given region, in reality they earned far less than what their contracts promised and between 10 and 15 percent less than their local coworkers. The difference in the standard of living and wages between Mexico and the United States compelled Mexican nationals to come north despite receiving ill treatment and false promises from contractors and employers. Many *braceros* maintained families in Mexico with wages that far surpassed what they could have made by staying at home. Locals who had to

raise families at the higher U.S. cost of living felt the pinch of the program's downward force on agricultural wages. By one account, the willingness of braceros to work at starvation levels widened the gap between farm and industrial wages by 60 percent.⁸

California growers' dependence on the bracero program varied from south to north and from crop to crop. Throughout the twenty-two-year history of the program, reliance on Mexican nationals skewed southward toward the desert regions and the south coast of the state. By the last year of the program, 1964, 42 percent of the seasonal employees in the desert came from the bracero labor pool, compared to just 9 percent in the San Joaquin Valley. On the south and central coasts, where orange and lemon production dominated, braceros constituted 38 and 31 percent, respectively, reflecting the citrus industry's historic dependence on the program. In fact, California lemon producers, who accounted for 90 percent of the lemons grown in the United States, drew 74 percent of their labor from the program. In the desert, where a significant number of braceros worked, melon producers in the Palo Verde and Imperial Valleys drew 44 percent of their labor from Mexican nationals, while date growers located in Coachella Valley depended on braceros for 91 percent of their labor. In the San Joaquin Valley, melon producers were the biggest users of braceros, drawing 41 percent of their labor force from the program. Among grape growers, only those in the south coast region relied on Mexican nationals for more than half their labor needs, and in the San Joaquin Valley, they constituted a mere 2 percent of workers. Grape growers in the desert region had a slightly higher dependence on Mexican nationals, at 11 percent of the total number of employees, although California grape growers in general used the program much less than their peers in other crops.⁹

In the San Joaquin Valley, farm worker advocates worried about the impact of the bracero program on wages, but other factors shaped poverty there. In a study of rural labor conditions in Fresno County over a six-month period, from January to July 1959, a team of researchers based at Fresno State College (which later became Fresno State University) found that braceros rarely totaled more than 1 percent of the labor force in the area and recently had been eliminated from the fruit harvest altogether. Instead, growers had become dependent on what researchers referred to as "day-haul" laborers: settled workers who brought in local harvests and returned to their homes each day. In some instances, workers traveled as far as Salinas, near the coast. Most San Joaquin Valley farm workers found ample employment in the crops immediately around Fresno, which enjoyed a harvest cycle that started in April and lasted



MAP 1. California growing areas and locations of UFW activity.

until October, the longest in the country. According to the researchers, only a small minority of Anglo melon pickers based in the county followed a year-round cycle that took them first to the harvests in Arizona and the southern California deserts, up through Kern County, and back into Fresno. Known as “aristocrats,” these workers often earned between \$8,000 and \$10,000 per year, making them the highest paid farm laborers in the county.

Most workers earned far less due to a system that facilitated constant labor surpluses and disrupted potential worker solidarity. Researchers found evidence of growers who had invested in labor camps for Mexican nationals and Mexican Americans but had recently abandoned these projects in favor of hiring through local labor contractors. Camps promised a more stable labor

pool, though growers grew to resent the cost of maintaining such settlements. Most growers found it more convenient to outsource the hiring process to a third party that bore the responsibility of finding workers and making sure they got to the farms. The county Farm Labor Bureau, financed through tax dollars and grower contributions, served as one source, though researchers found that most growers preferred the completely independent labor brokers who operated without restrictions from the government. According to the authors of the report, "The farm labor contractors expressed the feeling that the Farm Labor Office [i.e., the Fresno County Farm Labor Bureau] does not play a role of significant importance in the present agricultural pattern."

The disparities in the cost of day-haul laborers compared to camp laborers encouraged this transition to labor contractors. Fresno State researchers found that growers paid labor contractors a going rate of between \$1.10 and \$1.15 per worker per hour. Contractors were expected to hire workers at an average of \$.75 per hour, although frequently they increased their shares by driving down wages at the point of contract. In one instance, a contractor working to fill jobs at a nearby sugar beet farm arrived at the corner of Tulare and F Streets in Fresno to recruit among a large pool of unemployed men. The contractor offered to pay workers by the row rather than by the hour. One worker told the researcher, "The pay is \$1.90 a row but the row may stretch from here to Sacramento." His friend had taken the same job the day before and "netted one dollar (for about ten hours' work)," while another, more efficient worker finished two rows, earning a total of \$3.80.¹⁰ Although many balked at the wages, the informant told the researcher, "Guys will get hungry enough," and the contractor will eventually have his crew. The authors of the report alleged that workers could do better with contracts with the Farm Labor Bureau, earning as much as \$6 to \$7 per hour, though such opportunities were few and far between. In fact, the terms of contracts varied so widely that researchers were unable to offer an average in their report.

By comparison, workers found much better pay and living conditions on the few ranches where growers still maintained camps. At the Weeth Ranch west of Fresno, for example, thirty-five permanent employees lived in clean one- and two-bedroom units made of concrete block with functioning kitchens and bathrooms. Weeth attempted to pay his workers \$1.10 per hour but found that they slowed their pace and did not complete the task in a day. When he increased their pay to \$2.50 per hour, his work crews finished their tasks in five hours, earning approximately \$15 per day. Although Weeth expressed satisfaction with his workers, he was doubtful that he could main-

tain this system, given the cost and competition from local growers who used contractors. He preferred machine labor, although researchers concluded that the cheapness of labor under the current system forestalled such developments.¹¹

The trend toward hiring through labor contractors had a detrimental effect on the living conditions of most workers. Under this new system, growers no longer took responsibility for their employees' well-being, including where or how they lived. These concerns fell to the county, which now experienced many incidents of lawlessness, dependency, and unsanitary conditions in the numerous "fringe" settlements that completely encircled Fresno in 1959. Labor contractors drew the vast majority of their recruits from these "blighted areas" that existed in various stages of decay. The authors of the report gave the following description of Three Rocks, a typical fringe settlement: "Housing consists of tar-papered, very small shacks (condemned housing from labor camps) with outdoor privies, no water is available in the area where the housing is, must be carried from the grocery store which is on the road that borders the property."¹² Six hundred people occupied this particular settlement, a majority of them Mexican American. Most settlements, however, consisted of black or ethnic Mexican residents, while poor whites made up as much as 10 percent of the total fringe area populations. Only 33 percent of the inhabitants owned their own home, although 75 percent owned a car, reflecting the importance of mobility in getting to and from job sites and recruitment centers.¹³ In areas where single men predominated, high levels of alcoholism, prostitution, and violence occurred, creating constant challenges for law enforcement officials. In settlements where families resided, county restrictions against public assistance for free and able-bodied men drove many unemployed fathers to "habitually seek to be jailed" so that their wives and children could secure food subsidies from the county. "In many cases," researchers found, "the noon meal at school [was] the only full meal many of the children received."¹⁴

