



Harji Sangra (centre) and Sukhwant Hundal (far right) were Canadian Farmworkers Union organizers at Hoss Mushroom Farm. From left to right, Jasweer Kaur Brar, Jasbir Kaur Sagoo and Sakhdarshanpar Machi were new union members on picket duty. The women had had enough of the poor working conditions that were typical for mushroom workers in the Fraser Valley: up to 15-hour workdays with no overtime, piece-rate pay amounting to \$2-\$3 an hour, no bathrooms, and dismissal for union activity.

South Asian Farmworkers Rising

AN INTERVIEW WITH CFU ORGANIZER HARJI SANGRA



A partnership between the South Asian Studies Institute (University of the Fraser Valley) and the BC Labour Heritage Centre led to the groundbreaking Union Zindabad! South Asian Canadian Labour History in British Columbia. The book explores the stories of South Asian workers in BC over a period of more than 100 years, including the pivotal work of the Canadian Farmworkers Union (CFU).

For the book, labour historian Anushay Malik conducted a series of interviews. One of these was with activist Harji Sangra, who became involved in the Canadian Farmworkers Union in the 1980s when she was a university student. She taught English to women farmworkers and worked as an organizer for the union. Sangra also participated in writing and performing plays for the farmworkers' movement, promoting the union and social justice issues.

Our thanks to the South Asian Studies Institute (University of the Fraser Valley) and the South Asian Canadian Legacy Project for allowing Our Times to condense and lightly edit the interview for publication in this issue.

ANUSHAY MALIK (AM): You're one of the few women who was involved in the Canadian Farmworkers Union. What were the inspiring factors that pushed you to do this? Were your parents involved in union work or political work before?

HARJI SANGRA (HS): My mom was a farmworker all her life. She immigrated in the late 1950s. And

my dad, he always worked in a sawmill. He was always proud of the fact that he was in a unionized sawmill, which made a huge difference. He came in the early 1950s. Along with my mom, he always had stories of how well they worked — a lot of the South Asian men who worked in sawmills at that time. There was a lot of racism and discrimination.

PHOTOGRAPH: CRAIG BERGGOLD



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Children in the fields during strawberry harvesting, Fraser Valley, BC. Circa late-1970s.



They did not get paid the same wages as Caucasian males. When they did become unionized with the IWA [International Woodworkers of America], that was a huge thing. So I always grew up with a union background.

AM: Can I ask you whereabouts your mom worked, and your dad as well?

HS: My parents lived in South Vancouver all their life. Most of the agricultural farms were in Richmond at that time. From 1970 on, my earliest memories are of my mom waking up at five a.m. She was a day labourer who picked cranberries for a huge, huge cranberry operation. My earliest memories were of driving my mom in the early morning to the farms over in Richmond with my dad, and then my dad dropping me at school, and my dad going to work.

At about age eight or nine, during the summers, I would go with my mom, and we would be day labourers. We would pick blueberries

My uncle, my mom's brother, and his wife, they were also farmworkers. We worked on the farms too. At about age eight or nine, during the summers, I would go with my mom, and we would be day labourers. We would pick blueberries. A lot of kids went sort of as something fun to do. We went because it was a necessity. My mom wanted me to pick berries with her, so we picked blueberries and strawberries every summer.

I remember, it was really, really long hours, really tough work. But I also remember my mom having a lot of camaraderie with all the other Punjabi women. To this day, she still keeps in touch with all her friends.

My mom, after many, many years, was actually

injured at work, at the farm. I still remember that there was no recourse. We spent years and years trying. And she had almost died. About five farmworkers were in a Jeep, on the farm, and there was a train coming and there were no proper markings [by the tracks]. And the Jeep went right over and these five women farmworkers, including my mom, were all taken to hospital with severe injuries. My mom had a head injury. She still has a big cross on her forehead to this day. After that, we tried to apply for disability benefits, and it was just an incredible nightmare. My mom was left with no income for a long, long time while we battled all the red tape to get her benefits. Those are certainly some of my early memories.

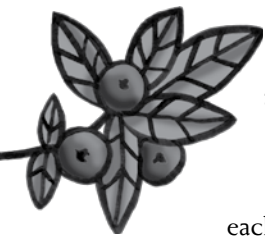
At that time, pesticides were quite big. When we were fighting our disability case, my mom was quite sick. She is quite sick now, too. She has a type of blood cancer. I always think back to the lack of protective gear and the pesticides being used. A lot of the women my mom's age, you know, did end up getting quite sick in their later ages.

