

Ernie Powell 1968-1973

Early days

I was first introduced to the farmworker movement in 1967. I had just finished my tenure as a VISTA summer associate (Volunteers in Service to America). VISTA was started by President Kennedy and was known as the “domestic Peace Corps.” When I went back to school at San Bernardino Valley College after my summer with VISTA, I organized a student group on campus opposing the war in Vietnam. My VISTA summer had radicalized me in the sense that I clearly understood that there were two Americas—one for the rich and well off and one for the poor. The war in Vietnam was an extension of that reality.

As an activist in the anti-war movement in San Bernardino, I met Cecil and Patricia Hoffman. Cecil was the Presbyterian minister at a church in Colton. Both Cecil and Pat had worked with Reverend Chris Hartmire in the California Migrant Ministry. Cecil and Pat told me about the farmworker movement. They shared stories about the “Huelga,” Cesar, and the picket lines in Delano.

For my next two college summers I worked in a church volunteer program in Los Angeles known as Ecumenical Summer Service Los Angeles. ESSLA was funded by a number of denominations in Los Angeles. Their mission was to bring college students to Los Angeles for the summer to work with organizations that fought for social change. Students from all over the country came to L. A. and lived at University Church at the University of Southern California campus. Besides serving meals to seniors in downtown Los Angeles, they worked at the Los Angeles Free Clinic, a daycare center at St. Luke’s Church in South Los Angeles, the Ocean Park Community Center, and on the Los Angeles boycott for the United Farm Workers.

I joined the boycott that summer as an ESSLA participant. Everyday we went to stores and stood in front of those stores and asked people not to shop there because of the scab grapes. I remember my first boycott picket line was at a Ralph’s supermarket at Jefferson near Western Boulevard in Los Angeles. The very first person I approached was an old guy who seemed to have spent his life fighting unions. He looked like a werewolf right out of the movies. He gave a verbal pounding about the “right to work” and “those goddamned unions” that nearly brought me to tears. Luckily, Freddy Chavez (Cesar’s nephew) was my co-picketer. Freddy helped me shake it off by saying “Welcome to the movement.”

Things got better, of course. We went out every day, including Saturdays. We hit Ralph’s, Vons, and other stores all over Los Angeles. At one Ralph’s in West Los Angeles, I asked a guy not to go in. He kept walking and just turned to me and said, “Don’t worry, I’m stealing.” He came out about five minutes later with a chicken stuffed in his coat pocket.

Naturally, there was more to this experience than meeting a union buster and a thief. For me, this was the beginning of understanding how people fight injustice. I was a middle-class student who wanted to do something that had meaning. The spirit of commitment I saw in people—mixed with the brilliance of their strategic perspective—made a profound difference to me and represented a turning point in my life.

It was also the beginning of my mentorship with Chris Hartmire. Chris was the head of the California Migrant Ministry (it later became the National Farm Worker Ministry). Every day or two I would go into Chris's office and get his counsel and guidance on what we were doing. He helped me understand the underlying meaning of this work and how it all connected together as a life commitment. He shared his views on how hard work is really a key part of a people's movement. He talked a lot about nonviolence and how that can and does become an element of justice and teaching. He told me about his conversations with Cesar. He shared many lessons about nonviolence and justice. He talked about the total commitment the farmworkers were making and how that impacted him and added to his own spiritual grounding. What Chris gave me during those discussions as well as the example he imparted have stayed with me all of my life. I am also thankful to Sue Miner, Chris's assistant. She said to me at one point, "You know, you never had an appointment; I just let you walk into Chris's office."

Every week during those summers, all of the boycotters gathered for a meeting. At those meetings LeRoy Chatfield (the director of the Los Angeles boycott) and Chris Hartmire walked us through the events of the previous week. We heard about other boycott cities as well as news from Delano.

In those weekly meetings, one could see the totality of the movement and how it all worked together. LeRoy pointed out with precise clarity what our work was doing to the stores and to the grape industry. He outlined strategy and showed us how our work fit in with the rest of the movement. He also asked each of us to report on what worked and what didn't, along with lessons learned and tips to make us more effective. He reported on meetings with managers of supermarket chains when a particular chain decided to "give in" and stop selling grapes. LeRoy did a great job of keeping us pumped up to go out and get things going. In his calm and thoughtful way he let us know that what we were doing was having a strong impact. The strategic insight was truly valued by each of us. The boycott staff had grown to about 80 full-time organizers, and each week we left those weekly meetings knowing we would win.

