

Title

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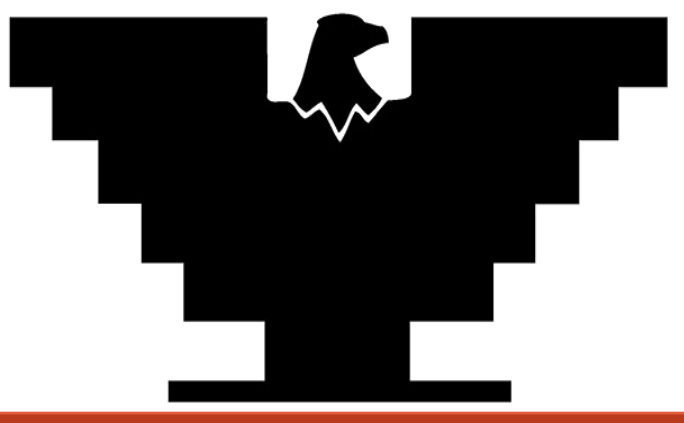
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Life in the Fields: The Lives of Imperial Valley Farm Workers During the Emergence of the UFW

Told in the Perspective of the Silva Family

By Gisele Valdovinos



Abstract:

This is a project is very close to my heart as it tells the story of my family and of my home. This project is about farm workers in the 1960s-1970s in the Imperial Valley; it is about their work, life and their involvement in activism. The Imperial Valley is a small county that is made up of many agrarian cities that are near the Mexicali border. Throughout the years, many families have immigrated to the Imperial Valley to find a boundless amount of work in the fields to feed and house their families. My family immigrated from Mexicali into the Imperial Valley during the mid 1960s and they would all work in the fields. This was a time where farm workers were exploited for their labor as they were paid very low wages and experienced bad working conditions. The rise of the United Farm Workers would change this and influenced farm workers to come together. I would like to tell this story as it is one that often overlooks individual farmworkers that were involved in the UFW and it allows my family's story to be heard. My family was deeply involved in the UFW as they suffered many grievances under the oppression of farm owners and wanted a better life for their family and community in the Imperial Valley. This activism is something that deserves to be heard and not forgotten, as my family is still proud of the sacrifices they made to fight for their rights. In this project, I will discuss some of the experiences that my family faced, how that shaped their involvement in the UFW and the lasting impact of the UFW on my family.

My Family:

Below are my 4 family members that I interviewed to conduct my research. They were very supportive in helping me in my research and very passionate about telling their stories about this time in their lives. Even though it was about 50 years ago, they still find great pride in their work and activism. I conducted these interviews by visiting their homes and recording casual conversations with them, sometimes even including other family members who were curious about this time. Another way I conducted my interviews was by calling them on the phone and asking them questions that I was curious about. This experience opened me up to so much of my family's history. I heard stories I never knew and pictures I had never seen, it was a very special moment to grow closer to my family and be able to be a vessel in telling their story.

Isabel Silva (my great-grandma)

