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SAN DAMIANO HALL OF THE CHURCH OF ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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NY groups to honor 50th year of Delano Strike

By Noel Pangilinan

NEW YORK CITY – It happened 50 years ago in California, more than 2,500 miles away. But several immigrant groups -- mostly Filipinos -- in this city known as the Big Apple, believe that the events and the lessons learned during the 1965 grape workers strike in Delano, California are worth commemorating and disseminating.

“The Delano Strike of 1965 is a victory of the solidarity of migrant workers,” said Fr. Julian Jagudilla, executive director of The Migrant Center at the Church of St. Francis of Assisi, the lead convenor of a conference commemorating the 50th anniversary of this historic event.

The whole-day conference, “Delano @50: Celebrating Migrant Workers’ Solidarity”, will be held on October 24, Saturday, at the San Damiano Hall of the Church of St. Francis of Assisi in midtown Manhattan.

The conference is free to the public. The conference will take place in the San Damiano Hall of the Church of St. Francis of Assisi is located at 127 West 31st St. (between 6th and 7th Avenues) in New York City.

Two veterans of the Delano Strike, Roger Gadiano and Albert Rojas, will be among the main speakers at the conference. They will share their experiences and insights on how the Filipinos, Mexicans and other migrant workers’ groups were able to forge and preserve their unity during the five-year strike.

Dr. Albert Bacdayan, the former chairman of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Kentucky and who is coming out with a book about the Delano Strike, will also speak during the conference.

Gadiano is currently the treasurer of the Filipino American national Historical Society-Delano chapter, while Rojas is now a board member of the Sacramento Labor Council for Latin American Advancement.

Leaders from various migrant workers organizations will also provide an overview of the urgent issues confronting migrant laborers.

The documentary movie, “The Delano Manongs: Forgotten Heroes of the United Farm Workers,” will be shown at the conference. Produced by Filipino American Marissa Aroy and husband Niall McKay, the movie tells the story of the Filipino farm workers who started the strike in Delano, which started the collaboration among Filipino-Americans, Mexican-Americans and other ethnic workers that was the key factor in the strike’s victory.

The Delano Grape Workers Strike was an important milestone in the history of migrant workers’ solidarity in the United States. At about the same time that the Civil Rights Movement was sweeping through America, agricultural workers from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds were waging their own battle in the farmlands.

On Sept. 8, 1965, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), composed mostly of Filipino farm workers, who came to be known as “Manongs”, walked out of the grape farms in the Delano area, demanding wages equal to the federal minimum wage and more humane working conditions.

One week after the strike began, on Sept. 16, the predominantly Mexican-American National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), joined the strike. Eventually, the two groups merged, forming the United Farm Workers of America (UFW) in August 1966.

AWOC was led by Filipinos Philip Vera Cruz, Larry Itliong, Benjamin Gines and Pete Velasco, while the NFWA was led by Mexican-Americans Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta and Richard Chavez.

The Delano Strike, which lasted more than five years, was a significant victory for the UFW. In 1970, table-grape growers agreed to sign union contracts, granting workers better pay, benefits, and protections. These were the first union contracts that grape workers in the U.S. were able to secure.

It has been 50 years since the grape workers walked out of their jobs, but Fr. Jagudilla said the cause that the Delano strikers fought for is still relevant in today’s realities, Fr. Jagudilla said. “The lessons learned during the Delano Strike are still important today in light of the current fight for a 15-dollar-an-hour minimum wage, and in the light of the continuing exploitation of migrant workers in the form of human trafficking, wage theft, discrimination and other unfair labor practices,” Fr. Jagudilla said.

“Migrant workers of today need to have the same degree of resolve that the migrant workers exhibited during the Delano Strike. They need to be as united today as the Delano strikers then,” Fr. Jagudilla said.

The Delano @50 conference is organized by the Migrant Center, the International Migrants Alliance (IMA), the Mexican American Progress Movement (MAPM), the Philippine Forum, the National Alliance for Filipino Concerns (NAFCon), the Filipino Immigrants and Workers Organizing Project (FIWOP) and AnakBayan-USA.

The conference will be capped by a cultural night featuring songs, dances and spoken words from performers from different immigrant groups.

To get to San Damiano Hall, from trains A, C, E, 1, 2 and 3, get off at 34th St.-Penn Station; from trains N, Q, R, B, D, F and M, get off at 34th St.-Herald Square.