



## MARIA ELENA DURAZO

AGE: 63

OCCUPATION: *Vice President for Immigration, Civil Rights,  
and Diversity at UNITE HERE*

BORN IN: *Madera, Madera County*

INTERVIEWED IN: *Los Angeles, Los Angeles County*

*According to a USC professor interviewed by the LA Times, Maria Elena Durazo is “probably the single most influential individual in Los Angeles politics.” As the head of the 800,000-member-strong Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, Maria Elena dramatically expanded the power of workers—especially immigrant workers—in a city that has long been hostile to organized labor. During her tenure, the LA County Federation of Labor, or “County Fed,” helped push through numerous living-wage ordinances, elect labor-friendly politicians, and was the major force behind the city adopting a \$15 minimum wage in 2015.*

*That’s quite a legacy for a woman who spent her childhood crisscrossing the state with her migrant farmworker family. It was in California’s fields that Maria Elena, who had ten siblings, first witnessed and experienced the exploitation of immigrant workers. But it was only later that she fully understood that not all families are forced to survive on such low wages, or to live much of the year in a tent, or to pick cotton until their hands bled. Over several phone conversations, she spoke about the structural challenges that*

*farmworkers face when trying to organize, her own journey from child farmworker to national labor leader, and how her time in the fields helped push her into what became her calling: organizing and advocating for immigrant workers.*

FOR ME, MY FRIENDS WERE MY  
BROTHERS AND SISTERS

My father came to this country in the early 1940s, after my two oldest sisters were born in Sonora, Mexico.<sup>1</sup> He was from a town whose name is a little embarrassing. It was called Oputo.<sup>2</sup> Every time I'd say it, people would laugh at me and I'd be like, "But that's really the name of it, you know." My mom was from Cananea, the mining town nearby.<sup>3</sup> They met and that was the start of the family.

My father first came over by himself and connected with an uncle who was already working in the fields in Madera.<sup>4</sup> The uncle was a *mayordomo*, a supervisor. I don't know what my father's status was when he came, but at some point he was able to get a green card. Maybe it was because he volunteered for the army. He never went abroad during World War II—he talked about peeling potatoes, doing that kind of stuff. So he was able to get his papers and bring my sisters and mom, and that started our whole journey in this country.

I was born in 1953, the seventh of eleven brothers and sisters. There were eight kids in my family, including me, who worked in the fields—five girls and three boys. We started as soon as we were able

---

<sup>1</sup> The state of Sonora is in the northwest corner of Mexico and borders Arizona and New Mexico.

<sup>2</sup> There are multiple translations of the word *puto* in Spanish; the least offensive is a male prostitute.

<sup>3</sup> Cananea is a city of nearly 35,000 in Sonora.

<sup>4</sup> Madera is a city of over 60,000 in the San Joaquin Valley, 25 miles northwest of Fresno.

to help out. I was carrying water around to my family in the fields when I was five years old.

We all were born in different towns in California. I was born in Madera; Elizabeth and Ricky in Fresno; Johnny was born in San Jose. Our family would go from field to field in our truck, and a couple of us would sit up in the front with my mom and dad, the rest in the back with our clothes and stuff.

We went as far south as Calexico and all the way up to Oregon. Peaches, plums, apricots, walnuts, tomatoes. Of course grapes. Every year was a different school. I certainly don't remember having a lot of friends, because we'd start and then have to leave, start and have to leave. For me, my friends were my sisters and brothers.

We'd try to make do with what we had, with what was around. I played marbles in the dirt with my brothers. Among the sisters, there were four of us working in the fields, and we became notorious for singing, like karaoke style. And dancing. We'd put on our own little shows for each other. In San Jose, next to our house was a sort of a ranch, and they had horses in it. We'd try to sneak off and jump on the horses when the owners weren't around. I remember once, my siblings threw me up on the horse bareback and slapped the horse, so the horse went galloping away. I was holding on as long as I could before he threw me off. What the heck? That's how we entertained ourselves.