In the end, the authors depicted a view of rural poverty that differed in form if not severity from the one found in the southern deserts. The heavy employment of temporary Mexican guest workers and undocumented immigrants in the South undermined local wages, precipitating the migration of workers northward. In the San Joaquin Valley, local residents struggled against declining wages caused by a changing employment system in which growers increasingly externalized the cost of labor and placed a heavier burden on contractors and the county government. Fringe areas that served as the major source of labor swelled in the postwar era with the migration of



FIGURE 1. A child stands in front of a derelict house in an undisclosed farm labor camp. ALUA, UFW Collection, 7118.

undocumented Mexican immigrants and former braceros who had “skipped” their contracts. For the authors of the study, however, migration constituted a less important factor in the creation of rural poverty than the maintenance of a large pool of desperate workers living on the margins of society, whose conditions led them to accept whatever wages contractors offered. “Steps need to be taken immediately,” they concluded, “to bring about more equitable rates of pay, better housing, better educational opportunity, better police and fire protection, increased access to medical care, and all the other advantages which might be expected to accrue to citizens in our wealthy, productive economy.”¹⁵

Such studies confirmed what most on the ground understood: life for farm workers had gotten worse since World War II, despite massive government investments in irrigation projects and during a time when growers expanded their production. U.S. Secretary of Labor James F. Mitchell, speaking to a gathering of farm labor specialists in 1959, confirmed these losses, testifying, “There is very little evidence that the underemployed and unemployed farm worker is passing out of society.” The relative rootedness of workers in the San Joaquin Valley notwithstanding, Mitchell reported that the number of migratory farm workers in the United States had not de-

creased in a decade. Wages had declined over a seven-year period, leading Mitchell to remark, "We must remember that these workers not only do not have the protection of most of the social legislation which places a floor under the economic wellbeing of most Americans; but they are also deprived even of the 'automatic' action of a free labor market, in which a labor shortage tends to bring its own correction."¹⁶ In spite of his observations, Mitchell possessed little power to alter the conditions undergirding this system. In the 1960s, local activists, community organizations, and workers themselves would be quicker to address these problems than government.

Rural labor advocates did not sit idly by as growers' profits increased and workers' conditions worsened. In some cases, local activism rose organically from the righteous indignation of people who applied their own analysis to the injustices that they witnessed around them. In other cases, workers circulating in and out of rural areas carried with them knowledge of how to leverage the power of unions and initiate reform through labor organizing. Still others attempted to adapt an urban model of reform to rural areas. Whatever the approach, in the 1960s advocates increasingly took matters into their own hands.

In the southern deserts, advocates for reform prioritized the goal of ending the *bracero* program, given the dramatic impact it had on the lives of farm workers in the area. The presence of Mexican nationals upset social relations in these rural communities, often pitting the guests against residents who felt entitled to local jobs. As I have described elsewhere, conflict occurred over employment as well as courtship, leading to violence and sometimes murder.¹⁷

In 1960, a coalition of workers in the Imperial Valley tried to increase their wages by striking the lettuce fields. Two AFL-CIO representatives, Al Green and Clyde Knowles, had begun to organize local workers with an eye toward starting a new union, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC). Green and Knowles believed a new, statewide union movement could be built among migratory Mexican and Filipino workers who began their seasons in the southern deserts with the lettuce harvest. Growers' importation of *braceros*, however, complicated this dream and led some organizers to take out their frustrations on Mexican nationals in the fields. Fights in bars between *braceros* and striking workers also erupted in vice districts on the outskirts of many rural towns, leading to a chaotic situation.¹⁸

Two local activists, Miguel and Alfredo Figueroa, participated in these early attempts at unionization as a consequence of their upbringing. When

the Figueroas were children, the family moved from Blythe, California, to nearby Oatman, Arizona, where their father took a job in the gold mines and joined the local mineworkers' union. Although mineworkers and farm workers occasionally overlapped within working-class communities, their rights and expectations differed considerably. The success of the United Mine Workers union provided miners with the leverage to insist on fair pay and better social services. In contrast, the lack of collective bargaining rights for farm workers meant that they often suffered discrimination on and off the job and had relatively little faith in their ability to change their condition. Occasionally, however, families like the Figueroas worked in both mining and agriculture, leading to a cross-fertilization of cultures that benefited farm worker communities. As young men, the Figueroas assisted their father in the mines and the melon harvest in and around Blythe.

During the early 1960s, Miguel and Alfredo threw themselves into farm worker activism across the desert region of southern California. Their trips to the Imperial Valley caught the attention of local law enforcement officials who maintained communication with their peers in Blythe. According to Miguel, the surveillance of Mexican Americans depended on a network of police officers, bankers, and deputized growers who kept tabs on anyone who tried to improve the lives of farm workers living in the Tri-Valley region. When Miguel and Alfredo returned home from working with AWOC in the Imperial Valley, town leaders called them to a meeting at the local bank and threatened them with violence. Miguel recalled their line of questioning: "What the hell [are] you guys doing down there? Do you know that those people have guns? Do you know that you Figueroa boys might get hurt?" The town leaders eventually let them go, but other incidents of harassment followed. In 1963, for example, Blythe police officers dragged Alfredo from a local bar and publicly beat him, provoking a confrontation between his brother Gilbert and the police. Alfredo Figueroa won a case against the department, although a jury in Coachella awarded him a less than satisfactory settlement of \$3,500. Investigators with the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights later wrote that the incident epitomized the kind of intimidation and abuse Mexican Americans encountered in the rural Southwest.¹⁹

Such threats and acts of violence did not deter everyone, least of all the Figueroas. The election of John F. Kennedy inspired hope that the federal government might intervene to improve conditions for farm workers in California. The newly formed Mexican American Political Association, led by the labor intellectual Bert Corona, organized "Viva Kennedy!" campaigns

in the West, which sought to rally Mexican American voters and offset the considerable advantage the Republican candidate, Richard Nixon, held in California in 1960. The Figueroas participated in these electoral efforts in the Tri-Valley area, although they became disillusioned with Kennedy after he was elected, when he appealed to AFL-CIO leaders to call off the AWOC lettuce strike in El Centro.²⁰

