

# The Neglected Legend of Dolores Huerta

Dolores Huerta, a largely unsung hero in the fight for farmworkers' rights, is the subject of the new movie, *Dolores*, that recounts her life as a feminist and union organizer, reports Dennis J Bernstein and Miguel Gavilan Molina.

By Dennis J Bernstein and Miguel Gavilan Molina

Peter Bratt's new film *Dolores*, about the life and times of United Farm Workers Co-Founder Dolores Huerta, shows the work of a woman who was way ahead of her time and whose work is right on time for the struggles that working people and all common folks are facing in the age of Donald Trump.

The filmmaker reminds us in a synopsis of the film, "Dolores Huerta is among the most important, yet least known, activists in American history. An equal partner in co-founding the first farm workers unions with Cesar Chavez. ...

"Dolores tirelessly led the fight for racial and labor justice alongside Chavez, becoming one of the most defiant feminists of the twentieth century – and she continues the fight to this day, at 87."

I interviewed Dolores Huerta and filmmaker-director Peter Bratt on September 5. Joining me for the Flashpoints Radio interview was the show's Senior Producer, Miguel Gavilan Molina, an old friend of Huerta, who learned about the United Farm Workers as a child farm worker in "the fields of toil." The film is currently showing in selected theaters across the country.

Dennis Bernstein: Dolores Huerta, [...] I know you want to be out at that rally today [Sept. 5] protesting. We have just seen that President Trump has rescinded DACA [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals], a terrible decision that hurts these kids and their families in so many different ways.

On the same day we hear that some Dreamers were actually killed trying to save people in Houston, a city with roughly 600,000 undocumented people who don't know whether to seek shelter or hide from the people who are supposed to provide that shelter.

DH: What they are saying is that they are going to shoot it over to Congress, in an interesting ploy. Jeff Sessions said that Obama had overextended his authority and had not gone to Congress to get the necessary authority. But actually, throughout history, presidents have made decisions about immigration without going to Congress.

In the next election, every single Congressperson in the House of Representatives has to run for office and because of actions like the recent pardoning of Arpaio, many Latinos are going to be organizing to take out Republicans. So maybe they are going to try to buy favors with the Dreamers.

DB: Sessions talks about the rule of law but here is a man who has literally

made a career of trying to prevent people from voting.

DH: Well, if we all get involved we can take a lot of these Republicans out. We have to build our own wall, a wall of resistance. We have to get justice not only for the Dreamers but for the entire undocumented community.

DB: Amidst all of this, there was a victory in Arizona when a federal judge decided that the ethnic studies program there was a successful, important program that the kids in Tucson deserved to have. The racists there used you as an excuse for cancelling the program.

DH: I think we have to introduce ethnic studies programs into our kindergartens. People are not aware of the contributions to this country made by people of color. Unless we erase the ignorance and the bigotry and the misogyny and the homophobia, we are going to continue to be a country in distress. Children of color are made to feel like second-class citizens while white children feel this sense of entitlement because they have been taught that their ancestors did it all.

DB: They accuse you of hating white people.

DH: We don't hate anybody. We are a movement of love and justice and we are trying to reach those with hatred in their hearts so that they can join us in making a better world.

DB: Miguel, how did you first meet Dolores?

Miguel Gavilan Molina: Marching. When I was twelve years old, my *tio* and a couple of his *compadres* drove down in 1966 to Delano. I didn't know what was going on but I saw that red flag and I saw hundreds of brown Mexicans and no one was looking at the ground! Nobody was beat down from the weight of being poor, of being out there in the fields of misery.

I learned that, first of all, we were human beings, not just farm animals with no rights. I remember working in the fields and running, whenever airplanes flew over. But after that day, we didn't do that anymore. And then every time I heard that Dolores was going to be in the area, I brought our car club to the marches—to Sacramento, to San Francisco, to San Jose.

Dolores was the grandmother of the Chicano movement, she empowered all of us. She gave a voice to Chicanismo and also empowered *la mujer*. My mother was empowered by seeing, for the first time, a brown woman, a Mexicana, speaking for all of us.

DB: Did you think of yourself as a woman out there fighting? Was it daunting? Did people try to stop you?

DH: Fred Ross, Sr., who organized Cesar [Chavez] and myself, taught us that if you can talk to a few people at a time, you are reminding them that they have power to change things in their lives. When you bring them together at house meetings, they look at each other and say, "hey, we do have that power."