Our brothers, they got to do a lot more things than the girls. My dad sort of trusted the boys to go off on their own. That's how they learned how to swim: they'd go into the canals. No way we girls could go out there, or go to the swimming pool or anything like that. Part of it was my dad was, you know, a big prude. But the other part was that he felt like the boys could take care of themselves. So the boys learned how to swim and I didn't, and it's really embarrassing, when you're my age and you don't know how to swim.

Many times we didn't have housing. I'm not exactly sure why. I think my dad was trying to make the most money that he could

during the key harvest times, so that in the winter, when there was less work, he'd be able to carry over. We'd just park the truck down near a river. What do you call it? Squatting. One time we were down by the river, and suddenly there was a helicopter overhead. The helicopter shone its lights on us and we were ordered to get out. I remember scrambling to pack up. Other times we lived in the barn of the grower, where the tractors and equipment were kept.

I remember the different towns. But sometimes I don't remember the schools themselves. What is clearer is the crops. That's really clear in my mind, the crops we picked. And I remember San Jose. We were living in a tent in San Jose when my infant brother died. I was maybe four or five. My mom couldn't get him to the doctor in time. He was burning with fever. A church heard about it and the priest took up a collection to be able to bury my brother. I'll never forget the little white casket for his funeral.

#### PICKING COTTON WAS THE ROUGHEST OF ALL

In order to incentivize us, my dad would give us a quota of buckets or boxes, whatever it was that we were filling. If you did more, you'd get ten cents or whatever. The quota was based on age—he was pretty fair about it: he didn't expect the younger ones to pick as much as the older ones. And that was neat, 'cause you knew you'd get ten cents if you worked really, really hard. We'd use the money to sort of enhance our lunches with candy or other sweets like Snowball cupcakes.

Picking cotton was the roughest of all, because of all those little buds. It's very prickly. You have to pull the cotton out of the little bud, and every time you get pricked at the tip of your finger, so by the end of the day your fingers have all these little pricks of blood. Not gobs of blood, but just constant.

I remember my dad saying that we had to be really careful, because on top of how little the foremen paid, they'd also cheat us.

We had a long sack that we'd drag, and because cotton was so light, you had to pick a lot in order to make it worthwhile. So you dragged it over to the truck and the supervisors would weigh it. They'd write something down as to how much you brought over, and empty it and give your sack back. You couldn't trust these foremen. You didn't know how well the scale was working. And it always seemed like you were getting less than you were owed. My dad would do the best that he could to watch them, but we didn't have any control. Unless a bunch of people didn't like it and were willing to speak up, it was pretty much you had to take whatever they paid you.

In the fields they never had bathrooms. We'd go out, at least two or three of us girls, and find the furthest possible place. We always wore layers, and we'd take a shirt off and cover ourselves, make like a little tent around us, so we could go to the bathroom.

My dad preferred for us to work as a crew. For example, the plums in San Jose—he'd negotiate with a grower over a certain amount of money, and then our crew, our whole family, would do the orchard. But there were a number of times where there was so much work that we were just mixed in with other groups.

Our dad always kept an eye on us girls, making sure that guys didn't get near us, that sort of stuff. He was extremely strict with the girls. Some of my sisters disagree, but I'm grateful now. Because what he was really saying was, I don't want you to get in the cycle of being young, getting pregnant, and then what happens in your life? He was doing it for a lot of good reasons, reasons that he didn't explain to us. All we knew was that he wouldn't let us talk to guys. He knew the dangers, right? He knew that foremen would take advantage of young girls. He knew the foremen would use sexual favors.<sup>5</sup> That was going on, and we just didn't pay attention to it. For us it was like, *Hey there's a cute guy, why can't we talk?*

---

<sup>5</sup> For more on sexual harassment and sexual abuse of workers in the fields, see Appendix V, page 310–18.

“I WISH I’D BEEN ABLE TO DO MORE FOR YOU”

When I was in sixth grade, we came back to Fresno for good. My older sisters didn’t want to move around in a flatbed truck anymore. Part of the reason we settled down in Fresno was that grapes provided year-round work. There’s always something to do related to the grapes—you prune, you tie, there are the different phases. We could settle in at school and work on the weekends. We worked whatever was within an hour or two from Fresno, but we weren’t moving from town to town anymore.