As a young organizer, or soon-to-be organizer, it struck me how people gave of their time and their spirit to bring about the victories we had in getting people not to go inside the stores. On a day-to-day basis I rarely heard anyone complain. I saw, in real terms, what Cesar was saying about the element of time. In one of his speeches he said that though the growers have money, lawyers, politicians, and cops, the farmworkers and their supporters had people and time. So it was up to us to work hard—to always go back and keep organizing. Time was our resource. Ultimately, we could beat them because of the strength that came from our unity, our spirit, and the justice of what we were doing.

The boycott in Los Angeles was a great experience. Each team would stand in front of the store all day and into the early evening and ask people not to shop there. A good day was turning away anywhere from 50 to 100 people. We had to deal with angry managers trying to kick us off their property. When the police arrived, we used what was called the Pruneyard decision, which was a Supreme Court case that gave us access to private commercial property for the purposes of free speech as long as we were not disruptive. We convinced the police we had a right to be there. It drove store managers nuts, to say the least. Anyhow, at the end of each picketing day we called in to Chris and Leroy and let them know how many people we turned away.

We had this really amazing moment at one point where we got word that the television series “Mod Squad” was going to shoot an episode at a Safeway store in Culver City. We got there at 6 o’clock in the morning with picket signs and convinced the actors and crew to not shoot there because of the grape boycott. They got the message and canceled the shoot!

Store boycotts were happening in Boston, New York, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco—almost every major and minor city in the U.S. Finally, the growers gave in and agreed to contracts during the summer of 1970. The Los Angeles boycott team traveled by bus to the hiring hall in Delano to watch Cesar sign the big contracts with Giumarra and the other growers. I remember the moment Cesar walked in at the front of the hall with all of the growers following. They sat down and together signed the contracts. I think at one point the crowd wanted to boo the growers. Cesar did not let that happen—for now, on this great day, the fighting could stop and we could all enjoy the victory. During that one day in Delano, I met other leaders I had heard about. I remember Larry Itliong, Phillip Vera Cruz, and Gil Padilla, Jim Drake (Migrant Ministry), and Marshall Ganz, to name a few.

After we got back to Los Angeles, I recall that LeRoy finally took a day off (he seemed never to take a day off). He reported back to us that he went to see the movie “Woodstock.” Good for you, LeRoy!

The Huelga in San Ysidro

After the grapes, the union then moved toward organizing the lettuce workers. After my boycott summer, I returned to school in San Diego. I worked with local boycotters there as the lettuce struggle began. In those days I met Richard Ybarra and Carlos Leggerette. Both Richard and Carlos were well-known leaders in the Chicano community in San Diego. Richard later became Cesar’s bodyguard. Then, in the late 70s, I worked for him in the California Conservation Corps.

At the same time (around 1970 to 1971), Margo Cowan, a brilliant young woman who had moved to California after college to organize, was talking to farmworkers working in tomatoes and avocados in San Diego County. One evening Richard Chavez (Cesar’s

brother) met with a group of workers who picked tomatoes for the Egger-Gio Ranch in Imperial Beach. He handed out UFW buttons to those in attendance. About half a dozen wore those buttons to work the next day. Bobby Egger saw those buttons and fired each worker on the spot.

All the workers walked off their jobs in support of the fired workers and thus began the San Ysidro strike.

I have a vague memory of the first time I saw the picket line in Imperial Beach. It was right off Interstate 5, going south to Mexico. I went down there on an early morning. I became involved in getting support from churches. It happened that way because I knew Chris Hartmire. As described above, he gave me some very good coaching on how to organize church people to be helpful and provide both active support as well as resources.

The San Ysidro strike was very intense. Emil Gio and Bobby Egger owned the tomato field. Egger had a long-standing relationship with many of the workers. He felt deeply betrayed. Gio was a businessman who owned restaurants in San Diego, including a very famous one in the San Diego Bay section. Egger was more the day-to-day guy. He was very involved in the local Catholic community. He went to church regularly and donated to the church as well. He knew the bishop of San Diego, which had an impact on things. Egger was deeply angered by this whole effort. This was “in his backyard,” and he resented the intrusion and the challenge of it all.

