



Understanding Impact

Larry Itliong: A Forgotten Fighter for Farmworker Justice

Historical Context

Larry Itliong was a Filipino-American labor organizer who played a key role in the farmworker rights movement. He was born in the Philippines in 1913 and immigrated to the United States in 1929, during the Great Depression. Like many other immigrants, he came looking for opportunity but instead found poor working conditions, racism, and low wages. He spent years working in salmon canneries in Alaska and picking crops in California, where conditions were harsh and workers were often treated unfairly. Because of his background as a poor, nonwhite laborer, Itliong faced discrimination, but he also saw how powerful workers could be if they came together. He started organizing in the 1930s and helped found the Filipino Farm Labor Union in the 1950s. By 1965, he was a well-known labor leader and led a major protest called the Delano Grape Strike, where Filipino grape workers demanded better pay and treatment. Knowing they would be stronger together, Itliong reached out to César Chávez, who led a group of mostly Mexican farmworkers. Their decision to join forces was historic. In 1966, this partnership led to the creation of the United Farm Workers (UFW), a union that brought Filipino, Mexican, and other Latino workers together under one organization. The UFW became a powerful voice for farmworkers across the country. Itliong served as one of its key leaders and helped organize strikes, marches, and boycotts that pressured companies to sign contracts giving workers better wages, safer working conditions, and the right to form unions. Itliong's work with the UFW showed how different racial and ethnic groups could unite for a common goal, even when employers tried to keep them apart. The UFW's success came from this solidarity and helped bring national attention to the struggles of farmworkers, many of whom were immigrants or people of color. Although César Chávez became the most recognized figure from the UFW, Itliong's leadership was just as important. He later left the UFW in 1971 but continued to fight for the rights of Filipino-American workers until his death in 1977. Larry Itliong's story is often left out of textbooks, but he was a vital part of American labor history and made a lasting impact. He helped build a more unified, powerful labor movement and proved that farmworkers regardless of their race or background deserve dignity, fair treatment, and a voice.

Connection to Habit

Larry Itliong's leadership in the farmworker movement shows how the actions of one individual can have both immediate and lasting impact. His influence in uniting Filipino and Mexican workers during the Delano Grape Strike helped form the United Farm Workers (UFW), a labor union that improved the lives of thousands of farmworkers across the country. By organizing across racial lines and demanding dignity for some of the most marginalized laborers in the United States, Itliong helped spark a movement for economic and racial justice that continues to influence labor organizing today. His impact reminds us that change is not inevitable; it comes from the courage and choices of everyday people.

Discussion Questions

- What motivated Larry Itliong to become a labor organizer, and how did his background as a Filipino immigrant shape his activism?
- Why was the Delano Grape Strike a turning point in the farmworker movement, and what role did Itliong play in starting it?
- How did Larry Itliong's efforts to unite Filipino and Mexican workers challenge the divisions often used by employers?
- In what ways did the formation of the United Farm Workers (UFW) change labor organizing in the United States?
- Why do you think Larry Itliong is less well-known than César Chávez, even though both were important leaders?
- What are some unintended or lasting effects of Itliong's activism for today's labor or immigrant rights movements?
- How can we better honor and learn from the contributions of leaders like Larry Itliong in classrooms and communities today?

Suggested Activity

Materials:

- Printed or digital copies of the quotes and sheets of the historical context
- [Farmworker Justice Quotes](#)
- Chart paper
- Sticky notes

Step One: Historical Context [5 mins]

Give students or read the historical context aloud to introduce Larry Itliong's role in labor organizing. It mentions his immigrant background, experience with racism and poverty, emphasis on multinational unity, and the launch of the Delano Grape Strike.

Step Two: Quote Analysis Carousel [30-35 mins]

Post large sheets of paper around the room with these headings:

- Impact on Filipino Workers
- Impact on Mexican Workers
- Impact on Labor Rights in America
- Unintended Consequences of the Strike

Students rotate around the room in small groups and add sticky notes to each chart paper based on their analysis of the quotes, using the questions provided and historical context as a guide. Encourage them to think about both short-term and long-term impact.

Step Three: Whole Class Debrief [10 mins]

Bring the class back together and ask:

- How did Larry Itliong's actions show that impact can come from people society often overlooks?
- How did race and class influence both the visibility and erasure of workers like Larry Itliong and others?
- What lessons about solidarity and power can we take from these different voices today?
- What kind of impact do you think Larry hoped for in saying, "We have to do this for ourselves and for the others too"?

Primary Source

Farmworker Justice Quotes and Guiding Questions

Impact on Filipino Workers Quotes

1. “We are underpaid and underfed. We live in houses not fit for animals. We work 10 hours for \$1 an hour, sometimes less. And yet, they expect us to be grateful. That is why we walked out.” — Statement from Filipino grape workers during the Delano Grape Strike, 1965 (AWOC archives)
2. “I told [Chávez] that if we didn’t strike, we’re gonna die. We’re gonna die anyway. We’re Filipino workers. No one speaks for us. That’s why we have to do this for ourselves—and for the others too.” — Larry Itliong, reflecting on the start of the Delano Grape Strike

Guiding Questions:

- What working conditions are being described here?
- How did the strike give Filipino workers power or visibility?
- What short-term and long-term changes came from their action?

Impact on Mexican Workers Quotes

1. “The Filipinos started the strike, and we respected it. We knew we had to stand with them, because they had stood with us before. It wasn’t just about grapes—it was about dignity.” — Dolores Huerta, co-founder of the United Farm Workers, interview with La Causa oral history project
2. “We were all hungry. We were all poor. We needed to come together if we wanted to win.” — Larry Itliong, reflecting on the start of the Delano Grape Strike

Guiding Questions:

- What does this quote tell you about the relationship between Filipino and Mexican workers?
- How did cross-racial solidarity affect the power of the strike?
- What does this reveal about the larger meaning of the movement?

Primary Source

Farmworker Justice Quotes and Guiding Questions

Impact on Labor Rights in America Quotes

- “This is the beginning of a new day for farmworkers in America. We want union contracts. We want the right to organize. We want clean drinking water, rest breaks, and bathrooms in the fields.” — César Chávez, public speech during the UFW’s national boycott, 1966
- “The Constitution said that everybody has equal rights and justice. You have to make that come about. They are not going to give it to you.” — Larry Itliong, as quoted in an interview

Guiding Questions:

- What labor rights are being demanded here?
- How did the UFW help change national conversations about agricultural labor?
- What impact did the strike have beyond California?

Unintended Consequences of the Strike Quotes

- “The Mexicans got credit. The union got credit. But where are the names of the Filipino men who started it? That is what hurts the most—we were part of it, but we were forgotten.” — Philip Vera Cruz, Filipino UFW vice president, in a 1977 oral history interview
- “I feel we are just as good as any of them. I feel we have the same rights as any of them.” — Larry Itliong, 1976 speech

Guiding Questions:

- What unintended consequence is this speaker highlighting?
- How can impact be felt even when people are left out of the historical narrative?
- Why is it important to revisit who gets remembered in movements for justice?