

Rudy Reyes 1965–1980

May 13, 2003

Dear LeRoy Chatfield,

Thank you for your letter of invitation. I dredged through my memories, and came up with some names that I think should be included in that list.

Mary Bernier. She was with us from 1966 to 1977. Also from the 1967 New York boycott (and Boston) and the 1973 New York boycott.

Richard Flowers and Sue Farrell. Black and white, people will remember them, with the groups of Augie Lira and Kerry Ohta, Luis Valdez and Donna. Danny Valdez, too. And Felipe Cantu. Bob Fisher from L.A. and George Zaragoza of Bakersfield.

Bert Delarmente, Larry Mediana, Peggy Gunn (she was a daughter of a Bakersfield grower), Sylvia Kalitinsky from New York. We were all together with Dolores Huerta, Dolores Padilla, and Gilbert Padilla in the first L.A. Boycott. Pierre Mandel, an L.A. resident was our number-one supporter, got beaten up and arrested with us lots of times. Paula Goldman, Ernie Delarmente, and Bert's brother, also an original AWOC striker.

John Shroyer went following grape trucks and on railroad freezers. Freeze them to solid rocks or defrost to 90 degrees, whatever.

Luis Melendrez since 1965. Also went by himself to Colorado and New Mexico and came back with a brand-new bus full of food and checks.

Macario Bustos. An original striker; later became a ranch committee member on whatever ranches he went to work for.

Fred and Virginia Hirsch, Liza's parents. The whole family came as volunteers and stayed with us for 15 years.

Eddie Frankel (the list says Eddie Franco).

Joseph Reeves. Filipino-white mestizo. Original striker.

Sharon Martin. Volunteer from Colorado. She was with us two years. Got married to her doctor-boyfriend, joined the Appalachian Volunteers, now somewhere in Appalachia.

Meta Mendel-Reyes. 1973 to 1981. She was in New York on the way to a vacation in Europe. She attended Fred Ross's meeting, joined the boycott, then worked in the Coachella office. She is now a political science professor in Kentucky.

Mark Silverman. He was a volunteer since 1966. Then he was sent to the New York boycott in 1968. Came back to Delano when we won. Then he went to Cuba with the Venceremos Brigade. Don't know what became of him.

Margarita Avila. She was a volunteer from L.A. in 1971. She worked mostly in the construction of the clinic and the Agbayani Retirement Village. She died in 1981, in a car accident.

Marcia Aaronson. A volunteer since 1973. Then she worked in the Coachella UFW office for years.

George Catalan and Emiliano Pajimula and Fred Caleo. Original AWOC strikers, they were also in the picket lines in Delano. They were also in the New York boycott.

Willie Barrientos. Original AWOC striker, mostly an organizer in the fields and in the cockfights. It's a big Sunday event, illegal, so only a few of the main men (mostly Filipinos and Mexicans) knew where the events would be. Roosters with knives fight to the death. Bets on the sides, big and small. Lots of food, beer, and prostitutes. Hundreds of people attended, so it was a good place for organizing, too.

Julian Balidoy. Same as Willie. Also in the L.A. boycott.

Well, this is all for now. I have to go to work. I'm old now, so I only work on a part-time basis, cooking in a deli. Not bad—lots of food, lots of people to talk with, or argue with, right now about Iraq and our lost civil rights. Got to get back our civil rights, LeRoy Chatfield!

Viva La Causa,

Rudy Reyes

May 18, 2003

Dear Rudy Reyes,

What a surprise to get such a long and newsy letter from you. I added all the names to the NFWA. Documentation Project list, but since I have no addresses, I also marked them "missing" in the hopes that others might send me their addresses. I sent invitations to Mary Bernier and Meta Mendel-Reyes. (How did Meta pick up the Reyes name?)

As you rolled out your list of the names of strikers—Macario Bustos, Willie Barrientos, Julian Baliday, Joseph Reeves, etc.—it brought back many good memories of those days when we were young and didn't know what we were doing taking on the growers.