Many local activists were also angered by Kennedy's refusal to heed the calls of the labor intellectual Ernesto Galarza to end the bracero program. Galarza, a former policy advisor for the Pan American Union, became involved with farm worker unions, although his main contribution came by way of his scholarship. Utilizing political connections and social science methods, he studied the effects of the bracero program on the wages and work conditions of all farm workers in California. In 1956, he published a short book, *Strangers in Our Fields*, and spoke critically about the program in public. His interventions initiated a quiet reassessment of the policy by the Department of Labor, and by 1960 the program began to fall out of favor with lawmakers.²¹ In 1961, Congress passed a two-year extension of Public Law 78 after tremendous debate, and the following year the Kennedy administration finally took a public position against the program. In 1963, Galarza published a longer, more critical book on the bracero program, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story*, which helped push the contract-labor agreement to the brink of extinction. Although Congress and the president would honor requests from Mexico to gently wind down the program rather than cut it off immediately, lawmakers, growers, and activists acknowledged that the Mexican contract-labor program would soon come to a close.²²

Studies such as those by Galarza and Fresno State College provided momentum for changes in the farm labor system as activists pressed the issue on the ground. Many reform advocates combined criticism of the bilateral agreement with a commitment to creating an institutional presence in rural California. The slow death of the bracero program allowed advocates to think about conditions after its demise, specifically how to reform a rural labor system dominated by disempowered migratory workers and day-haul laborers. In the early 1960s, both unions and community organizations vied with one another to assume leadership as the fight to end rural poverty moved into a new phase.

THE EVOLUTION OF FARM LABOR ACTIVISM

No one disputed the need to end the bracero program, although little consensus existed on what to do beyond this goal. In addition to assisting AWOC in the Imperial Valley, Miguel Figueroa worked with Ben Yellen, one of two physicians in the valley who had served braceros and saw first-hand the abuses of the program. Yellen distributed a self-published pamphlet known as the “yellow sheet” that criticized the bracero program and exposed local growers for their circumvention of the National Reclamation Act. Like Galarza, he campaigned for an end to the Mexican contract-labor agreement, but he saw it as a by-product of a larger problem related to the unequal distribution of public wealth in the form of irrigated land. Yellen believed that the problem of rural poverty could be eliminated by the enforcement of 160-acre limitation and residency requirements on megafarm owners who received federally funded water. He argued for the dismantling of these lands and their redistribution to farm workers, thereby achieving the novel solution of turning farm workers into farmers. Although Yellen counted among his supporters the University of California economist Paul Taylor, his was mostly a one-man crusade that had little support from labor unions and community organizations.²³

Organizing workers was a far more common approach among activists, although not all agreed on the method. Union organizers like Al Green and Clyde Knowles believed that a union should be the ultimate objective, but their plans became mired in the conflicts between local workers and Mexican nationals. Consequently, prior to 1964, AWOC organizers and affiliates found themselves spending as much time campaigning against the bracero program as they did organizing workers for collective action. By the time the Mexican contract-labor program came to a formal end on December 31, 1964, AWOC had established itself as the most likely labor organization to lead a new union drive in rural California.

Members of another organization, the Community Service Organization (CSO), believed in the empowerment of communities to place demands on elected officials to improve living conditions and social services. During the mid-1950s, the CSO used its momentum from the election of Edward Roybal in urban East Los Angeles to expand into farming towns throughout California. The organization worked on issues affecting Mexican Americans, but its expansion into rural communities forced it to contend with Public Law 78 and the displacement of local workers by braceros. By the late 1950s, a rift had

developed between middle-class professionals who wanted the CSO to remain politically agnostic on contentious issues such as the bracero program and members who wanted to align with labor organizations.²⁴

The preference for organizing farm workers fell in line with the efforts of CSO founder, Fred Ross, and his protégé, Cesar Chavez. Ross had begun his activism in Riverside and San Bernardino counties, working with black and Mexican residents of citrus *colonias* to create Unity Leagues, community organizations built on the model of Saul Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation organizations in Chicago. The Unity Leagues served as a testing ground for Ross's theory that one had to "organize people where they are, not where you want them to be." When his efforts produced an organized citizenry and improvements in their communities, such as streetlights and school buses, Ross felt confident about doing similar work in more urban neighborhoods under the banner of the CSO. In 1952, he met and recruited Cesar Chavez, a young veteran of the U.S. Navy and a former farm worker living in the San José barrio of Sal Si Puedes. Born in Yuma, Arizona, in 1927, Chavez understood the difficulties of rural life in the southern deserts. During the Great Depression, he had watched helplessly as the state took possession of his family's farm, forcing them into the stream of itinerant farm laborers traveling throughout California during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Chavez's wife, Helen Favela Chavez, also knew rural poverty; her family was dispersed throughout the Palo Verde, Imperial, and San Joaquin Valleys. Such intimate knowledge of rural California made Chavez sympathetic to the plight of farm workers and inspired him to move the CSO in the direction of farm worker justice.

As Chavez distinguished himself as a skilled organizer and became an officer within the CSO, he explored new solutions to the problems confronting rural communities. He began by recruiting members who shared his concerns and experiences, tapping activists in the many small towns familiar to him. Gilbert Padilla, who had been working part time as a dry cleaner and as a gleaner of onions and other crops grown in the Central Valley, was among his most important discoveries. Chavez found Padilla through his friend Pete García, a CSO affiliate who had invited him to a recruitment meeting at his home in Hanford. When Padilla declined out of a belief that the CSO was just another "social club," Chavez and García met him after work, and the three men ended up talking late into the evening about their shared goal of improving farm worker conditions. Padilla appreciated Chavez's desire to make community organizations more accountable to the needs of rural communities and agreed to become a member.²⁵ Padilla



FIGURE 2. Members of the Community Service Organization, ca. 1950s. Second from right, Cesar Chavez; front row center, Fred Ross Sr.; far left, Saul Alinsky; third from the right in back, Helen Chavez. ALUA, UFW Collection, 330.

and Chavez's relationship would ultimately serve as the foundation for a new farm worker movement.

