

## Episode 18: How Many Deaths Will It Take: Remembering the Canadian Farmworkers Union

Transcript by Patricia Wejr

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:00:07] Welcome to another edition of On the Line, the podcast that shines a light on stories from BC's rich labour heritage. I'm your dapper host Rod Mickleburgh. In this episode, we tell the inspiring tale of a group of dedicated individuals who took up the cause of Fraser Valley farmworkers toiling in dreadful conditions not far from the gleaming towers of downtown Vancouver. And we tell it mostly through their own words. It's a saga that includes death and violence and courageous union organizing. And like so much of this province's labour history, it should be much better known. The Fraser Valley contains some of the richest farmland in Canada, providing a steady supply of fruits and vegetables for the people of the lower mainland and beyond. But getting that produce from farm to table has long been rife with exploitation. In the 1970s, thousands of South Asian immigrants worked on these farms, recruited by often unscrupulous labour contractors who skimmed their wages, and working for farmers who often housed them in virtual third world living quarters with almost no attention paid to their health and safety. This was also a time of growing social activism in BC, and the appalling situation of the farmworkers did not go unnoticed. Amongst those shocked by their treatment was Raj Chouhan. Like many South Asians who came to B.C. in the 1970s, he had first found work on the farms of the Fraser Valley. He was taken aback by what he saw in the fields of a country as rich as Canada. When he began asking questions, he was fired. That experience set him on a determined course to do something about the plight of the farm workers. He was not alone. A number of those early organizers were interviewed as part of the University of the Fraser Valley's South Asian Canadian Legacy Project, led by the B.C. Labour Heritage Centre. This has resulted in the book *Union Zindabad!* by the Centre's Donna Sacuta and Bailey Garden, along with Dr. Anushay Malik. We will hear from some of those interviewed, starting with Raj Chouhan, who went on to become President of the Canadian Farmworkers Union.

**Raj Chouhan** [00:02:39] So we met with Dr. Hari Sharma and through that met with many other good people like Dr. Chin Banerjee, Dr. Dale Burma in Montreal, and Dr. Mumbai in New York. The group together we started one organization called Indian People's Association in North America (IPANA). The main focus of that was again talking about workers' rights, peoples' rights, equality, justice, anti-racism, those kind of things. And, you know, I became aware of the situation in the fields here. After that, we found out there was no law covering farmworkers either the Employment Standards Act or the Labour Code and Health and Safety Regulation. None that applied to farmworkers. So, you know, all those things really encouraged us to do something about it. Initially, the issues that we heard were, for example, people were not paid on time, people were taken to work. They are paid very little. And whatever they earned the labour contractors, they knew the farmworkers most of them were not aware of their rights. (They) didn't know what protection they could go and seek and so they were totally being abused. And their transportation, their hours of work, health and safety, all those issues. We came to know that it was more we talked to people, more and more people talked about it, but at the same time there was lots of intimidation and fear to lose their job. So not—everybody was not willing to talk to us. You know, they were really afraid to speak with us. So it took many years to get to a point where people can feel comfortable and start talking about it. So like, for example, from our initial conversation, from my initial contact with the farmworkers in 1973, it took us five years to get our first meeting where we had about, I would say, about 20 farmworkers or close to that in a meeting first time, you know, until that we would meet one-to-one, talk to maybe two people here and one family. But most people are not feeling

comfortable to talk about their issues because they thought the moment they talk to somebody, the labour contractor or the farmers would fire them. And some even were told that if you complain, you could be sent back to India. Those kind of things. So when we had that meeting in 1978, in September, in a school library in Surrey, at 20 people, approximately 20 people came there and I thought, 'wow, we have won the first battle'.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:05:55] Sarwan Boal was another farmworker who was part of the early efforts to form a union. Having grown up on a farm in the Punjab, he began work picking berries after immigrating in 1970. When he heard that Raj Chouhan and others were taking on farmworker issues, he came on board as a member of the Farm Workers Organizing Committee, which was a precursor to the Canadian Farmworkers Union. The organizing work was all-encompassing.

