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¡Si Se Puede!

IN CONVERSATION WITH DOLORES HEURTA

INTERVIEWED BY DANA GEFFNER

“¡S í, se puede!” You have probably heard that iconic rallying cry, but you might not have known the story of the woman who coined it: Dolores Huerta. Co-founder of the first farmworker labor union, the United Farm Workers of America (UFW), alongside Cesar Chavez, she organized the massive grape boycotts of the 1970s and 80s that earned California farmworkers lasting legal protections.

Ms. Huerta has worked for civil rights and social justice for over half a century, and she is finally getting the recognition she deserves with a recent documentary film, *Dolores*.

Fair World Project’s Executive Director, Dana Geffner, was excited to join Ms. Huerta in a wide-ranging conversation in which she shared advice on everything from organizing in today’s challenging political climate, to having difficult conversations, to the ways we can all support farmworkers.

I saw the movie, *Dolores*, and it was fantastic and inspirational. It has been in major cities around the United States, and I am sure you have had a chance to talk to audiences and communities about it. I was wondering if there is anything that surprised you about the audience’s reaction?

The audiences have seemed to find it very relevant in terms of today’s issues, and they have said that it was very moving and inspiring to them.

As a veteran organizer, can you share a little advice for those who might just be getting into organizing in their communities? When you are training or mentoring a new organizer, what is the most important piece of advice you give them?

My advice is that you cannot do it by yourself, you have got to have other people there with you to be able to do the job. Figure out what your goals are and what you want to achieve. Even if a goal might be far in the distance, it is important to start making a plan with action steps detailing the work that needs to be done to reach that goal that you are striving for.

Are there other resources that you would recommend for new and emerging organizers and leaders?

Well, the only resource that you must have to organize are human resources – people.

The Dolores Huerta Foundation focuses on community organizing. Can you tell us about the program called Vecinos Unidos?

This is our organizing group that we have. These are people in the community who come together to organize. They decide what issues they want to take on in their community, and then they take on the work that is needed to make it happen. It is a volunteer-based organization.

The movements you have organized with have made so much progress, yet so many of the same battles are being fought

again. The current administration is rolling back so many protections; white supremacy, for example, is becoming more visible. Do you have any advice on how to keep up the struggle?

We have to keep organizing and also be hopeful that this time will pass. The fact that white supremacists are revealing themselves as they are makes it a lot easier in some ways. People of color have always been faced with racism; women have always been faced with misogyny and sexism. The one thing that has come out of this is that by seeing who someone is, you can tackle it head on and call upon all of our public and private organizations and corporations to say “this is part of your responsibility” to make sure that we get at racism.

There is a long-standing perspective in some quarters that labor and environmentalists are in opposition, and even today, there is a growing movement around regenerative and organic agriculture, yet once again, farmworker justice is not always included in the discussion. But you have brought these two things together in your work for a long time. Can you talk a bit about what shaped your perspective?

There is one strawberry grower in the Bay Area who grows organic strawberries and also has a contract with the UFW, complete with paid health insurance and pension benefits for workers, but he is probably the only one I know who does that. A lot of organic farmers are small farmers, and, while I do not want to speak for them, I think many of them feel that they do not have the resources to be able to pay farmworkers the kinds of benefits that they would get under a UFW contract.

There are some so-called “organic” farmers that are huge, but they are usually agricultural employers who set aside some of their land for organic farming. We have to remember that farmers who grow fruits and vegetables do not get subsidized the way that the meat and poultry industries do. It would be good if we could get subsidies for organic farmers and get our Department of Agriculture more in tune with sustaining the planet. It would make it easier for some of these farmers, who

serve Mother Earth, to do organic farming – they really do not get the kind of help they should get from our government.

There are several labor justice certifications available to help consumers make better choices. Yet most of these certifications do not require unions or worker representation in the fields. How do you feel about certification in place of unions or worker representation in the fields – do you think it can ultimately undermine workers' organizing if it is not required? Do you see red flags with the certification model, or is this the next step for the labor justice movement?

