

Larry Itliong Day: A Forgotten Leader of the American Labor Movement

By

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Each October 25th, we honor Larry Itliong, a Filipino American labor and civil rights activist and a founding figure of the United Farm Workers (UFW) union. Over four decades, Itliong fought tirelessly for improved working conditions for immigrants especially those in the farm and cannery industries and for the fair treatment of all immigrants and Asian Americans in the United States.

Modesto “Larry” Dulay Itliong was born on October 25, 1913, in San Nicolas, Pangasinan, Philippines, to Artemio and Francesca Itliong (one of six children). At the time, the Philippines was a U.S. territory. San Nicolas, now one of sixteen districts in Pangasinan, was founded in 1572 by Augustinian missionaries after the Spanish conquest of Manila in 1570. Before colonization, it was known as *Baybay*, meaning "shore" in Tagalog, and was home to a small Sangley (Chinese) community.

By 1901, under American occupation, San Nicolas became a formal district. Life there in the early 20th century was rural and harsh, shaped by colonial rule and widespread economic hardship.

In the 1920s, many young Filipino men; known as *Manongs* (Ilocano for “elder brother”) migrated to the western United States to work in fields and canneries. Because Filipinos were considered U.S. nationals, they filled jobs vacated by Chinese and Japanese workers, who were barred from immigrating after 1924. These men faced legal and social discrimination, including anti-miscegenation laws, police harassment, and mob violence. Most were limited to low-paid jobs in agriculture, canneries, and domestic service.

A bright and outspoken student, Itliong attended local schools in San Nicolas. In 1929, at the age of fifteen, he left the Philippines with dreams of becoming a lawyer and fighting for justice. Arriving in Seattle on April 6, 1929, Larry hoped to find the "land of milk and honey." Instead, he landed amid the Great Depression, encountering economic turmoil and intense racial discrimination.

Soon after arriving, Itliong began working in the salmon canneries of Alaska, where he witnessed the harsh and discriminatory conditions endured by immigrant workers. Filipinos were often assigned the dirtiest, most dangerous jobs and lived in overcrowded, unsanitary bunkhouses.

He worked up and down the West Coast from asparagus farms to vineyards facing discrimination not only from employers but also from labor contractors and competing ethnic labor groups. Despite this, Itliong quickly gained a reputation for being outspoken and unafraid to challenge injustice.

An excellent card player, avid cigar smoker, and natural polyglot, Larry spoke multiple Filipino dialects, Spanish, Cantonese, and Japanese. In his downtime, he studied U.S. labor law, educating himself on workers' rights.

While working in the canneries, he lost three fingers in an accident, earning him the nickname "Seven Fingers." During his recovery, he helped form the Alaska Cannery Workers Union, which later became Local 7 of the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America and later part of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU).

Due to the Great Depression, Larry also worked on the railroads and traveled through Montana, South Dakota, Washington, and eventually California as a migrant farmworker. There, he witnessed the exploitation of Filipino and other immigrant laborers.

In the 1930s, Itliong became active in organizing Filipino farmworkers in California's Salinas Valley. He led strikes and protests, demanding better wages, housing, and fair treatment. These early campaigns helped shape his leadership role in the Filipino labor movement. He became known for rallying his fellow *Manongs* with bold words: "Let's go, don't be scared! I'll be in the front, just follow me."

When the U.S. entered World War II, Itliong enlisted in the U.S. Army, serving primarily as a messman on a transport ship. Though little is documented about his wartime service, the experience taught him discipline, strategy, and unity skills that would shape his later organizing. For his service, he was granted U.S. citizenship in 1944. Like many Filipino veterans, he later faced bureaucratic obstacles in securing military benefits.

After the war, Itliong returned to labor organizing in California. He moved to Stockton, participated in the post-WWII asparagus strike, and co-founded the Filipino Farm Labor Union in 1956. In 1959, he helped create the multi-ethnic Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) under the AFL-CIO, eventually becoming its leader.

In September 1965, Larry Itliong played a pivotal role in initiating the Delano Grape Strike. Over 2,000 Filipino farmworkers, fed up with low wages and poor living conditions, walked off the job. Recognizing the need for solidarity, Itliong reached out to Cesar Chavez and the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), a Mexican American group. After some hesitation, Chavez and Dolores Huerta agreed to join forces. The two organizations merged to form the United Farm Workers (UFW).

As a key UFW leader, Itliong organized picket lines, delivered speeches, and negotiated with growers. He ensured that Filipino workers often overlooked even within the labor movement received equal representation. His leadership helped secure vital improvements in wages, benefits, and living conditions for thousands of laborers.

In recognition of his advocacy, Itliong was selected as a delegate to the 1972 Democratic National Convention in Miami Beach, Florida. There, he represented agricultural workers and Asian American communities, advocating for labor rights and social justice. His presence on the national political stage marked a milestone in the influence of immigrant laborers in American politics.

One of Itliong's enduring contributions was the creation of the Paulo Agbayani Retirement Village in Delano, which opened in 1974. The village provided a dignified home for aging Filipino farmworkers many of whom had no family in the U.S. and were ineligible for Social Security due to discriminatory laws. It was a place of community and recognition for a generation that had sacrificed so much.

Larry Itliong was married six times and had seven children. Despite the demands of his work, he remained a dedicated father who passed down a keen sense of justice and cultural pride.

In his later years, Itliong was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Though the condition weakened his body, his mind remained sharp, and he continued to advocate for workers' rights as long as he was able.

Larry Itliong died on February 8, 1977, in Delano, California, at the age of sixty-three. He was laid to rest at the Delano Cemetery, where his gravesite remains a place of homage for those inspired by his life and legacy.

Although often overshadowed by figures like Cesar Chavez, Larry Itliong's role in the labor movement has gained renewed attention in recent years. Historians and community organizations have worked to bring his story to light, highlighting his leadership in initiating the Delano Grape Strike and forming the UFW.

In California, October 25th is now recognized as Larry Itliong Day in public schools. His memory lives on through the Larry Itliong Resource Center and Museum in Delano, a designated section of a California highway bearing his name, and schools, parks, and university programs dedicated to preserving his legacy.

Larry Itliong's life was a testament to the resilience, courage, and determination of immigrant laborers in America. From the canneries of Alaska to the vineyards of California, he fought relentlessly for dignity and justice not just for Filipinos, but for all workers.

Though his contributions were long overlooked, today his legacy is finally being honored. Larry Itliong stands not only as a co-founder of the UFW but as a pioneering hero in America's long struggle for civil rights and labor equality.