DB: In the movie, Cesar Chavez was asked why he chose you to work with him and his answer was “faith, drive, skills, knowledge and willingness to sacrifice.” What was it that drove you?

DH: When people understand that this political world is their world also, they realize that they can participate in that world, can make changes that affect them and their family.

DB: How could you be a mother, an organizer, an activist, a writer of legislation, all at the same time?

DH: You find out what kind of help you need. Like Fred Ross would tell us all the time, you don't have to have all of the answers because along the journey the answers will come to you.

MGM: Going back to the battle for ethnic studies in Arizona, you made a statement that brought the situation to a national level. You said, “Our existence is our resistance.”

DH: I was lucky to be born in the state of New Mexico. My grandfather would tell me the stories about how they took that land from Mexico and how they were treated because they were Hispanics. People want to build a wall? Let's use the 1848 map.

MGM: One of the things covered in the film, which really put the Chicano movement on a national scale, was the grape boycott. It brought awareness to Mexican-Americans as the cultivators and harvesters of the food that feeds the nation, but it also revealed corporate conspiracy with military forces to use violence against a peaceful, nonviolent movement.

We know that there were legendary arguments between you and Cesar Chavez, particularly when the union began complaining that they were breaking the strike by using workers brought directly from Mexico. On the one hand, Cesar didn't want Mexican workers....

DH: Actually, that is not true. From day one, the United Farm Workers has always been the largest organization of undocumented workers. In 1963, when the [Bracero Program](#) ended, they legalized tens of thousands of the Mexican braceros—without the help of Congress, by the way. Cesar and I set to work legalizing as many of these workers as we could, going with our typewriters out in the fields.

When we passed the Agricultural Labor Relations Act, we made sure that undocumented workers were covered by the law and all union benefits were made available to the undocumented. Then we passed the Amnesty Bill, which gave two million farm workers their residency.

MGM: Out in the fields you witnessed police violence. You yourself were the victim of police violence during an action in San Francisco in 1988. Would you say that today brown lives matter?

DH: Of course they do. In Bakersfield, California, where we are organizing at the moment, they have the highest rate of police killings in the country.

We're fighting the school district in Kern County and the school-to-prison pipeline. We just reached a settlement with the Kern County school district which forces them to change their policies and procedures. The way we work is we organize the parents, we organize the people, so that they can do it for themselves.

DB: I think one of the untold stories of the United Farm Workers is that you were on the cutting edge of the environmental movement, highlighting how chemistry was hurting both the farm workers and the consumers of food. But that battle continues. We are [still doing stories](#) about spraying [pesticides] near schools where the kids of farm workers are trying to learn.

Peter Bratt: And it is not just the farmworkers. There is Flint, Michigan, where a mostly African-American population was being poisoned by the water. There is Standing Rock, where oil is being piped through a poor and indigenous community.

DH: We have to put all the issues of environmental poisoning under the Department of Health and Human Services. Take it out of the EPA, take it out of Agriculture. In Bakersfield recently the farmers were being poisoned by a chemical that Trump just took off the restricted list.

DB: Peter Bratt, why did you decide to make this film? You have been working on it for five years.

PB: I wish I could take the credit for making this film, but it was really my brother Carlos Santana. He had the foresight and the wisdom to see the necessity of Dolores' story. There is an urgency today and a lot we can take from her work over the last seven decades.

As we were crisscrossing the country, digging through archives, the Black Lives Matter struggle had already started. I was looking at footage and thinking, my God, this was Black Lives Matter thirty years ago!

DB: What were some of the epiphanies you had making the film?

PB: Just the fact that Dolores lived at the intersection of racial justice, feminism, and environmental justice. Today we talk of intersectionality, of bringing movements together. But people like Cesar and Dolores, Angela Davis and Martin Luther King, they lived it, it grew out of necessity.

DB: Dolores, I want to talk to you about Robert Kennedy. He makes two significant appearances in the film. One was when he appeared at the hunger strike and the second when he was assassinated in Los Angeles. Can you talk about Kennedy's contribution to the work you were doing at that time?

DH: Over the years he was a great supporter. He helped us raise money for our clinics in Delano. We were working on his campaign and we had a lot of hope that we were going to have someone out there fighting for us. The last thing he said before he was killed was that we have a responsibility to our fellow citizens. June of next year will be fifty years since he was assassinated. We have no choice but to go forward. We don't have the luxury of cynicism or disengagement. There are too many people out there depending on us.