AM: Did the other women who she worked with often come to your house?

HS: At that time, not many women drove. So my dad would pick up my mom's friends from all the way in Vancouver. I would be in the backseat, and my mom, my dad would drop them off. When I got my licence at 16, it was my duty to pick up my mom and her friends, and bring them back to Vancouver.

AM: Can you give us any insight into what the conversations between your mom and her friends were like?

HS: Oh, they would definitely complain about the conditions, in a somewhat humorous way. They were



One day at UBC, in the South Asian centre, I saw a poster saying “teach English to foreign workers.” And I thought, wow, that would be really interesting. So I phoned, and that’s how I was introduced to the Canadian Farmworkers Union

each other's best company. They would always say there was no proper bathroom. The owners had a lot of money, and the workers had to be very vigilant about their wages and not being paid on time.

There was always a sense of the weather. Women did weeding and gardening and blueberry picking, but the main thing was cranberry harvesting, and that is very laborious. It's very difficult, because you're wading in large trenches of water. Sometimes they would not have proper equipment. They would not have waterproof clothes. But there was definitely camaraderie.

My dad would say to my mom, “don't work,” but my mom was illiterate. She can't read or write Punjabi. But she wanted to bring in an income, and those were the only jobs available at that time. There was a lot of exploitation, but there was also that “feudal” kind of sense [in relations with the employers]. Sometimes I tried to advocate on behalf of my mom, because we knew the farm owners. They weren't from our village, but they were people we knew, so there was always this sense of “you need to respect them.” And that we don't want to cross any limits. And that we don't want to say too much. You should just be thankful you have a job and they pay you.

AM: How did you then go about pursuing your studies and your career and becoming involved with the Canadian Farmworkers Union?

HS: It must have been 1983 or 1984. I was a UBC [University of British Columbia] student, in sociology. I was always interested in social justice. I was always interested in global issues. So I was always looking for opportunities, even when I was on campus, to be more involved in my community.

We come from a large extended family, and I always had lots of conversations with my cousins. We all grew up in humble situations. My grandfather came in 1907, so we were quite established, you know, but I was wanting to do more community work. I had a very good command of Punjabi — my grandparents

lived with me, and that was a big focus. I was one of the few in my family at that time who had more language skills. I was quite proud of that.

One day at UBC, in the South Asian centre, I saw a poster saying “teach English to foreign workers.” And I thought, wow, that would be really interesting. So I phoned, and that's how I was introduced to the Canadian Farmworkers Union. They had an office in Burnaby at that time. I went into the union office and met a great gentleman named David Jackson, who was an organizer [and ESL coordinator for CFU]. He was, I think, doing his master's degree. He was the one, I think, orga-

nizing the program to teach survival, political English, to Punjabi farmworkers. It was just an incredible opportunity.

I would go to the office, and they had a big room at the back. And women would come. Very few women could come out to the union office at that time. So I would go to Punjabi women's houses. It was quite an interesting curriculum — everything from what are your rights to teaching English. It was based on the pedagogy of Paulo Freire. I found that fascinating, so I started reading more about it.

It was such a humbling experience because I connected with those women. I would just have so much fun. They'd offer me a cup of tea, and we'd always speak English. And we talked about how things were



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going on the farm, what kind of issues were happening and how they could deal with them. That's where I met all the incredible people of the Canadian Farmworkers Union — Charan Gill, Raj Chouhan, Sarwan Boal. I was quite young at that time and just entering my studies. I just learned such an incredible amount. I was getting theory. I was reading a lot. David Jackson was awesome. And then I also had the practical, where I could just really connect with women, too.

A huge part of the farmworkers' struggle was to improve the living conditions of people in the cabins. They had no running water

Moving forward, I was hired one summer, under a grant, with the Canadian Farmworkers Union as an organizer. And that was incredible. I think it was two summers maybe. It really opened my eyes to what was happening in the industry. At that time, there were just so many tragic incidents. I still remember one of the incidents where a child had drowned in a bucket of water in a cabin. I just couldn't believe that could happen. I didn't really realize the situation of the cabins. A huge part of the farmworkers' struggle was to improve the living conditions of people in the cabins. They had no running water.

AM: People have talked about the cabins before. Can you expand a little bit on this?

