

Andrew G. Imutan 1965–1974

I joined AWOC, AFL-CIO as a volunteer organizer and fundraiser after hearing Larry Itliong speak about the low wages, bad housing facilities, lack of protection from labor laws, antiquated working conditions, unsanitary working facilities (drinking water and lack of toilets in the field), and a union contract. I could not believe what I was hearing because I thought such poor treatment of workers could not happen in America. But speaker after speaker echoed what Larry said. The more I heard, the angrier and more upset I became. Most of those who attended the meeting at Filipino Community Hall (filled beyond its legal capacity) were men in their 50s and 60s. Some were old enough to be “retired,” had they worked in a different industry—one that provided pensions and benefits. The farmworkers were not protected under Social Security, minimum wage requirements, or any existing labor laws, which other workers have taken for granted for a long, long time. That meeting was in early August of 1965.

After a short discussion, a motion was passed to send letters of demand to growers in Delano, Arvin, and Lamont and to the neighboring grape farms, asking for better wages, better working and living conditions, and recognition of AWOC, AFL-CIO as the sole bargaining unit on behalf of the grape workers. The letters were sent to the growers the following day. They were sent by registered mail with return cards.

In May of 1965, the AWOC members in Coachella, Indio, and the Imperial Valley had gone on strike against the grape growers after their demands for an increase in wages—from \$1.10 to \$1.40 per hour plus 25 cents per box bonus—were refused by the growers. Violence erupted from the start when trucks hauling grape boxes were turned over, scab workers were mauled, and rocks were thrown at cars, breaking windshields. The growers retaliated, inflicting injuries on strikers. Sheriffs called to the scene arrested many strikers. The bail bonds needed to release, temporarily, the strikers from jail and the corresponding lawsuits filed by the growers against the union cost the union a lot of money—money that could have been used to help strikers and the strike in other ways. The costs to the growers were also high because the lack of skilled workers to pick and pack the grapes resulted in a lot of grapes rotting on the vines.

As the strike progressed, harassment from both sides escalated, and the growers' losses became heavier due to unpicked grapes. Finally, the Coachella and Indio growers agreed to the demand of the union and increased wages to \$1.40 per hour plus 25 cents a box. Although the workers got the wages they demanded, it was a hollow victory because the growers did not sign the union contract. The union had to pay for the damages caused by the strikers and most of the charges were dropped in exchange for no written agreement. The growers got away with it once again because of the methods used. Violence to win a strike may result in a shorter strike, but the outcome is unpredictable because violence begets violence and lives may be lost. This strike became very expensive to the union in terms of bail bonds and damages done by strikers to growers' property or scab workers. And if injuries were serious or a death caused, there would be long periods of prison time.

The lessons learned in Coachella were not to be repeated in Delano and vicinities in the strike that followed, but that is getting ahead of the story.

The growers in Delano were adamant in their offer to pay only \$1.20 per hour in wages. Most of the large growers in Coachella were also grape growers in the Delano area and used the same workers. In previous years, what the growers paid in Coachella were the same wages paid in Delano and in some instances, it was even more.

When Larry reported to the members of AWOC during the meeting in late August that the growers had ignored the demand letters sent to them, the workers' response was that of anger and frustration. The noise level rose as so many workers were speaking at the same time, each wanting to be heard.

Larry banged the table to restore order. Everyone quieted down and those who wanted to speak raised their hands. Larry recognized Felicing Ytom and motioned him to go to the microphone in the center of the hall so everyone could hear him. He started to speak in English, but everyone had difficulty in understanding what he was saying until finally someone shouted "speak in Tagalog or Ilocano; we are practically all Filipinos here anyway." There were some Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and other nationalities in attendance who were also members of the union. Someone volunteered to translate everything said into English.

"No, we should not work for \$1.20 per hour that the growers are offering. We just came from Coachella and they have met our demands for \$1.40 plus 25 cents a box bonus. The price of grapes in the markets has gone up to an unprecedented high. We should insist they increase the wages. This time we will also hold out for better working conditions. We need cool water and as there are some women with our crews, we need toilet facilities to give them some privacy."

