To eventual readers: This was not meant to be read, but heard. I originally intended to do my presentation with simpler notes. Please excuse how relaxed this paper reads, as I put it together in the present form when I realized I could share it with more people. Additionally, a few minor tweaks were made from his original form the day before the discussion. 

As usual, please be mindful: This is very much a work in progress in its early stages; please don’t circulate/transmit or reproduce without permission. All comments and corrections most welcome. Thank you so much for your time!

Conference: HOW CLASS WORKS – 2012
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SUNY Stony Brook

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PANEL: Issues in Class-Consciousness II.
Saturday 10.45am. Room SAC 303.

Challenging the Colors of Class Identity, the Farm Workers' Movement and their Struggle for Visibility, 1962 – 1975.

key words: labor, immigration, class and race, policy-making, campaigning, grassroots, coalitions.

Before I start, let me express my gratitude to the conference organizers for having me, and to you all for attending this presentation. Listening to everyone during the past few days has been a very inspiring and humbling experience. As a word of warning, you should probably know that I am still in the early stages of my doctoral research, which means two things: first that what I have to say here is mostly hypotheses, second that I do welcome all comments with open arms as I am looking to improve my own work in both fields of labor history and immigration studies. In this 20
minute talk, which I called “challenging the colors of class identity”, I meant to present to you a personal assessment of the relevance of the United Farm Workers' struggle during the 1960s and the 1970s. Obviously I did not mean to tell the story of a struggle that is now well-known, but rather, by introducing a few historical elements that might have been put under the rug a little too quickly for being too obvious or too trivial, I mean to discuss the current state of the rich historiography on the matter which, I believe, might benefit from being less about the UFW alone, and more about the UFW in relation with the labor movement as a whole, or the labor sentiment, whatever that may be.

Doing so is probably made easier by explaining how I came to find interest in the topic. Since the panel is called “issues in class-consciousness”, I thought it would be more profitable to me as well as the people nice enough to listen to me if I focused on the theoretical implications of the history I'm attempting to write. Years ago, when I decided on a subject for my master's thesis, I elected to do work on immigration and unionism since 1965. I knew there were lots of quality studies on the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, and I had read amazing work by sociologists and political scientists on current events, but I thought a labor history on the matter was still to be written for a period ranging from 1965 to the present day. I was just a little bit wrong: a scholar named Vernon Briggs had already written numerous books advocating for labor unions to drop what he calls a pro-immigrant agenda which apparently started in the 1960s, and to go back to their anti-immigrant tradition, seeing in the era of Samuel Gompers the finest example of how restrictionism favored the development of unionism. Since the 1960s, 30 million immigrant workers made it the United States, entered the job market and, according to Briggs, put pressure on the American working class in such a way that they could not avoid their decline. Immigration rises, labor falls, it's that simple. I have always wondered if people who think in such a light realize that during the same time period, 70 million women have entered the job market, with attributes similar to migrant labor: it is cheaper labor as gender prejudice benefits the employer, they are in the services industry, etc. I do wonder whether or not they would advocate for restrictions for women in a similar way they do for immigrants. Anyway, there are many flaws in his argument, be them analytical, political or moral, but having witnessed with my own eyes the vitality and the potential of immigrant activism in the demonstrations of May First 2006 and 2007, not necessarily with unions alongside, I found that argument only harder to accept. So I did a bit of institutional history: I studied the policies put forward by labor unions and found that it did indeed evolve, in words at least, but not that quickly and not that radically. I became interested in answering the following question: over the past 50 years, how did unions and unionists see foreign-born workers? To put it in a more convoluted but academic way, my interest shifted slightly towards the cultural history of
working-class representations as I believe it is essential in order to make sense of the recent change in unions' policies on immigration.

