United Farm Workers Movement (UFW): Philip Vera Cruz, Unsung Hero Excerpt
By Kent Wong

What I learned from Philip Vera Cruz

1) 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.

2) 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.

3) Although I was active with the United Farm Workers, Philip had to teach me that it was the Filipino Americans who first organized a farm workers 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.

4) 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.

5) 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.

6) 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.

His Times and Life

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

8) "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.”

An American Immigrant Farm worker

9) 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.

10) 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.” 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.

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

Delano

12) 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.

13) 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.

14) 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.”

15) 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 farm workers 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 nonwhites. 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 farm workers.

The Asparagus Strike

16) 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. 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.

17) 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.

18) 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 farm workers. Many Filipino American workers, who received their first education in the power of the strike, subsequently became union leaders themselves.

1950s: Organizing Farm Workers

19) 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.

20) 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

21) 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 farm workers.

22) On September 8, 1965, at the Filipino Hall in Delano, the Filipino American members of AWOC 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.

23) In March 1966, six months after the Delano strike began, the NFWA organized a historic farm workers 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.

24) Following the march, the AFL-CIO encouraged a merger between AWOC and NFWA. The merger occurred in August 1966 and was supported by the vast majority of Filipino American and Mexican American farm workers. 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.

25) 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.”

26) 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.

27) 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.

28) Philip, like all other union staff members, received 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.

29) 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 farm workers. Plans were unveiled at the United Farm Workers 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.

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