Would you write me another letter describing your work on the boycott in New York and Los Angeles? Why did you decide to go on the boycott? How did you get there? Who taught you how to boycott? What did they teach you? What kinds of things did you do in a typical boycott day? How did you know if you were successful? How did you support yourself? Where did you live? What kinds of people supported the farmworkers?

Rudy, if you could write me a letter about these kinds of things, it would be very helpful for those who come after us. Remember, they only know the dictionary definition of the word "boycott." They have no idea how it started, where it started, how it worked, and who did the work of the boycott.

Thank you so much for your contribution. I hope to hear from you again very soon.

All the best,

LeRoy

P.S. I agree with you! We have got to get back our civil rights. That was about all we had going for us in 1965, our civil rights; maybe that's all we needed.

June 4, 2003

Dear LeRoy,

How did I start as a striker? I was working in the grapevines at the Zaninovich Ranch in Delano when people started talking about a "meeting tonight at the Filipino Hall." Julian Baliday was in my small group of about seven or eight. We were all in small groups. We were all young, 20 to 25 years old, and Julian was about 40. He said we young boys are always talking about girls and grapes and money. Why don't we all go to the meeting and talk about raising our money? I found out later that Julian had been to lots of these meetings and was already well known to lots of the Filipinos.

The meeting of the AWOC was very uplifting. We had a couple more meetings, then we voted on a strike deadline.

Our adrenaline levels were up! Even our crew boss, Jimmy Gementiza (Filipino, and his wife, Becky, white) were for it. We were living in a camp, and we all went to all the entrances of the fields and stopped everybody from going to work. All the other ranches were stopped. Then all of us young Filipinos joined together, about four or 400, in full cars, and we roamed all the streets, stopping all cars that looked like they had farmworkers

in them. We asked them to join us, or to go home. We beat us a few who wanted to be stubborn. We showed them the error of their ways. Most of us didn't have money, but some of the older folks did, and gave us money to buy beer and booze. It was getting very exciting!

We slept in cars, notwithstanding the smell of smelly socks. People with houses let us shower in their homes, thank goodness! Some of us slept in the grass at Lake Woollomes, a reservoir just outside of town.

After a couple of weeks, some of the crew bosses and their people were growling. The young people with families in the Philippines were already complaining. They came here to the U.S. to work, so their wives and kids could eat and go to school there in the Philippines. The crew bosses were missing the best part of the year—the picking season. They used to make \$5000 to \$7000 a month and the Mexicans were grabbing it! Cesar Chavez said, “We’ll join you soon, brothers!” But money was draining away! The crew bosses were being replaced by Mexican crew bosses, and the growers were saying that if the Filipino crews were not back very soon, the jobs were going to be given to the Mexicans and the Arab crews. Who wants to hear about the “Great Farmworkers’ Struggle” when your wife and kids are asking for money?

LeRoy, it was different with me and some of the young Filipinos and Mexicans and white students. It was all about excitement, ideology, and rhetoric, but when your family asks you for the rent and food in the Philippines—or Mexico or Yemen—you will imagine their faces and expectations—and their hunger!

Families here in the U.S. (huelgistas) got their rents paid and were given canned foods. Their older sons and daughters moved to Coachella, Fresno, and other areas that were not affected by the strike, then sent some money to their striking families in Delano. So some were okay and some not, which is how scabs came about. Then it turned about face, so that some areas had more scabs than huelgistas.

But, anyway, when truckloads went to L.A., we followed them, and our L.A. supporters tried to prevent the unloading of the grapes. If they got them unloaded anyway, we tried stopping any big buyers from buying them. If the grapes still got into stores, we set up picket lines to ask consumers not to buy the grapes and, if possible, not to buy in this store. Then our dozens or hundreds of supporters took turns calling up those stores, telling the managers that they were long-time consumers, and they wouldn't buy anything anymore until they promise not to buy and sell grapes from Delano anymore. After a while, we set up our boycott headquarters in L.A. to coordinate all our supporters into a cohesive army.