I think that it is more complicated than that. It takes a lot of time and resources to get union contracts for workers so they can have representation on the job. We know that the evil corporate forces in the agricultural industry in this country are doing everything they can to keep farmworkers from organizing. So, in the meantime, farmworkers need to work in places where they are not being poisoned and are treated somewhat decently.

There are many different models of organizing happening. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) in Florida are campaigning to get better wages for workers, and there are other groups like the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) in Ohio. There are different standards by farmworker organizations with different goals, but they are all trying to make life a little bit better for farmworkers, and I think that is probably better than nothing.

To get full union contracts, like the UFW has, with pension plans, medical insurance, grievance and arbitration procedures, etc., is a much more difficult goal. Any organizing that makes life a little bit better for workers and consumers is good, and I do not think that we should put down any of them. Having been with the UFW, I know what it takes to get those contracts. It takes a lot of resources and is very difficult. We know that the ultimate goal for workers is to be able to have those union contracts but we also know what it takes.

The other thing we have to remember is this: the only reason that the UFW can get those contracts is because the state of California has the Agricultural Labor Relations Act. Other states do not have laws that guarantee collective bargaining rights to farmworkers, so it is very difficult. In fact, very few states in the U.S. have laws to protect farmworkers' right to organize. California has those protections because of the hard work of the UFW.

We really cannot put down these other groups if they do not have the final goal of a union contract with all of these benefits, because they do not have the legislative support that they need to get them. To have an impact for farmworkers, at the very least the key agricultural states with the biggest farmworker populations would have to pass those laws, and there is a lot of political

opposition. It is very difficult. Maybe someday they will get there, but without legislative support it is very difficult for those labor groups to get union contracts.

In the movie, it is very clear that sexism played a major role in making Cesar Chavez the face of the UFW. Can you say what you have learned from confronting sexism and racism throughout your career, and how you counsel others to deal with it?

Well, the only way to handle racism and sexism is to confront it directly, whether it is sexist policies in the workplace or individual behaviors – just calling them on it brings it to their attention. Of course, if it is very egregious, you can always file a lawsuit. In California and in the U.S., we do have laws that protect workers against racism. I know that with the present administration there will not be a lot of enforcement, but many states also have good laws that protect people from racism and sexism. But the main thing is to encourage people, especially working people and women, to have the courage to speak out. Many times women are hesitant out of fear of violence, but, at least in California, they can make complaints and it can be kept very confidential. So, I think people have to look into their own state laws.

Racism is more difficult. It is important to document the behaviors and keep very careful logs of those things people say and do. Then, especially if you get fired and lose your job, and you think it is because of those two elements, then you definitely have a course of action. It is a little bit more difficult, however, when you have to deal with friends and family. Often, we do not want to bring this up because we do not want to embarrass somebody that we know, but one good way to do it is just to take them aside and tell them about their behavior. There are a lot of times people do not realize that they are making sexist remarks, especially with older people. I know my kids are always saying "Oh, so-and-so said this; he called me 'honey,'" and that is sometimes what older people used to do and did not mean it to be offensive, so I think the intention is very important. Also, it is important to know that we do not need to keep silent, because if we do, nothing will change – things will not improve.

Can you tell us what is the most significant social change you have seen in your lifetime?

What is happening now with social media and digital technology is transformative. Information can be transmitted and people can research just about anything in a few seconds. It is a great tool that really gives people the type of research they need to work on a particular issue. But it does not replace the person-to-person type of organizing either, going back to your first question that you asked me about organizing. It is good to disseminate information and use it as a tool to bring people together. But when it comes to building an organization, that person-to-person recruiting and educating is vital.

Look for *Dolores* in theatres in the U.S. in September of 2018, and learn more at: doloresthemovie.com.

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