HS: It would be very basic housing. People would come from smaller communities up north to the Metro Vancouver area, and they would stay for the season and be given a room by the employers. Some or most employers took some money off the workers' paycheques for that. And most of these cabins had no facilities. They were almost like slave conditions. One huge aspect of the Canadian Farmworkers Union was to improve the living conditions of the people who lived in the cabins. Many of them came with young children. They would come for the summer or the season with their families, and they would work under slave-like conditions for farmers.

AM: Can you describe what the organizing work involved?

HS: Well, me and a girlfriend were hired as organizers that summer. We just thought, "wow"!

We had some training, and our job was to go to the fields. We would pose as berry pickers, and then we would talk to people. We would get a sense of what's going on. And we, in our own ways, very subtly tried to encourage them to join the union, explain the benefits of the union, make some personal contacts, leave some information. It was very interesting. One time [the farm owners] found out these girls are union workers, and we were literally chased off the farm.

AM: Were you ever scared?

HS: No, no, no — we had a right. We went, and we



Harji Sangra (right) and Anju Hundal performed in Vancouver Sath's theatre tour of the Fraser Valley. Vancouver Sath, a collective of South Asian writers, dancers, actors and union organizers, presented Punjabi and English theatre productions, including *Picket Line*, *Crop of Poison* and *Whose Marriage?*.

picked berries, and it's free speech. We could talk. People didn't talk openly, but I have memories of us picking berries, and I'm always quite a chatterer. It's easy to start a conversation with some of the workers, and you'll get a sense of what's happening. If people were very reluctant to talk to the union, it would, understandably, go in phases. If they knew we were union, word would get out. We wouldn't really say sometimes, but it was a mix. Even through my own family, I was really trying ways to raise awareness. At that time, it was very much in the media here, too. There had been so many tragic incidents, so people were aware of what was happening with farmworkers.

I still remember, I was a little bit younger when Cesar Chavez came up from California. That was huge when he came up to give that solidarity. I remember the boycott of grapes in California. Chavez talked about that movement in California and how it was possible to organize farmworkers.

AM: Wow. And do you remember when you were

PHOTOGRAPH: CRAIG BERGGOLD



From organizer to actor: Harji Sangra (centre), performed in Vancouver Sath's play **Picket Line** at the 1987 Vancouver Mayworks Festival in Grandview Park. The play tells the story of the CFU's organizing drive at Hoss Mushroom Farm.

speaking to these women — what were the one or two major issues that you heard repeated again and again?

HS: Well, one of the big things was it's such hard, hard, labour-intensive work. It exhausted them. The really, really long hours. I even remember when we would go to the farms with my mom for the summers. You would go with contractors, right? Contractors were a big part of the whole industry. And we knew many contractors — some were family, relatives. Buses, they would pick you up at four o'clock, 4:30. My maternal aunt and uncle, they would be gone by four o'clock every single day. And they would come home at about 9 p.m. And that's just in my family. Those were vivid, vivid memories because we would go over and we would say, "Isn't Auntie back home yet? Isn't Mama back home?" And they would say, "Oh, no, no, it's summertime. They won't be back home 'till about 9:30." That was one huge thing. The other one was the infrequency of proper payment. There were a lot of issues around payment. In terms of employment benefits, there was a lot of abuse around that — part of your pay being cut.

AM: With all this work, I mean, you're also then friends and close with people like [union activist] Pritam Kaur,

which I'd love to hear a little bit more about, by the way. But I just want to know how the transition toward Vancouver Sath* happened, not just necessarily Vancouver Sath, but also where the women are. I mean, what your story is enabling us to see is women.

HS: Well, there was a huge strike at Hoss Farm. And Craig [CFU photographer Craig Berggold] did a lot of photography, a lot of documentation of that strike. That was huge. That was such a historic strike. That was all led by women on the mushroom farm. I forget some of the names, but the picket line around Hoss

"Isn't Auntie back home yet? Isn't Mama back home?" And they would say, "Oh, no, no, it's summertime. They won't be back home 'till about 9:30."

Farm went for ages and ages, and it was all women who had been fired because they had organized and unionized who were at the front of that picket line. That picket line was there for a long time. And I remember I went to that picket line, and I met a few people there at that time through the union. [Members of Vancouver Sath] Sukhwant Hundal, Sadhu Binning, Jagdish Binning, Anju Hudal — they were all part of that. When the strike was happening, everybody would go to the picket line to support these women. So that's where I got to know Sadhu and Vancouver Sath a little bit more. And we became really good friends.