With me, my dad was very pushy about going to school. Unfortunately, we just didn’t have enough to survive on, so my older sisters didn’t finish high school. Not because they weren’t smart enough—dad just needed them to work and help support the rest of the family. So I benefitted from that because I was younger. My older sisters went back to school later and got their GEDs, and one got her teaching credential and her BA.

My dad loved to read. He was always reading a book, always reading a newspaper. He’d send away for projects, to learn how to do this and that, how to fix electrical appliances. So he really was self-taught. We didn’t have that many books around the house, but he’d sit down with me in the evenings and teach me where to put the accent marks in Spanish, how to write in Spanish, or he’d do projects with me.

That was influential. But I have to say one of my main motivations to study was that work in the fields was so awful. We’d pass the day and try to make the best of it. You always had your transistor radio to listen to. That’s why Cesar Chavez was so smart in developing a radio station, ’cause everyone had their transistor radios in the fields.<sup>6</sup> So you’d try to figure out ways of getting through the day. But

---

<sup>6</sup> In 1983, the United Farm Workers launched its first radio station to reach farmworkers. Today, the Radio Campesina network consists of nine stations in three states—California, Arizona, and Washington—with a listener audience of 500,000.

bottom line, I wanted to do whatever I could so as to not have to do that the rest of my life.

One of my older brothers, Ben, went to Fresno State. This was the late sixties, and he became a real activist. He burnt his draft card, there was the Chicano movement, the farmworkers movement—all this activity was going on.<sup>7</sup> Ben took me to my first protest, against the Vietnam War. And then when I was in high school, he took the time to help me navigate the system, so I got exposed to college, even though it was around the activism. He also had friends who would talk about how to apply to college, how to apply for financial aid. All those kinds of things helped a great deal. I applied and I got accepted at several colleges. There was this one, Saint Mary's in Moraga, and when my dad saw that it was a Catholic school he said, "OK, you can go to that one."<sup>8</sup>

I remember when I left home to go away to college. I'll never forget this. When I left home, my dad packed a little box, a care package. Remember the care package days? And like a typical farmworker, it was in a little cardboard box, wrapped up in twine. It had tortillas and a bunch of stuff to take away to school. Anyway, he pulled me aside to give me the package—I still get all choked up—and he says, "I want to apologize to you." And I thought, *Well, this is really something*. He never sat down and had a nice conversation about this or that. He was always the disciplinarian in the family.

So I said, "What do you mean?"

And he goes, "I wish I'd been able to do more for you."

I thought, *How is it that someone who worked day and night, and never abandoned his family, could feel that somehow he failed us?* It sticks to me to this day. There was no reason for him to feel that he'd failed

---

<sup>7</sup> The Chicano movement of the 1960s sought to ensure equal rights and increased power for Mexican Americans in the United States.

<sup>8</sup> Moraga is a town of 16,000 people ten miles east of Oakland. Saint Mary's College is a liberal arts college connected to the Catholic Church.

us, when in fact he'd done so much to protect us. He always believed that if he worked hard he'd get rewarded for it. And he never was. I think that moment had more influence on me than almost anything else in deciding what I was going to do. Something very strong hit me. Things shouldn't be that way.

### I WANTED TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IMMIGRANT WORKERS

I went away to Saint Mary's in the early seventies. Back then it was easy to get attracted to the activism that had just started to happen on the campus. It's a very small school, but we were influenced by what was going on at Berkeley, and I'd been influenced by my older brothers' activism in the Chicano movement. We had teachers from Berkeley and other schools that were real hotbeds of activity, and we recruited them to teach classes at Saint Mary's.

Part of what we were trying to do was make it easier for Chicano students like me to come to college and make the transition. Within a year or two, I was in the middle of organizing on the campus to recruit more Chicano and black students. We didn't have enough black students to form a Black Student Union or Chicano students for MEChA, so we had a Third World Center, and we did things together—black and brown—which was a really good experience.<sup>9</sup>

I was a sophomore when we took over the chapel on the campus for a week and fasted. What we were demanding was services for better retention of minority students. We'd done all this recruiting to bring black and brown students to campus, but it was difficult for many of us to stay in school, because of a lack of financial aid and that sort of thing. So we wanted better services to not only attract

---

<sup>9</sup> MEChA, the *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán* (Chicano Student Movement of Aztlán), is a Mexican–American civil rights organization that was founded in the 1960s.



students, but to keep them in school as well. So we took over the chapel and started our fast. Well, I actually fasted. I found out later that some of the students didn't really fast, that they were cheating. That's something we all laugh about now!

