



## Democracy Dies in Darkness

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# How the United Farm Workers can regain their influence

**The union has a unique opportunity to build a broad movement with popular support.**

By Lori Flores

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Farm workers harvest a corn crop in the central valley town of Tulare, Calif., on Sept. 8. (Mark Ralston/AFP/Getty Images)

There are 2 million to 3 million farmworkers in the U.S. today, but the United Farm Workers (UFW) union only has a membership of 10,000 people, sapping it of its political potential and negotiating heft.

As Teresa Romero takes the reins as its new president, she faces the challenge of making the union more outward-facing and nationally popular, so that it can continue to advocate for farmworkers across the country. The vast majority of farmworkers still are not paid decent wages or overtime and

face dangerous working conditions in vegetable fields, fruit orchards, poultry and dairy farms and vineyards.

Romero will be a very different UFW president, and some might see that as a challenge — she is a woman, an immigrant (she migrated to the U.S. from Mexico in the early 1980s) and someone who does not come from a farmworker background. It is precisely these three parts of her identity, however, that give her an advantage in trying to restore the UFW to prominence and influence. By amplifying Latina farmworkers' voices, further highlighting immigrants' vulnerability in the agricultural industry and gathering the support of Americans who have no connection to the farmworker experience, she could return the UFW's base, national prominence and political might to its peaks, or even exceed them.

The UFW first captured national attention in the 1960s and 1970s through its strikes and consumer boycotts of California grapes and lettuce, and through its first charismatic president Cesar Chavez. A devout Catholic who likened his philosophy of nonviolence to that of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi, Chavez captivated both the American mainstream and more radical Chicano Movement activists through the marches, fasts and picket lines he led in the fields.

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Across the country it became cool to wear pins emblazoned with the “Don't Buy Grapes” slogan or the red-and-black Aztec eagle logo of the union. This popular support of Chavez and his largely Mexican and Filipino American farmworker membership gave the UFW leverage to negotiate union contracts with major agricultural firms in California that raised farmworkers' wages, instituted medical plans and paid vacations and restricted pesticide use.

Historians have debated the victories and problems Chavez brought to the farmworker movement 50 years ago. He successfully capitalized on a broader “rights” climate in which the African American and Chicano movements were unfolding in the U.S. South and Southwest, and a consumer rights movement that was encouraging citizens to express their moral and political views through what they did and did not consume.

Additionally, he made sure that Americans associated the UFW with farmworker **families** and the extreme deprivation that helpless children faced. These strategies worked. They drew the support of those who might not have otherwise sympathized with the plight of poor farmworkers of color.

Eventually, however, Chavez’s desire to control the union from the top down catastrophically clashed with UFW members’ demands for more input and power. Through several purges and accusations, he alienated many of his most talented staff and ardent supporters.

He also exhibited antipathy toward undocumented immigrant farmworkers, viewing them as strikebreakers and hindrances to the unionization of U.S. citizen workers. So when more indigenous Mexicans and Central Americans began replacing Mexican American workers in the fields in the 1980s, the UFW did not take the opportunity to bring them into the fold and adjust to this demographic shift.

Chavez died in 1993, passing the leadership reigns to his son-in-law, Arturo Rodriguez. At that time, the UFW had to face the reality that farmworkers were increasingly immigrant and undocumented, hailing from a multitude of countries and linguistic backgrounds. The union worked to address this demographic diversity along the West Coast and has experienced organizing successes particularly in California. But its national popularity and network of allies has waned significantly in the 21st century.

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The magnetism of Chavez's legacy is no longer enough to bring people into the UFW. Undocumented and guest workers in agriculture — who are laboring under the dark cloud of possible firing or deportation if they complain or mobilize — need more convincing that a union can concretely serve them.

Romero should use her immigrant background to acknowledge the UFW's past mistakes and cultivate new transregional collaborations with other farmworker organizations around the country. The Florida-based Coalition of Immokalee Workers has succeeded in organizing the state's diverse tomato pickers by getting their employers and corporate buyers of tomatoes (from Taco Bell to Trader Joe's to Walmart) to sign on to a Fair Food Program that ensures farmworkers are paid fairly and treated humanely and lets shoppers know which food earns that label. In North Carolina, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) has fought on behalf of H-2A guest workers who, despite being legally contracted, can experience similar abuse and neglect as their undocumented counterparts.

By forming closer alliances with each other, these organizations can have a stronger collective voice in congressional conversations about agriculture, immigration and labor that as of now remain frustratingly mired in the imagined panacea of an expanded guest worker program. The government has never provided enough money or infrastructure to adequately monitor whether guest workers are being treated fairly by the employers they are bound to for the entirety of their contract. Farmworkers — whether citizen or migrant — need basic rights protected by revised national legislation **first**, way before the existing program has the hope of truly succeeding, let alone an expanded one.

Moreover, as a woman not connected by birth or marriage to the Chavez family, Romero can acknowledge Chavez's historic importance but does not need to rely on a cult of (male) personality to attract more union members and supporters to the UFW. This will create an opportunity to bring the experiences and perspectives of women to the forefront.

From the 1960s to the 1980s, Dolores Huerta (UFW vice president until 1999) and other women members moved themselves and their families to lead consumer boycott campaigns in cities like Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Indianapolis, Miami, Philadelphia, New York City and Montreal.

[Latina farmworkers recently reminded us](#) that they aren't immune from #MeToo problems. Sexual harassment plagues those who toil in the fields, in addition to health risks from pesticide exposure, a lack of food and potable water, substandard and unsanitary housing conditions and preventable transportation accidents that maim and kill commuting farmworkers. Romero should take every opportunity to amplify women's voices in the farmworker struggle.

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Finally, as someone who never worked in the fields, but who came to deeply care about farmworkers' conditions and rights over time, Romero is a UFW president who can make the union speak again to the everyday American food consumers who wants to buy fruit, vegetables and wine with the assurance that they are not infused with pesticide toxins or human suffering.

According to economist Philip Martin, elevating farmworker wages by 40 percent across the board would require that every American household pay only \$21.15 more per **year** for their groceries. At its height the UFW amassed a diverse array of supporters — rich and poor, male and female, young and old, religious and secular, from the West and East, and everywhere in between — and made them feel like even though they were physically and experientially distant from the farmworker struggle, they could still help farmworkers in simple ways from wherever they were. To grow and stay relevant in the 21st century, the UFW must creatively reach out and talk to those allies again.

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