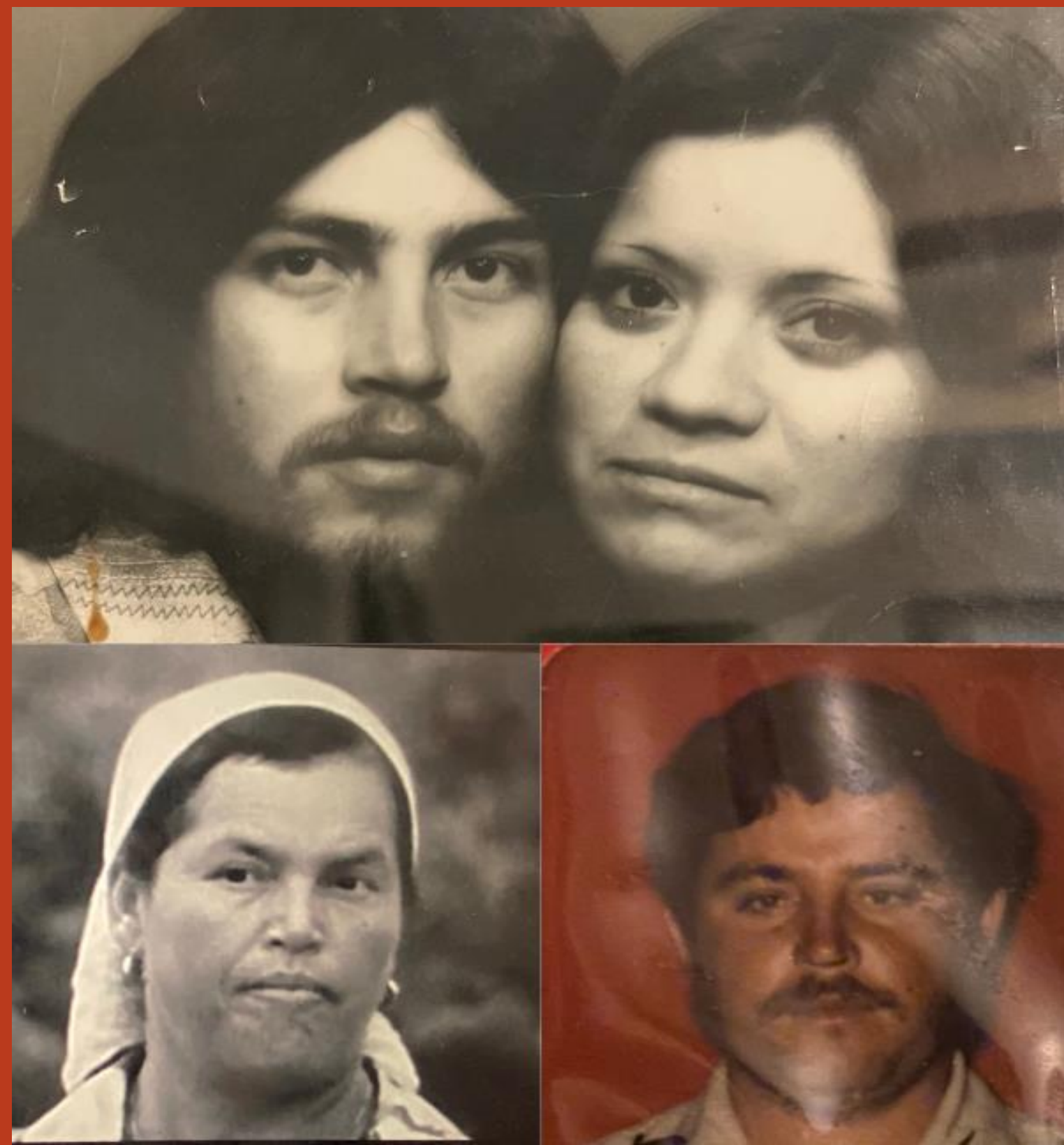
Isabel Silva was born in Aguascalientes, Mexico in 1924 in a small village. There she met her late husband Javier Silva, and they would have 15 children together. The family would later migrate to Mexicali to work in the fields as they were part of Bracero program in the 1950s. In the mid 1960s, she and her family would immigrate to Holtville, California located in the Imperial Valley. Her and her family worked in the fields all across California. In the 1970s, she would join the UFW and fight for the rights of Imperial Valley farm workers with the UFW. She would join many strikes and marches in the Imperial Valley and she would frequently travel to Delano and Coachella just to attend marches and strikes. In addition, she participated in many UFW meetings in the Imperial Valley and was even a delegate at the first UFW Constitutional Convention representing Imperial Valley farm workers. She is now 100 years old and is still very proud of her involvement in the UFW.