On February 16, 2000, the AFL-CIO Executive Council released a three-page resolution on immigration which revised part of its previous policies, as it called for a new amnesty of undocumented workers, and the elimination of the I-9 process which was implemented by the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986.¹ A declaration by Linda Chavez-Thompson, herself a second-generation Mexican American and the Vice-President of the Federation at the time, left little doubt as to what the AFL-CIO had in mind when issuing their reformed public stance on immigration: “[AFL-CIO supporting IRCA 1986] caused many of us great pain. We were great foot soldiers, but we weren't appreciated... The movement itself has changed so much since then. Now you see the faces of immigrants everywhere.”² These few sentences highlight the complexity of the matter at hand: from the unions' point of view, changing the official stance on immigration was not simply a call for realism following the inefficiency of the restrictionist policies which they supported, it was a deep reaction to the changing ground level of unions' membership, and to the sociological evolution of their own potential constituency. Chavez-Thompson's suggestion is twofold: first, foreign-born workers proved their worth as dynamic agents of labor's actions, precisely at a time when the movement as a whole suffered, second, they had obtained visibility on the large scale. I set out to make sense of this apparent evolution. I felt that the reason the perception of immigrants was changed was because of the doing of immigrants themselves. Maybe it was derived from a pessimistic preconception of my own, where only the people suffering from an oppression could truly understand it, and struggle for its abolition, I'm not sure, but what was very important to me was the way the labor unions' leadership lagged behind some movements. Among those movements, there is the United Farm Workers' movement which has now obtained almost a mythical status, a perception that is telling of how it relates to the hopes and attempts to revive the labor movement today: the future of the labor movement lies with the involvement of foreign-born workers, and to some extent, those foreign-born workers have already demonstrated

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¹ Employers were and still are required to fill the I-9 form to verify the eligibility of people to work in the United States. After having supported such a process in 1986 in order to lessen the burden of competition on native-born workers, the AFL-CIO found that rather than dissuading employers from giving jobs to illegal workers, it was mostly ignored during the employment process, and used to intimidate workers in the instances during which they would organize.

that they can achieve some success.

Now, I am well aware that my argument about the links between present-day immigrant activism and the legacy of the UFW is to some extent counter-intuitive: when faced with the question of illegal immigration, the UFW vehemently fought against the use of such migrants by their bosses as they were strikebreakers. Randy Shaw already argued in his book “Beyond the Fields” that there is a link, because of personal ties between the labor movement of today and the UFW, which served as an incubator of talented strategical advisors for unions. But this is not my point either. My hypothesis is that although such movements did not mean to address the issue of policy-making on immigration, they initiated a national rethinking of American working-class identity as they appeared to the public at large as a class-oriented struggle with unfamiliar faces. What is a worker in the United States? Who is part of the American working-class as a conscious, united constituency? There is a need to look at how institutions recognized class identity, and denied that workers of Latino origins belonged.

So, at the time of Cold War liberalism, how did union leaders look at foreign-born workers? During the 1950s, the AFL-CIO sometimes looked at migrants in a way that was not directly hostile: it was really a mix of anti-communism and charitable sentiment. Most notably, it led them to call for the help of Hungarian and Cuban refugees. The AFL-CIO defended a moral ideal of republican benevolence that made otherness the defining criteria of a possible reform, as unions certainly never wanted to reach out and organize, but merely intended to offer help. As far as latino immigration was concerned, it was clearly different. In 1963, George Meany, president of the AFL-CIO, personally lobbied the government in order to strengthen the Mexican border.³ Now, how did rank-and-file unionists look at foreign-born workers? This is harder to get a sense of, but I did find some correspondence between unionists and the leadership of the AFL-CIO, where unionists were even harsher towards immigrants than the unions bureaucracy was. At the time of the Civil Rights, although the leadership still professed in declarations that there was a necessity for the nation to embrace diversity, and that working people of all backgrounds should unite behind the flag of labor, it still found Mexicans to be a specific case of necessary exclusion from the ranks of their ideal community. Epistolary exchanges of the AFL-CIO with some of its members highlight the phenomenon fittingly. For instance, in 1963, a unionist named C. Pollard expressed in a letter to the

federation that he was worried about the entrance of 50,000 Cubans and 125,000 Mexicans in the United States. The Legislation Department of the AFL-CIO purposefully avoided to mention Cuban immigration, and answered him that they would do everything possible in order to lobby for limitations on the coming of agricultural workers from Mexico. The end of the quotas system in 1965 would eventually make such a specific measure impossible, but a climate of mistrust towards Mexican Americans remained, from union leaders as much as from ground level unionists.