In 1959 Chavez exhibited his affinities with agricultural workers and unions by accepting a grant from the Packinghouse Workers of America to study the effects of the *bracero* program in Oxnard, California. He succeeded in forcing the Farm Labor Bureau to comply with a provision in the bilateral agreement that required growers to hire local farm workers before contracting Mexican nationals. He also helped local farm workers secure state unemployment insurance benefits during seasonal downturns. Such actions deviated from the CSO's more familiar voter registration work and came closer to the services provided by unions.²⁶ When Chavez became the national director of the CSO, he assigned Padilla to the CSO service center in Stockton, a predominantly farm worker community, and encouraged him to pursue grants like the one he held in Oxnard. To his delight, Padilla succeeded in securing a grant in 1961 from the Bishops' Committee



FIGURE 3. Gilbert Padilla, 1966.

on Migratory Labor in Chicago to study housing conditions for local farm workers.²⁷

Padilla joined a growing team of rural recruits, including Julio and Fina Hernandez and Roger Terronez from Corcoran; Tony and Rachel Orendain and Gil Flores from Hanford; and a loquacious and fiery single mother from Stockton, Dolores Huerta.²⁸ Huerta had never worked in the fields, but she maintained a strong connection to labor unions and farm workers through her family. Her father had worked in the coalmines in Dawson, New Mexico, where she was born, and had belonged to the United Mine Workers.²⁹ When Dolores was an infant, labor unrest in the mines forced her father to seek alternative work harvesting beets in Wyoming, Nebraska, and California. The family eventually settled in Stockton, California, where her father

worked in the asparagus fields among a predominantly Filipino workforce. In the 1940s, he participated in a strike on the Zuckerman asparagus farm alongside Huerta's future friend and Filipino activist, Philip Veracruz.³⁰

Huerta clashed with her father over his "chauvinist" behavior and considered her mother, Alicia Margaret St. John Chavez, a stronger influence in her life. During the Great Depression, Alicia divorced Huerta's father and raised Dolores and her sister on \$5 per week from wages earned at the Richmond-Chase canneries and a local restaurant. In 1937, Alicia participated in a strike of the canneries as a member of the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America, which forced her to depend entirely on her earnings at the restaurant.³¹ In 1941 she opened a successful lunch counter with her second husband, James Richards. A year later the couple purchased a hotel from Japanese American owners who had to sell when the government relocated all Japanese Americans to internment camps. Alicia relied on her children to staff the restaurant and clean the hotel, providing Dolores with an invaluable cultural experience that strengthened her confidence and ability to organize in any community. She recalled the unique composition of their neighborhood and clientele: "The ethnic community where we lived was all mixed. It was Japanese, Chinese. The only Jewish families that lived in Stockton were there in our neighborhood. . . . There was the Filipino pool hall, the Filipino dance hall. It was [a] very colorful, multi-ethnic scene."³² When the Richards' relationship soured and the couple divorced, Alicia lost the restaurant but held on to the hotel. Dolores continued to help her mother and became friends with many of the Filipino farm workers who were their primary patrons. Later her mother met and married Juan "Fernando" Silva, a former bracero, who conveyed to Dolores his deep feelings of bitterness over his treatment at the hands of growers.³³ These influences made her sympathetic to Chavez's appeals to join the local CSO, which she accepted in 1960. In time she too would be as important to the new movement as Padilla and Chavez.

The addition of rural chapters in the CSO and the new members' success in bringing attention to the plight of farm workers compelled Chavez to call for the creation of a farm labor committee. According to Padilla, the decision should not have been controversial because the CSO already maintained committees on housing and education, although some members questioned whether Chavez's new plan augured a more aggressive move toward labor organizing. Some members preferred to maintain a more nonpartisan image and believed that alignment with worker concerns would move the organiza-

tion strongly to the left. Others objected to pursuing work that, they believed, duplicated AWOC's efforts. Opponents of Chavez's plan pointed out that AWOC, with funding from the AFL-CIO, had initiated the lettuce strike in Imperial Valley and made inroads in organizing Filipino workers in the Central Valley. Consequently, the CSO national committee chose to table the decision until the national convention in Calexico in March 1962, when they would discuss the matter in greater depth.³⁴

In preparation for the conference, Chavez met with Padilla to share his plans. Padilla recalled, "[Cesar] said, 'I am going to propose to the convention that every chapter should have a farm labor committee, and that we should start doing something for farm labor. . . . If they don't approve this, I'm going to leave. I'm going to quit.'" ³⁵ Chavez also communicated his intentions to a number of members on the CSO board of directors, but no one took him seriously, given his successful recruitment of new members, his ability to get outside grants, and, most important, his dependence on the director position as the only source of funding for his family. "I didn't believe him," Padilla recalled, adding, "because he's the one that built all the chapters." Like Chavez, Padilla also supported an entire family on his CSO salary, partially covered by the grant from the Bishops' Committee. Although the grant was set to expire in June, Padilla had hopes of applying for an extension and had already secured a promise from the local chapter to continue paying him.³⁶

Chavez attended the Calexico meeting flanked by his new staff, including Padilla and Huerta, optimistic that a deal could be struck with his fellow board members. One of the founding members and his friend, Tony Rios, had been a member of the Electrical Union, and two other board members, Jay Rodriguez and Gil Anaya, had belonged to the Butchers Union and Steelworkers, respectively. In addition to these men, Chavez believed he could count on other board members who understood the power of a union and could see the value of his proposal. To his chagrin, however, they rebuffed Chavez. Those with union experience argued that AWOC's failed strike in the lettuce fields demonstrated the difficulty of organizing farm workers and recommended that the CSO leave the task to them. Padilla also recalled that many members with professional backgrounds objected to doing farm labor organizing altogether, signaling the degree to which the CSO had become a more conservative organization since its beginning. "We had really professional guys up there, not like in the fifties when you had those grassroots people." He added, "[The grassroots people] didn't speak English, [and] were awkward [when] speaking, but they had lots of balls and guts." In this case,

neither union supporters nor professionals supported Chavez. At some point, Padilla recalled, the meeting turned “very nasty,” with Chavez’s opponents accusing him and his allies of betraying the original mission of the CSO. “I was attacked,” Padilla recalled, “but I wasn’t supposed to respond because I was staff.”³⁷ Amid the insults, Chavez stood up and followed through on his threat to quit.

Chavez’s resignation scared Padilla, who understood that Chavez’s decision required him to leave the organization too. Padilla confronted Chavez outside the convention hall, but Chavez showed little remorse. “I quit! Fuck them! I’m not going to do it [any]more,” he told Padilla. Chavez’s response revealed his famous obstinacy and a willingness to risk everything to achieve his goals, two traits that would become the hallmarks of his leadership. In resigning from the CSO, however, Chavez considered the stakes quite low, given that they had not yet committed significant resources to the project. He also had great faith in his recruits to pursue their goals independent of the CSO. When Padilla asked Chavez, “What about me, what about us?” Chavez responded with typical brevity and confidence: “Let’s go organize it ourselves.”³⁸ Within three days of the meeting, Chavez left his post in Los Angeles for the small town of Delano, where his brother, Richard, and most of Helen’s family lived. Padilla moved back to Hanford to work at the dry cleaner and prepared members of the local CSO chapters in anticipation of Chavez’s call to action. On April 12, 1962, Chavez tendered his formal letter of resignation to the CSO from Delano and began making preparations for a new farm workers union.³⁹

