

THE FARM WORKERS' FILIPINO AMERICAN CHAMPION (2/12)

The birth date of Cesar Chavez, the late farm workers' leader, will be celebrated next month, and rightly so. But it's well past time we also celebrated the life of probably the most important of the other leaders who played a major role in winning union rights for farm workers and otherwise helping them combat serious exploitation.

That's Larry Itliong. He died 35 years ago this month at age 63. Itliong got involved in the farm workers' struggle very early in life, not long after he arrived as a 15-year-old immigrant from the Philippine Islands. He was among some 31,000 Filipino men who came to California in the late 1920s.

They migrated throughout the state doing low-paying farm work, isolated from the rest of society and discriminated against because of their race. They were prohibited from marrying Caucasians, from buying land and otherwise integrating into the community at large.

The Filipinos were perhaps the most isolated of the groups of penniless workers that growers imported from abroad. That, however, caused the Filipinos to band closely together. They formed extremely efficient work crews to travel the state under the direction of their own leaders, at times even forming their own unions.

They actually struck – a rarity for farm workers at the time – when grape growers in Southern California's Coachella Valley rejected their pay demands in 1965. The strike was led by Itliong, who was then working for the AFL-CIO's recently-formed Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee. The strikers got what they wanted in just ten days.

Elsewhere, however, the Filipinos were forced to accept growers' terms, initially after brief strikes at several vineyards to the north. But their fortunes changed after they struck grape growers in the Delano area of Kern County, where many Filipinos lived.

Again, they called on Itliong to lead them. He clearly understood the deep anger and frustration that motivated his fellow Filipinos – an understanding based on his own long experience. Soon after he came to California from the Philippines, he turned to farm work and, while still in his teens, was involved in an unsuccessful tomato pickers strike in Washington State.

After that, Itliong traveled up and down California, trying, as he said, "to get a job I could make money on . . . Whatever money I made from one job was not enough for me to live on until I got to the next job." He barely made enough to pay for food and the cigars he seemed to be endlessly chomping. School was out of the question. But Itliong did learn plenty.

Like Chavez, he said he learned that farm workers could not improve their wretched working and living conditions, could not win any rights, if they did not band together to demand decent treatment.

Itliong did not have the intellectual and philosophical bent of Chavez. Nor did he share Chavez' deep distrust of outside unions and their orthodox tactics. But Itliong was as convinced as Chavez of the need for unionization. And the depth of his conviction made Itliong a natural leader among the Filipinos.

He was readily hired as a full-time organizer by the AFL-CIO's Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, eventually leading the strike against Delano grape growers that drew worldwide attention, much of it focused on Chavez.

The vineyard strikers were seeking no more than a pay raise of 15 to 20 cents an hour. But growers refused to negotiate with Itliong and meanwhile evicted strikers from the grower-owned camps where they lived.

Growers relied on animosity between Mexican-American and Filipino workers, caused in large part by the growers' practice of setting up separate camps and work crews for various racial and ethnic groups.

But Chavez, who was then forming a union in Delano for Mexican American workers, did not hesitate when Itliong asked him for help. Chavez felt that his group, then called the National Farm Workers Association, wasn't ready to strike itself, but would honor the picket lines of the striking Filipinos.

Yet if they were to honor the picket lines of Itliong's group, Chavez' members asked, Why not strike themselves? Why not? And so they did.

That became the grape strike of 1965 that drew worldwide attention and support and ultimately led to the unionization, at long last, of California's farm workers. It was Larry Itliong and his Filipino members who started it all, and who played an indispensable role throughout the struggle.

Without them there could not have been a strike. Without them, there could not have been the victory of unionization, without them no right for the incredibly oppressed farm workers to bargain with their employers.

Within a year of the strike's launching, Chavez and Itliong's organizations merged to form what became the widely acclaimed United Farm Workers union – the UFW. Chavez was president, Itliong vice president. Chavez and the UFW's far more numerous Mexican American members were in firm control.

Itliong never really accepted this situation. He finally resigned from the UFW's executive board in 1971. He complained that the union's outnumbered Filipinos "were getting the short end of the stick" from the Anglo lawyers, clergymen and other activists who were Chavez' chief advisors.

Itliong preferred the more orthodox tactics of the AFL-CIO organizing committee, apparently not realizing it was the unorthodox tactics of Chavez' group that finally led to unionization – boycotts, non-violence, use of religious and student groups and all manner of other help from outside the labor movement.

But this is not to detract from the extremely important role Itliong played in bringing farm workers a union of their own. He may not have clearly understood the need for new tactics, but he most certainly understood the paramount need of farm workers for unionization, and the great needs of Filipino Americans generally.

Larry Itliong devoted most of his life to seeing that they got much of what they badly needed.