*bottom left photo, this photo was featured in the films Cesar Chavez by Diego Luna and Fight in the Fields by Rick Tejeda-Flores and Ray Telles

Javier Silva Jr. (my uncle)

Javier Silva Jr. was born in Aguascalientes, Mexico in 1942 to Isabel and Javier Silva. He would immigrate to the Imperial Valley with his family when he was a teenager. He was unable to finish high school as he would help his family by working in the fields. He would work in the fields from the early 1960s until the late 1980s, more than 20 years in the industry, to provide for his 3 children. In his teenage years, he would join his family in attending UFW marches, strikes and meetings inspired by his parents' activism. Later he would also be a UFW representative in a company that he worked with as they had signed a contract with the UFW. Even after the contract broke, he still fought for his rights and the rights of his co-workers. He is very proud of his activism and very thankful for all that the UFW has done for him.

*bottom right photo



Gustavo Silva (my grandpa)

Gustavo Silva was born in Aguascalientes, Mexico in 1955 to Isabel and Javier Silva. He would move to the Imperial Valley when he was in middle school. When he entered high school, he would start working in the fields on the weekends to help support his family. He would later have to drop out of school in order to work in the fields full time. He fondly remembers how after school he would drive to Coachella by himself to see Cesar Chavez speak and he would participate in marches. He, like his brother, credits his parents for his interest and participation in the UFW as he often attended meetings and marches alongside his family. He would work in the fields from the late 1960s until just a couple years ago when he retired in 2022. He worked very hard all his life to provide for his family and looks fondly on his participation in the UFW.

*Top photo to the left

Maria Silva (my grandma)

Maria Silva was born in Mexicali, Mexico to Abigail and Jose Gomez in 1955. Her family of 9 immigrated to Holtville, California when she was in high school to work in the fields. She would drop out of high school to work with her family. She would later meet my grandpa and they would have 3 children. They would work together all across California in the fields. Even though she never participated in the UFW, she greatly saw the changes that the UFW made in the industry and was grateful for those improvements. She would later stop working in the fields to work in other industries to have more time to raise her children.