Activism became so important to me I almost didn't finish college. I was driven by what my father had said to me when he sent me off to college, how much he had worked and how little he was rewarded. So my activism started out focused on campus, but by my third year some of us campus activists got involved in things that were going on in Oakland with Bert Corona, who was an incredible immigrant-worker organizer.<sup>10</sup> There was a strike at a *tortilleria* factory in Richmond, and being involved in that was one of my first steps away from activism on campus to activism within the larger immigrant community. I made the connection between workers and immigration. It wasn't a union issue for me, it was about immigrants working in bad conditions and fighting back. That's what became in my heart the key thing—I wanted to do something about immigrant workers.

I graduated from college in 1975, moved to Oakland, and got married. My son Mario was born a year later, in Oakland. When he must've been six months or so, we moved to San Jose for about a year. Corona had started a CASA chapter in San Jose, and so I got active with them.<sup>11</sup> What hit me the most about Corona was that he was very, very supportive of women in leadership roles. He was very open-minded about decision-making, and you could tell that his approach was just much more respectful of the rank and file workers than some other labor organizers. That was really impressive to me.

---

<sup>10</sup> Humberto Corona, known as "Bert" Corona, was a major civil rights and labor leader and an inspiration for young Chicano activists in the 1960s and '70s.

<sup>11</sup> CASA, or the *Centro de Acción Social Autónomo—Hermandad General de Trabajadores* (Center for Autonomous Social Action—General Brotherhood of Workers) was founded in Los Angeles in 1968 and operated for a decade as a vocal and active political group within the Mexican American community.

I was only in San Jose for about a year when my husband and I separated. Then I moved to Los Angeles, in late 1977. I always had a full-time job to support myself. So in San Jose I worked full-time as a translator for the public health nurses. In LA, I worked for the *LA Times* as an ad taker, and then I did my CASA work. I mean, to me it was like, *OK, how do I support myself and my son?* But my real goal was to be a community organizer or worker organizer.

MY SON SAYS THAT THE PICKET  
LINE WAS HIS NURSERY

In 1978, I became an organizer with the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union.<sup>12</sup> The union had enormous resources they were putting in Los Angeles to try to organize the garment industry. Like today, it was all immigrant workers back then. The union was very aggressive. They had militant actions, strikes, picketing, boycotting. I mean they were open to creative and innovative ways of doing things. We sued the INS for the way they would drive right up with green vans and go into workplaces and round people up and deport them.<sup>13</sup> We said you can't walk into a workplace without a warrant and without specifically naming the people that you think are undocumented. That was a big, big issue. I was very proud that the union was incorporating the realities of what undocumented immigrant workers went through every day.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), founded in 1900, was for a time one of the country's most powerful and radical unions. Union membership began to decline in the 1960s, however, and in 1995 it joined forces with the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers' Union to form UNITE, the Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees.

<sup>13</sup> Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) was the federal agency responsible for immigration enforcement prior to the passage of the Homeland Security Act in 2002. For more on federal immigration agencies, see the Glossary, page 286–7.

<sup>14</sup> In 1982, a coalition of unions filed a class-action suit against the INS claiming that immigration raids on private businesses without warrants or consent of the

I was proud and excited to be making a difference for the workers, but it was also very difficult, because I was a single mom with a young son at home. My son Mario, who is forty years old today, says that the picket line was his nursery. I learned how to do this work and take care of a family. You always have this sense of, *How do I do both?* But you end up doing both out of love of both. You don't abandon one or the other. Sometimes one gets more attention, and the other one less, and then it goes the other way.

