

# The United Farm Workers Movement through Music and Poetry

## OVERVIEW

### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

Who is Dolores Huerta, what role did she play in the United Farm Workers movement, and how is she recognized today?

### OVERVIEW

*In this lesson, students will examine the lyrics and context surrounding Nikki Darling’s poem, “A Street Called Dolores Huerta” and Alice Bag’s song of the same name. Students will use the work of these artists as a lens through which to consider the importance of the United Farm Workers movement and to discuss the legacy of Dolores Huerta, one of the movement’s central figures.*



Migrant labor has been essential for the agricultural industry in western states such as California, Oregon, Washington, Arizona, or New Mexico. In the 20th century, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and Mexican immigrants performed much of the agricultural work in the western United States. The Bracero Program alone brought 5 million Mexican workers to the U.S. from 1942 to 1964 in an effort to solve labor shortages caused by World War II. Agricultural work was low-paid, physically demanding, and dangerous. The workers and their families lived in poverty and lacked educational opportunities. They faced violence and discrimination when they sought fair treatment and reasonable living conditions.

Cesár Chávez (1927-1993) and Dolores Huerta (1930-) were the children of agricultural workers and were familiar with the challenges they faced. Chávez had even dropped out of school in the 8th grade in order to work to support his family. Both Chávez and Huerta were deeply committed to community organizing and fighting social and economic injustice. Together, in 1962 they launched the union that became known as the United Farm Workers to establish better pay and working conditions. The UFW understood that although the workers were very poor, they were able to wield significant power at the ballot box, through grassroots organization, and through boycotts. Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, the UFW made great gains for workers’ rights by establishing disability insurance for farmworkers, fighting the use of dangerous pesticides, raising wages, and eventually passing the Agricultural Labor Relations Act of 1975, which granted farmworkers the right to collectively organize. The farmworkers’ movement became so influential that Miriam Powell called it “the civil rights movement of the West.”

One of the most successful boycotts was the National Boycott of California Table Grapes, which began as a Filipino workers' strike in 1965. To support the strike, the UFW organized a boycott of table grapes. Dolores Huerta's organizational skills were instrumental to this effort. She led picket lines and traveled to cities across the country to publicize the boycott and encourage the public not to buy grapes without union labels. The cause was boosted by the Civil Rights movement, which had increased public awareness regarding lowered standards of living for victims of racism and prejudice. Civil rights organizations, faith groups, student activists, and even politicians such as Robert F. Kennedy brought attention to the UFW's cause. Soon, millions of consumers had joined the boycott and stopped buying table grapes. As a result, grape growers signed the first union contracts and brought social justice to agricultural labor. Yet while the United Farm Workers movement vastly improved working conditions, agricultural workers today still face low pay and high levels of discrimination and violence. They are still predominantly migrant workers and are often exploited by their employers, who ignore labor laws and fair practices.

Dolores Huerta faced particular challenges as a woman in the predominantly male space of politics. For Huerta, fighting for gender equality was just as important as fighting for social and economic equality. Huerta fought gender discrimination within the UFW, where women were often constrained by the traditional views and gender expectations of their fathers or husbands. Huerta advocated for the participation of the entire family in the movement. After all, she argued, men, women, and children worked in the fields together. Following Huerta, women devoted their efforts to organizing at a grassroots level by joining the picket lines, organizing marches and boycotts, rallying for changes to legislation and policy, and registering Latinos to vote. Many of the tactics that the UFW pioneered have been adapted by other groups, from environmentalists to advocates for immigrants' rights. Huerta's slogan, *¡Si, se puede!* (Yes, we can!), was even adopted by President Barack Obama in his presidential campaign.

Music played a central role in the grassroots efforts of the UFW. Songs provided a sense of community and connection for the movement, as the workers would sing at union meetings and as they marched or stood on the picket line. Some of the songs, such as "De Colores" or "Solidarity Forever," were traditional Spanish and American folk songs. Other songs, such as "El Picket Sign," were written expressly for the movement by the Teatro Campesino, the cultural arm of the United Farm Workers. Music has also played a role in commemorating the movement and in recognizing Huerta's important contributions over sixty years of activism.

