

*United Farm Workers (UFW) Movement:
Philip Vera Cruz, Unsung Hero*



Photo: Jerry Whipple (center), regional director for UAW Region 6, presents a \$100,000 check to the UFW executive board at a ceremony in Los Angeles in 1974. From left to right: Marshall Ganz, Eliseo Medina, Pete Velasco, Mack Lyons, Jerry Whipple, Richard Chavez, Cesar Chavez, Gil Padilla, Phillip Vera Cruz, Dolores Huerta.

PHOTO: EL MALCRIADO STAFF

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KENT WONG

What I learned from Philip Vera Cruz

I first met Philip Vera Cruz when I was an undergraduate at UC Berkeley in the early 1970s. I remember thinking how out of place Philip looked on campus. He wore old work clothes, a sweater vest, and a crumpled brown hat. His hair was gray and his face lined from the years he had worked in the fields of California under the relentless sun.

Philip had come to UC Berkeley to speak before an Asian American Studies class. When he opened his mouth to speak, the students were in for a surprise. Despite the quiet demeanor usually associated with older Asian immigrants, Philip spoke with great force and passion. Philip was a vice president of the United Farm Workers Union, the highest-ranking Filipino in the union.

“My life within the union, my life now outside the union, are all one: my continual struggle to improve my life and the lives of my fellow workers. But our struggle never stops.”

Although I was active with the United Farm Workers, Philip had to teach me that it was the Filipino Americans who first organized a farmworkers union in the San Joaquin Valley. He proudly shared the story of how the Filipino Americans launched the historic Delano grape strike. He explained that the establishment of the United Farm Workers Union was a merger between two separate unions, one representing Filipino American workers and the other with a primarily Mexican membership.

Philip was a courageous union leader who dared to speak up, organize, and challenge the arrogance of power. He was convinced that although the wealthy growers, politicians, and the courts opposed the union, the workers could prevail if they stood up and organized.

Through the years as I became more involved in the labor movement, I kept in touch with Philip, and we became good friends. When I began traveling across the country to organize the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA), Philip was always there to give me advice and counsel. The formation of APALA was a dream-come-true for Philip. For so long he had been discouraged because the contributions and potential of Asian American workers in the labor movement had gone unrecognized.

In 1991 when I began work as director of the UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education, I helped to publish a book on Philip’s life written by Craig Scharlin and Lilia Villanueva. In 1992 when I was elected president of the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, we honored Philip as an “Asian Pacific American Labor Pioneer” at the founding convention. When my second son was born in 1993,

my wife and I chose “Philip” as his middle name, in honor of Philip Vera Cruz. And in 1994 when Philip passed away, I organized a memorial service in his hometown of Bakersfield, California, and presented his eulogy.

The Delano Grape Strike and the Role of Philip Vera Cruz

The Delano grape strike in California, which began in 1965, led to the birth of the United Farm Workers Union (UFW). The strike established the reputation of Cesar Chavez nationally and worldwide.

But few people know that it was in fact Filipino American workers, under the leadership of Philip Vera Cruz and others, who on September 8, 1965, voted to strike and therefore helped to begin this historic movement in American labor. The Filipino American members voted to strike to oppose the growers’ threat to reduce wages. The Delano grape strike did not end until the UFW finally won contracts with the growers in 1970.

With little formal education or training, Philip emerged as a leader of the United Farm Workers Union, a leader in the Filipino American community, and as an Asian American labor pioneer. Philip saw the farmworkers movement in a broad context as a struggle against racism, worker exploitation, and a system that is driven by profits.

The story of Philip represents a chapter of U.S. labor history and Asian American history that has seldom been told. Philip’s story embodies the spirit of the *manong*, the first Filipino Americans, and the spirit of all workers struggling for liberation.

How Filipino American Workers Reached America

“When my mother asked me how long I planned to stay away, I told her three years. Well, I’ve been here in the U.S. over 50 years now and I haven’t been back yet...”

–Philip Vera Cruz

Philip’s life is part of the story of the *manong* generation, the first wave of Filipino immigrants who came to the United States in the 1920s and the 1930s to seek a better life. Almost all were young, single men. They worked in the fields, in the factories, and in low-wage service jobs.