Chavez’s ambition to start a new union took time and encountered more than a few skeptics. Organizing a union required faith that the bracero program would soon end and that farm workers could attain the same collective bargaining rights granted to industrial workers under the National Labor Relations Act. Galarza’s activism created momentum for achieving the first goal, although the struggle against the program and the failure to sustain a labor movement among citizen workers made Galarza dubious of Chavez’s chances. He gave him counsel and wished him well but had already begun to turn his attention to urban issues. Saul Alinsky remained supportive of Chavez during his transition from the CSO, but he too advised Chavez against the venture and encouraged him to organize in cities for his Industrial Areas Foundation.⁴⁰ Chavez’s mentor, Fred Ross, remained optimistic, however, and helped channel IAF money to Padilla as he made important inroads in the labor camps.⁴¹ Dolores Huerta moved from Stockton to

Los Angeles to become a staff member at the CSO's national headquarters while she awaited news from Chavez.⁴² Meanwhile, Chavez's wife and the oldest of their eight children worked in the fields to support Cesar as he put together the union.⁴³

Chavez succeeded in convening the first meeting of the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), in Fresno in September 1962. At the meeting, composed mainly of former CSO members, the delegates adopted the black eagle logo as their symbol and red, white, and black as the official colors of the new union. They also adopted a dues structure that required each member to pay \$3.50 per month. The initial death benefit insurance for members mirrored those of Mexican *mutualistas* familiar to many of the delegates. The delegates also selected officers, including Sanger resident, Jesus Martínez, as president; Hanford resident, Tony Orendain, as secretary-treasurer; Cesar Chavez as director general; and six others, including Gilbert Padilla, as board members.

Chavez dedicated the first year to building the organization CSO-style by holding meetings in the homes of Mexican farm workers and conducting registration drives and get-out-the-vote campaigns throughout the valley. Padilla participated in these activities and earned the trust of many local residents by organizing against police brutality and substandard public housing. He recalled that, although they brought many new members into the NFWA, neither the structure of governance nor the appointments worked out as well as Chavez and he had hoped. The work obligations of some officers and lack of shared commitment led to breakdowns in service. Chavez also found his role too vague and, ultimately, unsatisfying. As a result, he reshuffled the governing structure in 1964, taking over as president, a position that granted him the control he sought from the start. Orendain remained secretary-treasurer, and Chavez elevated Padilla to vice president. Chavez also recruited Dolores Huerta to return to the Central Valley to become a second vice president.⁴⁴

The activities of other nonaffiliated activists operating in the San Joaquin Valley gave Chavez confidence that he had allies. Although rural poverty had become a distinguishing feature of life for most farm workers in California, the high rates of residency and the relatively weak influence of the bracero program in the valley provided farm worker activists a more stable local population with whom to work. Church groups set up operations in many of these farm worker settlements, often conducting relief work rather than organizing residents for political protest. Like the CSO, however, these groups contained members who wanted to go beyond the role of assisting field work-

ers to form self-help organizations that approximated unions. The emergence of civil rights groups, such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference during the 1950s, also influenced the thinking of these religion-oriented groups. The audacious challenges by black civil rights organizations to Jim Crow laws and discrimination in the American South inspired many local activists to pursue a similar transformation in the rural West.

The California Migrant Ministry figured prominently among the religious organizations committed to serving rural communities. As a program within the Division of Home Missions of the National Council of Churches of Christ, the ministry had grown accustomed to working with immigrant populations. Like other organizations during the 1960s, including the CSO, the California Migrant Ministry felt the influence of youthful affiliates who had come of age after World War II and questioned the boundaries of what traditional community organizations could and should do.

The ministry's selection of Wayne "Chris" Hartmire as director, a twenty-nine-year-old father of three and a Presbyterian minister, demonstrated its willingness to embrace the leadership of a new generation. Hartmire sought to build on the work of a previous director who had secured a grant from the Schwartzhaupt Foundation to learn from CSO organizers' attempts to build new chapters in rural California. Upon his arrival, Hartmire met with Chavez, who recommended that he spend a month in Stockton working with Gilbert Padilla and Dolores Huerta to become familiar with the needs of the community. "I quickly became a CSO enthusiast," Hartmire remembered, attending all of the CSO conventions, including the fateful Calxico convention in 1962. "In retrospect," he remembered, "I . . . wondered whether Cesar wanted a 'yes' vote." Hartmire believed Chavez had already reached the conclusion that most of his CSO peers did not have the stomach for organizing farm workers and wanted an excuse to start his own organization.⁴⁵

Hartmire took the lessons from Stockton and the CSO and immediately applied them to social work in the Central Valley. He recruited Jim Drake, a young New Yorker fresh out of Union Theological Seminary, to anchor the new rural projects for the ministry. Drake had finished his course work in December 1961, and his wife, Susan, had just given birth to their son, Matthew. As Jim remembers it, he pursued a place on Hartmire's staff "out of desperation" because he needed a job to be able to feed his family. At their first meeting, Hartmire quizzed him about what he knew of organizing. He lied to get the job. Immediately following their meeting Drake drove

to the nearest public library to educate himself. He remembered, "In the card file was one book on organizing published by the United Nations. I stole it."⁴⁶ This would not be Drake's last act of improvisation to propel the movement forward.

In spite of their relative lack of experience and knowledge, the two embarked on organizing farm workers in the San Joaquin Valley from 1962 to 1964. Hartmire instructed Drake to move to rural California and consult with Cesar Chavez on how to get started. For Chavez, Drake's arrival provided a set of wheels and the ministry's gasoline money to take him around the valley and make local connections that would contribute to the formation of a new farm workers union. Drake benefited too, learning the lay of the land and meeting Gilbert Padilla in the process. Padilla was generous with information and gave Drake a history lesson on organizing.⁴⁷

Padilla recommended Porterville, a small town thirty miles from Delano in the heart of grape country, where a county-owned labor camp known as Woodville housed three hundred families. Drake and another ministry representative, David Havens, followed Padilla's advice and used a small amount of money raised by Hartmire to rent an office behind the local barbershop for the Farm Workers Organization. Drake got the attention of residents by purchasing a large tank, filling it with gasoline, and inviting farm workers to pay a \$2 annual fee for the privilege of purchasing fuel for \$.20 per gallon—far below the going rate. Given workers' dependence on automobiles for transportation to local jobs, the plan worked, and the office flourished. News of their organization spread to the neighboring town of Farmerville near Visalia and attracted residents of another labor camp, Linnell, to participate in the program. The fueling station provided Drake and Havens an important base of operation, and the two began to run CSO-style house meetings with local farm workers to explore their needs.