As you know, from 1942 to 1964, the United States and Mexico had signed a series of laws called the Bracero Program, which instituted the employment of temporary contract laborers from Mexico to the United States. Hundreds of thousands participated in this effort implemented by the Federal government to find an alternative to growing illegal immigration. Out of this context, no single union dedicated to agricultural workers had really emerged as a considerable force. There were more than 400,000 workers in the sector, of different origins. Agriculture had been a historical difficulty for all labor organizers and there was little tradition to speak of. Attempts to organize this workforce were rare, but not exactly non-existent. In the 1960s, many labor unions, radicals and liberal activists alike suspected organizing workers of Latino origins would be a waste of time, either due to their harsher conditions of work or their supposedly inherent culture of individualism. In 1958, the CSO had sent one of its young organizers, named Cesar Chavez, in Oxnard, hoping to broaden the scope of their mobilization of Mexican Americans. Saul Alinsky, who founded the CSO, did not mean for his organization to venture so far into immigrant territory, but he did not justify his fears with the usual racial stereotypes. To him, organizing in this economic sector “was like fighting on a constantly disintegrating bed of sand”. Chavez felt differently. Despite all the difficulties posed by a population that, indeed, changed constantly because of its many travels, and focused on the urgency of the betterment of their living conditions, he felt that there was a fertile ground on which collective action would prove to be more effective than individual solutions. Best remembered for authoring the ambitious and multifaceted cry for optimism, “si se puede!”, in his

5 Henry McGuckin mentions in his autobiography that the IWW claimed to organize more than 100,000 agricultural workers at the beginning of the 20th century. That figure seems largely exaggerated, despite the IWW’s ability to find support beyond its ranks. See Henry McGuckin, Memoirs of a Wobbly, Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 1987, page 70.
6 Community Service Organization, a latino-based organization created by Saul Alinsky and Fred Ross in 1947 to organize Mexican Americans in Los Angeles and California’s Central Valley.
7 Saul Alinsky, quoted in Randy Shaw, ibid.
every action, Chavez and his collaborators always meant to redefine the possible. He would leave the CSO in 1962 and participate in the creation of a union of agricultural workers. As he expanded his original activism in community organizing with the CSO into a more class-oriented struggle with the UFW, he chose the labor playing field for him and many others alongside to initiate a rethinking of the relationship between racial prejudice and class identity in the United States.

There would be little point in telling the whole story in detail, as such a medium as the present paper would not fit the daunting task, but a few aspects deserve our attention. The UFW's story starts with the struggle of Filipino American workers, under the banner of the AWOC, against various table grape growers of Coachella Valley. They demanded equal pay with workers of Mexican origins, at around $1.40 per hour. The struggle was carried over to different farms, and when the harvest began in Delano in September 1965, the NFWA led by Chavez joined the fight in solidarity. By August 1966, the UFW was created out of the reunion of the two organizations. Their demands became progressively more structural, as they were also fighting for the very recognition of their right to organize. The National Labor Relations Act of 1935 (NLRA) never recognized the right of farm workers to union organizing, and the labor movement as a whole never cared to lobby for a change. In 1975, the farm workers would eventually impose the passing of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act in California, which precisely offered recognition and legal support to the UFW's efforts to organize and enter in negotiations with corporations.

