

“Clear away the dignitaries! Clear away the dignitaries! The platform is reserved for the *originales!*”

The Mexican-accented voice came over the loudspeaker system, booming out its message to 10,000 people gathered around the steps of the State Capitol in Sacramento on Easter Sunday 1966. The *originales* were the 57 men and women who had made the entire three-week pilgrimage from Delano. The rest of the crowd were people like my wife and I who had joined up with the marchers for a day or two or three.

The “dignitaries” were there, too, in large numbers. That morning we had walked into Sacramento from four miles away and the “dignitaries” were scattered throughout the long line with the bobbing red flags.

And at the Capitol steps, it was like a class reunion of liberals, radicals, and ex-radicals. Even old animosities, political and personal, were submerged, if not forgotten, in the genuine joy we all felt at what was happening on the steps. All of us joined in jeering the name of Governor Brown, who had refused to meet with the marchers that day, preferring to spend it with his family at Frank Sinatra’s home in Palm Springs.

Then, as we heard the Mexican-accented voice coming through the loudspeakers, saying “Clear away the dignitaries! Make room for the *originales!*” we began to understand the true meaning of the march. For many years, since the ’30s, we, the dignitaries, had been the only voice of the farmworkers in California. The bitter, unsuccessful strike against the DiGiorgio farms in the late ’40s had been led by Hank Hasiwar, a New Jersey socialist; H. L. Mitchell of the old Southern Tenant Farmers Union; Ernesto Galarza, who had given up his post with the Pan-American Union to work on behalf of the farmworkers, and a handful of devoted union officials.

But none of us were farmworkers and all through the ’50s and the first few years of the ’60s, we were leaders without followers. The organization to which I belonged, Citizens For Farm Labor, sparked by the indefatigable Ann Draper of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union, numbered on its executive committee representatives from many organizations, active in liberal and radical causes. But when we appeared at hearings to protest the use of braceros, we had to import farmworkers to give body to our group. We spoke on behalf of the farmworkers, but all we could do was make a loud noise, based on our status as “dignitaries” in the community.

Then, slowly, we sensed a change taking place. The Mexican-American organizations, usually reluctant to participate in mass or public action, began to show up on the picket lines we mounted around government buildings. And much more important, we began to hear rumblings in the San Joaquin Valley. Cesar Chavez, whom we had known as a CSO organizer, was building an organization of farmworkers — the National Farm Workers Association — which was unlike the ones we had tried to establish in the ’40s and unlike the ones the AFL-CIO had financed, so grudgingly, in the late ’50s and early ’60s.

We heard new names, too, names like Gil Padilla and Dolores Huerta, and we discovered that they had set new goals for themselves in place of the rather narrow ones we had defined in the struggle for them. We discovered, too, that the new organization was operating independently of the AFL-CIO, while maintaining a close relationship with the Filipino farmworkers in the AFL-CIO’s Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC).

As the NFWA slowly grew, we offered it our help and our public voices. But our advice was not solicited. When we offered it anyway, we were heard out politely, for that is the Mexican-American way, but it was not accepted. We learned quickly that these farmworkers were going to run their organization by themselves, making their own decisions and learning from their own mistakes.

The pilgrimage from Delano grew out of a tough strike against the grape growers of Kern and Tulare counties, begun last September by AWOC but led by Cesar Chavez and the NFWA. They launched a nationwide boycott of Schenley Products, and when Schenley agreed to sign a collective bargaining contract with the NFWA, they followed with a boycott of the products of DiGiorgio, largest grower in the strike zone. Hundreds of groups and individuals all over the country gave their help, but the operation was always run by the NFWA.

It was a new kind of farm strike, a new kind of farm labor movement, which put the *campesinos* in the driver’s seat and the “dignitaries” quite firmly in their place. It is the source of new hope that these most exploited of American workers may one day enjoy the fruits of their labor.

—Paul Jacobs