After several years with the Garment Workers' Union, I went to People's College of Law.<sup>15</sup> Way back in high school I thought that I was going to be an attorney. While I was at People's College I interned at a labor law firm for a couple of years. While I was there, in 1985, I met someone at HERE Local 11, and got offered an organizing position.<sup>16</sup>

Working with hotel and restaurant employees was quite the opposite of my experience with the garment workers. The union was very disconnected from the work force they represented, which had become largely immigrant. They were disconnected to the extreme of not translating materials or contracts into Spanish, not conducting any membership meetings in Spanish or having a translator. The culture of the union, of representing the workers without interacting with them, was a complete contradiction and it wasn't getting any better. The union leaders were unwilling to make the changes. It was extremely, extremely controlled; they never negotiated with a committee of workers. That's what pushed things to a head. My choice

---

business owner were violations of the fourth amendment guarantees against unreasonable search and seizure. In 1985, a U.S. district court ruled against such INS raids, barring warrantless arrests or questioning of suspected undocumented workers on the grounds of private businesses, including farms.

<sup>15</sup> People's College of Law is a small, progressive school geared towards working adults in downtown Los Angeles.

<sup>16</sup> HERE stands for the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union. In 2004, HERE merged with UNITE—the Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees—to form a new union: UNITE HERE.

was either to walk away or to try to do something about it. A number of people, outside organizers, kept nudging me: “You should work to change things, take on a leadership role.” So I finally did. I organized a group of folks and we took on the leadership, took ‘em out. I was elected president of HERE 11 in 1988.

We had to start from scratch. Now that’s a big culture shock, to say to workers, “You’re the union. We need you to be involved and we need you to become leaders in your workplace.” And a lot of them kinda looked at us like, “What are you talking about?” You know, “We pay you dues, that’s what you’re supposed to do, not us.” But there was a mix of attitudes, and from some of the hotel workers I’d hear, “Yeah, that’s right, we’re gonna make our union stronger, I’m gonna be a part of this.”

We decided that we were going to raise the issue of being immigrants in this industry. We started to negotiate contract language to offer protections for immigrants. For example, once you were hired, the employer shouldn’t have the right to re-check your immigration papers whenever they felt like it. ‘Cause that was just an environment of intimidation. In ‘86, even before I got elected, we went out and did a lot of work around Reagan’s amnesty, helping our members process their applications.<sup>17</sup> Which was a really big deal, ‘cause this was the opposite of how immigrants had been treated before. So rather than exclude immigrants, we openly welcomed them as a core part of what we were.

After three or four years of fighting, we had our first really big victory, against Hyatt in ‘91. The next year we had to prepare for a citywide hotel strike. We thought we were gonna have to go out on strike. We produced a video called “City on the Edge,” and our message was that there was poverty in Los Angeles in part because of

---

<sup>17</sup> The Immigration Reform and Control Act, passed in 1986, provided permanent legal resident status to eligible migrants, including those who could prove that they’d worked in agriculture in the U.S. during a certain time period. For more information, see the Glossary, page 286–7.

how the industry was treating workers. The city could continue to just use PR with palm trees, you know, to get tourists, but eventually it had to deal with real content, and substance, and had to treat workers in this industry better. And we won that citywide contract short of having to strike. So that was very important, and it raised standards to a much higher level.

Developing that first generation of organizers was very difficult, and some made it and some didn't. It was a real mix: we won some fights with employers, we lost some. It took a lot of years. We just kept at it.

#### TO FEEL AND TOUCH WHAT THAT WAS LIKE

I met my second husband, Miguel, when we worked together at Local 11.<sup>18</sup> We got married in 1988, and after that he got hired at the Federation as the political director. He made a lot of changes in the labor movement as far as making organizing a real priority, reaching out to Latinos and immigrants, to say labor is about everybody.

When Miguel died in 2005, he was the executive secretary-treasurer of the LA County Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO. In 2006, his successor resigned, I was named the interim secretary-treasurer, and I ran in the election to become the permanent secretary-treasurer. The challenge for running for the position was that I wasn't known. I didn't personally know most of the leaders of all these different unions that made up the Federation. So I didn't know about construction unions and their issues, I didn't know firefighters. But they knew about me and about Local 11 being a fighting union. And I knew about fighting back. I was also committed to making sure the labor movement wouldn't become, as Miguel said, the "ATM of

---

<sup>18</sup> Miguel Contreras had his first organizing experiences with the UFW, and grew to become one of the most important Latino labor leaders in the country. He died of a heart attack in 2005.

the politicians.” I did have that reputation, so we were able to pull together the support I needed to win the election in 2006.