**Sarwan Boal** [00:06:25] We were actively going out talking to people every day, almost, you know, 15 hours a day. And we were going to people's homes and talking to them, explaining and making members. Those days we had \$5 dues if somebody wanted to become a member of Canadian Farmworkers Union. So that's all we did. So—I think with the struggle and with the hard work we did, all of us, we established people's trust. We won people's trust there. We could walk into any home and talk to people. You know how it is, the Punjabi family, if the woman is alone there, you can't go. The people are there. You can't talk to a woman, you know. It's a culture. And we had to break that and we broke that culture and win their trust. And so from then onward, they didn't care who we were talking to. It doesn't matter. We were calling even in the middle of the night, the people, the young girls who were working in the mushroom farms or in the other places, and that's what we did. It was a real commitment and hard work, you know, and that was the total commitment we all gave, all of us.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:07:43] Not only was it total commitment, it was dangerous. Sarwan Boal recalls a visit he made to a few farmworkers at their bare-bones cabin.

**Sarwan Boal** [00:07:52] So when we were going to the cabin one day I took David Lane with me. He wanted to see the cabin and I took him with me. We both went after work and went to this farm, Khosa Brothers farm. And we were talking to the people at the cabin, because they came back after work at late at night. And then the farmer came and he came running, and I don't know, somebody informed him, 'the union people are here' and he had a gun in his van. He just got the gun right at us, both of us were standing at the door and David Lane was kind of -- because he didn't know—he totally was so scared. He said, 'this is it.' I said, 'don't worry about it, they're not going to shoot us. I know that. I know these people. They won't shoot'. And I told him. He said, 'get out of my farm.'" I said, 'look, we got, legally we're here. We're not here illegally. We got a legal, we give you the notice.' And he said, 'no, I'm going to shoot you.' 'Okay, shoot me if you want'. Then his wife came running from inside the house and she took the gun out of hand and she started swearing at him. Anyway, that was it. So that was it. That was the struggle working on the farm in the Fraser Valley organizing them. It was very hard to organize the open fields. It's not a factory, you go in front of the factory, start giving leaflets.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:09:12] Charan Gill arrived in BC in 1967. He first worked at a sawmill in Williams Lake, but after he was injured, he went into social work and became a dedicated social activist that led him to the cause of the farmworkers. He helped the Canadian Farmworkers Union become a social movement as well. Charan Gill's son, Paul, remembers the time Cesar Chavez, legendary head of the United Farm Workers of America, came north to speak to them.

**Paul Gill** [00:09:42] He said just the most amazing thing. He said, 'You know, you guys have an idea, but many people have an idea. An idea is the sound of one hand clapping. An idea with an action to it is the sound that you should make'. And he goes like this. And then the next thing he says, 'I want you to clap with me exactly the way I do'. And he goes like this, and then everyone claps in that manner. He says that's how organized people clap and it just blew me away because you had this auditorium of 1,000 people hanging on his every word. So Cesar Chavez was really an amazing gentleman and I know that after that my dad was so high from that experience just having him there.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:10:31] The National Film Board's well-made documentary on the farmworkers struggle, 'A Time to Rise', includes music and a clip of Cesar Chavez talking to the farmworkers.

**Cesar Chavez** [00:10:42] Thank you very much. I wanted to start by showing you how we do the applause in our union. We do it organized. Because it sounds better. Let me show you. You follow me. Okay. [clapping] Things when they're organized, they're better for you and me. Always. [music]

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:12:07] When he immigrated to BC in 1970, Harinder Mahil was 19. After a brief time as a farmworker, he went to work in local sawmills and became active with the New Westminster local of the IWA, along with its president, Gerry Stoney. When he also became involved with the Farm Workers Organizing Committee, he used his union connections to help rally support from mainstream unions.

**Harinder Mahil** [00:12:34] I think I would say that I was drawn to people who connected the Farm Workers Organizing Committee with the trade union movement and I remember when I talked to you about getting Gerry Stoney at one of the public meetings. Then I invited Syd Thompson, who was the president of the Vancouver local of the IWA. Then we invited Jack Munro, who was the regional president of the IWA. I was able to make these connections with the trade union movement because I had been part of the Labour Council and part of the—some connection with the BC Federation of Labour and so on.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:13:16] The Farmworkers Union built on these connections. Raj Chouhan.