I started contacting local church leaders. One of the most supportive was Mike Cooney, the minister from the local Methodist congregation in Imperial Beach. He did not hesitate to show up on picket lines and also raised money and organized food drives.

The strike needed the church people for two reasons. The first was to show a presence at the picket line. This helped in generating community support. It was a good media tool as well. Having clergy present also kept the scene less violent. It was harder for anti-union goons to beat people up with ministers, priests, and nuns around. The second way the church folks helped was in material support. They organized food drives and raised money for the strikers. They formed the Interfaith Coalition for Faith and Reconciliation. They picketed, helped with the press, and generally just gave presence to the injustice of the situation.

Through all of this, I was becoming closer to Margo. In all my time in doing this work I have never seen a better organizer. She never counted the hours of the day. She never thought about herself. She committed her entire life to working with the strikers and winning a contract. The workers loved and respected her.

I was also able to work with Father Victor Salandini, known as the Tortilla Priest. Father Salandini was a Catholic priest who showed up one day and offered help. This man was a saint. He held Mass right at the picket line, he ministered to the workers, he inspired us and helped keep our perspective nonviolent. When we had an action right in front of Bobby's

house, he held Mass on his front lawn. He had a vestment with the UFW eagle right on the front. His Eucharist was a tortilla. Father Salandini was doing this at great personal sacrifice. His involvement really angered Egger because of Egger's connection to the Catholic Church. Egger successfully lobbied the bishop to get the priest removed from San Diego. A big and public confrontation took place. I think Father Salandini just flatly refused to go and stayed with the strike.

Margo was worried about how violent the strike was getting. Workers were threatened on a daily basis. Hired goons did show up for a while and there were violent confrontations. Many of the strikers wanted to fight back.

So Margo decided to fast. It lasted about 21 days. I remember clearly how the fast brought power to the strike. It reminded everyone what our efforts meant and it helped the strikers hang in there longer and do so with the nonviolent discipline required to carry on. I also remember seeing and being with Margo during the fast. In her, I saw levels of commitment and spiritual strength that I had never seen so closely in another human being. Seeing her sacrifice made everyone realize that our goal was justice, not retribution.

In total, 90 workers were on strike. Many of them lived south of the border.

Although the union planned none of this, it supported the strike with staff and funds. Jim Drake was very involved as the head of organizing.

At some point, probably around the third month or so, I just went full time. The California Migrant Ministry hired me to work the San Ysidro strike. Schoolwork had become pretty irrelevant to me. In fact, it was so irrelevant that a bunch of my classes went to "incomplete" status and I got a letter from San Diego State putting me on probation. Soon after that, I proudly flunked out.

My full-time job was to get support from the churches. But working on a strike means doing a little of everything. So I helped with the picket line and worked with Margo, the strike leaders, and Jim Drake on strategy. Some nights I stayed at the all-night vigil organized right on the road next to the tomato field. The strikers had erected a shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe next to the field. People slept there at night to maintain a constant presence. The shrine was an inspiration to the strikers and supporters.

There were many tactics used in the strike. One was direct and constant contact by the strikers on the Egger operation. Strikers and strike supporters maintained an all-night presence. In retaliation, Egger hired a guy named Richard Napolitano. This person was a professional strikebreaker used by growers across the state to cause problems for the union. One night Napolitano used a bullhorn and for hours screamed into the car of one of the supporters parked near the Egger house. He also showed up at the picket line and harassed supporters and strikers.

Margo found ways to keep everybody busy. Even the older farmworkers who were not able to stand on the picket line had jobs. Every day, beginning very early in the morning and continuing into the evening, a few people not picketing were assigned to call Bobby's packing house constantly.

Another tactic was a march. With Father Salandini leading the group, the strikers and supporters marched along the highway to the picket line. Many local labor and church leaders participated. I think there were at least 2000 people on the march.

At one point the union gave thought to boycotting Egger-Gio tomatoes. So I jumped in my car and in four days drove from San Diego to Los Angeles, Oakland, and San Francisco looking for their tomatoes so we could start a boycott. I found one box in northern California. We could not start a boycott—this grower was just too small.