A crew boss followed, saying, "We should fight for a union contract so that we will have security and protection just like other workers. I have worked for Caratan since he had a small ranch and now he has become tenfold larger and richer while we still remain poor and wanting. They have become what they are today because of us," he said.

"We are now old, we need to retire very soon, but how can we do that when we do not have Social Security coverage or pension plans with the employers we worked for all these years. If we retire now, we will have to go on welfare, how shameful. And because we do not have any of those benefits, which workers in other industries have taken for granted, we have no choice but to continue to work until the day we die. The growers should consider our contribution, in terms of our labor, toward their present affluent status," said another.

"If we had a union contract with the growers when we were still young, we could also be enjoying what other workers have. But since we failed to do so, we need to work even though our bones and bodies are aching," another said.

Larry allowed as many workers as wanted to speak to do so. It took quite a while for those who stood in line to finish with the statements they wanted to convey. When everyone in the line had said his piece, someone suggested that the union give the growers another week to respond. Larry suggested that someone motion to do that. After it was done and seconded, it was passed unanimously.

“Our next meeting will be a week from now on September 1, at 6 p.m., to be exact. We will make our final decision on that day. I hope the growers answer our letters. Will somebody make the motion to that effect?” Larry said.

Lacuesta made a motion to adjourn the meeting and Felicing seconded it. After it was seconded, Larry banged the gavel to adjourn the meeting. People continued congregating in the hallway, discussing the events of the night, and some spoke of their experience in the strike in Coachella. It was late, so I bid Larry goodbye and I went home with so much anticipation of more to come. I predicted the growers would not answer the union’s letters.

September 1, 1965. The meeting was called for 6 o’clock, but by 3 o’clock Filipino Hall was full. There were Filipino, Mexican, Puerto Rican, African American, and a few white farmworkers crowding the space in the hall. More than 80% of them were Filipinos. The workers were noisy and excited because they knew they needed to make a major decision that could affect their lives.

Rumors had spread that the growers did not answer the union’s letters. There were Filipino crew bosses representing more than 30 ranches in and around Delano. Everyone seemed to anticipate the critical situation in need of a solution. If the growers did not give importance to their demands, the workers would need to come up, tonight, with the right decision on what they must do.

It was standing-room only, but more and more workers arrived. They wanted to know whether the rumors were true that the growers had not even had the courtesy to open the letters from their long-time employees. They wanted to be present to hear for themselves the result of the letters sent. They all knew that a strike was probable and they were prepared for what would come. I guess they were just frustrated by the treatment and attitude of the growers. It was a very weird kind of employer-worker relationship that existed between them and the growers because the growers could not even remember their individual names and all of them were called “Boy” by their employers. Many workers were in their 50s or 60s, yet the growers still called them “Boy.”

There was no love lost because no familiarity had ever developed between them. The growers never cared about their workers, only about the grapes that were picked and the profits made after they were sold in the markets in the East Coast. There was no compassion, no consideration, no camaraderie, no feelings of warmth or care coming from the boss you made very rich through your labor from year to year.

When Larry arrived and sat on the chair at the small table in front of the workers, you could read in their faces their impatience to hear what Larry had to say. "Will everyone with a chair please take a seat, and those without may sit on the floor," he kidded. "Thank you for your interest in being present. I think the meeting tonight will be of great interest and importance to everyone. I am asking you to participate in any way you can because whatever the result, it will be of great concern to you, and to the families of those who are married," he continued.

He then got the returned letters, still unopened, and raised them for everyone to see. "The growers ignored our letters of demand for an increase in wages from the present \$1.20 a box to \$1.40 plus 25 cents a box. They gave that rate to us in Coachella, Indio, and the other places in the south, after, as you all know, we struck against them. It took us 10 days before they agreed to our demands there. You have to make your decision what we have to do about it here. Those who want to say something, please raise your hands and as I recognize you, please approach the mike in the middle of the hall," Larry said.

