

Philip Vera Cruz & Modesto “Larry” Dulay Itliong - Filipino American Labor Leaders and Civil Rights Activists

By Trish Weaver

Although a decade apart, both Philip Vera Cruz and Modesto “Larry” Duly Itliong were born in the Philippines and then came to the United States when they were young men. Upon immigrating to the US, Vera Cruz and Itliong began working as laborers in various industries and experienced the terrible working conditions and deplorable treatment suffered by migrant workers, particularly Filipino and Mexican farmworkers.

Both men became influential labor organizers, co-founding the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, and leaders in the Asian American movement. In 1965, Vera Cruz and Itliong organized an effort known as the “Delano grape strike,” where they led workers to walk off the farms of California table grape growers, demanding wages equal to the federal minimum wage. While the farm owners were accustomed to breaking a Filipino worker strike by employing Mexican workers as replacements (and vice versa when Mexican workers went on strike), the Delano grape strike was the first time that Mexican workers – lead by Cesar Chavez – and Filipino workers joined in solidarity on the picket line. Vera Cruz and Itliong were instrumental in forming this workers’ alliance.

The Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, led by Vera Cruz and Itliong, joined forces with the National Farm Workers Association, led by Chavez and Dolores Huerta, and became the United Farm Workers (UFW), which continued the Delano grape strike for **five years**. The UFW also employed other grassroots strategies such as consumer boycotts, marches and non-violent resistance and ultimately secured a collective bargaining agreement that gave them the increase in pay they sought.

In 1974, Vera Cruz and Itliong were also instrumental in establishing Agbayani Village, a retirement complex for older Filipino farm workers who had immigrated to California during the 1920s and 1930s. Racially discriminatory laws in place at that time prevented these Filipino men from marrying outside of their race and as a result, a majority of the workers were unable to establish families since very few Filipino women had migrated to the United States during that time period. Consequently, by the time those workers became elderly in the 1960s and 1970s, many of them were destitute and had no family members to help support or care for them. Agbayani Village was created to ensure that these men would have somewhere to turn for assistance in their old age.

We recognize and applaud the tremendous work of Vera Cruz and Itliong – organizing and fighting the deplorable treatment of these essential workers, whose labors filled American dinner tables.