

Frances Ryan, 1966–1968

In the winter of 1965-66, I joined my first picket line in support of the farmworkers who were aiming to stop customers from purchasing certain wines from stores in Berkeley. My recollection was that Perrelli-Minetti wines were the ones targeted. For those of us who were students at the University of California, Berkeley, it was easy enough to gather at a certain liquor store on University Avenue on Friday nights and do a stint on a picket line, telling people to stop buying the Perrelli-Minetti wines. A few months later, I joined picketers at a Safeway store on the border of Oakland and Berkeley, this time targeting fresh grapes as a boycott item as well. Here I met Mary Lou Watson, who became a lifelong friend.

About this time, I organized a small fundraising spaghetti dinner, inviting everyone I could to the living room of my Berkeley apartment. Dolores Huerta arrived to give one of her usual lively, positive encouraging talks to the 15 or so people who probably contributed about \$5 each to the farmworker cause. It was as grassroots as it gets: small, purposeful, and enjoyable.

Some of those same spaghetti dinner friends and I joined in for the final day of the farmworkers' famous 25-day march into Sacramento on Easter Sunday in 1966. The farmworkers started their *Peregrinacion* (pilgrimage) in Delano, and supporters joined the march all along the route up the San Joaquin Valley. There was so much enthusiasm in that gathering, such positive hope in the air, and the delightful meeting of old friends that it felt like all was possible and probable for the farmworker movement.

During the last semester of graduate work at Berkeley's school of social work, I managed to persuade the school administrators to allow me to finish up my field work placement by working in Delano with the farmworkers. Because a friend in Delano knew of my Spanish language skills, I had been invited to be a volunteer with the bilingual newsletter. This involved a four-hour commute between Berkeley and Delano as I would spend three or four days of the week in Delano and then return to Berkeley for a few days of classes. The biggest challenge was developing creative academic language to describe what I was doing so I would get school credit!

The usual routine we followed was to rise around 3:30 or 4 a.m. to get out to the picket lines where we did what we could to turn workers away from working in the grape fields. Waving the red Huelga flag boldly designed with a black Aztec eagle in a white circle, we were also saying: "Join us, the union will help you get better working conditions, better wages, toilets in the fields..." Later in the morning, I joined my work group at one of the buildings near the Pink House (union headquarters then) in preparing the bilingual newsletter, which was part of the organizing outreach to the workers in the many small farm towns up and down the valley. Occasionally, I worked with Luis Valdez and David Fishlow on some translations for *El Malcriado*, the farmworker newspaper.

When school ended in June of 1966, I stayed on as a full-time volunteer in Delano. I was immersed in the fresh, hopeful energy that enlivened the long hours of work. We were given room and board and \$5 a week spending money. My friend, Mary Lou, and her sister, Donna, were there, as well.

The first United Farm Workers contract was signed with Perrelli-Minetti winemakers. I remember how historic it felt gathering in the humble fraternal order lodge hall where Cesar sat at the table with these mostly Italian businessmen. Surely, a few years earlier those businessmen wouldn't have dreamed they would ever be sitting down with Cesar and signing such an agreement. I don't even remember any reporters showing up for the event.

The gains that were made then and later by the UFW—the contracts, the benefits for members—were decimated by the long years of antagonistic state government leadership. Governors Reagan, Deukmejian, and Wilson made sure that the laws that did exist were not adequately enforced. Many lies were told about Cesar and the UFW in the attempt to stir up fear against him and against the organizing of workers.

Cesar was steadfast, maintaining his continual nonviolent vision, and was remarkable in his ability to create an atmosphere of, if not full harmony, at least willingness to work together with the multi-ethnic/racial crew that we all were in Delano: Mexican-American, Mexican, Filipino, Anglo, African-American. Plus, we were Jewish, atheist, Catholic, Protestant. Cesar never pushed harmony on anyone; he just showed his way of respecting everyone. As long as someone was willing to walk a picket line in support, there was acceptance. Sometimes it was great fun to see hippies marching next to stodgy, old-line officials from big city unions.