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The historical conditions that led to the United Farm Workers' struggle for labor rights
- The significance of the United Farm Workers movement as a historical event
- The role of women in the United Farm Workers movement and the role played by Dolores Huerta in particular
- How these historical events and figures are recognized and remembered today
- The role music played in the United Farm Workers movement

### 2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to describe the ways in which the United Farm Workers movement and Dolores Huerta have contributed to contemporary Civil Rights issues and to the feminist movement by examining how poetry and music by Diana Garcia, Nikki Darling, and Alice Bag reflect the movement and its figures. Students will also draw connections between the songs and poems and contemporary struggles for the recognition of marginalized groups.

## ACTIVITIES

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Show **Image 1, Dolores Huerta** and ask students if they recognize the woman in the photo. Inform students that she is Dolores Huerta, a civil rights activist who fights for workers' rights, women's rights, and Latinx rights.
2. Pass out **Handout - A Street Called Dolores Huerta, Nikki Darling**. After reading the piece individually or as a class, ask students:
  - What is the name of the street you live on? Are the streets in your neighborhood or town named after a person? Is your school named after a person? Who are they named after? Make a list as a group.
  - Why does the author think it is necessary to name a street after Dolores Huerta?
  - The author imagines a street called Dolores Huerta. Why does the author think that this street would have potholes?
3. Show students **Clip 1, "A Street Called Dolores Huerta."** Ask students:
  - Compare Darling's poem with Alice Bag's performance. What changes did Alice Bag make?

- Does the music remind you of any other type of music you have heard or seen? Why might this type of music be appropriate for Nikki Darling’s poem? (*Note that the musicians accompanying Bag are Trio La Victoria, a group inspired by traditional Mexican Mariachi music.*)
- Why do you think Dolores Huerta is inspirational for these artists?

## PROCEDURE

1. To understand the historical context of the United Farm Workers (UFW), show students this video (from 0:20-3:48) from the PBS Series *Latino Americans* (<https://www.pbs.org/video/latino-americans-farmworkers-strike/>). Ask students:
  - Based on what you saw in the clip, what were the conditions like for farmworkers? Make a list of the hardships that they faced.
  - Who was César Chávez?
  - Who was Dolores Huerta?
  - What is a union and why did Chávez and Huerta decide to form one? How might a union help the situation of the agricultural workers?
  - What personal challenges did Huerta face?
  - What is a strike/*huelga*? Why did the workers strike?
  - What symbols did the UFW use?
  - What symbols did the UFW use? Why did the UFW use Mexican and indigenous symbols and create signs and songs in Spanish? What did these symbols mean to the farmworkers?
  - Describe the roles that Huerta and Chávez each took in the struggle for workers’ rights. How do you think gender played a role in how Huerta was perceived and treated?
  - What did the UFW achieve or gain with their actions such as the march to Sacramento? Explain how their movement and tactics might have led to these changes and accomplishments.
2. Show students this video (from 12:07-15:02), from the same PBS series (<https://www.pbs.org/video/latino-americans-farmworkers-strike/>), of the UFW organized strike (*huelga*). This clip contains the song “El Picket Sign” by Luis Valdez and the Teatro Campesino, the cultural arm of the UFW. Ask students:
  - The UFW followed principles of non-violence in their protests and actions. Can you describe the actions that the United Farm Workers took to support and publicize the farmworkers’ cause?
3. Pass out **Handout - “El Picket Sign” Lyrics**. Read the lyrics aloud as a class, then ask students:
  - What is being described in this song?
  - What is this song advocating? Why might the song advocate that “the strike is good for everybody”?
  - Based on what you’ve learned so far, who might “Pagarulo” and “The Zaninoviches” be? (*Pagarulo and*