1920s The large influx of Filipino workers began in 1924, following the passage of a restrictive immigration act that barred immigration from China and Japan. In the West Coast, the demand for low-wage laborers was filled by immigrant Filipinos. Filipinos were

exempt from the racially restrictive immigration policies because the Philippines was a U.S. protectorate, and Filipinos were classified as U.S. nationals. By 1930 about one hundred thousand Filipinos were living in Hawaii and the U.S. mainland.

1930s In 1934 U.S. Congress passed the Tydings McDuffie Independence Act. This act granted the Philippines independence and changed Filipinos’ status from U.S. nationals to aliens. As a result, Filipinos were subject to the same Asian exclusion acts previously imposed on other Asian immigrants. The Tydings McDuffie Act reduced the influx of Filipino immigrants from a steady flow to a slow trickle.

Life in America was harsh for the *manongs*. They found work in

the most physically demanding jobs, with substandard pay and working conditions. In addition they were subjected to intense prejudice and discrimination. In the 1930s, anti-Filipino riots perpetrated by white vigilantes were common throughout the state of California.

Filipino Americans were also subjected to antimiscegenation laws that prohibited men from marrying outside their ethnic group. Due to the much lower number of Filipino women than men in the United States and the restrictions prohibiting future Filipino immigration, the *manong* generation was effectively prevented from marrying or raising families. Most lived their entire lives as single men.

His Times and Life

Philip’s life, which spans almost the entire twentieth century, represents the untold story of American immigrant farmworkers from the early 1900s through the 1990s. In reflecting upon life, Philip Vera Cruz once said:

“I see life as a continuous progressive struggle — a group of people struggle to survive. They get older and they are gone. But the next ones will come together and solve some of their problems. They’ll align themselves with others and make advances that the previous generation wasn’t able to accomplish... If more young people could just get involved in the important issues of social justice, they would form a golden foundation for the struggle of all people to improve their lives.”¹

1. Philip Vera Cruz: A Personal History of Filipino Immigrants and the Farmworkers Movement, Craig Scharlin and Lilia Villanueva, UCLA Labor Center and UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1992, p. 141.

An American Immigrant Farmworker

Philip was born in the Philippines on Christmas Day of 1904. His family originated in the province of Ilocos Sur on the island of Luzon north of Manila, the country’s capital. In 1926, he came to the United States.

Philip said, “When my mother asked me how long I planned to stay away, I told her three years. Well, I’ve been here in the U.S. over 50 years now and I haven’t been back yet... That’s the way it has been for most of us Filipino old-timers.”² He spent the next fifty years working in a wide variety of jobs, in a box factory in Seattle, as a busboy in Spokane, as a beet harvester in North Dakota, and as a hotel worker in Minneapolis. But most of the time, he worked as a farm laborer in California’s San Joaquin Valley.

In August of 1942 during World War II, he was drafted and sent to San Luis Obispo, California, for basic training. Because he was in his late thirties, he was discharged and assigned to work on the farms in

2. Ibid., p. 17

the San Joaquin Valley to assist the war effort with food production.

Delano

Delano, a small town in the heart of the California Central Valley, became Philip's home. He picked grapes, harvested lettuce, and cut asparagus. During the 1940s he regularly worked nine to ten hours a day and was paid about seventy cents per hour.

Pay and working conditions in the farms were deplorable. The workers performed stooped labor in the scorching heat of the sun, where temperatures ranged from 100 degrees to 110 degrees during the summer. Farmworkers lived in labor camps with outdoor toilets, showers, and kitchens. The workers had no access to health care, no benefits, and virtually no rights on the job.

Philip said, "The facilities in those camps were pretty bad. The first camp I lived in had a kitchen that was so full of holes, flies were just coming in and out... along with mosquitoes, roaches, and everything else.