The literature on the strategies of the UFW has well established its reliance on coalitions, stressing its importance with analyses of resources' management (Ferriss 1998, Pawel 2009, Ganz 2010). The UFW might have done so out of need, because Labor failed to deliver proper support, but it also impacted the way the whole nation identified farm workers: they were not so out of the national narrative anymore. The UFW appealed to churches with success, linking its struggle with a reading of the Bible and morals such as nonviolence which provided a coherent set of ideas. It also

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8 In 1962, while still holding responsibilities at the CSO, Cesar Chavez was in charge of registering voters in a barrio of San Jose, California, usually called Sal Si Puedes (Get Out if You Can). One can appreciate the subversive transformation of the name that led to his famous slogan. In 2006, during A Day Without Immigrants, “Si Se Puede” was the most commonly heard slogan of the demonstrations.

9 Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee. It was a local union, affiliated to the National Farm Labor Union (AFL-CIO).

appealed to community-based organizations, giving a sense of family to the solidarity it preached. Scholars have usually focused on the leadership's sense of opportunity and its will to bypass the economic weakness of an easily-replaced workforce, by calling for help, not simply from unions that were not necessarily on their side in the early days of their movement, but to the largest number, in the shape of consumers. The UFW organized very well received boycotts that made consumers part of a moral and social struggle. But inclusion always works both ways. By including consumers in their actions, what they did in surprisingly efficient manner, is include themselves in a nation-wide community of progressives, beyond the ranks of the Old and the New Left. Nothing is more crucial in understanding the way the UFW related to the national debate, and how national concerns applied to the cause of the foreign-born farm workers, and this has been to this day, critically understated in all commentaries on their history.

Another element in the strategy of farm workers was the way they always cared to speak in the name of many, rather than in the name of the select few. Borrowing a tactic from the Teamsters that had previously led a struggle against Di Giorgio Corporation, unionists would collect signatures from all workers, not simply unionists, and present them to employers to make a sturdier case in their favor. The UFW always presented to its interlocutor a solid group, be in the face of the public or when facing an employer, as dissensions in its ranks would only make the news at the end of the 1970s. At its peak, the union could claim to organize over 50,000 workers, and have the support of a considerable number of others. By achieving such numbers, the UFW could make the claim that their movement was not an anomaly, but a cause embraced by a large number of people. The very fact that political scientists would consider La Causa a political fight, and consider the UFW the most important organization of Chicano sensibility, reveals that its unionists were working towards a goal that challenged power on a broader scale, through the visibility of its racial identity.

This was also reinforced by the UFW's occupation of the public debate, beyond the boycotts, as it was very much in favor of shock politics in general. Chavez went on well-publicized fasts, a tactic he would later in his life use on numerous occasions. Farm workers of the UFW participated

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11 One could legitimately draw a comparison with the situation in the industries of the South. Lawrence Richards explains in *Union-Free America* that the failure of the American labor movement can be explained most notably by the employers' ability to relate to familial and regional relationships with their employees, meanwhile labor organizers were always outsiders. See Lawrence Richards, *Union-Free America: Workers and Antiunion Culture*, University of Illinois Press, 2008. A critical review of mine about the relevance of this book today will soon be published in an upcoming issue of *Politique Américaine*. 
in the most famous event of their movement, the 340-mile march from Delano to Sacramento in 1968, which was the turning point in getting their employer to agree to a meeting. What the UFW did is change the place and the meaning of the picket line, as it was not simply directed towards an employer in hope that he realizes the spacial struggle at hand, but also at all potential allies, empowering themselves and others by the sharing of information. The movement was spectacular, proto-situationist in a way. Their efforts in that direction would go as far as organizing various cultural events. They even held a Farmworker Theatre, *Teatro Campesino*, a grassroots company led by Luis Valdez, started as early as 1965. Scholars might have failed to include such elements in their telling of the story of the UFW, but remembering them might lead to a path of questioning their identity as much more than a contextual factor: on their part, it was a conscious effort to build an identity and give it a political potent message through its construction.