And I was really, really inspired by the work of Vancouver Sath at that time. They had been publishing a magazine called *Watan* [a quarterly dedicated to Punjabi language, literature and culture in Canada]. And from there, they made Vancouver Sath. And then I was part of that. It was like family, and it was like mentors, and it was people I learned so much from about social justice, about community work, and about Punjabi. And I remember still, at that time, I think they said, "I heard you were going to write a play, and we want you to be in it, in Punjabi." And I said, "No, no, no! I can't do a play. But I'm interested in all these topics."

They encouraged me, and that's where I really developed my Punjabi skills even further. And I really enjoyed it. We would cooperatively write plays, and then we would perform them. And it was people's theatre — based on the concepts of community theatre, power-play theatre. And it was just incredible.

We did so many plays in the community. And one of the plays, of course, was called *Picket Line*.

*Vancouver Sath was a group started by politically conscious Punjabi artists, writers, other creators and community activists. Along with their many endeavours, they wrote and performed plays. Some of the group's members were actively involved in the BC farmworkers' struggle. To read more about Vancouver Sath, see rungh.org/vancouver-sath.

For more about the South Asian Studies Institute, see ufv.ca/sasi.



PHOTOGRAPH: CRAIG BERGGOLD

Union Zindabad!

SOUTH ASIAN CANADIAN LABOUR HISTORY IN BRITISH COLUMBIA



PHOTOGRAPH: CRAIG BERGGOLD

A farmworker hauls and dumps Brussels sprouts into the grower's warehouse processing bin. Farmworkers had a daily "piece-work" card punched by the labour contractor. Harvesting was usually paid at piece rates, not hourly wages. This often resulted in many field workers receiving less than a minimum wage.

The following is excerpted, with permission, from Union Zindabad! South Asian Canadian Labour History in British Columbia, by Donna Sacuta, Bailey Garden and Dr. Anushay Malik. Union Zindabad! was produced by the South Asian Studies Institute (University of the Fraser Valley) as part of the South Asian Canadian Legacy Project. This chapter of the book tells the story of how the Canadian Farmworkers Union came to be.

"Zindabad" is used as a political rallying call, cheer or exclamation of support in Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, Odia and Bengali languages, literally translating to 'Long live [idea or person].' In the BC labour movement, cries of 'Farmworkers Zindabad!' have been heard at massive protest rallies in recent decades, but the phrase has a history that reaches across the Pacific Ocean. The title of this exhibit encapsulates the spirit of South Asian Canadian labour activism: 'Long Live the Union!'" — FROM THE OPENING PAGES OF UNION ZINDABAD!

The creation of the Canadian Farmworkers Union in the 1980s was a watershed for South Asian Canadian labour.

Abysmal working conditions prevailed on many farms in the Fraser Valley in the 1960s and 70s. Thousands of farmworkers — mostly South Asian immigrants — toiled long hours in the summer heat, under the heel of labour contractors who skimmed their low wages and owners who relegated them to appalling living quarters.

Young immigrant Raj Chouhan was shocked by what he found when he sought work. "There was

no running water, no toilets, absolutely no facilities," Chouhan told a reporter years later. Employees often lived in converted barns, six to a cubicle, their kids among them. "I was expecting, in a country like Canada, there would be something better than that," said Chouhan. When he asked questions, he was fired, and the young immigrant had a cause.¹

Stretching into the 1980s, along with organizers Sarwan Boal, Judy Cavanagh, Charan Gill and the IWA's Harinder Mahil, aided by scores of volunteers and supporters, Chouhan led a valiant effort to organize Fraser Valley farmworkers, publicize their plight

and secure decent working conditions. Employers were supported by the Social Credit government, and farmworkers excluded from regulations and labour standards covering other BC workers.

Despite coercion and violence, the Canadian Farmworkers Union persevered, winning union certifications and shining a spotlight on the dark corner where farmworkers had been shunted by government and an unaware public.

Working Conditions for Farmworkers

Most farmworkers spoke no English. Two-thirds were women. New to Canada — and reminiscent of earlier generations of South Asian Canadian workers — they were fearful of their fate if they complained.

The work was seasonal and followed the calendar of agricultural crops. Farmworkers traveled to the Fraser Valley from all parts of British Columbia, including the lower mainland. Those from outside the region lived in crude ramshackle shacks with no running water. Those who lived closer to farms were transported to the fields by contractors or family members. The women and elderly workers often brought their children as young as 8 years old to work beside them.