Meanwhile, Padilla worked on behalf of the NFWA, using the last months of his grant to conduct a survey of farm workers' complaints. He began by recruiting members of Central Valley CSO chapters in Corcoran, Huron, and Selma who vowed to stay in the organization until Chavez set up his new union. "I had those guys organized doing the survey," Padilla recalled.⁴⁸ When the money ran out, he stayed on as a field laborer but soon picked up another grant through Ross to run a women's educational project in Hanford that included attention to reproductive rights and child care.⁴⁹ Drake and Havens shared an interest in making contraceptives available to women farm workers.

According to Padilla, Havens harbored the misconception that because most women farm workers belonged to the Catholic Church, they would be resistant to their message. “They go [to church] to look for their soul[s],” Padilla told Havens, “They don’t pay attention to the priest!” To prove his point, Padilla accompanied Havens to the Woodville camp, where they quickly distributed a box of free contraceptives to four or five women who became their primary distributors to the rest of the residents.

The trips into the camp revealed the extent of the housing crisis among farm workers. “The labor camp was a very disgusting site,” Padilla recalled. The houses amounted to windowless, two-bedroom tin shacks built in 1937 for dust bowl migrants that had been handed down several generations to the current residents. During the hot summer months, residents would place on the roof wet rugs recovered from the local dump in a futile attempt to get some relief from the heat. Padilla found that women resented having to share communal toilets and showers, where they encountered many single men who sat outside the facilities in an attempt to catch a glimpse of them naked. The conditions appalled Padilla, who encouraged Drake to join him in an effort to close down or reform the camp. Drake expressed some trepidation but agreed to look into the history of the facility, and Padilla agreed to do outreach among the residents.

In his research, Drake discovered that the federal government had designed the homes to last no more than ten years. After World War II, growers had taken over the camps and continued to use them for their workers throughout the 1950s, until they began to divest from housing projects in favor of working with labor contractors to acquire day-haul laborers. By the 1960s, the Tulare County Housing Authority had taken over the camps, but it did nothing to improve the conditions. Drake conferred about the tenants’ rights with James Herndon, an African American attorney working on behalf of the poor in San Francisco. Herndon inspected the dilapidated facilities and informed Drake that the county was in violation of a 1947 law that restricted owners from raising rents on condemned dwellings. He recommended that they pursue legal action.⁵⁰

Ever the organizer, Padilla encouraged Drake to take the bolder step of setting up a fund and asking tenants to pay their rent to them instead of the county. In return, Padilla and Drake promised to protect the tenants if the county attempted to evict them from the camp. Although not everyone participated, enough did, and county officials began to send eviction notices.

They also sent the sheriff to intimidate the residents, although Padilla reassured them that the county had no legal standing to force them to pay. "I said, '[The] County doesn't know . . . who's paying . . . so when they come to you to tell you to pay [your rent], screw 'em.'" According to Padilla, several residents followed his directions and lived in the camp for months, rent-free. They paid whatever they could to the fund set up by Padilla and Drake, which was deposited in the bank in case they needed it to take legal action against the county. Padilla also raised awareness of the problems in the camp by inviting the secretary of labor to visit; he also attracted the attention of the local press.⁵¹

The standoff between the residents and the county eventually erupted when the local housing authority chose to raise the rents to cover its losses. The action angered the newly empowered residents, who took to demonstrating against the county. Drake recalled the scene: "One day the Tulare County Housing Authority arbitrarily raised the rent on the condemned, tin shacks from \$19 to \$22 per month! I drove down to the camp not knowing this, and there was Gil under the water tank, standing and shouting on top of a car. By the time he got down, he had started a rent strike—300 families joined!"⁵² Padilla, Drake, Havens, and a young college student, Doug Adair, counseled the Woodville families to join with residents of the nearby Linnell camp in Farmville to create one big march to the Tulare government office building. The protesters overwhelmed housing authority officials, who took cover in their offices until the marchers moved on to a local park for a celebration. In the months that followed, Drake and Padilla took the county to court, where they won a settlement that restored the original rent and forced the housing authority to build a new facility on the same property.⁵³

The Tulare rent strike inspired many farm workers and a number of local organizers to join the NFWA. Among them was Brother Gilbert, a priest who had left his post as principal of the Catholic Garces High School in Bakersfield to help lead the march. "I wore my official Christian Brothers black suit, black silk vest, and a white starched collar somewhat similar to the clerical collar worn by the Catholic clergy." Brother Gilbert, later known by his birth name, LeRoy Chatfield, eventually left the priesthood to become a critical member of Chavez's team. During the rent strike, he carried a placard with a quote by the famous union organizer, Joe Hill: "Don't Mourn—Organize!" Chatfield got the idea from a Catholic anarchist friend, Ammon Hennacy, who ran a Catholic Worker hospitality house in Salt Lake City. "Even though I had never participated in a farm worker 'rent

strike' march before," recalled Chatfield, "I thought Joe Hill's quotation was appropriate for the occasion."⁵⁴ Chatfield was not alone in his lack of experience. Many considered the rent strike an important opening salvo in a new movement to improve the lives of farm workers in the San Joaquin Valley.

A STRIKE IS NOT ENOUGH

While the National Farm Workers Association built its organization, Al Green and AWOC continued to work on a parallel track in the southern deserts and elsewhere in the San Joaquin Valley. Although disappointed by the failure to halt the use of Mexican nationals as scab labor in the Imperial Valley, AWOC kept the pressure on, believing that the national mood toward the bracero program had shifted in its favor. AWOC's national sponsor, the AFL-CIO, wanted to be organized and ready in the fields when the bracero program ended. To prepare for this moment, national representatives channeled funds to Green and Clive Knowles, who searched for the most likely workers to organize. The national office also pursued legal action against the U.S. Department of Labor to enforce ceilings on the employment of Mexican nationals who remained in the labor market. This move guarded against the replacement of domestic workers who, they believed, constituted AWOC's future.⁵⁵

Green and Knowles reached out to many workers, including those within Chavez's fold. Padilla recalled that when he left the CSO, Green tried to persuade him to come work for AWOC. "I didn't like the program," Padilla said, "because they were organizing labor contractors."⁵⁶ This strategy circumvented organizing in the fields in favor of appealing to middlemen who maintained communication with several workers at a time. This was particularly true among Filipino labor contractors who stayed in contact with Filipino migrants as they spanned the entire West Coast, working in canneries, on boats, and on farms from Alaska to Arizona. As the Fresno State College study showed, however, these same men could be as exploitative as the growers for whom they worked, often retaining the greatest share of the money set aside for hiring field hands. The decision to organize contractors rather than the rank-and-file workers betrayed the organizing philosophy that Chavez, Padilla, and other CSO veterans had learned from Fred Ross. Chavez articulated the philosophy years later: "Fred used to say that 'you can't take shortcuts, because you'll pay for it later.' He believed society would

be transformed from within by mobilizing individuals and communities. But you have to convert one person at a time, time after time.”⁵⁷ Padilla and Chavez regarded AWOC’s approach as the kind of shortcut Ross had advised them to avoid.