**Raj Chouhan** [00:13:21] So when we came to a point in 1978 that we were getting pretty close to, or we were feeling very confident that we were very, very close to form an organization, we reached out to many unions. In 1979 after the formation of FWOC, we had reached out to Canadian Labour Congress. We also reached out to BCGEU. BCGEU was the first—and IWA was obviously, both Harinder and I were members of that. So they were all just, without asking any questions, they were there. They said 'Yes. We will help you to organize farmworkers.' And then there was other unions that was not associated with Canadian Labour Congress like CAIMAW, people who work in the steel plants or mines and all that.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:14:15] Meanwhile, the public was starting to learn just how terrible conditions were for the farmworkers. A baby rolled off a bed and drowned in a water container in the horse stall that housed her family. There was no running water. Not long after that, three young boys left to play while their parents picked berries, drowned in an abandoned gravel pit. An inexperienced 19 year old farm worker died of pesticide poisoning. When a coroner's jury found the Social Credit government was partially

responsible, the Socreds announced that WCB coverage would finally be extended to farmworkers. Under pressure from farm owners, however, the Socreds reneged on their promise just before the next election campaign. Harji Sangra remembers what happened when her mother was seriously injured on a Richmond cranberry farm.

**Harji Sangra** [00:15:11] And I still remember that there was no recourse. We spent years and years trying to, well, getting medical assistance. She almost died. There was an accident where about five farmworkers were on a jeep on the farm, and there was a train coming and there was no sort of proper markings. And the jeep went right over and all these five women farmworkers, including my mom, were all taken to hospital with severe injuries. And so my mom had a brain I mean, a head injury. And she still has a big cross on her forehead to this day. And after that, we tried to apply for disability benefits, and it was just an incredible nightmare. And so my mom was left with no income for a long, long time while we battled all the red tape to get her benefits. So those are some of my early memories.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:16:10] That led Sangra to become active in the Farmworkers Union. With the help of the BC teachers Federation and Frontier College, the CFU launched a first of its kind crusade to teach Punjabi-speaking farmworkers basic English.

**Harji Sangra** [00:16:25] I had a very good command of Punjabi. I lived with my grandparents. My grandparents lived with me, and that was a big focus. So I was one of the few in my family at that time who had sort of more linguistic skills, and I was quite proud of that. And so one day I remember at UBC in the South Asian Building, South Asian Centre, I saw a poster saying, 'teach English to farm workers.' And I thought, 'wow, that would be really interesting.' And so I phoned and that's how I was introduced to the Canadian Farmworkers Union. They had an office in Kingsway in Vancouver, it was in Burnaby at that time. And I remember just phoning and saying that, 'I'd like to tutor.' It was like tutoring for survival English. So it was just an incredible opportunity. So I would go to the office and they had a big room at the back and women would come and sometimes I would go to houses too. So, you know, sometimes the women, very few women could come out to the union office at that time. So I would go to Punjabi women's houses and I would teach English. But there was always that sense of, you know, your rights. And so they had sort of a curriculum and you know, it was a little bit, it was quite an interesting curriculum. Everything from what are your political rights to, you know, teaching English. And it was based on the pedagogy of Paolo Fieri. And then moving forward, I was hired one summer under a grant with the Canadian Farmworkers Union as an organizer, and that was an incredible—I think it was two summers maybe or summer I was hired. So I was hired as an organizer. And wow, it really opened my eyes. It really did open my eyes to what was happening in the industry.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:18:16] Incorporating art and culture was another successful element of the Canadian Farmworkers Union. Paul Binning helped connect performance and songs to labour activism. He was motivated by his own experience working long hours in the fields as a child.

**Paul Binning** [00:18:33] We did a culture show in New West, one of the union halls. So that's how we got connected. They wanted to see the folk dance. They wanted to see the bhangra. There's something in Punjabi, something belonged to them, they want to see that. They want to feel that. So that's how they had run and that's how we really got involved. And then on, you know, like every time the Farmworkers Union they had—we had once a week we used to have a fundraising dinner. All my family, took part of it, you

know, cooking and everything else. And I lived in Richmond, I had a big garden, lot of crops like potatoes, it used to go from my garden to making that dinner. All my family took part in helping out making the dinners, and we started singing the revolutionary songs, you know, with the bhangra and everything else, that was a big flash-back, from the community. They said, 'no, no bhangra is for—is supposed to be happy occasions, for celebration. You're not supposed to sing these kind of songs.' And I sort of said, no, it's also we can give people a message, we can change things. We can, with the songs and everything else, we can tell people, what we want to tell them. And we can say this song because they, you know, these songs are inspiring songs. You know, they get people going, you know, they get people moving because people really get into this. You know, when you doing, when you get a beat going on and you're singing these revolutionary songs, you know, everybody's blood starts flowing now and then, you know.' (Music plays)

