What happened when Mexicans and Filipinos joined together

From: 40th anniversary of Delano Grape Strike two-day reunion in Delano, September 2005

Speech by Andy Imutan

My name is Andy Imutan and I am one of the original Filipino workers who went on strike in 1965. I am now only one of two living Filipino workers from that era as most of my brothers have passed away. The one thing that does remain is their legacy and their fight for a just cause.

The whole movement began in Coachella that same summer [of 1965]. That's when a group of Filipino workers went on strike demanding that their wages be increased from $1.10 an hour as well as better living conditions. Finally, after 10 days of picketing we accomplished what we had set out to do -- we increased our wages by 30 cents an hour. The victory was more grandiose, not so much for the wage increase but for its significance at defeating the growers. We knew then that we could accomplish a lot more.

As I look back, I don't think we could have accomplished such victory in Coachella had it not been for the leadership of our brothers Ben Gines, Pete Manuel, and Larry Itliong, who were all instrumental in that victory.

After a successful first strike we did it again, this time in Delano where wages were also starting out at $1.10 an hour. However, the struggle became a lot harder when Mexican workers started crossing our picket lines. There was no unity between the Mexicans and the Filipinos. The growers were very successful in dividing us and creating conflict between the two races. Although we tried to discourage and reason with the Mexicans that this was just hurting everyone, we weren't able to convince them.

So Larry Itliong and I decided to take action by seeing Cesar Chavez, the leader of the National Farm Workers Association. We met to come up with a plan that would be beneficial for everyone, including the Mexican workers. However, Chavez said his organization wasn't ready to go on a strike. It took several discussions and a lot of faith, but finally the Filipinos and Mexicans joined as one on September 16, to picket the Delano growers. On March 17, 1966 we set out on a march from Delano to Sacramento that initially only had 70 farm workers and volunteers. But by April 11, as we climbed the steps of the state Capitol, there were 10,000 supporters who had joined us in the cause.

A few months later our union, AWOC, and the NFWA joined as a single union. Out of this union the United Farm Workers was born. It was a very exciting time as we knew the potential when we joined together not as competitors but as true brothers joined in a very legitimate cause.