

eventually came to own a hotel in Stockton, California, where Dolores was raised in an integrated neighborhood, received her early education, and met her first husband, an Anglo. After her marriage, she earned a provisional teaching credential by attending community college and taking night classes at College of the Pacific, becoming a grammar school teacher.

However, in the midfifties she decided to change her life dramatically. Abandoning her middle-class aspirations, she became convinced that personal happiness could only be achieved by helping the underprivileged. Toward that end, she joined the CSO, where she received her initial training as a community organizer under Fred Ross, who taught her the mobilization techniques associated with Saul Alinsky. "The emphasis of Alinsky's message," writes Richard García, "coincided with hers—a pragmatic non-ideological approach to life and change."¹³

It was in the CSO in 1955 that Huerta met Chávez, initiating a lifelong though sometimes turbulent association. A devout Catholic, somewhat puritanical in his value system, Chávez would always have trouble accepting her two divorces and the apparent neglect of her children. These personal difficulties, though, rarely impeded effective collaboration by two individuals equally dedicated to the cause of ameliorating the lives of the downtrodden. When Chávez bolted the CSO in 1961, Dolores Huerta followed. Together, they forged the new union. She was in Delano when the strike began. During the next few years, it would completely consume her life.

THE DELANO STRIKE

The strike against local grape growers in the Kern County city of Delano, just thirty miles north of Bakersfield, was initiated by the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), a Filipino union affiliated with the AFL-CIO, on September 8, 1965. Led by Larry Itliong (1913–1977), Filipinos struck to gain higher pay and recognition as a union, a right given to industrial workers by the 1935 National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) but denied to agricultural laborers. Since most of the field hands in the area were Mexicanos—by the sixties, they constituted at least two-thirds of the agricultural work force in the state—Chávez was asked to join and help conduct the strike. Fearing that his own fledgling union was unprepared, he agreed with some reluctance. However, given his union's superior numbers and his characteristic determination, Chávez soon became the acknowledged leader of the entire operation.

UFW tactics and strategy at Delano mirrored Chávez's personal philosophy. Profoundly impacted by both Gandhi and Dr. King, he had come to embrace the philosophy of militant nonviolence. Like his two renowned mentors, Chávez was against violence on principle; but he also realized, as they did, that violence was