*Zaninovich were prominent grape growers around Delano, California.)*

- The lyrics refer to Benito Juárez, the first Indigenous President of Mexico, and Emiliano Zapata, who led a peasant revolution in Mexico in the early 20th century. What role do these figures play in the song? Why might have they been included?
  - What role might have singing “El Picket Sign” played for workers striking or considering a strike?
4. Pass out **Handout - Huelga, Diana García**. Individually or in groups, ask students to read the handout. Then, ask students to draw a picture based on the description in the poem.
  5. Show students **Image 2, “Huelga,”** and tell them that the photograph displayed is the one that the poem describes. Ask students to compare their drawing to the photograph. Then ask:
    - How do the poem and the photograph portray Huerta? Make a list of her characteristics.
  6. Split students into groups, and give each group **Handout - Dolores Huerta Interview**. Have students read the interview as a group (alternatively, they can listen to the interview). Then ask student groups:
    - Why does Huerta think that people don’t want to get involved?
    - According to Huerta, what is the difference between mobilizing and organizing? What examples does she give for each activity?
    - Huerta argues that it is important for everyone to be involved. Who specifically does she mention in this interview? Can you think of other groups that should be included in politics and activism in your community?
    - Why is it important for marginalized or underrepresented voices in the community to be heard? How can we give space and center marginalized folks in movements?
    - Why do you think it is important for working class people from marginalized groups and backgrounds to be represented and hold positions of power in politics, government, and in

## SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Tell students that Nikki Darling’s poem and Alice Bag’s performance from the Motivational Activity led to the inauguration of Dolores Huerta Square in East Los Angeles. Ask students:
  - Why are street names important? What can street names tell us about historical events or people? What is the relationship between a person and a street named after them?
  - In many regions of the United States, streets are named for powerful figures who committed violent acts and were involved in atrocities such as slavery, white supremacy, or colonization. How might living on or near one of these streets feel for the marginalized communities that still bear the effects of these historical traumas? What should local governments do about this?



## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES?

1. Use the list of the street names you made in class or use a map of your city or town. Research who the streets are named for and make a list of how many are named for men and how many are named for women. What other groups are represented? For example, are there streets named for people of color, indigenous people, or immigrants? Next, choose a person that you admire. Write a letter to your local city council person arguing why you think a street should be named after the person you chose.
2. While the United Farm Workers movement achieved a great deal, some of these gains have been lost and there is still work to be done. What challenges and injustices do farm workers still face today? Research recent activism efforts for farm workers and compare and contrast these with the actions of the United Farm Workers movement discussed in this lesson. You may consider the Milk with Dignity (<https://milkwithdignity.org/>) campaign organized by Migrant Justice (<https://migrantjustice.net/>), the Driscoll Berry Boycott organized by Familias Unidas por la Justicia (<http://familiasunidasjusticia.org/en/home/>), or the recent strikes that were supported by the UFW (<https://ufw.org/>) following the outbreak of COVID-19 on California pistachio farms.



## STANDARDS

### COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (K-12)*

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Reading 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Reading 3: Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Craft and Structure 4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

Craft and Structure 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 8: Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity 10: Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing (K-12)*

Text Types and Purposes 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Text Types and Purposes 2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.



Production and Distribution of Writing 4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge 7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge 8: Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language (K-12)*

Language 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

Language 2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)*

Speaking and Listening 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Speaking and Listening 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Comprehension & Collaboration 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

Presentation of Knowledge 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.





## **SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)**

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

Theme 7: Production, Distributions, and Consumption

Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices

## **NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION**

### *Core Music Standard: Responding*

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

### *Core Music Standard: Connecting*

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

## **NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS**

### *Responding*

Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard 8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Anchor Standard 9: Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

### *Connecting*

Anchor Standard 10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

Anchor Standards 11: Relate artistic ideas and work with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.



## RESOURCES

### VIDEOS

- “A Street Called Dolores Huerta.”

### HANDOUTS

- Handout - *A Street Called Dolores Huerta*, Nikki Darling
- Handout - “El Picket Sign” Lyrics
- Handout - *Huelga*, Diana García
- Handout - Dolores Huerta Interview