Harji Sangra's first introduction to farmwork was as a child, when she accompanied her mother to the fields in the summer. "My earliest memories were driving my mom early morning to the farms with my dad

and then my dad dropping me at school, my dad going to work. And we worked on the farms, too. And so about age eight or nine. During the summers, I would go with my mom and we would be day labourers. We would pick blueberries."²

Farmworkers Organizing Committee

The origins of the Canadian Farmworkers Union can be traced to the Vancouver chapter of the Indian People's Association of North America (IPANA). Its earliest members included Harinder Mahil, Raj Chouhan and Chin Banerjee. These men were already friends who recognized that farmworkers in British Columbia were being exploited.

At an IPANA meeting in 1979, Chouhan and Mahil agreed to attempt to organize the farmworkers. Both had personally experienced the working conditions on farms, and both had connections to the labour movement.

Harinder Mahil described the formation of the Farmworkers Organizing Committee (FWOC). "Some of us who were members of IPANA had worked in the agriculture industry here, Raj Chouhan was one of them. We also knew of people who were working in the agricultural industry primarily picking up berries, strawberries, raspberries, blueberries and being exploited. There was no coverage, they were not seen as workers. They were not covered under labour legislation, the Employment Standards Act, which sets minimum standards for workers in the province."

Mahil, Chouhan and the others could see that the dreaded labour contractor system that South Asian workers had fought against for so long was once again in place for farmworkers.

"There was a contract system, contractors who were mostly Indo-Canadian would take these workers to farms and they would get a certain percentage of the worker's salary as their cut," said Mahil. "At an IPANA meeting I said, "we should be dealing with those problems. Everyone that was there said that makes sense, that we should be looking after the interests of members of our community. And it is an issue we should do something about."

"We were told to proceed to work on this issue and we set up the Farm Workers Organizing Committee. We called a public meeting; the meeting was at the Carpenters Hall in Westminster, which was basically next to IWA office. And I had called Gerry Stoney to come to be there."

Mahil said 200 farmworkers attended the first meeting. Soon they were flooded with media attention, and appointed Charan Gill to handle calls.³

Canadian Farmworkers Union Formed

On April 6, 1980, to the rousing cry of "Zindabad!" (long live!), the FWOC became a union — the Canadian Farmworkers Union (CFU). Raj Chouhan was



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President. In July of that same year the CFU achieved its first union certification of farmworkers.⁴

Financial and organizational support for the CFU was given by BC unions and the Canadian Labour Congress. Union leaders, activists and members were extremely active in supporting CFU organizing drives and on picket lines.

Union support came from beyond British Columbia's borders. United Farm Workers President Cesar Chavez came to Canada from California to assist CFU President Raj Chouhan. The IWA's Gerry Stoney made the introduction. Chouhan and Chavez made a strong connection through their shared struggle and met many times over the years.

Organizing and Strikes

Even before the CFU was formed, on July 17, 1979, the Farmworkers Organizing Committee mobilized its first direct action picket line with nearly 200 farmworkers at Mukhtiar Growers in Clearbrook, BC. The workers had not been paid their back-wages for six weeks.

"Contacted by some farmworkers who convinced others to stay out and with the support of FWOC members, Mukhtiar paid \$80,000 in wages on the spot," after two hours of negotiations. Workers went back to work after they received their cheques. The FWOC's first major victory was reported in the local, national and provincial press and TV.⁵

In the meantime, tragedy swept the growing fields. Sukhdeep Madhar, a seven-month-old baby, drowned when she rolled off a small bunkbed into a large bucket of drinking water in the converted horse stall used to accommodate her family. The farm owner had provided no running water.

The CFU had been certified to represent the workers at Jensen Mushroom Farm in the Fraser Valley on July 18, 1980. Most of the workers had not had a wage increase since October 1978. The strike at Jensen's began in April 1981.

After many months of maintaining a 24-hour picket line, Jensen completely stopped production and put his farm up for sale.

"Initially Jensen maintained production as 10 workers scabbed. The line was subjected to various forms of violence from name calling, to car pounding, to a physical scuffle, to telephone wires being cut, to trucks being chased at high speeds, to an attempt to burn down the trailer while a picketer was sleeping inside."⁶

Barely a week later, three young boys, left to play by themselves while their parents picked berries, drowned in a nearby abandoned gravel pit. The deaths shocked British Columbians. Decrying the "horror" of living conditions on the farm, a coroner's inquest

into the infant death called for immediate inspections of all agricultural accommodation in the province.

