

Dolores Huerta Day

By

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Dolores Clara Fernández Huerta, born April 10, 1930, in Dawson, New Mexico, stands among the most influential labor and civil-rights leaders in American history. Raised in Stockton, California, by a single mother, she witnessed firsthand the struggles of farmworker families children arriving hungry or barefoot to her classroom, parents living in precarious homes, and entire communities marginalized by race, poverty, and political exclusion. According to the National Park Service, these experiences convinced her that organizing workers would have a greater impact than educating their children. When Dolores Huerta Day is observed each year on April 10, it is not merely a commemoration of a life, but a recognition of an ongoing movement a legacy rooted in decades of grassroots organizing, nonviolent protest, and transformative labor victories. Her work with the United Farm Workers (UFW), her continued commitment through the Dolores Huerta Foundation, and her impact in communities such as Santa Clara County and Gilroy all make April 10 a living symbol of struggle and hope.

April 10 was officially designated as Dolores Huerta Day by California Assembly Bill 2644, authored by Assemblymember Eloise Gómez Reyes, which was chaptered in 2018. The law added Section 37222.20 to the Education Code, encouraging public schools and educational institutions to hold exercises remembering her life, recognizing her accomplishments, and educating students about her contributions. It also added a requirement to the Government Code for the governor to issue an annual proclamation declaring April 10 as Dolores Huerta Day.

Since then, successive governors have issued proclamations. Governor Gavin Newsom made the first state proclamation on April 10, 2019, declaring that date as “the first annual Dolores Huerta Day” in California. He reaffirmed it again in later years, including a proclamation on April 10, 2021. Acting Governor Eleni Kounalakis issued proclamations on April 10, 2024, and again on April 10, 2025, formally recognizing her ongoing influence and service.

On the legislative side, Senate Concurrent Resolution 57 (SCR 57), authored by Senator Eloise Gómez Reyes, was chaptered in 2025. That resolution proclaims April 10, 2025, as Dolores Huerta Day in California and explicitly encourages all public schools and educational institutions to conduct exercises remembering her contributions.

Huerta's path to labor organizing began in her work with the Community Service Organization (CSO), where she met César Chávez. The CSO, a Mexican American civil-rights group, taught her both the tactics of political mobilization and the importance of self-determination. In 1962, she and Chávez co-founded the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), later merging in 1966 with the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) then led by Filipino labor organizer Larry Itliong to form the United Farm Workers (UFW). This merger was not just structural: it signaled a multiracial alliance of Mexican, Filipino, Black, and Chicano workers united in the struggle for dignity.

One of the defining chapters of Huerta's UFW organizing was the Delano grape strike (1965–1970), a historic labor action that helped redefine farm labor rights in the United States. On September 8, 1965, thousands of Filipino workers affiliated with AWOC struck grape fields in Delano over low wages and deplorable working conditions. At a meeting just days later, Huerta and Chávez guided the NFWA to formally join the strike, unifying the movement. Over the next years, the UFW maintained pressure through nonviolent protests, community organizing, and a national consumer boycott of table grapes that garnered broad support.

During negotiations that followed the strike, Huerta played a vital role. She helped secure the UFW's first contracts with growers such as Schenley, Gallo, and Franzia. These agreements included wage increases, health benefits, and important protections: in particular, there were provisions addressing pesticide exposure, a major hazard for field workers at the time. Her negotiation skills were instrumental in transforming the union's pressure campaign into real economic and structural gains. Beyond contract bargaining, Huerta championed legislative change. She lobbied tirelessly for the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act of 1975, one of the first laws granting collective bargaining rights to farm workers, an achievement that would have been impossible without the moral and political leverage her organizing provided. In the 1980s, she also co-founded UFW's radio station, creating a platform for farmworker voices and bringing attention to issues like health, immigration, and pesticide safety. Her activism considered the intersectionality of farmworker life: she recognized how race, gender, and class intersected to shape the needs and vulnerabilities of agricultural laborers. Huerta remained vice president of the UFW for decades, sustaining her involvement even as the movement evolved. Her perseverance helped build institutional structures hiring halls, health clinics, credit unions that allowed farm workers not only to organize, but to build economic stability.