The toilet was an outhouse with the pit so filled-up it was impossible to use."³

The small town of Delano was divided by railroad tracks that ran north and south. These tracks also served as the color line segregating the minority farmworkers on the west side and the white farm-owners on the east side. The town's business district was located on the east side of the tracks. Chinatown was located on the west side and welcomed non-whites. The streets of Chinatown also served as the hiring hall for Filipino American grape pickers. The growers sent foremen down to the streets of Chinatown to recruit farmworkers.

The Asparagus Strike

In 1948 Philip was involved in his first strike. He went up to Byron, a small town seventeen miles north of Stockton, to work in the asparagus fields. Filipino American workers organized a strike around wages and working conditions in the labor camps.

3. Ibid., p. 5

PHOTO: GIL LORTIZ



"After all, it was the Filipinos who started this phase of the farmworkers movement when they alone sat down in Delano grape fields back in 1965."

“I see life as a continuous progressive struggle — a group of people struggle to survive. They get older and they are gone. But the next ones will come together and solve some of their problems. They’ll align themselves with others and make advances that the previous generation wasn’t able to accomplish.... If more young people could just get involved in the important issues of social justice, they would form a golden foundation for the struggle of all people to improve their lives.”

The strike quickly spread throughout the Stockton area, including Byron, Elton, and Tracy. The strike was led by the Cannery Workers Union, part of the International Longshore and Warehouse Workers Union Local 37. The president of the local was Chris Mensalvas, and the Business Representative was Ernest Mangaoang, both Filipino labor leaders.

Philip said that Chris Mensalvas was the most talented Filipino American union organizer in the country in the 1940s and 1950s. Because of the labor activities of Mensalvas and Mangaoang, the government tried to deport them to the Philippines under the McCarran Act, claiming they were aliens and communist agitators. Mensalvas and Mangaoang won the case against the government after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Mangaoang v. Boyd* that Filipinos who entered this country before the Tydings McDuffie Act entered as nationals and therefore could not be deported as aliens.⁴

The asparagus strike was an important milestone in Filipino American labor history. After several months, the strike won some concessions. Although the settlement was not a complete victory, this was nevertheless a significant campaign and one of the first successful strikes involving farmworkers. Many Filipino American workers, who received their first education in the power of the strike, subsequently became union leaders themselves.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 14

1950s: Organizing Farm Workers

In the late 1950s Philip joined the National Farm Labor Union (NFLU), affiliated with the AFL-CIO. The membership was mostly Filipino Americans, with some Mexican Americans and African American workers. Philip served as president of the local in Delano. This was Philip’s first experience as a union leader and the beginning of a new phase of his life.

The work to organize farm labor in the Central Valley attracted the attention of the AFL-CIO. In 1959 the AFL-CIO established the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) as a pre-union formation to test the waters for farm labor organizing. Two of the first organizers hired by AWOC were Dolores Huerta and Larry Itliong. Dolores Huerta later left AWOC to work for Cesar Chavez with the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA).

1960s: Delano Grape Strike

Philip also joined AWOC shortly before the Delano grape strike of 1965. The origins of the Delano grape strike began further south in Coachella and spread north to Delano. In Coachella the Filipino workers in AWOC had demanded \$1.40 an hour, a wage increase of \$0.10 per hour. This was the beginning of the harvest season, and the Coachella growers acceded to the demand. Yet when the harvest season moved north to Delano, the Delano growers refused to meet the wages paid by the growers in Coachella. This triggered outrage among the Delano farmworkers.

PHOTO BY RICHARD GRADY



Photo: Philip Vera Cruz (center), Vice President of the United Farm Workers (UFW), and unidentified men at a boycott meeting, c.1970s.

PHOTO BY CATHY MURPHY



Photo: United Farm Workers officials, June 10, 1976. Standing, left to right: Marshall Ganz, Phillip Vera Cruz, Richard Chavez, Pete Velasco. Sitting, left to right: Mack Lyons, Cesar Chavez, Gilbert Padilla, Eliseo Medina, Dolores Huerta.

PHOTO COURTESY OF www.farmworkermovement.org



Photo: A weakened Cesar Chavez looks apprehensive. With him are Philip Vera Cruz, Julio Hernandez and Jim Drake.