For the families of the three drowned boys, the CFU helped win \$30,000 in damages from the gravel-pit owner. The union pressed forward with demonstrations, public meetings and well researched briefs, backed by a supportive media and public.

With no comprehensive regulations or mandatory training in place, nineteen-year-old farmworker Jarnail Singh Deol died of pesticide poisoning. When a coroner's jury ruled the death of Deol was "preventable homicide" and said the government was partly responsible, the Social Credit government announced WCB coverage would be extended to agricultural workers effective April 4, 1983. They reneged on that commitment just before that spring's election campaign.

Raj Chouhan lambasted the turnabout as the government's "most dishonest betrayal."

"Jarnail's death stands as a monument to government inaction," raged the usually even-tempered Chouhan. "To those who demand patience, to those who are tired of our voices shouting for equality, we say, 'No more deaths! No more watching our young people die!'"⁷

Farmworkers would have to wait until 1993 before they were brought under the same health and safety umbrella as other BC workers.

The CFU fought hard to bring farmworkers the protection of a union contract. Bell Farms in Richmond was one of the few growers to accept the union. Covering ten full-time and thirty seasonal employees, the CFU contract at Bell Farms prescribed a forty-hour week, benefits and improved wages. A union hiring hall replaced the use of labour contractors.

On May 27, 1984, eleven women mushroom pickers were fired at Hoss Farm; five for signing Canadian Farmworkers' Union cards and six more who approached the grower about his actions. "I feel good about the picket line, because we are fighting,"

FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH DONATED TO CFU AT THE CANADIAN FARMWORKERS UNION ARCHIVE, SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS LIBRARY



On July 25, 1980, three young boys, Sumandeep, Gurjeet, and Boota, aged seven to 11 drowned in a gravel pit in Langley, BC, while their parents were picking berries in a nearby field.



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PHOTOGRAPH: JUDY CAVANAGH

On May 27, 1984, 11 women mushroom pickers were fired at Hoss Mushroom Farm; five for signing union cards and six more who approached the South Asian grower about his actions.

said Jasweer Kaur Brar. Their poor working conditions were typical for many mushroom workers. This included working up to 15 hours per day with no overtime, piece rates of \$2-\$3 an hour (far less than minimum wage), no bathrooms or cleaning facilities, and dismissal for union activity.

A Social Movement

The CFU was as much a social movement as a traditional trade union. With the help of the BC Teachers' Federation and Frontier College, the union launched a pioneering and successful English as a Second Language (ESL) Crusade to teach Punjabi-speaking farmworkers basic English.

The Canadian Farmworkers Union ran English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for farmworkers, taught by volunteer tutors. The students were mainly Punjabi, mostly women, many in their fifties and sixties. Classes were in students' houses.

Instructional videos were produced on the safe use of pesticides and other health and safety practices.

Union Organizing Through Art and Culture

In a ground-breaking organizational strategy, the Canadian Farmworkers' Union incorporated revolutionary artistic work by writing and staging their own plays, Bhangra dance performances, and more.

Paul Binning was an activist who helped connect arts, culture and labour activism. He was one of the first professional Bhangra dancers in BC, teaching many

Canadian-born youth through his Richmond based dance troupe, the Punjab Cultural Association.

Bhangra originated as an amalgamation of folk dances from various regions in the Punjab, coming together in the revolutionary era of the 1940s and continuing to evolve in years since. Song lyrics often include themes of love, patriotism, strength and celebration during times of harvest, which resonated strongly with BC farmworkers. Many of the traditional dance moves represent farming activities: for example, the "pick and place" action of harvesting or moving crop.

The Binning family was involved with the CFU from the beginning, and it wasn't long before Paul was in charge of organizing entertainment for the union's frequent fundraising dinners. Despite its strong historic working-class associations, not everyone in the community appreciated Bhangra's role as a labour organizing tool.

Binning defended what he called 'revolutionary Bhangra'. "We can change things with the songs. We can tell people what we want to tell them, and we can sing songs because they know these songs are inspiring songs. You know, when you get a beat going on and you sing these revolutionary songs, you know, everybody's blood is flowing now."⁸

Music and dance also bridged the gap between communities. This was often the case with the CFU, who used Bhangra performances to introduce a part of Sikh Punjabi culture to fellow trade unionists. It was at a cultural show in New Westminster hosted at one of the trade union halls that the two became really connected.