There was some commotion as more than 30 members formed the line to take turns in presenting their views. The first one to speak was Jimmy Aimes, crew boss for Caratan, and he spoke in his dialect. "I suggest we strike them as we did in Coachella. The rate we are asking for is not really very high. In fact, I think we should ask for more," he said.

Bob Armington, also a crew boss, followed. "I believe we are not being treated properly. When they ignored our written demands, it only means they do not respect or care about us. They should realize by now that the workers are no longer satisfied with the very low wages they are giving. We should follow what the Coachella workers did--teach them a lesson again," he said.

George Catalan, a worker, spoke next. "Yes, I think we need to do what the Coachella workers did; it is about time we stand up for our demands for better wages, better living and working conditions, and a union contract," he said.

Speaker after speaker suggested practically the same thing. The crowd became noisy and everybody was trying to say something at the same time. Larry stepped in. "Let us have some order. I do not want you to be unruly. Let us behave properly so we can come up with the right solution to these problems. It seems that all the speakers are recommending that we strike the growers. I am worried about strikes because a strike can cause too much hardship and inconvenience for everyone. The AWOC, AFL-CIO does not have the funds for strike benefits. We all need to sacrifice until the growers agree to give in to our demands. Think about it for a while," Larry said.

The air-conditioning unit was not sufficient to cool the hall because of the many people present. It was getting uncomfortable for the people and you could sense it in the mood they displayed. After a while, a new line formed to speak.

It was Johnny Pader who took the mike. "My crew and I just came back from Coachella and the same thing happened. The growers ignored our demands for an increase in our wages from \$1.20 plus 10 cents a box to \$1.40 plus 25 cents a box bonus. We went on strike and it took us 10 days before the growers agreed to give in to our demands. It was rough all the way but we won it. I believe the growers here who are also growers in Coachella will not want to prolong the strike to 10 days. I think they have learned their lessons there and they will not want to lose money here, too. Ben Gines and Pete Manuel were our leaders there and they did a very good job," he said.

Fred Abad was next. "Maybe we should put this to a vote in order to decide once and for all what we should do," he said.

"If that is what you want, we should ask for a motion to strike the growers because they have continually ignored our demands. Who wants to make the motion?" Larry asked.

"I move that we strike all the table growers in Delano, Arvin, and Lamont or everyone we sent the letters to, for ignoring our written demand," Bob Armington said.

"I second the motion," said Fred Abad.

"I want those in favor to please stand up with your hands raised," thundered Larry into the microphone.

Everyone in that hall stood up with their hands in the air; it was a unanimous decision to call a strike against the grape growers in Delano and vicinity. "We will strike the growers on Monday, September 8. We will meet you at the entrances to your ranches. Okay? Some of you who do not have vehicles could come here and ride with us. There will be cars here. We will have some coffee and doughnuts. Breakfast will be served later. You may go home now and I'll see you on Monday," Larry concluded.

September 8, 1965. At 3 o'clock in the morning, Filipino Hall was already filled with workers. Larry was there to direct the workers. The kitchen was serving coffee and there were doughnuts and bread rolls, and everyone was either eating or drinking coffee. Larry announced that at 3:45, we were leaving for the picket line at different ranches. "Most of the strikers are already at the gates of the ranches where they work. They just walk to the entrances of the camps they were staying in. They will be waiting for us there in different ranches. Let us spread from here and you should go where you are supposed to work. Form moving picket lines at the entrances to the fields," Larry instructed everyone. "We will follow you and we will make sure you are doing right. Do not forget your picket signs." There were plenty of cars parked, waiting to transport the striking workers to the ranches where they worked. By 3:30 in the morning, all of those in the hall had boarded the cars and were ready to leave. More than 3500 farmworkers walked out of the fields, demanding an increase in wages, better working and living conditions, and a union contract in Delano and elsewhere in Kern County, California.

Quite a few were reluctant to picket their own bosses and insisted they would rather picket somebody else's ranch. It was the first day and there was some confusion in regard to the activities and how to conduct a picket line.