The strike was not winning. Scab labor was regularly brought in. To counter this, Margo would take strikers and march right into the fields and ask workers to join the strike. She and the strikers showed a great deal of bravery.

Finally, the union decided the strike had to end. I do not recall the exact sequence but Margo agreed. I know it was very difficult for everyone.

One problem was a simple pragmatic one. It had to do with dealing with the shrine along the road next to the main field. Every night two or more people slept there. It was the spiritual center of the strike and no one could figure out what to do with the shrine. It burned down.

I have one other story to tell before moving on from this period. One morning, during the time when the conflict was at its heaviest, Margo and Bobby Egger happened to be driving—in separate cars of course—on a rural highway somewhere near the strike location. It was very early in the morning. Suddenly a car traveling on the same road made a bad turn near a dangerous curve. The driver, a young woman, lost control and the car wound up in a ditch. Both Bobby and Margo saw what happened and stopped to render aid. They functioned well together in doing what it took to make sure the driver was safe and attended to with whatever first aid was available at the moment. Bobby had a radio in his truck and made a call to get an ambulance. As Margo described it, this accident made the two of them work together to save a life. They spoke, they thought together, and they acted. The help they gave this accident victim probably saved her life. And then they went back to their everyday lives.

When the strike folded up, Egger hired a few strikers back. For others, the union worked to get people jobs. About six of the strikers had musical talents. The union suggested that they form a *teatro*, and they asked me to work with them. It was called *Los Peregrinos de la Causa* or the “the pilgrims of the cause.” We went up to San Juan Bautista and trained for a week under Luis Valdez, the creator of the original Teatro Campesino. Luis taught us how to be on stage and be good at it. Our job was to inspire people through theater and music

to better understand the movement. Specifically, the union wanted us to travel around the state and perform in front of other organized workers. We had a skit where there was a strike and a picket line. I was the grower, and in the skit the Huelgistas picketed me and won the strike and a contract. They also played music and sang songs from the movement.

It was tough going with this group. At one point the union gave me some money to buy a van so that we could all ride around the state together. I bought some kind of vehicle (it might have been a Volkswagen van) in San Diego and the next day it broke down.

We did performances in other parts of California. We rarely did theater, concentrating instead on playing music. We went up to the Salinas strike and played music in front of a few thousand workers. We also performed in Santa Maria in front of lettuce strikers. *Los Peregrinos de la Causa* broke up after a few months.

My next assignment was to organize in Napa Valley. The union was attempting to sign up wine grape workers.

Napa Valley

An organizer named Mike Hernandez arrived before I did and rented a small apartment in Calistoga, just off the main road. This was in the fall of 1971 or so. We were picketing both the Robert Mondavi and Charles Krug wineries as well as working to sign up workers all over the Napa Valley area. Jim Drake continued as the director of the organizing department at the time. I was very excited about this assignment because it was my first opportunity to directly organize workers.

Each day we picketed both Mondavi and Krug. We also spent time contacting workers and talking to them about the union. In addition, we got to know the Christian Brothers' farmworkers very well. The UFW had signed the Christian Brothers back in the mid-1960s. Their working conditions in Napa Valley were exemplary—a real example of how the union was able to negotiate wages, working conditions, housing standards, and benefit packages. The labor camp was modern and very well maintained. People working for Christian Brothers really liked their jobs. And they were very strong union members.

Our picket lines in front of Mondavi and Krug were not very large. We organized a few volunteers to join us on the lines. The owners, Robert Mondavi and Charles Krug (Mondavi's cousin) hated that we were there and tried to get the local sheriff to close us down.

Our picket line had some impact in disturbing their daily wine-tasting tours. This was particularly true at Mondavi. I had a bullhorn and could be heard from the picket line during the first stage of the wine-tasting tour. I reminded the people taking the tour that there were no bathrooms for the workers in the fields and that there were few regulations having to do with pesticide work. I also told them that children were working in the fields and that basically the wine they were going to sip was the product of exploited labor.

Eventually, they had to redesign the tour so that they could not hear my amplified voice in the hallways of their winery.

My colleague spent a great deal of time speaking and working with the workers either in the labor camps or around town.