"After that, I became very, very much involved . . . my Bhangra, with the kids, that I was doing with the kids became their first, main entertainment, to get the people together — then they could make their speeches. A lot of people came to see us, they came to hear our dhol [drum] . . . there's something that was Punjabi, something that belonged to them. They wanted to see that, feel that," added Binning.⁹

Discrimination was a frequent issue in the 1980s, and racial tensions did not go away during performances. Binning recalled an incident where his Bhangra performers faced repeated hostility from a local crowd in Fort St. James but evolved into connection and celebration once they had a chance to experience the dance.

Farmworkers tried their hand at playwriting; they performed short comedic skits at their first convention, poking fun at aggressive anti-union farm owners and exploring more serious issues such as workplace safety.

The BC Federation of Labour helped to sponsor a 1985 "CFU Cultural Programme" at Yale Jr. Secondary School in Abbotsford, which featured speeches, Bhangra, and a performance of "Picket Line" alongside another play titled "Jageeru Lumber".

Sadhu Binning, brother of Paul Binning and Vancouver Sath co-founder, helped to write "Picket Line" and explained how women's work was always often undervalued and the union helped provide validation as workers. "Back home, they [women] worked more than the men did, but that wasn't recognized as work outside of the home. So here, they themselves didn't have that feeling either; they just wanted to help the family, that was the initial feeling they had. But they were workers, and eventually, they realized they were workers and so they became part of the Farmworkers' Union."¹⁰

Racism and Backlash

Ten days after formation of the Canadian Farmworkers' Union (CFU) in April 1980, bat-wielding thugs attacked the home of vice-president Jawala Singh Grewal, smashing windows and trashing his pickup truck.

Raj Chouhan recalled an incident when he was picketing by himself at Jensen Mushroom Farm. "I was just walking back and forth with the placard on my neck. It was a narrow road entrance to the farm and it's right on

the freeway and just next to a big ditch, then the narrow road and entrance to the farm. So they came out with two pickup trucks with their strikebreakers from inside [the farm] 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 just started beating me up."¹¹

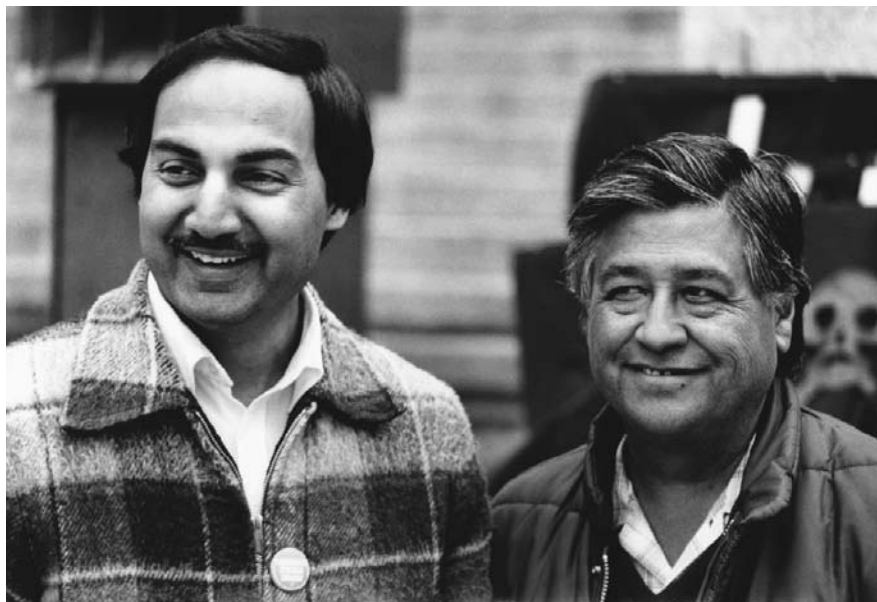
Sarwan Boal faced more than one incident of violence, including being threatened at gunpoint when he visited a farmworkers' cabin. "Then the farmer came running; somebody must have told him the union people are here. And he had a gun in his van, he's got the gun right at us, both of us. We're standing at the door. He said, 'get out of my farm!' I said, 'look, we we're here legally. We give you the notice'. And he said, 'I'm going to shoot you!' And then his wife came running from inside the house and she took the gun off of him and that was it."¹²

Achievements and Legacies

The exhausting slog and minimal advances eventually wore down the union's leaders. They left to take other jobs, and the Canadian Farmworkers Union began to fade. Yet there was a strong sense its success could not be measured solely in union certifications.