Cesar chaired the all-members-invited union meetings in a way that acknowledged the ethnic diversity. A couple of times, he even asked me to translate when Jessica was absent from a union meeting. He was perfectly fluent in both languages, but he knew the benefits of involving others in the action. Knowing that there was some anti-gringo grumbling among some of La Raza in Delano, I believe one of the reasons he asked me to do the translating was to show his acceptance of Anglos in the movement because there were certainly plenty of other people who could have translated.

As part of the plan to extend the boycott of fresh grapes, organizers were sent out across the U.S. I was sent to Portland, Oregon, to do whatever I could to simply stop the supermarkets from carrying fresh grapes. Soon after I arrived, I organized a picket line of local Portland supporters of the UFW. We gathered at a wholesale produce terminal where we had heard a shipment of grapes was about to arrive via a Teamster-driven truck. It was a glorious success as the Teamster driver refused to cross the picket line and left town without unloading the grapes. He then headed for Seattle where I called ahead to my fellow boycotters so they could get their picket line out to stop the truck again. We were part of an enormous disruption of the flow of grapes to their usual markets.

I had not conferred beforehand with the local Teamster union officials before throwing up the picket line, knowing they would never give me an OK. Soon I was requested to meet with the Teamsters and was given a glimpse into the mentality of their world. At the lunch meeting, I was fully prepared to play as dumb as I needed in order to keep some peace. Being 27 years old and fresh out of school, it wasn't too hard to project a true image of naïveté. They ordered a number of martinis for us all and I attempted to stay as sober as I could by sheer willpower. The lunch lecturing on proper union collaboration droned on and as it came to a close, I had reason to wish I were too inebriated to remember their ultimate insult. Just before the end of this bullying lunch meeting, Mr. Teamster Boss told a body anatomy joke of the type not told in polite company and one of the joke characters is told he will die. It was a clear introduction to the fact that Teamsters didn't want any interference in their world.

Strangely enough, I was later personally threatened by some union officials who were supposed to be supportive of the UFW because they were also affiliated with the AFL-CIO. I was relaxing with a friend one evening in the Portland Labor Temple bar when a couple of minor union officials intruded and accused me of marching in the recent anti-Vietnam War demonstration. As they had been drinking heavily, I could see their inhibitions were lowered and their yelling brought the bartender nearby. As these husky fellows glowered down at me over their beer bellies, I was glad I had made the decision not to attend the anti-war rally just for this reason. After a few more testy moments of bluster, assuring me that if I had gone, some part of my anatomy might have been broken by now, they lurched on out the door.

Just after Christmas, Cesar called a meeting in Delano of all boycott workers and we received new assignments. A big push was planned to target the New York City market because about 10 percent of all fresh California grapes are shipped to the produce terminal there. It was a fun but cold and tiring January trip in an old unheated school bus from Delano to New York. We were a motley group of about 25 people: Mexican-American and Filipino farmworkers and various gringo volunteers like me and Mary Lou Watson. I especially remember one middle-aged Filipino grape-picking lady, Leona, who had a husband and family in Earlimart. It was very hard for her to be away from them. It was an inspiration to see her determination. She was clear that it was up to her to contribute all she could to this farmworker movement. George and Feliciano and other older single Filipino men were a testimony to earlier immigration policies that allowed Asian men to come work in the U. S. but denied their women entry and also denied the men the right to marry non-Asians. These are the unsavory pieces of history that are often left out of schoolbooks.

Once in New York, we were housed and fed by the generosity of the Seafarers International Union in one of their dormitory buildings just off the Fourth Avenue subway in Brooklyn. In our crowded bunk bed-filled women's dorm, Dolores Huerta never failed to entertain and inspire us in the morning as she sat straight up upon awakening and proceeded to share her dreams from the night. Sometimes she would have very insightful dreams giving her strategy ideas for the boycott. Dolores was a true egalitarian and never

pulled rank to get any special favors in our spartan living. She had a gift for keeping our spirits energized and focused on the goal. There was little room for small-mindedness when Dolores was around.

