

“Letter from a Manong”. Sebastian Sahugan. *Ang Katipunan*, December 15, 1973.

Although the Philippines was under the U.S. government, Filipinos who came before World War II were exploited for our labor and suffered severe racial discrimination. The majority of Filipinos (40-50 thousand) were young, single men who arrived during the depression years. A few of us found jobs in the cities, usually as some kind of domestic help like busboys, dishwashers or janitors. But most of us could only find work in the fields. We worked 8 hours and earned 80 cents. On top of the worst kind of exploitation of our labor, we were also not allowed to own our own land or houses and not even permitted to marry or raise a family.

This left the Filipino to avail himself of any opportunity he could find. Those in the cities usually lived in cheap hotels, apartments or rooming houses and those in the country were farmworkers and lived in labor camps built by the ranchers. In the country and living in those camps, you were subject to the disposal of the ranchers—where he wanted you to work, at what time and as long as you were productive, you could remain there. Otherwise, you were evicted. These were the basic conditions of Filipino farmworkers. Now that many of us are old and cannot work as well, we have become like old clothes or shoes to be burned or thrown away because we’ve passed our usefulness. But in the United Farmworkers of America (UFWA), where we have organized to fight our basic rights—decent wages, better working conditions and workers’ rights, we also have health clinics and legal and social services provided for farmworkers. The Union is also building Agbayani Village for retired farmworkers.

Cesar Chavez, director of UFWA said at the Village’s groundbreaking ceremonies that this project is the first of its kind to be built by the Union, and others will follow. Now, Agbayani Village is in the making. With shovels, picks and iron bars, a handful of men and women began construction in April, 1973 by digging ditches of 500ft. long for water pipes and telephone wires. As days and weeks passed by, volunteers of different races and nationalities began coming in to help build the village. Much of this is because of last March, a group of young Filipinos from the Bay Area came to Delano to learn about Agbayani Village and what they could do to support our struggle. From this weekend meeting of long discussions lasting many hours, they went back and began to organize people to come to Delano and donate their labor to build this home for the Manongs. Because of their enthusiastic and consistent efforts, we have had many volunteers come—individuals, small groups, and whole work brigades of 30-40 people. All of them were enthusiastic workers and strong supporters of our struggle—men and women from different organizations and groups of students from high schools and colleges, and skilled workers from labor unions. Agbayani Village is now about two thirds done and with more volunteers coming: By God, the building will be completed by next Spring.

To me, this is the most beautiful home in the whole world. It is beautiful because it is being built by strong, beautiful hands of men and women whose hearts are filled with love, spirit of unity and a determination to remake this world into a better place to live in.