On September 8, 1965, at the Filipino Hall in Delano, the Filipino American members of AWOOC met to discuss whether to accept the reduced wages proposed by the growers. Instead of settling, the Filipino American members voted to strike, one of the most significant decisions in the history of farm labor struggles in California. The strike was launched by Filipino Americans and lasted for five years. In the coming years, the Delano grape strike would establish the reputation of Cesar Chavez nationally and worldwide. The birth of the United Farm Workers Union occurred during the strike. The Delano grape strike did not end until the UFW finally won contracts with the growers in 1970.

In March 1966, six months after the Delano strike began, the NFWA organized a historic farmworkers march from Delano to Sacramento. Hundreds joined the march, and thousands rallied in Sacramento. The march helped to put the Delano grape strike into the national spotlight.

Following the march, the AFL-CIO encouraged a merger between AWOOC and NFWA. The merger occurred in August 1966 and was supported by the vast majority of Filipino American and Mexican American farmworkers. The United Farm Workers Organizing Committee was born under the leadership of Cesar Chavez. Three Filipino Americans were included as officers in the leadership team: Larry Itliong, Andy Imutan, and Philip.

Philip said, “When the UFW came along it really changed my life. It gave me the opportunity to bring my basically philosophical and questioning nature down to earth, and apply it to real everyday issues that actually affect people’s lives. As a Filipino American it gave me the opportunity to participate in the political struggles of this country.”⁵

Philip was assigned to build broad-based support for the Delano grape strike. He traveled throughout the country, speaking before students, community organizations, and churches. The United Farm Workers movement captured the spirit and imagination of people everywhere. The campaign to boycott non-union grapes attracted national and international support.

Philip also recruited new UFW supporters and organizers. For many, this was their first exposure to the labor movement, and many of today’s leaders received their first union training with the UFW.

Philip, like all other union staff members, re-

5. Ibid., p. 25

ceived a salary of \$5 per week plus expenses for food and gas. The UFW was not a job — it was a commitment. For Philip the UFW was his family and his purpose in life.

When the strike was finally settled and when union contracts were won, one of the first projects that Cesar Chavez launched was the construction of a retirement home for Filipino farmworkers. Plans were unveiled at the United Farm Worker's first convention held in 1971. At this convention, Cesar Chavez was elected president, Dolores Huerta was elected first vice-president, and Philip was elected second vice-president, the highest-ranking Filipino officer.

1970s: Internal Conflicts within the Union

Although he invested his life building the union, Philip had some disagreements with the leadership of the United Farm Workers. One disagreement involved the union's position on undocumented workers. The UFW feared the growth of the undocumented workforce in the fields. They feared the growers' use of undocumented workers as strikebreakers, and on occasion even called the federal immigration authorities when undocumented workers appeared to cross the picket lines. Philip vehemently disagreed with this position and firmly believed that the union had a responsibility to organize all workers, regardless of their immigration status. The UFW position was an early position on organizing undocumented workers that is different now, and has been for many years.

Philip also disagreed with the leadership of the UFW on the issue of the Philippines. In the late 1970s, Filipino American activists throughout the country were mobilizing to oppose the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, president of the Philippines. Philip joined other Filipino Americans in calling for an end to martial law and widespread political repression.

In 1977 Marcos invited Cesar Chavez to visit the Philippines. In spite of Philip's opposition, Chavez accepted the invitation to travel to the Philippines, where he received a special Presidential Appreciation Award. Philip thought it was contradictory for the UFW convention to oppose some repressive regimes and not the Philippines. He said, "I cannot understand why a resolution was passed to condemn the dictatorship of Nicaragua and at the same convention, to praise the dictatorship of the Philippines."⁶

6. Ibid., p. 120



Agbayani Village

One of the first accomplishments after the UFW won contracts in the fields was the construction of a retirement home for farmworkers. The retirement home was named Agbayani Village after Filipino American farmworker Paulo Agbayani, who died while on a union picket line in 1967. Agbayani Village was designed as a sixty-unit home for retired farmworkers. Each tenant was provided a private room and an adjoining bathroom. In addition there was a central kitchen, dining hall, living room, and recreation room. The entire building had central air conditioning, an unheard-of luxury for farmworkers who spent endless summers working in the fields under the relentless sun.

