

# **JOURNEY FOR JUSTICE** **THE LIFE OF LARRY ITLIONG**



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**Solidarity Stories from Asian American and Pacific Islander  
Community Leaders, Asian American Leaders Table**

Gayle Romasanta

# Introduction

**“I feel we have the same rights as any of them because in that Constitution, it said that everybody has equal rights and justice. You’ve got to make that come about. They’re not going to give it to you.”**

This quote is from Filipino American labor organizer and leader [Larry Itliong](#), who organized Filipino migrant workers (known as the Manongs) on the West Coast for many decades. Itliong was pivotal in bringing Filipino and Mexican farm workers together with the leadership of Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and others during the Great Delano Grape Strike in California from 1965-1970. While that strike was largely successful and launched Chavez and the United Farm Workers into the national spotlight, the story of Larry Itliong and the Filipino workers who comprised the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), are less well known.

One person who has been lifting up Itliong’s story and the history of Filipino American farm workers is Gayle Romasanta, a writer, publisher, and artist who grew up in Itliong’s hometown of Stockton. In 2018, she wrote [Journey for Justice: The Life of Larry Itliong](#) along with historian Dr. Dawn Bohulano Mabalon and illustrator Andre Sibayan. By recording and sharing her community’s history, Gayle sees opportunities for Filipino Americans today to get engaged to advocate for themselves and in solidarity with others.

# Takeaways

## 1. Solidarity means building power.

Larry Itliong and AWOC's efforts during the [Delano Grape Strike of 1965](#) illustrate both the power of solidarity and the deep tensions that exist when bringing communities together.

The partnership between Filipino and Mexican farm workers was initiated by Itliong, who reached out to Cesar Chavez to call for unity between their groups in the Delano strike.

By that point, Itliong and the Manongs had been working and organizing in the fields or canneries for 40 years. Most of the Filipino workers were older men, and many had previously protested, picketed, and gone on strike to demand higher wages and collective bargaining rights. Itliong was a seasoned farm labor organizer with AWOC and had traveled up and down the West Coast organizing workers. In too many cases, he had seen workers undermine each other's demands by being brought in to break each other's strikes. Itliong could see this playing out again in the Delano Strike, so he reached out to Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) to organize a unified strike.

Chavez was initially unsure if his group was ready to join the effort, but he and Huerta made the case to their members. Mexican

and Filipino workers met together at Filipino Hall, in Delano, California, the headquarters of the strike, forging important connections between their memberships. "This was the first time that they were eating together and sharing their food," Gayle explained. "There was a lot of sharing and solidarity."

Ultimately, the Filipino and Mexican unions merged to form the [United Farm Workers](#) (UFW), with Cesar Chavez as the director and Larry Itliong as the assistant director. The strike lasted for five years, garnering major media attention nationally. In 1970, the workers won their demands including increased pay, medical insurance, and controls over toxic pesticides. Itliong was one of the representatives who signed the new contract. It was a major success for the worker rights movement.

## 2. Solidarity means building capacity to navigate tension.

"We didn't want to do anything without local organizers there. We needed to understand the terrain, what was going on there with law enforcement and the military, and we needed to work with local partners," Mike explains. Solidarity practice is never easy. Conflicts often emerge, especially in the midst of difficult campaigns. Building our capacity to address tension in a generative - rather than destructive - manner is a skill that comes with solidarity practice.

# Takeaways

Gayle explains that while the farmworkers' strike was successful, real tensions and even bitterness emerged within the merged UFW union. Filipino workers began to wonder whether there was a benefit to merging the NFWA, a membership association, largely made up of Mexican families, with AWOC, a predominantly Filipino yet diverse union who was part of the powerful nationwide federation of unions, AFLO-CIO (American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations) Many Filipinos felt they would be better served if they stayed separate.

According to Gayle, Itliong also began to wonder whether the UFW belonged to everyone or whether it had become Chavez's union. One factor was that the national media coverage did not put Filipinos, or any of the other workers who were part of the campaign, in the spotlight.

"You don't see Filipinos at all during that time and throughout these years, you're not hearing about them," Gayle explains. Perhaps, Gayle surmises, it was because Filipino workers had accents, or because they were older workers, or because they didn't want to feature leaders like Itliong, who had lost three fingers in a cannery accident.

Decades later, Filipinos in Stockton and Delano are still hurt about how these

dynamics played out. They felt excluded from the story of the strike altogether. Many elders who lived through those times have not forgotten what happened, explains Gayle. But there's also a broader community of Filipino Americans who never learned about Filipino involvement in the Delano Grape Strike at all – because it wasn't covered at the time and has not been taught in history books.

"I went and traveled around the country bringing this history to Filipino communities, and in the community in Houston, the nurses were crying when we had this talk because they could remember the news reports of the Grape Strike in California, but didn't know about Filipino involvement," Gayle shares. "They said had they known that there were Filipinos actually in this protest, they would have sent their nurses there, they would have sent supplies, they would have sent everything, and they were crying because they did not know."

### 3. Learn from history to deepen solidarity today.

To Gayle, the core message of unity and solidarity that Itliong strived for is still meaningful and worthwhile. She recognizes that her community needs both healing and a critical lens to understand this historical story.

# Takeaways

“When we’re doing solidarity work, we have to also understand and look at concretely what could have been better or what didn’t happen. Do we also marginalize other folks in this movement in making this movement bigger, more marketable?” Gayle asks.

In California, legislation has passed to require schools to teach the history of the Filipino workers as part of the Delano Grape Strike. October 25, Itliong’s birthday, is now also designated Larry Itliong Day in California to commemorate his leadership and this history.

“We have so much history that we can mine, and I really do think when we do solidarity building, history is absolutely important,” Gayle said.

# Your Turn

## Your Turn

What examples of solidarity from history do you look back to in your community? What went well during that time, and what did not go well? How are the conditions from that time similar or different from now?

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What are important aspects of shared leadership in solidarity practice? How does visibility, representation, and decision-making impact the distribution of power in a coalition?

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How does your community record and share your history? How is it passed down to younger generations? Why do you think solidarity histories are not shared?

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*Some quotes in this article have been edited for clarity.*