DB: You founded the Dolores Huerta Foundation in part to further the ability of women to be a part of the struggle.

DH: Right now we are active in nine different communities, in seven different school districts, trying to make sure that state funds are spent the way they were supposed to be spent, for low-income people, for second-language people. Many of the people we have organized are now sitting on school boards, water boards, city councils.

MGM: Peter, the film that first brought you national acclaim was *Follow Me Home*, which was about the story of Native Americans. You followed this up with a movie that focused on Chicanismo, *La Mission*. And now you've made *Dolores*. I know, Peter, how difficult it is for a Latin American film director to get any kind of support from the industry. What was the biggest obstacle you came up against?

PB: Films like this are not financed in Hollywood. With *La Mission*, it took us four years just to raise the money. With *Follow Me Home*, we actually had to do self-distribution, we hand-carried that film across the country. It is tough as an independent filmmaker but if you also choose as your subject matter Latinos or Chicanos, it is even tougher. You have to love your subject, it has to have deep meaning for you, because it consumes your life and the lives of those around you.

MGM: I'd like to ask you, Dolores, how has the border affected you and your personal life?

DH: We know that hundreds of people have died because of the wall. After all, crossing a border is not a crime. You are not hurting anybody when you cross a border without documents. They have turned it into a crime by deporting people. It is just part of the whole incarceration movement.

These people contribute so much to our society, why do we make them into criminals? It is political. Tom DeLay once said that the reason they don't want to legalize these people is because they vote for the Democrats.

DB: Today [Sept. 5] it was announced that the DACA program has been rescinded. We are already seeing protests across the country.

MGM: As Carlos Santana said a few years ago, concerning this issue of immigration, we are all Mexicans. Here in California, everybody is coming together, they are saying, "We are all DACA students." It is making clear that this movement is not just a Mexican thing, it is a human rights issue. It is a question of racial justice.

DH: We have to remind people about [SB-54](#) [the California Values Act], to send an email to the governor's office asking him to sign this into law. Sheriffs are putting a lot of pressure on Governor [Jerry] Brown to water down the bill.

MGM: Well, there is a problem with that, Dolores, and that is that one of the strongest unions here in California, the Correctional Officers and Police Union, has been putting a lot of pressure on Brown. I am not very comfortable

with Jerry. It took a lot of pressure last year to get him to sign some of those bills.

DB: Let's talk about the Foundation and your mission to inspire young women to get engaged. Talk about some of the women you have already worked with and how you plan to make sure that the work continues.

DH: Basically, we create leadership in the communities and the majority of them turn out to be women who are actually doing the work out there. It is a no-fail way to create leadership that Fred Ross, Sr. taught us.

The only problem is that people don't quite understand that this takes time. It takes time for the leaders to emerge. We go into communities and give them the tools to form organizations.

One woman with very limited English, together with her husband, got a bond issue passed to build a new gymnasium at their middle school. Then she got elected to the school board and got the principal fired for wanting to end the breakfast program. Later she found out that the person they had hired to manage the water district was guilty of embezzlement so she got rid of him. These people are hotel workers, construction workers, farm workers, but they get elected to these boards and start doing the work of governing for the people.

In addition, we support voting efforts and civic engagement. We have an LGBT project because we know that there is a lot of discrimination, especially against transgender youth and adults. We also have a health program, to get people to exercise and eat more nutritious foods. The reason we can take on so many projects is that we build a base of a hundred or so people and then they all form different committees and take on the issues.

DB: It is incredibly frustrating if you are a woman and you have worked so hard on a project and just when it is about to see the light of day some man walks in and takes the credit.

DH: As Coretta Scott King said, we will never have peace in the world until women take power. If you see a board and there are no women on that board, they are going to make poor decisions. We saw that with these senators who were trying to repeal the healthcare bill. There were two Republican women who said there was no way they could vote for that. And who did the media give credit to? John McCain.

DB: It takes courage to get up and speak in front of people.

DH: One of the things we tell all our people is that they are going to have to speak in front of school boards, city councils. We have them practice and write down notes about what they are going to say, and that is how they eventually overcome their fears.

DB: A poetry teacher of mine once wrote, "What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open." Indeed, that is the case with our guest today, Dolores Huerta.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of [Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom](#). You can access the audio archives at [www.flashpoints.net](http://www.flashpoints.net).