The first thing I really needed to understand were the specific issues certain parts of the labor movement had. I spent time with construction unions, half a day in the shoes of a worker. I went to an industrial laundromat, you know, to feel and touch what that was like. I went with a sanitation worker on a two-ton garbage truck.

The second thing I did was to try to find points of unity. After a couple of years, in 2009, we did something called Hollywood to the Dock. It turned out that in that year, contracts covering like 350,000 workers from the Screen Actors Guild and other unions were gonna expire. So this group of unions did a walk across the county, from Hollywood to the docks of San Pedro. It was all about connecting our unions to each other, to give the sense of the power of the labor movement. We spent the night in different places: two nights in a church hall, one night in a union hall. It was important to show our power and to send a message to the industries and the employers that we are going to back each other up.

The next year, there was a lockout at this borax mine in the Mojave Desert.<sup>19</sup> That was a test for us. We specifically picked it because it was two hours away from Los Angeles, but within LA County. The workers were locked out, and we challenged our union to show that solidarity. So we did a caravan of 200 cars, taking food and money to them. And marched with them. We did a really big action in support of them in West LA. So the idea was to pick out certain struggles and really throw down for them. Nobody would be isolated or left on their own.

---

<sup>19</sup> During a lockout, an employer prevents union employees from entering their worksite, and replaces them with temporary employees. The hope is to force concessions during labor disputes. This particular lockout was begun by the international mining conglomerate Rio Tinto against its employees in Boron, California. The lockout is described by narrator Terri Judd in the Voice of Witness book *Invisible Hands*.

## WHAT DO WE DO? HOW DO WE DO IT?

Now I'm the Vice President for Immigration, Civil Rights, and Diversity at UNITE HERE. I think of this chapter of my career as focusing on ways a union of primarily immigrant workers can have an impact on passing comprehensive immigration reform. That's one task. And to lift up the stories and struggles of immigrants as workers. I didn't go into union organizing for just any group of workers. I really wanted to make that connection between what my family experienced, you know, working in an industry that is highly profitable and yet where the workers live in complete poverty. That's what inspired me.

There are a lot of similarities between the workers in our union and farmworkers. Undocumented status, for example: you have to get past that particular fear. There is so much at stake. You're not just worried about losing your job—it could go so much further than that. So when undocumented workers do commit to organizing, they really put a lot on the line. It's a level of courage that is just so inspiring.

Organizing takes an enormous amount of resources. That's a big challenge for the farmworker union. It takes millions and millions of dollars for a single campaign. What is the pot of resources available? If you're not organizing in a number of geographic areas at the same time, and making gains, then it's really hard to sustain. For example, if you get only one sector of the industry, then it becomes an island. Now you're competing with a majority that is not organized. That's a challenge for organizing farmworkers. How are you going to build up the resources to the scale that is needed for organizing? It's easy to say, "The conditions in the field are awful; we should do it." Where are the massive resources that you need to do it?

The structure of the industry is also a huge challenge. You have all these little contractors that actually hire the workers, but contractors are not the ones making decisions. You've got to aim at much

bigger targets. In our industry, if we didn't have the resources to research the industry and employers, we'd be fighting the wrong target. We'd be fighting someone who's not the decision maker. Who owns the Sheraton? I don't just mean the name on it, but who actually owns it, who calls the shots? That's a very complicated question, and it takes a lot of resources to figure it out.

I continue to hold up the farmworker union as a wonderful example of a movement union, and not a conventional business organization. There are advantages to having institutions with resources battling side by side with housekeepers and dishwashers. But what continues to inspire me is this: *How do we create a movement union?* You can't lose sight of the enormous contribution that Cesar and Dolores and all those farmworkers made in teaching us what a movement union looks like. What do we do? How do we do it? To this day, I use them to help answer those questions.