But beyond the ability to mobilize the public at large in initiatives such as the ones already mentions, a question remains, how else did they lead a fight against division among the American working-class? That division at the time should not be understated, as it even showed in conflicts. The AFL-CIO, very much in the same way it failed to support the marches of the Civil Rights movement, failed to support the 1968 march. From 1970 to 1977, the UFW and the Teamsters entered a hard fought battle over the representativeness of their respective organizations. Two farm workers were killed in a historical regrettable instance of workers' competition and racial resentment. In this instance, George Meany who had just already included the UFW in the AFL-CIO did support the UFW, but this only happened after the farm workers had won over the sympathy of many Americans and a tragedy had already happened.

How did the UFW eventually won that support from the Labor establishment, or to put it in the way that I'm interested in, how did they include themselves in the grand narrative of working-class Americanism? Their relation to the public, to the people, to the nation already answers this question quite a bit. But I believe it was even more deliberate on the farm workers' part. The answer to that enigma could very possibly be found in the very words of the UFW leaders, and their political material. On the 10th of May 1969, Dolores Huerta pronounced the following speech: “We have been farm workers for hundreds of years and pioneers for seven. Mexicans, Filipinos, Africans and others, our ancestors were among those who founded this land and tamed its natural wilderness. But we are still pilgrims on this land, and we are pioneers who blaze a trail out of the wilderness of

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hunger and deprivation that we have suffered even as our ancestors did.”

If Huerta explicitly calls her fellow farm workers pioneers ever since the creation of the union, she does more than comparing. She offers an alternative narrative for American history when including the farm workers in the grand historical narrative that is centuries old. A way for the UFW to combat tendencies to perceive the conscious working-class as only white and industrial is to redefine Americanism, and she does so in utmost American fashion with a focus on liberty and freedom later on in her speech. The greatest legacy of the UFW might not be the passage of the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act in 1975, or the tactics it successfully employed for higher wages or job security. It could very well be how it helped the recognition of workers of Latino origins as authentic members of labor in the United States, sociologically, consciously and actively, achieving visibility in front of all Americans.

The literature on the UFW is growing exponentially nowadays. There have been two periods in the historiography on the subject. The first was, as it often is, the time of hagiographies, of the edifying narrative telling the story of Christ-like figures, etc. Interestingly enough, it corresponds to the moment when labor unions themselves eventually found a need for such a narrative that included Mexican Americans in the mythology of the historical movement. That was at the end of the 90s. And now we have entered a second time in the historiography, as some do history from the bottom up, telling the importance of the common folk, of the “true heroes”, of the farm workers that were involved. For instance, this is what the very last book on the matter does, by Franck Bardacke, “Trampling Out the Vintage” (it came out in late 2011), which outright states that the UFW had two faces, poor leadership, great members. I sometimes feel that the backlash on the remembrance of the UFW leadership might have gone too far. What Chavez, Huerta, Itliong and others have done goes beyond leading a movement that had specific demands. They found a way to move the color line of class solidarity. Farm workers and janitors demonstrated that they could win fights at a time when the rest of the labor movement would fail. They appeared and appealed to the public at large for their contribution to society (with boycotts, marches, etc, the well known spectacular elements of their strategies). It really is about the meeting point between three groups or three ideas: the involvement of foreign-born workers, the reaction of established institutions such as the AFL-CIO

14 She concluded in the the following way: “The grapes grow sweet and heavy on the vines, but they will have to wait while we reach out first for our freedom. The time is ripe for our liberation.” This is very reminiscent of how progressives have reformed the idea of American liberties throughout history. See Eric Foner, The Story of American Freedom, WW Norton & Co, 1999, 444 p.
that showcase conservative tendencies, and the national imagination as a playing field where conflicting views on Americanism meet: What is it to be a worker in the United States? Farm workers and janitors have answered that it is also picking fruits and cleaning floors, not simply working the factory line, and they have showcased their conditions to the public at large, capturing its imagination. They have done so by going around the unions, working on their fringes, building unions of their own, before getting to the center of the labor movement, circumventing their previous weaknesses by getting the support of coalitions much broader than the sole crumbling American working-class solidarity. Leaders of the UFW and the SEIU have not done so simply by providing methods and trained activists, they have also done so by deliberately instigating the acceptance of Latino workers in the mind of the whole nation.