

Fifth Grade Lesson on Filipino Farmworkers

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GA Social Studies Standards:

SS5H6 Describe the importance of key people, events, and developments between 1950-1975.

b. Explain the key events and people of the Civil Rights movement: *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), Montgomery Bus Boycott, the March on Washington, Civil Rights Act, Voting Rights Act, and civil rights activities of Thurgood Marshall, Lyndon B. Johnson, Cesar Chavez, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Background Information:

In the first half of the 20th century, immigrants from all over the world sought opportunities for work in the United States. Those who worked in agriculture were often drawn to California’s fertile valleys, where they might follow the life cycle of various crops, from planting to cultivating to harvesting, then starting the cycle over with another crop in another region, migrating over the course of the growing season.

Like many low-paying jobs that are often described as “unskilled,” farm work required *great* skill and was very physically demanding. Laborers worked long hours in the grueling sun and did not always have access to water and restroom breaks. They were not paid by the hour, but instead by piece rate - that is, by certain quantities of the crop, such as a bushel of apples or a bucket of sweet potatoes. This payment system incentivizes workers *not* to take breaks, and allows growers, or farm owners, to avoid paying a minimum wage, and to change how crop quantities were measured.

Filipino laborers began arriving on the U.S. mainland in large numbers in the 1920s. Along the West Coast, they began to organize for fair working conditions, launching their first strike in Watsonville, California in 1930. In 1959, the American Federation of Labor chartered the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), which heavily recruited Filipino workers in Stockton, including an organizer named Larry Itliong. In late summer 1965, Itliong and fellow Filipino organizer Pete Velasco won a wage increase for grape workers in the Coachella Valley; as the next grape harvest was to take place further north in Delano, they set their sights there.



Seasonal workers from the Coachella grape fields who followed the harvest expected to be paid the same wage in Delano, but they were not. So on September 8, 1965, Filipino grape workers, all members of AWOC, went on strike at nine farms. The growers responded with violence and shut off the gas, lights, and water in the labor camps where they lived. They also hired Mexican workers to replace them. A week later, Itliong persuaded the mostly Mexican National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), led by César Chávez and Dolores Huerta, to join the Filipinos’ strike. Together, the workers went on strike at 30 farms and set up a system of roving pickets. Chávez and Huerta asked

the public to stop buying grapes without a union label, leading to a national boycott on grapes and a secondary boycott on stores that sold grapes.

All this happened in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, which helped the striking AWOC and NFWA workers gain the sympathy and support of people across the nation. In March 1966, NFWA organized a historic march from Delano to the state capitol of Sacramento. The grape strike was officially in the national spotlight, even attracting the support and attendance of Senator Robert F. Kennedy. By the time the pilgrimage arrived in Sacramento, an agreement had been negotiated between the growers and the union. In August 1966, members of AWOC joined with NFWA to form the United Farm Workers (UFW), with Chávez as director and Itliong as assistant director. In time, the UFW would create a hiring hall, health services, a credit union, community center for members, and a retirement village.



The UFW was not the first example of cross-racial solidarity among farmworkers. In 1903, a group of 1,000 Japanese and 200 Mexican agricultural workers organized the Japanese Mexican Labor Association. They went on strike against a company that contracted beet workers in Oxnard, California and held trilingual meetings in English, Spanish, and Japanese every night. Their symbol was a pair of clasped hands across a red rising sun, and after several weeks, their strike was successful and growers agreed to the association's piece rate demands. While the UFW continues to operate in support of farmworkers' rights, other organizations have also been formed to push for similar cross-racial advocacy, such as the Farm Labor Organizing Committee and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers.

Instructional Resources and Suggestions:

- The Zinn Education Project summarizes the Delano Grape Strike and the contributions of Filipino farmworkers who organized it with links to videos and other resources: <https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/delano-grape-strike/>
- Marissa Aroy directed the 30-minute documentary *The Delano Manongs* which offers an excellent summary of Filipino farmworkers in California: <http://www.delanomanongs.com>
- From NPR (broadcast and article) - Grapes Of Wrath: The Forgotten Filipinos Who Led A Farmworker Revolution: <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2015/09/16/440861458/grapes-of-wrath-the-forgotten-filipinos-who-led-a-farmworker-revolution>
- *Journey for Justice: The Life of Larry Itliong* by Dawn Mabalon and Gayle Romasanta is a picture book about Itliong
- **Social Studies and Math Integration:** Gloria Gallardo and Cathery Yeh have a fantastic lesson plan in the book *Upper Mathematics Lessons to Explore, Understand, and Respond to Social Injustice* that integrates the history of farmworkers and unjust wages with concepts about place value using the picturebook *Journey for Justice*.
- Primary Source Repositories:
 - Welga Digital Archive: <https://welgadigitalarchive.omeka.net>
 - Walter P. Reuther Library Labor History Collection:
 - Larry Itliong Resources: <https://reuther.wayne.edu/taxonomy/term/804>
 - United Farm Workers: <https://reuther.wayne.edu/taxonomy/term/17>
 - Filipino American National History Society: <http://fanhs-national.org/filam/gallery/>

- UFW and the Delano Grape Strike:
<https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/the-united-farm-workers-and-the-delano-grape-strike>

Images Used:

1. Larry Itliong via Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University
2. Larry Itliong examines a picket line, via Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University
3. Bumper sticker from the grape boycott c. 1970, via Library of Congress