Chavez stayed true to his training even when workers themselves called on him to take stronger action. In March 1965, for example, a worker on a local rosebush farm, Epifanio Camacho, appealed to Chavez to organize a strike against the grower for repeatedly breaking promises of better pay. Chavez resisted, advising Camacho to have patience. By 1965, NFWA leaders had expanded its membership to approximately 1,200 through such painstaking methods that they believed would pay dividends later.⁵⁸

In contrast, AWOC’s approach garnered some immediate success, especially among Filipino workers. Larry Itliong, a veteran of the Pacific migration and a former labor contractor, epitomized the AWOC organizer. Born in San Nicolas, Pangasina, the Philippines, Itliong arrived on the West Coast in 1929 and worked in various crops throughout California and Washington, including a lettuce farm where he lost two fingers in a harvesting accident. He also canned salmon in Alaska and met many labor organizers along the way, some of them affiliated with the Communist Party. By the early 1950s, he had risen to the position of labor contractor in Kern-Tulare County while maintaining radical political views that made him an appealing candidate for membership in AWOC. In 1956 he joined the labor union organizing committee and began to assist Green, Knowles, and another organizer, Norman Smith, in attracting other Filipinos to the organization, including a young Peter Velasco and Andy Imutan. Along with Itliong, two other veterans of the fields, Philip Veracruz and Ben Gines, joined AWOC’s organizing efforts and became key figures in AWOC’s attempt to establish a foothold in the San Joaquin Valley.⁵⁹

In spite of differences in their approach, AWOC and NFWA members had mutual respect and stayed in contact. Itliong was present and organizing among Filipino workers at the time of the Tulare rent strike, whereas Padilla maintained a positive but distant relationship with the Filipino organizers he encountered. Although exceptions existed, NFWA confined much of its organizing effort to Mexican field workers, a decision that mirrored the heavy Mexican influence in the CSO. AWOC had greater success among Filipinos, likely a reflection of its emphasis on organizing contractors, in which Filipinos played an important role.

In the summer of 1965 the tracks of these two upstart unions converged in the grape harvest. AWOC took on a more aggressive posture that season in anticipation of the end of the bracero program. When Lyndon Johnson reneged on the government's plan and revived the program to allow a limited number of Mexican nationals to work in the Coachella Valley grape harvest, AWOC pounced. It pointed out that domestic workers—many of them Filipino immigrants—earned 15 cents less than the braceros and instructed all AWOC pickers to vacate the field. Coachella Valley growers quickly resolved the matter by agreeing to a pay increase in an attempt to avoid a contract and the possibility of an extended battle.⁶⁰ AWOC's success on the wage increase, however, encouraged union officials to explore new opportunities as the harvest moved northward into the San Joaquin Valley, where the season lasted much longer and workers had an opportunity to take a much stronger stand. Larry Itliong moved to Delano and began organizing among the many *manongs* (fellow country people from the Illocano-speaking region of the Philippines) who participated in the local harvest. Throughout this period, he also maintained communication with Dolores Huerta, whose rapport with Filipino farm workers from her days working in her mother's restaurant and hotel made her the ideal liaison for NFWA in its communication with AWOC. Although the organizations maintained friendly relations, the question of which union would take the lead in the new union movement among field workers created a bit of a rivalry. In addition, AWOC had support from the AFL-CIO, while Chavez had been cultivating his own relations with Walter Reuther and the United Auto Workers (UAW). The nominal investment in the race to organize farm workers by two national unions raised the stakes enough for each organization to keep an eye on the other.

The NFWA's organizing model and attention to Mexican workers gave it a stronger influence in the San Joaquin Valley, where ethnic Mexicans dominated in the labor market. In addition, the rent strike served as an important training experience for new organizers. One of the camp residents, Paul Espinosa, went on to organize *Radio Bilingue*, a radio program in Spanish and English that fed the local populations important information regarding the union. Another resident, Ernesto Laredo, continued to organize tenants, along with a sixteen-year-old girl, Yolanda Barrera, who served as a translator and who eventually became a federal prosecutor. According to Padilla, Espinosa urged him to branch out into organizing on the local grape ranch,

J. D. Martin's Rancho Blanco, where many of the tenants worked. There, a foreman had agitated male workers by separating them from their wives. When the women relieved themselves in the fields, the foreman would follow to sneak a peek at them. Espinosa believed they could organize the workers to get the foreman fired or to arrange for adequate bathroom facilities on the job.

A lack of agreement on the next step and Chavez's health, however, initially delayed further organizing. The demanding schedule of house meetings and travel landed Chavez in a Bakersfield hospital with pneumonia that August. This setback and a preference for building the union one member at a time prevented him from moving aggressively. In addition, NFWA organizers wanted to respect the wishes of their allies. Unlike AWOC, which had been organized by union men and supported by the AFL-CIO, NFWA had started as a coalition of community organizers, religious leaders, and college students who did not always have a common vision for what the organization would become. Padilla, for example, recalled the moment Espinosa came into the Porterville office to ask him to organize at Rancho Blanco. "Jim Drake happened to walk in when I was talking to [Espinosa] and he [said], 'Don't go strike, you can't strike.'" According to Padilla, Drake worried about conservative funders from the Church who might withdraw their support if they learned that they were organizing a union. Padilla appeased Drake by promising to evaluate the situation on the ranch and not get involved in labor matters.⁶¹

Padilla's encounters at Rancho Blanco compelled him to take action. He witnessed several instances of abuse of workers on the job and heard from a number of employees who were ready to protest. He knew many of the workers from the rent strike and discovered that at least half the workers lived in Earlimart, a small town near Delano that had been fertile ground for recruiting new NFWA members. "So, one day," Padilla recalled, "I got up and I said, 'Ah, I'm going to pull them out.'" While Chavez lay in the hospital, Padilla directed the first labor strike of the decade in the San Joaquin Valley. When Chavez heard of the action, he called Padilla from his hospital bed, ribbing him for waiting to make the move until he, Chavez, was sick. Upon Chavez's release by the doctor, the two immediately hit the fields with picket signs and called all NFWA members to participate in the labor action. When Chavez called the owner of the ranch to reach a settlement, the owner refused to meet. Padilla recalled the grower's response: "Let [Chavez] rot; I don't care."