Construction of Agbayani Village began in April 1973. More than two thousand people were involved in building the village, nearly all volunteers. People came from all over the country and as far away as Canada, Japan, and Europe to help.

When the village opened in 1975, Philip was the UFW officer in charge of Agbayani Village. The residents were almost exclusively manongs and retired farmworkers. Although they had worked throughout their lives in the fields, most had no life savings and no family. Yet at Agbayani Village, they now had their own community and a place to call home. Over the years, college students would make a pilgrimage to Agbayani Village to help with construction projects in order to bring gifts to the manongs and to hear their stories.

“When the UFW came along it really changed my life. It gave me the opportunity to bring my basically philosophical and questioning nature down to earth, and apply it to real everyday issues that actually affect people’s lives.”



Philip resigned from the UFW in 1977. In the following years, Philip lived in Bakersfield, California, with Debbie Vollmer. Debbie had a private law practice in Bakersfield where she practiced criminal defense. Philip’s schedule slowed down. He spent time growing vegetables in his backyard, caring for his cats, reading, and following world events. Philip also traveled to speak to student and community groups, although with less frequency than before.

In 1987, he returned home to the Philippines after more than sixty years. He was honored by President Corazon Aquino, Ninoy Aquino’s widow, and was presented the Ninoy Aquino award. Ninoy Aquino was a presidential candidate in the Philippines, and was assassinated on August 21, 1983.

In 1991 the UCLA Labor Center and UCLA Asian American Studies Center published a book on Philip’s life. Written by Craig Scharlin and Lilia Villanueva, the book is now in its third printing. The publication of *Philip Vera Cruz: A Personal History of Filipino Immigrants and the Farm Workers Movement* opened up a new chapter in Philip’s life. Thousands of copies were distributed. Many were used in Asian American studies and labor studies classes on college campuses throughout the country, and many young people who had never heard of Philip or the history of the Filipino American Farm Workers drew inspiration from his story.

Philip again was on the speaking circuit, addressing classrooms and speaking passionately about his life with the union. He always made it a point to get

to know activists personally, especially young people. He would engage in deep discussions with them, remember their names, and always express concern about their work and their plans for the future.

On May 1, 1992, Philip flew back to Washington DC to attend the founding convention of the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA). The APALA convention staged a march on the U.S. Department of Justice to protest the acquittal of the police officers accused of beating Rodney King in Los Angeles. Philip, at age 87, was on the front lines again, marching with other Asian American workers on May Day.

On the same evening before an auditorium of five hundred people, he received an award as an Asian Pacific American Labor Pioneer. He was thrilled to participate in a convention full of Asian American union activists who were building a new labor movement, and he was also pleased to know that others were carrying on the work he had begun as a farmworker and union organizer.

Philip said, “My life within the union, my life now outside the union, are all one: my continual struggle to improve my life and the lives of my fellow workers. But our struggle never stops.”⁷

Philip passed away on June 10, 1994, at the age of eighty-nine. A memorial service was held in Bakersfield, and people from throughout California drove for many hours to attend the early morning service.

7. Ibid., p. 125

Profits Enslave the World

(A poem by Philip Vera Cruz)

*While still across the ocean
I heard about the USA
So thrilled by wild imagination
I left home through Manila Bay*

*Then on my way I thought and wondered
Alone what would the future be?
I gambled parental care and love
To search for human liberty*

*But beautiful bright pictures painted
Were just half of the whole story
Reflections of great wealth and power
In the land of slavery*

*Minorities to shanty towns, slums...
Disgraceful spots for all to see
In the enviable Garden of Eden,
Land of affluence and poverty*

*Since then I was a hungry stray dog,
Too busy to keep myself alive...
It seems equality and freedom
Will never be where millionaires thrive!*

*A lust for power causes oppression
To rob the poor to senseless greed:
The wealthy few's excessive profits
Tend to enslave the world to need.¹*

1. p. xi.