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:20:49] All this was evidence that the Canadian Farmworkers Union was as much a social movement as a union concerned with wages and working conditions. The union's historic founding convention took place on April 6th, 1980. It was a joyous occasion, but just ten days later, bat-wielding thugs attacked the home of Vice President Jawala Singh Grewal, smashing windows and trashing his pickup truck. This was not an isolated event. Not only did the union itself attract violent opposition, there was racism too. Raj Chouhan.

**Raj Chouhan** [00:21:28] Well, in those days, racism was in-your-face kind of racism. It was not subtle. People's houses were burned. Actually, members of our community were killed. 1981, there was a young man who was walking to Moberley Park in South Vancouver, and he was beaten and beaten to death. And we also saw in those days Ku Klux Klan, where they were burning crosses in Prince George and Lower Mainland everywhere. So it was even more important for us to be for us, all of us as a group, to be out there to confront them rather than being just, 'oh yeah, could you please not do it or could you please change the law?' No, we had to organize and mobilize the community and we did it. As a result, we faced lots of violence. Some of our members were beaten up in those rallies. But the Ku Klux KKK's presence was very real in the community in those days in the lower mainland. But luckily we had people like Mike Harcourt, who was the mayor of Vancouver at that time, he openly spoke against it. And all the trade union movement, you know, they were also very vocal about it. And so it helped.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:22:57] The pervasive racism of the times led to the formation of another organization to take that on directly.

**Raj Chouhan** [00:23:05] We also formed BC Organization to Fight Racism. Because when we were talking about farmworkers' issues from '73 onward, the issue of racism was still there, every day, every moment of the day that, you know, we were facing lots of calls from people. They were talking about how they were harassed or beaten or their homes were, you know, the people are throwing eggs, those kind of— The issue of racism was front and centre. So at the same time, when we would talk about farmworkers, we were also talking about fighting racism. So it happened almost simultaneously. BC Organization to Fight Racism was a very broad-based organization. We didn't want to focus just on the South Asian aspect of it. We wanted to talk about the issue of racism in the whole society. So as a result, we were able to reach out to the First Nation, the indigenous people, the Chinese, the Filipinos, the blacks and you name it.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:24:15] Of course, the main goal of the Farmworkers Union was organizing, and nothing came easy. Even when a majority of workers voted for union

certification, getting a contract from anti-union owners took an all-out fight. At the Jensen Mushroom Farm in Langley the union had no choice but to strike to win a contract. Raj Chouhan recounts a harrowing incident that took place while he was alone on the picket line.