We rose early to get to the Bronx Produce Terminal before daybreak. What a sight we were: a ragtag army in every assortment of old coats and flimsy hats. We carried our handmade picket signs as we walked in circles in front of the grape wholesalers. We sang loudly and boisterously, partly to warm our own spirits and bodies, as it was fiercely cold. We really didn't know if this kind of picketing was enough of an irritation to get any of these tough New York businessmen to change their purchasing practices. We do know, as they told us, that they thought we were completely nuts.

Every day, our boycott leader, Fred Ross, would hold a strategy meeting with us and talk about what we were going to do next. He was a natural teacher who really wanted everyone to learn more about how to plan a successful campaign. He was incredibly strict and tough and had no room for slackers. So it was quite amusing that he ended up having to take the whole group to Sears to buy boots (we arrived pretty unprepared for a real winter with snow). His stern countenance took on a softer look as he pleaded with us to not let anyone know he had bought the boots at a non-union store. It seemed all the other stores were out of the type we needed.

Early 1968 was a year that seemed to hold promising possibilities. Anti-Vietnam War demonstrations continued to get more popular, the farmworker struggle was gaining thousands of supporters nationwide, and Martin Luther King was organizing many nonviolent efforts. My friends and I, like most human beings, saw and heard what we wanted to hear. As the spring of 1968 moved on, life unfolded its complexities. By April, only a handful of our original Delano boycott crew were left in New York. Others had been reassigned so more centers could open nationwide.

I had been following Martin Luther King's recent actions closely because he was helping another union, that of the sanitation workers, in Memphis. Just before a big planned sanitation workers march, King was killed. The New York Labor Council paid for a charter plane to send supporters to the march that King was supposed to have led. So our New York farmworkers' group flew to Memphis and were well received that evening at several African-American churches, where we talked about the UFW organizing efforts to standing room-only crowds. On the big day of the march, we joined the other thousands on the streets. It was truly intimidating to march past the oversized armored personnel carriers that were strung along the route. Nearby, the National Guardsmen looked young and scared.

Once again, when I needed it, Dolores Huerta boosted my spirits. She had brought along an oversized "Huelga" flag and enlisted us in helping to keep it unfurled so it would make a

good TV shot. In spite of our situation and our grief at King's death, we managed to have a few hearty laughs as we stepped along.

When we had first arrived in the Big Apple, the head of the New York City Labor Council had promised us a meeting with Mayor John Lindsay to plead our case requesting the city to stop buying fresh grapes and support our cause politically. When the meeting finally happened, in April of 1968, there were only four UFW boycotters left in New York and I had been named the acting boycott director when our dynamo leader, Dolores, was called away to other boycott fronts. Several leaders from the seafarers' and the meatcutters' unions accompanied us to the basement of Gracie Mansion, where we arrayed ourselves along an extremely long, thin table. The ensuing shouting match between Van Arsdale, the labor council president, and Mayor Lindsay was not what I was expecting. To defend himself against the accusation that he had deliberately kept us waiting three months for this meeting, Mayor Lindsay asserted that he worked harder than anybody in the room. He said he hadn't had any sleep the night before because he had been conferring with law enforcement and the governor about how to handle the out-of-control anti-war actions going on at Columbia University. My heart and hopes sank. I was grieving the death of Martin Luther King on April 4th. Now, my expectations that this powerful liberal leader would show us public support were drowned in the sounds and sights of these grown men yelling and jumping up and down like boys from rival clubs having a standoff about turf. Miraculously, at the end of the rather brief encounter, Mayor Lindsay passed the decision-making process on to his vice mayor, known to be a farmworker supporter. I recall that Irving Stern of the meatcutters' union promised more help as we walked out of Gracie Mansion. The following day, during his daily radio show, the vice mayor broadcast the news

that New York City would no longer purchase fresh grapes for any of its events. This was a superb coup and the publicity this generated nationwide was a much-needed boost for the vitality of the boycott. Many other cities proclaimed themselves "grape free" also. Word got around, however, that the Pentagon then increased their purchase of fresh grapes, but this was not considered newsworthy so was barely mentioned in the news.