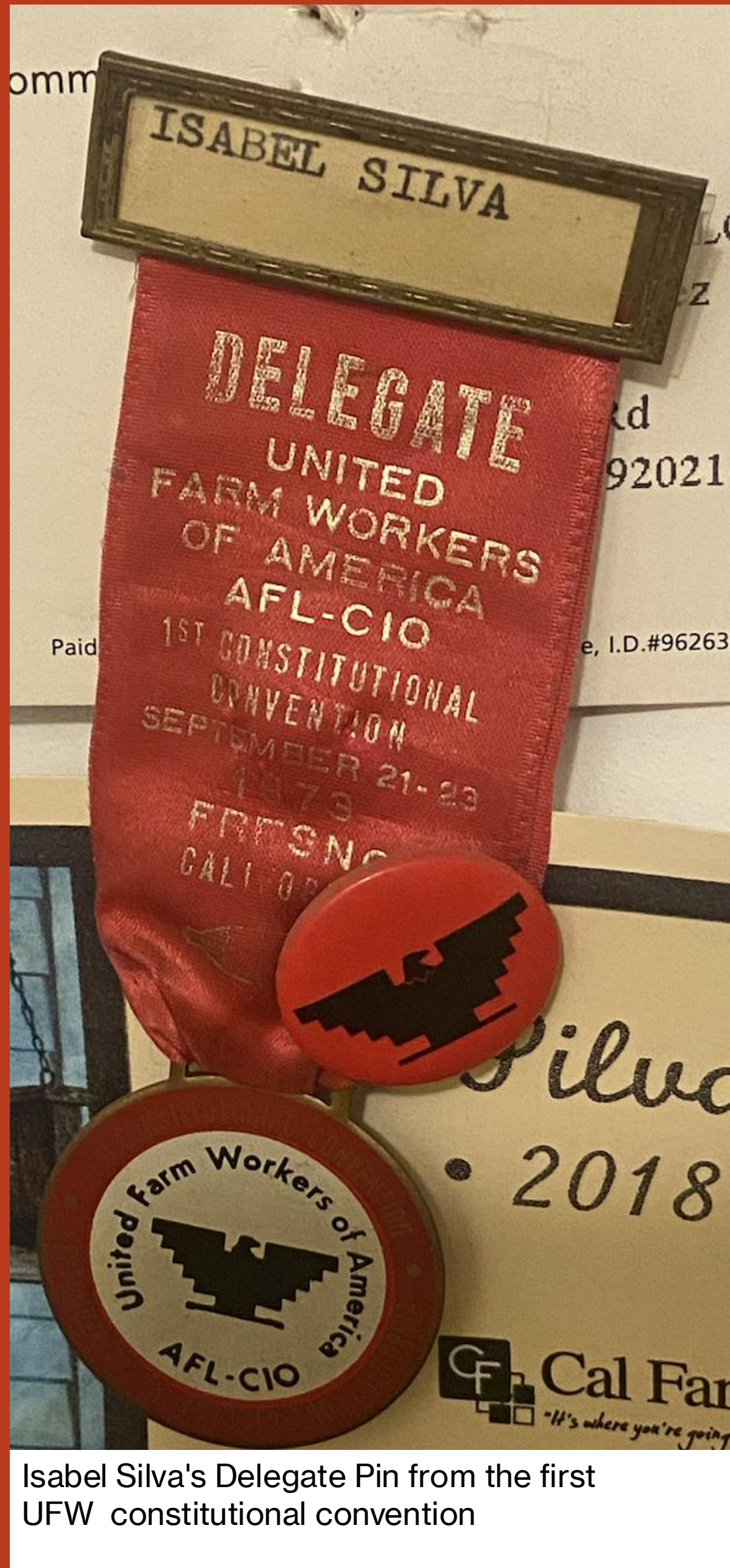
*Top photo to the left

Life In the Fields

Isabel Silva crossed the border on June 6, 1966, and from then she began to work in the fields. Working in the fields is a very common job in the Imperial Valley and one of the more difficult ones. However, during the 1960s and 1970s, farmworkers had no rights in the agriculture industry. They were often overworked and not respected employees. Gustavo Silva recalled having to work 24 hours, only getting paid 80-90 dollars a day and only getting a break to eat. The average wage of farmworkers at the time, according to my family, was from \$1.75 to \$3, depending on what city you were in and what industry (picking, irrigation or factory work) and on average they would work 10 hours a day. They would travel from city to city all throughout California, without knowing where they would sleep. My grandmother, Maria Silva, stated how sometimes they would have to sleep on the side of a canal as the hotels were full and they were so far away from home. They had no insurance, no sick days, no vacation time and did not have the right to unionize therefore they did not have a voice in the industry.

Impact of UFW

The UFW changed so much in the agriculture industry as they guaranteed farm workers many rights that they did not have before. Some examples that my family stated were very impactful for them was the right to unionize, being paid for overtime, given a minimum wage, given benefits, given security and guaranteed breaks. The UFW allowed field workers to take pride in their work, their culture and their unionization. My family feels a deep gratitude to the UFW for their resilience, as since I was a child they told me stories of how important the UFW was to their lives. It allowed them to be able to feed and house their families and make a better life for their children in a new country. They still hold on to old pictures, flyers and flags that they proudly hang in their homes as the UFW changed their lives. My family is very grateful for all the things that the UFW had done for them and how they forever changed the farming industry.