**Raj Chouhan** [00:24:43] Well we organized at one point Jensen Mushroom Farm, which is in Langley. So we were on strike there. It was like 24/7 the strike was going on and we met with lots of resistance from the employer. He was not willing to meet with us. He was not willing to talk. And so we had people on the picket line from a morning shift from 8:00 am to 4 p.m., then onwards like that. One day, the morning shift, for somebody they had to go home around 3:00. I was left alone on the picket line by myself. Inside the farm, obviously, they were watching that other women members and other members were gone home. And I was just walking back and forth with the placard around my neck there. It was a narrow road to the entrance to the farm, and it's right on the freeway. And just next to the freeway, there's a big ditch, then the narrow road, then entrance to the farm. So I was there. So they came out with two pickup trucks with their strikebreakers from inside and just parallel to each other. They were just driving and pushed me away, so I would not be able to be on the road, almost pushed me into the ditch. Then they stopped and they started beating me up. You know, 3 or 4 of them came out. And I had my keys or something in my hand. And when I realized that there was blood on my shirt and my trousers and all that, I thought, 'oh-oh somebody either stabbed me or I've hit somebody badly.' Then I realized after that it was me. I was holding my keys, car keys in my hand and I just punched myself in my hand (laughs). There was blood, but also blood coming from on the side of my face as well. And then what happened when they took off? Then they called the police. The police came there rather than listening to me and talking, you know, being sympathetic to my situation. The police officer started, really he was very abusive, started harassing me, 'why I was there, why did they do this.' So basically accusing me of instigating the whole violence. I said, 'oh, my God, what would I do now? You know, like I'm just by myself against a police officer. So is he going to charge me, I'm going to be arrested?' Lo and behold, because this incident happened right next to the freeway, one of our volunteer friend-lawyer Jim Quail, who used to work in Abbotsford, he'd every evening when he was driving back home, he'd stop his car on the freeway and just to say hello and all that. So he saw me there talking to the police officer. So he parked his car, came over the fence and he talked to—the police officer at that time, was finished with me, he took off. I told Jim, I said, look, I'm, you know, like blood all over my body and my clothes. And this police officer was harassing me, accusing me of something. So Jim Quail then contacted the Police Commissioner and we filed a complaint. Eventually they apologized, but had he not come there, I would have been arrested or taken to jail or something would have happened.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:28:35] The union finally did get a first contract at the mushroom farm, but the hard-nosed owner began hiring friends and members of his own family to stock the union membership rolls, and the union was decertified. There were some successes elsewhere, but the exhausting slog it took for just the most minimal advances began to wear down the union's leadership. They began to leave to take other jobs that provided more pay and security, and the CFU began to fade. Yet it left a mark that could not be measured in certifications. Working conditions and living conditions improved for all farmworkers. The worst of the farm owners and labour contractors had to clean up their act. This was almost all due to the union. Raj Chouhan.

**Raj Chouhan** [00:29:26] See, the union is the structure of to which you can articulate your issue, your concern. Then you can have a formal structure to which you can achieve those goals. Otherwise you are just having a brouhaha and raising your voice. People may hear

or may not hear. That may not work. In order to have a meaningful change at workplace, it's important that people organize themselves. And if the union is there, the union will help them to not only achieve that goal, but to have their rights in the future as well protected. So forming a union is absolutely fundamental.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:30:14] Things changed, says Paul Gill.

**Paul Gill** [00:30:17] I think the main thing is that—I don't think it's something that's practical or something that's a legislative change, but I think it's a change in people's opinion of themselves. And that I think the people brought themselves into a situation where they felt more respected by others and they respected themselves more. I think that was really the major change. I mean, you can talk about changes to employment standards or health and safety or whatever, but I think the change in attitudes of people towards farmers and farmworkers and for farmworkers themselves to not view themselves as just chattel or extra livestock or something, because that was really almost the view that some of these farmers had at the time. So changing those attitudes, I think, was very important.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:31:18] After leaving the Farm Workers Union, Raj Chouhan went on to become director of bargaining for the Hospital Employees' Union. In 2005, he was elected to the provincial legislature as the MLA for Burnaby Edmonds, and today he serves as Speaker of the House. It's been quite a ride for the once fiery young activist, but he looks back on those days without regret.

**Raj Chouhan** [00:31:42] Well, you know, sometimes when you're young, you have more energy and you are crazy enough to, not to think about anything else. And you have to be very passionate. And so we were I don't know, it was a kind of moment in our life that we thought we have to do that, it can be done. Sometimes we would get a call from farmworkers late in the evening that, you know, they were harassed or abused or thrown out of their farmer's property because they were living in cabins. So if I get a call, I'll call [unclear] and Sarwan Boal, we would jump into one car and we just go there. Doesn't matter if it was at 10:00 at night or midnight, you know. And we did it so many times. And now I think, like I said, how did we do it? You know? But it was supposed to be done. It was needed to be done. And we did.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:32:50] What a time it was. As noble a chapter as there is in the history of the BC labour movement. We hope you've enjoyed this look back through the voices of the participants themselves. Big thanks to the other members of the podcast crew, Donna Sacuta and Patricia Wejr for helping to put this together; to Anushay Malik for doing many of the interviews; to Bailey Garden and Donna Sacuta for their hard work on the Union Zindabad! Project; to John Mabbott for production and to the great folks at the BC labour Heritage Centre for making all of this possible. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. We'll see you next time, On the Line.