Then the growers had lots of grapes sent further out to New York, Boston, and other cities. So the union sent out some of the students with farmworkers to different cities. Sometimes just one person was enough. Just send one or two to any city, with bus tickets or a rickety car and gas money, and a phone number to call once they got there. From that

one phone call, they get invited to go and talk in college or church gatherings, and from there we built our picket lines. That's how we got to building up the boycott headquarters all over the U.S., Canada, and even Europe.

One volunteer, Elaine Elinson, was sent to England and Sweden. She really was such a sweet girl, and set agog thousands of stevedores from Liverpool and Dublin and Sweden and Belgium. Newspaper clippings from those cities, and from U.S. and Canadian cities, were then read to members at our Friday night meetings in Delano, which sent us into more of those tumultuous frenzies.

Some of our supporters were very innovative. There were the shop-in pickets, where a group of our picketers would be outside a store, hidden here and there. Then nicely dressed couples would stroll in, get a cart, and do their shopping, choosing lots of very small items so it will take hours of paid overtime to put those items back into the shelves later on. Then they'd put in lots of ice cream, pastries, and grapes, and squeeze heavy bulk items like frozen turkeys or hams to create dripping messes. There would be about 20 or 30 couples, interspersed among real customers. Then our lookout would give the signal to the picketers outside, and they start picketing. All these long lines of customers, our couples among them. Then one of our couples would say loudly, "What are those people picketing for? Are these grapes we are buying from California? Are you crazy to be selling grapes picked by scabs while the poor starving real farmworkers are on strike? Shame on you! I won't ever buy here anymore until you keep these grapes out of this store!" And our other couples would sing out, "Me, neither! And I've got lots of friends. I'll let them know you are helping starve the poor grape and fruit and vegetable pickers!" We'd have lots of good jokes and stories for days and weeks to come, and store managers received many phone calls along the lines of, "We know where your other stores are, and we have lots of supporters, so tell your general manager what happened at your store. In fact we have a hard time asking our friends, the Black Panthers, to keep it cool. But you'll be cooperating with us, right, sir?"

Most of our supporters who contributed to feeding us and maintaining our picket lines were from other unions, churches, and Jewish organizations. In Brooklyn, Paul Hall, president of the Seafarers' Union, gave us a whole block, a four-story dormitory with beds and sheets and telephones, and boxes and boxes of meal tickets to use in their big union dining room, until we won the first New York boycott. And imagine those big 6' 9"-footers of muscles in our picket line!

Viva La Causa,

Rudy Reyes

P.S. LeRoy: Meta was my wife. We're divorced now, but we maintain good communication. Our daughter, Jackie, just graduated from college in Pomona. In my

adventures in California and in the first and second boycotts in New York and Boston, I was with Mary Bernier. In California, I mostly submarined in ranches.

June 8, 2003

Dear Rudy,

I read and reread your latest letter several times. I believe it is a valuable addition to the Documentation Project because it talks about the beginnings of the AWOC strike, how the strike was conducted, and then, as the strike wore on for a few weeks, the understandable tensions that resulted between the older, married Filipino workers who needed the harvesttime money to support their families and the younger workers who could afford to embrace the cause for the rights of workers. And you do a good job of explaining the interracial tensions created by the growers to play off the Mexicans and Arabs against the Filipinos. And, of course, when busloads of scabs arrived day after day, the strike was all but broken. All the hopes and dreams of a farmworkers union rested on the outcome of the boycott. And over the years, that is how it played out.

Your detailed descriptions of some of the boycott strategy and tactics are also helpful in understanding how a boycott could be successful. Looking back, almost 30 years later, it is amazing to me how the boycotters (farmworkers and student volunteers) could be so motivated and fearless as to set off for a St. Louis or a Cleveland with no money and not knowing a single person there but could start with a telephone number to build a viable and effective boycott. Some day this story needs to be written and I am hopeful that the Documentation Project will be of assistance to the person who writes that story.

A few more questions, if you feel up to writing another letter.

When the strike started, you were in your early 20s. What kind of formal education had you had up to that point in your life? Be as specific as you can.

How many years were you a part of the farmworkers movement? At what point in your life did you decide to leave the movement? What were some of the reasons that brought you to this decision? And what kinds of things did you do after you left?