While much of Huerta's union work happened in California's Central Valley, her influence and legacy reach deeply into Santa Clara County, including Gilroy, an area historically tied to agriculture. In January 2023, the Gilroy Library hosted the Smithsonian

traveling exhibit “Dolores Huerta: Revolution in the Fields.” The exhibit traced Huerta’s life, from her childhood and CSO activism through the UFW grape strikes, and featured bilingual materials, historic photos, and a panel discussion with Huerta, filmmaker Luis Valdez, and author Francisco Jiménez. The exhibit’s impact was deeply personal for many in Gilroy. Gilroy branch librarian Elizabeth Muñoz-Rosas shared that her father had once worked in the fields; he met Huerta decades earlier when UFW organizers walked those very fields, and her words inspired him to believe in a different future. In recognition of Huerta’s role in protecting farmworker health, especially her activism around pesticide exposure — the Santa Clara County Board of Education passed a resolution honoring her. Resolution No. 2296-3 explicitly cites her UFW work, noting her advocacy for worker protection, pesticide use reform, and immigrant rights. This local acknowledgment underscores how Huerta’s national organizing continues to resonate in communities shaped by agriculture.

Dolores Huerta’s commitment did not end with her union work. In 2002, she founded the Dolores Huerta Foundation (DHF), channeling her decades of organizing experience into building grassroots leadership and community resilience. The Foundation’s mission is to “inspire and organize communities to build volunteer organizations empowered to pursue social justice.” One of DHF’s core strategies is Vecinos Unidos (“United Neighbors”), which trains local community leaders in historically marginalized regions using the organizing model developed by Fred Ross Sr. In regular community meetings (“Juntas Generales”), members develop plans to address systemic issues such as lack of infrastructure, education inequities, or health care access. Over more than twenty years, Vecinos Unidos chapters have successfully advocated for tangible improvements: parks, paved roads, sewer services, better schooling, and more.

Another pillar of DHF’s work is its Resource Centers, located in under-resourced regions such as Bakersfield, Arvin, Tulare, Palmdale, and Sanger. These centers provide a wide range of support from legal and civil-rights referrals to health-care outreach and social services. Crucially, these centers are staffed in part by trained volunteers from the communities they serve, turning service delivery into mutual organizing. Youth leadership is a particular focus for DHF through its LYFE (“Liberated Youth for Empowerment”) program. LYFE equips young people with tools to understand systems of inequality, develop leadership skills, and engage in civic and social action. The program includes special pathways like civic engagement, transformational art, and new media/technology. In 2023, DHF ran its first Camp LYFE at the National Chavez Center, where forty youth participated in dance, theater, spoken word, visual media and more. After the camp, youth join a supportive alumni network featuring mentorship, scholarships, and long-term civic engagement opportunities.

At the local level, Santa Clara County has also formally honored her. The Santa Clara County Board of Education adopted Resolution No. 2316-2 on March 15, 2023, specifically recognizing April 10 as Dolores Huerta Day and calling for educational institutions in the county to commemorate her life and legacy. Earlier, on March 16, 2022, the same board passed a resolution (supported by County Superintendent Mary Ann Dewan) encouraging schools to teach about Huerta's impact, especially in relation to equity, inclusion, and migrant education.

Beyond Santa Clara County, Los Angeles County has also issued its own recognition: the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, led by Supervisor Hilda Solis, proclaimed April 10 as Dolores Huerta Day, honoring her life of service, powerful organizing, and lasting influence.

Dolores Huerta is very much alive, and her legacy continues to grow. By integrating these proclamations and resolutions into the narrative of her life, Dolores Huerta Day becomes more than a symbolic celebration it is a living, civic recognition rooted in law and community, a reminder that her fight for dignity, justice, and collective power is ongoing, and that her values continue to influence public policy, education, and grassroots organizing.

Dolores Huerta Day is much more than an annual celebration; it is an active call to remember the long struggle for labor justice, community power, and social equity. Huerta's leadership in the UFW taught a generation how marginalized people can build collective power, win contracts, and influence policy. Her foundation ensures that her strategies remain relevant today, training organizers, supporting vulnerable communities, and creating new leaders. In places like Gilroy, where agricultural labor continues to be part of the local fabric, her presence and memory are especially meaningful. The fact that a major community institution like the public library hosted a Smithsonian exhibit about her and brought her in person testifies to her enduring impact. The Santa Clara County Board of Education's resolution further solidifies her legacy in local policy domains, particularly in educating young people about labor history and environmental justice. The day encourages citizens not just to reflect but to act: to listen to workers, to demand safer conditions, to foster new leaders, and to believe in "Sí, se puede" yes, we can.