It was clear to organizers that the path forward was via political change. When the NDP formed government in BC in 1991, Moe Sihota — the first South Asian to be elected to federal or provincial office in Canada — became Minister of Labour. The minimum wage rose to \$7 an hour, the highest in the country, and working conditions were enhanced with a new Employment Standards Act.

For the first time, farmworkers, live-in nannies, taxi



Raj Chouhan, CFU founding president (left), and legendary Cesar Chavez, president of the United Farm Workers of America relax after speeches at a 1983 Vancouver rally demanding health-and-safety regulations for farmworkers. Cesar Chavez was renowned for leading non-violent protest in the farmworkers' struggle for equality and justice.

PHOTOGRAPH: CRAIG BERGGOLD

PHOTOGRAPH: CRAIG BERGGOLD



A field worker tops Brussels sprout suckers before harvesting in Aldergrove, British Columbia, 1983.

drivers, artists, security guards, fishermen and newspaper carriers were brought under the legislation.

In 1996, the NDP went further, setting up a hands-on Agricultural Compliance Team (ACT). With representatives from Employment Standards, the WCB, the Motor Vehicle Branch and federal agencies, ACT took a proactive approach to inspections and enforcement, providing the best protection BC farmworkers had ever had.

Changes and standards that unions had sought for years were now in place, and labour's voice was heard at the cabinet table.

Workplace safety, poorly treated farmworkers, child labour laws, abuse of temporary foreign workers — these were all matters pursued by unions away from the bargaining table, often at great expense. This goes to the heart of the labour movement's existence as agents of social change, beyond issues of dollars and cents.¹³

Union Zindabad! was produced by the South Asian Studies Institute (University of the Fraser Valley) as part of the

South Asian Canadian Legacy Project. Visit the project at saclp.southasiancanadianheritage.ca to find more stories of South Asian Canadians who helped build BC. To read all of **Union Zindabad!** go to saclp.southasiancanadianheritage.ca/union-zindabad-labour-history. All archival materials from the book along with more resources can be found in the South Asian Canadian Digital Archive, at sacda.ca.

Photographer Craig Berggold worked as an artist-in-residence at the Canadian Farmworkers Union during the historic organizing drives of the 1980s. He is the lead researcher at The Canadian Farmworkers Union Archive Project at Simon Fraser University's Special Collections Library. Access the Canadian Farmworkers Union collection at digital.lib.sfu.ca/cfu-2-collection/canadian-farmworkers-union-collection. **Our Times** would like to thank Craig for providing photographs and captions to accompany both the interview with Harji Sangra and this excerpt, and Digital Asset Archivist Thamilini Jothilingam for guidance given along the way.

NOTES

¹ Rod Mickleburgh, *On the Line*, 211.

² Harji Sangra, Interview by Anushay Malik, April 22, 2021. Union Zindabad! Interview Collection.

³ Harinder Mahil, interview by Anushay Malik (Part 2), May 13, 2021. Union Zindabad! Interview Collection.

⁴ See Anand Patwardhan and Jim Monro, *A Time to Rise*, National Film Board of Canada (1982) chronicles the conditions of farmworkers in BC that provoked the formation of the union, and the response of growers and labour contractors. Made over a period of two years, the film is eloquent testimony to the progress of the workers' movement from the first stirrings of militancy to the energetic canvassing of union members.

⁵ Description for Photos-020, *Canadian Farmworkers Union Collection*, Simon Fraser University Library.

⁶ Description for Photos-139, *Canadian Farmworkers Union Collection*, Simon

Fraser University Library.

⁷ Rod Mickleburgh, *On the Line*, 212.

⁸ Paul Binning interview by Anushay Malik, May 6, 2021, Union Zindabad! Interview Collection.

⁹ Paul Binning interview.

¹⁰ Sadhu Binning interview.

¹¹ Raj Chouhan, interview with Anushay Malik, May 21, 2021. Union Zindabad! Interview Collection.

¹² Sarwan Boal, interview with Anushay Malik, April 21, 2021. Union Zindabad! Interview Collection.

¹³ For a comprehensive history of health and safety regulations for BC Farmworkers, consult *The History of Health and Safety in B.C.'s Farmworker Industry* (video), BC Labour Heritage Centre and WorkSafeBC, 2017. <https://youtu.be/uCHumxkiNII>