Finally, now looking back these many years later, as an old man (to use your words), what do you think was accomplished by the farmworkers' movement? Or was anything accomplished, in your view? Are you proud of what you did for the movement during your years of service or do you have regrets about it all? How would you feel today, as the proud father of a daughter who just graduated from college in Pomona, if she threw herself headlong into a similar movement to help poor people?

These questions might be more work than you want to undertake and if so, I understand. On the other hand, your answers to them could complete the work you have already done for the Documentation Project with your first two letters.

Yes, viva la causa ...

LeRoy

P.S. I added Elaine Elinson to the master list for the project. If you know how to reach her, please let me know.

June 27, 2003

Dear LeRoy,

When we went on strike on September 8, 1965, I was in my early 20s. I finished high school in Seattle. In school, I read Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, so after graduation, I decided to go on an adventure and be a hobo. I rode the freight trains, lived in hobo jungles, and worked a few days here and there picking fruits for pocket money, because I was too proud to go begging in the streets. I said to myself, "I'm here for adventure, not to be a bum." But in camaraderie, of course I joined in soup lines, chipped in a few coins to make a jug of wine, and traded bullshit with fellow hoboes, slept under trees in orchards in summers, and under cardboard boxes in snowy winters. Sometimes we talked about having a union for fruit pickers, but mostly jokingly.

I always liked action. I walked picket lines. This is how I met Doug Adair, walking the lines in a rent strike (housing), and how I met David Burciaga, who was working for a ministry. I met Larry Itliong in an asparagus strike in Stockton. I then decided to go to a big city to find a job in a restaurant so I could eat good, and I jumped on a freight train. When I jumped down in L.A., I was broke and hungry.

I met a group of black guys sitting in a vacant lot, drinking from a gallon of Ripple. They offered me a sip, so I stayed with them, and we ripped through the whole jug. The Watts riots were boiling hot, so we joined in to see if we could find another jug. It was very violent, but I was enjoying it. But then the blacks were also feuding against some Chinese. Since I look Chinese, my new friends told me I better get out of the city.

I hooked into a freight train, and I got hungry, so I jumped down in Delano. I saw lots of Filipinos in Chinatown, which, by the way, didn't have any Chinese except the ones in the only Chinese restaurant, The Pagoda. So, some Filipinos took me to their camp. That's where I was working when the Delano grape strike struck.

I was the president of the Freedman Ranch, and Meta Mendel was the union rep for that ranch. We were doing all right. It was so hot in Coachella, 120 degrees in the shade. So sandy, the sand gets into everything. But we liked the people. Then a rich woman from New York, Ann Israel, came as a volunteer. She got into power. She became Anna Puharich. There was a purge, and some of the people we liked and respected were being fired left and right. Meta and I got married and we had our baby. We decided to go to San Jose, and she worked for State Employees International Union as a union rep, while I worked in a Japanese restaurant.

Yes, our strike sparked a lot of movements and awareness among farmworkers all over the nation. Close to where I am in Philadelphia, in Kenneth Square, the mushroom industries were struck. There were lots of strikes and firings and court injunctions, NLRB rulings, and after five years, the union there had been winning the rulings; the union is getting contracts. The seeds from Delano are all over the country. Whatever little I might have contributed, I don't regret. I'm proud that I was part of it. As the Bard said, "The world is a stage—the men and women merely the actors, actresses." I'm glad I was an actor, not part of the audience. Meta and I told Jackie of our stories. She knows now of unions, she is union-made. If she becomes a militant, I just hope she doesn't get hurt. I told her not to go active out of the U.S. I've kept track of the story of Lori Berenson, she's still in jail in Peru, 15 years?

Bye,

Rudy Reyes

July 9, 2003

Dear Rudy,

Thank you for your last letter, Rudy; it answered many of my questions.

The reason why it took me longer to respond this time was because I have been off hiking in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, and just returned last weekend.

If you are interested in writing another letter, it might be helpful to the readers to know what years you were in Coachella as the president of the Freedman Ranch Committee and in what year you and Meta left the union.