Things got nasty a few times. One day a supervisor pulled over in front of Charles Krug, got out of the truck and proceeded to tear my shirt off and slug me a few times. A sheriff arrived and arrested him. The guy went to jail. The day he assaulted me I called Jim Drake to report that I had been punched around. Great organizers think of the best questions. After telling him that I got smacked on the head, Jim replied, "Well, that won't bother you." He then asked, "Did you get any press?" Actually, we got a little.

One day Jim Drake came up to Napa to meet with us and assess the situation. While picketing, he turned to me and asked if anyone had ever had a calm and reasonable talk with Robert Mondavi. My discussions with Mondavi were through his car window when he came to work or otherwise passed the picket line. Our discourse was limited to rather nasty comments and strikingly unfriendly exchanges. I told Jim that and he said, "What the hell, I'll go see the guy." So he walked up the driveway to the winery and asked to see Mondavi.

Jim later told me how it went. At first it was a bit tense—not heated—just tense. As they talked, both realized that there was no need to be hostile and they could agree to disagree. At one point Mondavi offered Jim a cigar. As he was lighting the cigar Mondavi leaned forward from his desk and said to Jim, "I can get along with you. We may not agree on anything, but at least we can be businesslike and friendly. But that kid out there, the one with that mustache, he is always rude, he cusses me out every time I see him—what is with him?" Jim said, "Bob, I am here to talk to you, he is here to nail you."

That story has stayed with me. It reminds me of what an organizer does. And it reminds me that I would not make a good negotiator, to say the least.

I remember one night we had a meeting with the Mondavi workers in their labor camp. We were in a basement. About 50 workers were talking to us as we explained the benefits of having a union contract. All of the sudden we heard the sound of footsteps—boots on stairs. I left the meeting and found that the foreman was coming along with two officers of the law. My goal was to talk to them long enough and confuse them enough so that we would not get arrested. I also wanted to give my colleague enough time to get union authorization cards signed.

I went upstairs with the two sheriff officers and the foreman. I started talking as fast as I could. I asked them about the Michigan State Supreme Court decision that allowed us to be in the labor camp as long as someone had invited us. I had no idea what the hell I was talking about but I was trying to buy time. I could tell these guys were not pleased and that they just wanted to either get us out of there or arrest us. Just as the whole situation was

about to get really bad, my fellow organizer came up from the basement and subtly pointed to the signed authorization cards in his pocket. We exited the scene—cards in hand.

The organizing drive in Napa Valley lasted about two months. At the same time, the union was feeling good about the lettuce industry negotiations. They thought at that point that there was good faith on the part of the Salinas and Coachella growers. So they decided that it made sense to start organizing the orange industry. Cesar called the organizing department into La Paz for three days of meetings. It was exciting. I was hoping that I would get assigned to Florida to work with migrant orange workers.

There were about 50 organizers in this big room at La Paz, which was the union headquarters just south of Bakersfield. Marshall Ganz put together information on the orange industry. We learned how many workers they had, how their exports worked, how their profit and losses were structured. We went from early morning the first day into the late evening.

The next morning we had to get up and resume working at 8 o'clock. I remember Cesar started the meeting by telling us that he went home the night before and read a book on Puerto Rican farmworkers. We were awestruck that he had worked that entire day and then read a book late into the night.

This may not sound major, but there is a point here. Many of these small things made a profound impression on me. I was just out of school. I knew this was what I wanted to do so I used every opportunity to learn how to organize my life to make myself disciplined enough to be an organizer. Just watching the way Cesar, LeRoy, Marshall, Dolores, Chris, and others spent their day-to-day lives was something I wanted to model. How they used time and resources and how they led others—all of this added up for me. I took in every small and large detail I could. These men and women were my role models. They set examples for me as an organizer. They taught me how to use time. They taught me how to develop the discipline needed to do grass-roots organizing. In these people, I saw levels of commitment that I had never seen in my middle-class upbringing.

Every day I think about the way I saw farmworkers and their leaders respond during those days. I remember the big things like the sacrifices Margo and the workers made during that very difficult strike or the talks that Chris and I had or the strategy that I saw LeRoy describe on a blackboard. At the same time I have always remembered the little stuff—such as how Cesar stayed up reading while all of us younger folks needed sleep.