The unwillingness of J. D. Martin to settle the dispute signaled an important difference between growers in the San Joaquin Valley and those in Coachella. The longer seasons and a thriving day-hauler labor market gave San Joaquin Valley growers confidence that they could weather the storm.⁶²

Chavez and Padilla viewed the strike as an impromptu action initiated by the workers rather than the beginning of a new movement. The strike came toward the end of the season and over issues not related to wages or a contract. In fact, as Padilla recalls, they did not even refer to NFWA as a union. In this regard, for Chavez the strike symbolized a flexing of NFWA's muscles and put the growers on notice that they could no longer mistreat their employees. For Larry Itliong, however, the strike represented a potential threat to usurp a union movement that he and AWOC members had been planning to take over. Padilla recalled his response: "Dolores told him that I was striking and I'm moving in, so he got scared." On September 8, 1965, Itliong pulled Filipino workers out of nine vineyards in Delano, initiating the grape strike.⁶³

The AWOC action caught Chavez by surprise and forced upon him a decision about striking that he was not prepared to make. Padilla recalled his concern immediately following the news that Filipinos had walked off the job: "You better come; the world's coming to an end! There's 5,000 Filipinos on the street, [on] strike." When the two met, Chavez asked Padilla to attend an AWOC meeting in Delano at a community building known locally as Filipino Hall. He also instructed Bill Asher, a staff member on the newspaper *El Malcriado*, affiliated with NFWA, to join Padilla to document the historic meeting. Padilla and Asher sat in the front row in the mostly Filipino audience. For Padilla, the meeting revealed a diversity among Filipinos he had never known. "I didn't know what the fuck was going on," he remembered, because they were "speaking all their different languages." The meeting required several translators for the Filipinos alone to communicate among themselves, because members spoke at least three languages: Tagalog, Illocano, and Pangasinan. In spite of the language barriers, Padilla interpreted the sincerity of AWOC's commitment and received an appeal from Itliong for NFWA to join them. When Padilla returned with the news, Chavez arranged with the local priest to hold a meeting of NFWA members at the local church, Our Lady of Guadalupe, in Delano. He called on allies in the civil rights organizations, CORE and SNCC, to use their connections to draw in activists interested in supporting farm worker justice and told Asher to get the word out to the community of farm workers via *El Malcriado*. Meanwhile, Padilla

took a sleeping bag down to Filipino Hall to live among AWOC members and discuss mutual interests.

Strategically called on September 16, Mexican Independence Day, the meeting of NFWA drew a capacity crowd that overwhelmed the small church built with money donated by many of the Catholic Slavic growers in the valley. Padilla conducted the meeting, which led many in attendance to confuse him with Chavez. He invited AWOC members to address the crowd to explain the reasons for their strike. Chavez, who waited patiently off to the side, had yet to decide whether he would ask NFWA members to join in the labor walkout. "Cesar was afraid to call a strike," Padilla remembered. When he finally spoke, however, he discovered a readiness for action among the people. He resisted shouts of "Come on, say it!" from people in the audience who wanted him to initiate the strike there and then, largely out of respect for the priest, who had asked Padilla and him not to call a strike that evening. Instead, he called a meeting for the following week at the American Legion hall. "That's where we called the strike," Padilla remembered. "The following day we went out and picketed, and the rest is history."⁶⁴

Numerous scholars and journalists have documented the history of the Delano grape strike and the beginning of the modern farm worker movement. Many tell the familiar story of how a reluctant Cesar Chavez was drawn into the strike by the more radical, union-oriented AWOC members, especially Larry Itliong. This Filipino farm worker vanguard took the first brave steps toward the formation of a new multiethnic union. According to Padilla, the collaboration between AWOC and NFWA forced members to deal with cultural differences between Mexicans and Filipinos, as well as the very different relationships these two organizations had with the established national unions.

Early on, differences in resources brought the two closer together. The NFWA had not accumulated a strike fund or a permanent home, whereas AWOC had AFL-CIO money and Filipino Hall. The situation forced many Mexican families to rely on the generosity of Filipino workers to feed their families while out on strike. Many recalled strikers eating meals together in Filipino Hall, often sharing cuisines. "We [were] introduced to fish heads and bitter lemon and all that Filipino food," Padilla fondly remembered.⁶⁵ As the growers dug in and resisted a settlement, many of the men—both Filipino and Mexican—began to seek work elsewhere, testing the fortitude



FIGURE 4. AFL-CIO and AWOC members march in support of farm workers during the Delano strike, 1965. Left to right: Larry Itliong, AWOC; Walter Reuther, UAW; Cesar Chavez, NFWA. ALUA, UFW Collection, 362.

of the striking families. At these moments, Mexican women picked up the slack and led the picketing in the fields. The now famous photo of UAW president, Walter Reuther, leading a march, flanked by Cesar Chavez and Larry Itliong, in November 1965 conveys the multiethnic solidarity of the moment, although it obscures the significant role women played in sustaining the movement.⁶⁶

The photo also hides the simmering tension that existed among the various labor factions that composed the movement at the beginning. AWOC struck, in part, because of worries that NFWA was about to take the lead in the race to establish a farm worker union. This misperception was fueled, in part, by Al Green, who had been active throughout rural California in search of the right formula for success. A mercurial figure, Green had belonged to the International Brotherhood of Teamsters before the organization was ejected from the AFL-CIO for corruption in the national office. He maintained connections to packinghouse workers organized under the Teamsters and advised Itliong and other AWOC members to be open to whatever affiliation gave them the best chance for victory. Meanwhile, the

presence of the UAW's Walter Reuther at the November march and his gift of \$10,000 to both AWOC and NFWA indicated more than just a helping hand from a big national brother. During the mid-1960s, Reuther locked horns with AFL-CIO president, George Meany, over a range of policy issues, including the role of the national union in the civil rights movement. That Reuther had an especially close relationship to Chavez spurred Meany to send Bill Kircher, an AFL-CIO representative, to shore up the national union's influence over the new movement. By August 19, 1966, Kircher had forged a merger of AWOC and NFWA under the name United Farm Workers Organizing Committee and brokered an agreement for Chavez rather than Itliong to become the president of the union.⁶⁷ The decision made sense, given that the majority of workers were Mexican; however, it also threatened to alienate the significant number of Filipino workers who still maintained allegiances to other unions, including the Teamsters.

By 1966, leaders had worked out much of the logistical issues related to who would guide the union, but many issues remained unresolved, including how this movement would succeed where others had failed. Although many noble efforts had been made over the previous sixty years, no organization or leader had figured out the right approach to earning collective bargaining rights for farm workers. The typical union strategy, the strike, had thus far failed. By the end of the harvest that year, growers showed their usual stubbornness in resisting negotiations and a confidence that they could outlast the poorly funded union. To succeed, Chavez would have to consider the boycott, a strategy that had lapsed since the NFLU used it in 1948 but that would have new potential in the era of the civil rights movement.