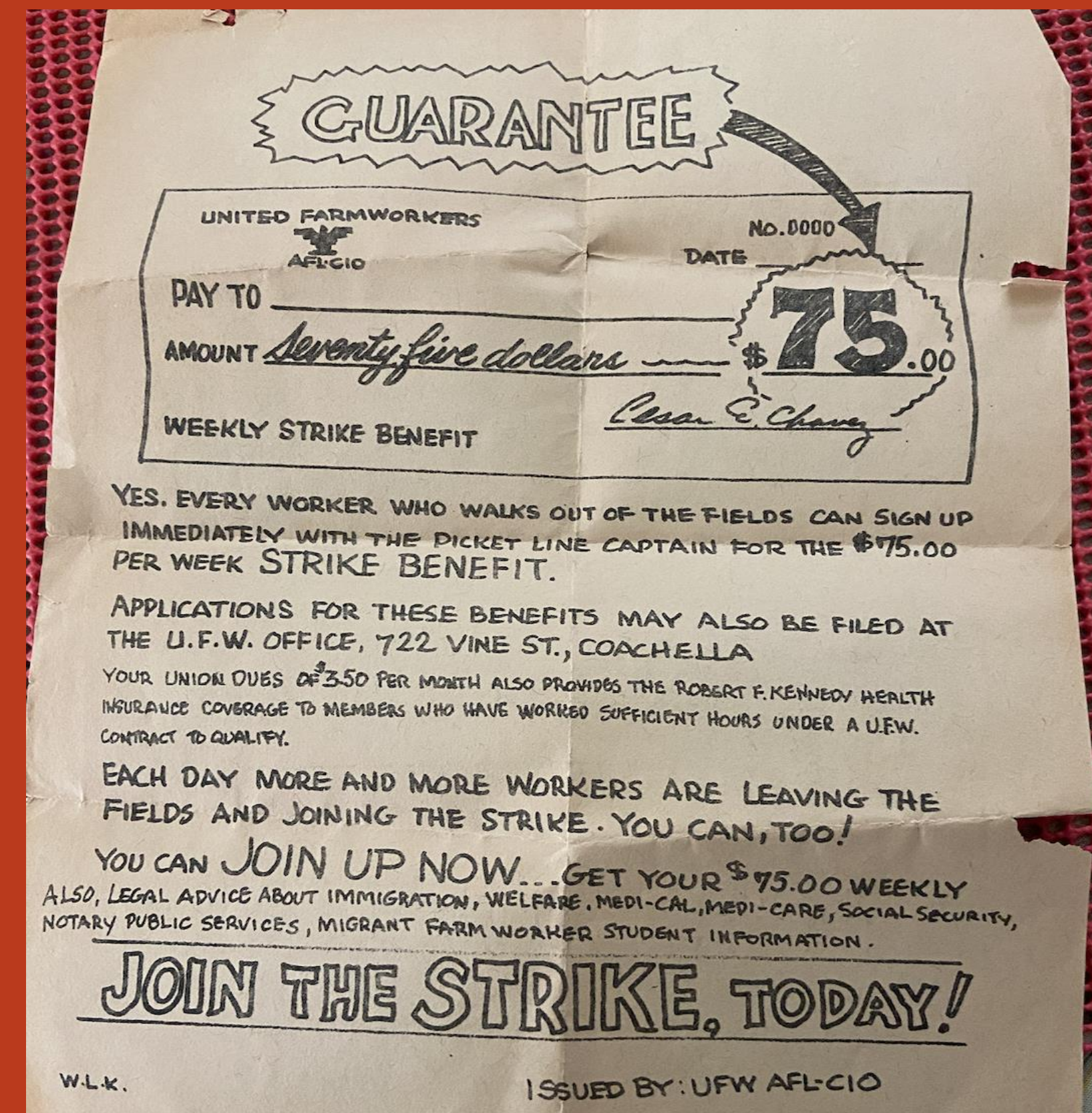


Isabel Silva's Delegate Pin from the first UFW constitutional convention



Image of my great-grandpa, man in a grey shirt, with denim pants and holding a cowboy hat, seated next to Cesar Chavez

*Bob Fitch photography archive, © Stanford University Libraries



UFW flyer from Javier Jr. collection of UFW memorabilia

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