It all adds up to understanding the depth of commitment it takes to do organizing. Drive, passion, and singularity of purpose are mandatory. Organizing requires clarity and the ability to create change by altering the relationships of power. The farmworkers taught me the basics. They taught me that using the tools of democracy makes it possible to change economic and political relationships.

The people I worked with and for in the UFW knew exactly what they wanted in society. They wanted to shift the equation in a way that brought poor farmworkers economic justice. And they understood the economics and politics of what they were doing and what it would take to demand and win the benefits and wages workers deserved.

From Napa to Philadelphia

In the fall of 1971, I believe, we gathered in La Paz to talk oranges. We were set to go. A photo of the CEO from Sunkist was posted above the men's urinal at La Paz. Marshall had done an industry analysis.

On the second day we were all talking oranges when Cesar left the room to take a call from Jerry Cohen, the main UFW attorney. At that moment he was in Salinas talking to the lettuce industry. They were negotiating union contracts for lettuce workers. When Cesar left the room Marshall took over and continued to brief us on the orange industry.

Cesar returned to tell us that all of the sudden things were not looking good in the lettuce talks. Jerry was telling Cesar that the growers were digging in their heels in on some key issues. Again, Cesar was called back to the phone and he left the room.

Cesar came back—this time with some very heavy news. He said that the growers would not agree to certain health and safety conditions related to pesticides. He and Jerry, over the phone, surmised that this was part of a strategy by the growers to obstruct the negotiations. So Cesar decided to call off the talks and instructed Jerry to tell the group of lettuce growers at the negotiating tables the following: “Tell them Cesar said ‘fuck you.’”

Now this was not typically the kind of language Cesar used. So Jerry said to him, “Are you sure?” Cesar repeated, “Tell them I said ‘fuck you.’” So, while still holding the phone, Jerry turned to the growers and said, “Cesar said to tell you ‘fuck you.’”

We were blown away. We knew that the orange fight would not start at this juncture. After telling us what had occurred, Cesar turned to Marshall and said, “Take all of this stuff down and let's put up the lettuce information once again.”

The next night I met with Jessica Govia in La Paz and she assigned me to the Philadelphia boycott. A week later I was on the road.

Philadelphia

I left La Paz right after meeting with Jessica and drove back to San Diego. My car in those days was a blue Datsun. I don't recall what I had to get done—I owned only a few books and a bag or two of clothes. I had no furniture in those days. I made whatever arrangements were necessary and, on a crisp and beautiful morning, I awoke to drive myself across the country to start my job in Philadelphia. Over breakfast I read a magazine—I think it was *Time*. There was story about Frank Rizzo, the new mayor and

former chief of police of Philadelphia, soon to be my new home. The story reported that Rizzo wanted a municipal electric chair.

Five days later I arrived in Philly in the middle of the night. I remember the last part of the drive through Hershey. The smell of chocolate kept me awake. When I entered Philly, I drove up Broad Street and was completely awestruck at the sight of city hall in the middle of the street.

I called Richard Trejo, the boycott coordinator, as soon as I drove in and he gave me directions. The house was in North Philadelphia on the 2500 block of Mascher Street. It was a three-story walkup in one of the city's roughest neighborhoods.

I loved living there. For years, I had wanted a taste of life on the East Coast. I liked that it was near a subway. I could ride the "El" all over town. I liked it because it took me away from the middle-class boredom I came from. At night you heard music. People sat on the steps in front of their houses and you got to know each other. It was a working-class neighborhood that had black, Puerto Rican, and white neighbors. Though rundown, it was a very vibrant neighborhood.

Besides Richard Trejo there were Joe and Jeannie Digman. They were from Portland. I think I had met them in La Paz. Richard was the head of the boycott team.

The union had decided to spend a few months trying to get contracts with the wine grape growers so the boycott was now aimed at big liquor outlets. My assignment was Princeton, New Jersey, as there were some big and swanky liquor stores there.

Princeton is about 50 miles from Philly. I remember that as you drove over the Delaware River into the state capital, Trenton, a big sign read, "Trenton makes and the world takes."

I tried commuting to Princeton but it was too far. So part of my organizing assignment was to find a place to stay every night. Sometimes I would go to a house meeting in the evening and just ask folks if they had a spare couch. Other times I stayed at the Princeton Seminary School. The priest there was very supportive of the boycott.