You write that "some of the people we liked and respected were being fired left and right." It would be interesting and helpful to readers if you could give some of the names of the people in the union you liked and respected. And if you had any ideas why they might be "purged?" (If I understand your letter, you and Meta were not yourselves fired from the union. Is that correct?)

I guess my last question on behalf of future readers is how did you make your way to Philadelphia and when and why?

I am pleased that you have written as much as you have for the Documentation Project. It is an important project and you are making a special contribution to it. I appreciate it.

All the best,

LeRoy

July 15, 2003

Dear LeRoy,

Pardon me if my memory of dates and places sometimes gets hazy and garbled. I'll blame it on old age, which is always at hand to lay the blame on. When did I work in Coachella? I'll start from when I got back from the second New York boycott. I was sort of sick, should I say. Maybe it was 1976. I stayed at the old Schenley camp where the "manongs" (Old Filipino) strikers were living, together with lots of student volunteers, who were also staying there while they were constructing the new Agbayani Village.

I went leafleting grape and lettuce workers, and going on picket lines against Gallo Wines. When the new Agbayani Village was finished, I moved in, too. I also paid rent, same as the manongs. I was the youngest manong. Maria Rifo also moved in and she planted roses in front of her apartment. They were nice, modern apartments, though the price was too steep for me and the manongs who were already on Social Security pensions. The old Huelgista mamongs stayed, out of loyalty to the union, but the other manongs (outsiders and semi-outsiders) wouldn't come in. There were lots of shacks and rooms that they could rent very cheaply. Plus the union passed a resolution banning the manongs from engaging the so-called prostitutes.

LeRoy, the manongs came during the 1920s and 1930s. They were young then, but discrimination was the order then. The growers imported only healthy, strong males. The only way to stay in a camp is to be able to keep up or close up to the fastest workers. Who is the fastest worker? The grower—through the straw bosses—picks the fastest workers, tells the camp cooks to feed those picked ones real good. Though the food costs were divided among all the workers (plus maybe a 50 percent surcharge to be given to the boss), the leaders of the pack were given extra food. For breakfast they get four eggs, instead of one like the others get. Lunch and supper, more extras.

So, women were excluded from the importation of the semi-slaves. To vent their natural desires, the men had only the prostitutes who visit the camps. Back in 1965, the cost of the "fast service" was \$3. Maybe now, with the inflation rates, it's \$10. And then the union

wanted to stop it? So visitors to the village won't see such goings-on? Who was going to the manongs' rooms to see to it that no cash transactions were done? Or bartered?

So, LeRoy, since I couldn't pay the second month's rent to the village, I took off for Coachella and worked at Bob Armington's camp at the Freedman Ranch, which was the first union contract in the Coachella Valley. A lot of old-time Huelgistas were also working there, like Fred Abad, et al.

After work every day, we went to town in Coachella, to the UFW office, where all the Huelgistas congregate to palaver and brag and complain and scratch their armpits. We all go to the target of the day—to picket whichever one Nancy Elliott picks. I was already a veteran of picket lines. I had the loudest and screechingest voice, and was very aggressive and cantankerous and obnoxious. The picketers were then peaceful and quiet and would just walk on, thinking of what to cook for the night when they go home, or how many vines they clipped that day—8 cents a vine for incentive.

And here comes this newcomer from Big Time Delano, with his loud and obnoxious style of picketing. And the police came and talked to me and to our picket captain. They both wanted it as peaceful as before. I told our captain, "What's the sense of picketing? We are all tired from the fields, and we just keep on walking, and for what? The customers keep going in and coming out with bags of different drinks, so what are we accomplishing? In Delano, New York, L.A., we make ripples in the pond." So, from then on, we had livelier picket lines, lots of arrests, and some tear gas in our eyes and nightsticks on our shoulders and butts, but we were noticed by all.

Very soon, we had the Freedman Ranch Committee election. I was nominated, received the most votes, and became the president of the Freedman Ranch Committee. The ousted president, Vicente Ponce, became my very bitter enemy, as he had always been president, and 98 percent of the Freedman workforce was Mexican, 2 percent were Filipinos and other. But they liked my kind of action.

