Co-founder of the United Farm Workers Association, Dolores Clara Fernandez Huerta is one of the most influential labor activists of the 20thcentury and a leader of the Chicano civil rights movement.

Born on April 10, 1930 in Dawson, New Mexico, Huerta was the second of three children of Alicia and Juan Fernandez, a farm worker and miner who became a state legislator in 1938. Her parents divorced when Huerta was three years old, and her mother moved to Stockton, California with her children. Huerta’s grandfather helped raise Huerta and her two brothers while her mother juggled jobs as a waitress and cannery worker until she could buy a small hotel and restaurant. Alicia’s community activism and compassionate treatment of workers greatly influenced her daughter.

Discrimination also helped shape Huerta. A schoolteacher, prejudiced against Hispanics, accused Huerta of cheating because her papers were too well-written. In 1945 at the end of World War II, white men brutally beat her brother for wearing a Zoot-Suit, a popular Latino fashion.

Huerta received an associate teaching degree from the University of the Pacific’s Delta College. She married Ralph Head while a student and had two daughters, though the couple soon divorced. She subsequently married fellow activist Ventura Huerta with whom she had five children, though that marriage also did not last. Huerta briefly taught school in the 1950s, but seeing so many hungry farm children coming to school, she thought she could do more to help them by organizing farmers and farm workers.

In 1955 Huerta began her career as an activist when she co-founded the Stockton chapter of the Community Service Organization (CSO), which led voter registration drives and fought for economic improvements for Hispanics. She also founded the Agricultural Workers Association. Through a CSO associate, Huerta met activist César Chávez, with whom she shared an interest in organizing farm workers. In 1962, Huerta and Chávez founded the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), the predecessor of the United Farm Workers’ Union (UFW), which formed three year later. Huerta served as UFW vice president until 1999.

Despite ethnic and gender bias, Huerta helped organize the 1965 Delano strike of 5,000 grape workers and was the lead negotiator in the workers’ contract that followed. Throughout her work with the UFW, Huerta organized workers, negotiated contracts, advocated for safer working conditions including the elimination of harmful pesticides. She also fought for unemployment and healthcare benefits for agricultural workers. Huerta was the driving force behind the nationwide table grape boycotts in the late 1960s that led to a successful union contract by 1970.

In 1973, Huerta led another consumer boycott of grapes that resulted in the ground-breaking California Agricultural Labor Relations Act of 1975, which allowed farm workers to form unions and bargain for better wages and conditions. Throughout the 1970s and ‘80s, Huerta worked as a lobbyist to improve workers’ legislative representation. During the 1990s and 2000s, she worked to elect more Latinos and women to political office and has championed women’s issues.

The recipient of many honors, Huerta received the Eleanor Roosevelt Human Rights Award in 1998 and the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2012. As of 2015, she was a board member of the Feminist Majority Foundation, the Secretary-Treasurer Emeritus of the United Farm Workers of America, and the President of the Dolores Huerta Foundation.

<https://www.nwhm.org/education-resources/biographies/dolores-huerta>

*Following is a partial transcript of a speech by Dolores Huerta from a KQED news report on the National Farm Workers Association march and rally in Sacramento on April 10, 1966.*

...the organizing efforts of the National Farm Workers Association, and today our farm workers have come to Sacramento. To the governor and the legislature of California we say you cannot close your eyes and your ears to us any longer. You cannot pretend that we do not exist. You cannot plead ignorance to our problems because we are here and we embody our needs for you. And we are not alone. We are accompanied by many friends. The religious leaders of the state, spear-headed by the migrant ministry, the student groups, the civil rights groups that make up the movement that has been successful in securing civil rights for Negroes in this country, right-thinking citizens and our staunchest ally, organized labor, are all in the revolution of the farm worker.

...the day has ended when the farm worker will let himself be used as a pawn by employers, government, and others who would exploit them for their own ends. La huelga and la causa is our cry, and everyone must listen. Viva la huelga! Viva Cesar Chavez!

...giving them the confidence they needed through inspiration and hard work. Educating them for months 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.

...and he did not solicit money from any area, this was prior to the strike of course. Cesar felt that outside money for organization of farm workers was no good and it would not do the trick. And that the workers had to pay for their own organization, and this was accomplished. Prior to the strike the National Farm Workers Association was supported entirely by its own membership through the dues that they paid. Furthermore...

...support has been highlighted by people who have joined us here today. Furthermore, these groups are committing themselves to help us until total victory is achieved. The developments of the past seven months are only a slight indication of what is to come. The workers are on the rise. There will be strikes all over the state and throughout the country because Delano has shown what can be done and the workers know that they are no longer alone. [applause] The agricultural workers are not going to remain static. The towns that have been reached by the pilgrimage will never be the same. On behalf of the National Farm Workers Association, its officers, and its members, on behalf of all of the farm workers of this state, we unconditionally demand that the governor of this state, Edmund Brown, call a special session of the legislature to enact a collective bargaining law for the farmer workers of the state of California. [applause] We will be satisfied with nothing less. The governor cannot and the legislature cannot shrug off its responsibilities to the Congress of the United States. We are citizens and we are residents of the state of California, and we want the rules set up to protect us in this state, right here. If the rules to settle our economic problems are not forthcoming, we will call a general strike to paralyze the state’s agricultural economy. [applause] We will call a general strike to let the legislators and the employers know that we mean business. We will take economic pressure, strikes, boycotts, to force recognition and obtain collective bargaining rights. The social and economic revolution of the farm workers is well underway and it will not be stopped until we receive equality. The farm workers are moving. Nothing is going to stop them. The workers are crying for organization, and we are going to organize them. We may act in strange and unusual ways in our organizing, but we’re willing to try new and unused methods to achieve justice for the farm workers.