The following months were increasingly difficult for me personally as there was no longer the extended family of our Delano group. Our New York core consisted of a new Anglo boycotter, Candi, and two very shy older Filipino farmworkers and me. It was becoming increasingly evident that New York local union leaders didn't want to be talking with me, they felt important enough that Cesar should be sending them a UFW officer to discuss boycott business. When Cesar came out for a nationwide summer tour of boycott centers, I shared my conviction that they would get much more support if Dolores or another union official could return to head the New York office. In addition, I was exhausted. There had been so many stresses, including the death of Robert Kennedy in June. Kennedy had just won the Democratic primary election in California when he was fatally shot, and Dolores Huerta was there near his side when he fell. I was worn out and it was no longer possible for me to sustain the energy needed for this work. I

asked Cesar if I could go back to California and soon it was arranged for a union official to head the New York boycott.

As the timing was right, I decided to work for the boycott office in Chicago for a while on my way to California. It was the week of the Democratic presidential convention. It was fun seeing my old boycott friends, especially Mary Lou, Eliseo Medina, and George. Again, Dolores was doing her thing in Chicago to get publicity for the farmworker cause. Eliseo excitedly spilled beer on the TV when the evening news showed her waving a giant "Huelga" flag up in the convention center balcony.

The boycott crew had rented an apartment in a Puerto Rican and industrial neighborhood near 13th and Wabash, only a few blocks from the convention center. Personally, we were very sympathetic to the anti-war demonstrators and other offbeat antics like Wavy Gravy running a campaign for "Nobody for President." But, we knew we had to attend to our own business. This was an important time to publicize the farmworker goals as we spoke daily to various interest groups. We carefully avoided the boisterous demonstrations because we couldn't afford to tie up our time getting arrested. The rowdiness came to us one evening, however, as we heard shouting and the sounds of a chase down our narrow street. We climbed out our second-story window onto the flat roof and saw what were unmistakably plainclothes policemen in hot pursuit of some young anti-war demonstrators. With no thought to the consequences, we started yelling in an attempt to distract the chase. My recollection of what we said are vague but it was something along the lines of "Pick on somebody your own size, you pigs." These police were absolutely huge guys, Mayor Daley's finest. They looked up at us and a couple headed into our building since one of the pursued had come our way. We scrambled back through the window and I don't think any of us had ever planned a strategy so quickly. Since the five of us on the roof doing the yelling were all Anglos, we hid in the closet and bathroom while Maria and Antonia pulled out the ironing board in order to look domestic and Eliseo and the Filipino brothers sat in the living room pretending great interest in the newspaper. It was a very proper-looking household scene. There were a few tense minutes while we heard the policeman stomping through the halls of our tenement, but they couldn't figure out from which apartment they had been challenged and they left without pounding on our door. The fellow taking refuge in our building had escaped out the back hall door. Those of us who had taunted the plainclothes police relaxed into nervous laughter at our escape and then had to face the quietly rendered rebuke from our housemates who had been forced into play-acting their domestic scene and who would have had to face the police directly if they had come to the door. This gentle scolding made its point: It was we Anglos who had caused the incident and then hid behind the Mexicans and Filipinos. We promised to behave ourselves for the rest of the convention.

After hitching a ride to California, I worked with the boycott in San Francisco for a while, but soon realized I did not have the energy to continue. I was classically burned out and needed some renewal. I went to Delano to complete my exit as a union volunteer and pay

my respects to Cesar, who was suffering from a chronic back problem following one of his long fasts. I was mustered out with a few hundred dollars and returned to San Francisco sometime in August of 1968.

Volunteering for the farmworkers union was an incomparable time of learning for me. Cesar's leadership and his unfailing dedication to nonviolence were guides that have carried me through many difficulties. My memories of Dolores have often lifted my spirits. But it is the memory of the unsung small heroes and heroines that has touched me the most. Leona, cold and miserable on the bus to New York, tears creeping out of the corners of her eyes, but determined to stay the course and offer her help. George and the many other Filipino bachelors giving quiet examples of patient endurance as they worked for a better tomorrow for their brothers.