Meta Mendel was our union rep for Freedman. We lived together for a couple of years, we got more serious about it, so we got married, then we had our baby, Jackie. We always had been sort of wanting to move on from Coachella because of the heat and the sand. By then I was already an irrigator, and was getting good pay, while Meta was getting \$5 a week, so we figured if we want to move someday, we had better save more money. So Meta gave notice to the union, and she quit.

As a first job, she picked green beans, which is a hard and achy job. Then she worked at a KFC, which I liked, as she get to bring home leftover fried chicken, which I've always been fond of. Then she got a job at the Bell Telephone Company, and within two weeks she was the shop union steward! After a while, I also quit being president of the Freedman Ranch Committee. When we thought we had enough money, we said goodbye to all our friends, and we moved to San Jose.

When we got to San Jose, there was hardly any farm work in the city, so I worked in a Japanese restaurant as a dishwasher and cook's helper. As for Meta, the SEIU grabbed her right away to be a union organizer and negotiator when they read her resume, which told them she was from Cesar's union and had been arrested at times for picketing and union activities. They said, "This is fresh blood!"

When Meta and I agreed to a divorce, I took my van, headed for Florida, and ended up here in Philadelphia. As for the purge that went around 1979–81, maybe you should talk to Doug Adair. He's got more memory recollection ability than I have, he being the El Malcriado editor for quite a while. But, as a matter of fact, writing back and forth to you has made me remember more of the good memorable past. Thank you for these!

Rudy

P.S. I can't remember the date, but after Cesar came back from the Philippines, Meta, due to some lack of staffing or whatever in Delano, was transferred there for a few weeks. She said she went to a La Paz meeting. In the meeting, Cesar talked about his trip to the Philippines. He talked about the hospitality there, and the Marcos martial law, and how he was shown the prisons there in Manila and he didn't see any brutality there among the political prisoners. So, Meta, an outspoken liberal, of course (otherwise, why would a volunteer work for \$5 a week unless she was a civil rights advocate?), asked if perhaps Cesar was shown a whitewashed scenario? Someone raised a hand and made a kiss-ass oratory saying if Cesar says a black thing is white, then it is white! And she said lots of the people there did the same thing, trying to make her feel as if she was a traitor for asking such a question. And Cesar just stood there, smiling.

When Meta told me this later on when she came back to Coachella, we couldn't talk for a while. After a few minutes, we just agreed with each other and said, "We are, after all, working for the farmworkers, not for Cesar Chavez, not for the UFW, not for the AFL-CIO, but for all the farmworkers!"

Que Viva La Causa, Viva La Huelga!

Rudy

July 24, 2003

Dear Rudy,

I thought your explanation about the Filipinos was brilliant. This will be a very important addition the Documentation Project.

It is quite possible that you will be the only AWOC striker to write an essay for the Documentation Project. So many of the strikers have passed away and the others on the list I have to classify as “missing” because, to date, no one has provided me with addresses or even told me whether they are still alive.

This is just another concrete example of how “forgotten” the Filipinos are, especially at the end of their lives. They did not marry, they have no children—they remain alone to the very end and then are forgotten. At least I would like to make sure their names are on our Memorial List.

You have covered so much ground in your letters that I am not sure what there is left for me to ask.

The only thing that comes to mind is: As you look back now almost 25 years later, how does Cesar Chavez and his farmworkers’ movement—and your personal 15-year involvement—seem to you? Do you think you accomplished anything? Do you have any regrets about giving 15 years of your life to the movement? Have you personally benefited from that experience? Did you learn anything from your involvement? If you had that part of your life to live over, would you do anything differently?

These kinds of questions have no factual answers; they are difficult to answer, I know that. But here you are working part-time as a cook and you wrote me, “LeRoy, I am an old man now.” (By the way, so am I!) So as befits an old man, what wisdom have you gleaned from your 15 years of night-and-day involvement in trying to build a farmworkers’ union?

Thanks again for all the effort you have put into your essay. It is a valuable contribution to those who come after us, believe me.

Take care,

LeRoy