The Princeton wine outlets really fought and took full-page ads out in the local paper condemning what we were doing. The Wine Nine boycott lasted about a month or so. I do not recall if we won any contracts. After the Wine Nine, we got started on the lettuce boycott. Since the National Farm Worker Ministry paid me, I was assigned to organize church support. I worked with numerous denominations to get ministers and people of faith to provide resources and be present on picket lines in front of supermarkets.

One of the most memorable organizing efforts we had was when the union decided to take on the Republican Party. The Nixon Administration had decided to put the farmworkers union under the National Labor Relations Act. The irony of this was that, under different circumstances, this was something the UFW might want. For years, farmworkers had

fought for organizing and bargaining rights. But in this instance, the Republicans were trying to do this so that they could kill the secondary boycott. Under the NLRB, secondary boycotts were illegal. So the union had to fight this. Because it was an administrative move and not a legislative one, the union decided to go after every Republican elected official anywhere with the hope that so much pressure and activity would get them to ask the Nixon Administration to back off. It was a total national effort and after about a month or so they backed off—we won!

I got to know a lot of great labor people in Philly. They were very supportive of our efforts. I remember meeting Harry Boyer, the head of the AFL-CIO in Pennsylvania. We asked him to get to Governor Dick Schaap and ask the state to stop buying scab lettuce. It worked and we held a press conference at the capitol. Pennsylvania became the only state in the country to stop buying lettuce in support of the farmworkers.

I also remember Wendell Young from the retail clerks union. Young was president of the United Food and Commercial Union. He would show up at picket lines and also helped us generate support and press attention when needed. At one point he got into some kind of controversy with Mayor Frank Rizzo, and Rizzo was quoted in the press as saying, “Go tell Wendell Young to eat lettuce.”

One of our organizers was a woman named Betsy Daily. She lived in Narberth, a small community right outside of the city. I got to know her family very well as each Sunday they invited me to have dinner in their home. That was very special for me. Betsy’s dad, “Deuce” Daily, was a great union man. A member of the electricians’ union, Deuce was one of the strongest union guys I’ve ever met. Dinner was so much fun. It was a big Irish family and there was always conversation—sometimes the kids really teased Deuce just to get his goat. It was really good for me to be there and I will always think warmly of Mary Daily, Betsy’s mom, and her whole family.

Day to day was typically picket lines in front of supermarkets with house meetings in the evening. Evenings were also spent calling supporters to get them to our picket lines. The three-story apartment we had was also campaign headquarters. The basement had an old-fashioned mimeograph machine. To get Xerox copies, we had to travel to a supporter’s office. I recall that we had one good typewriter—we were always hustling correction fluid and Xerox paper. We had to hustle everything.

I will never forget the election period leading up to the 1972 Nixon-McGovern race. We participated with the labor movement anytime a major candidate came to Philadelphia. We always made sure that UFW buttons were available, hoping that one of the candidates would wear one and it would get on television, hopefully on the evening news.

I saw Sergeant Shriver speak at Temple University. McGovern showed up and spoke in downtown Philadelphia. During the primary that year I went to the Philadelphia Athletic Club to see Senator Muskie. The event was on the top floor. The advance guys had a problem because the entire crowd was staying near the beer and ignoring the Senator. The

Senator was quickly moved to the area of beer distribution and that is where his speech took place. The night before the election, we spent most of the night putting up McGovern posters all over Philadelphia. I remember Richard Trejo predicting that evening that the Democrats would win in a landslide.

My assignment that day was a Democratic precinct in Puerto Rican and black neighborhood in north Philadelphia. It was a scene right out of a movie about big-city politics. I was told to report to "Louie" that morning. My assignment was to position a table right near the entrance to the voting location. Though the law required that the distribution of literature be done 100 feet away, Louie said right near the entrance was just fine.

I spent the morning handing out McGovern literature to voters brought over to the polling location by precinct workers from the neighborhood. They were taken directly to our ward boss, the infamous Louie, who then escorted them to the precinct workers and then right into the voting booths. One level pulled meant you voted for the entire Democratic ticket. It was quite the scene. At one point, a big long Cadillac pulled up. Out stepped a man in a very expensive suit. Off went Louie, though I did not immediately notice his absence. The man in the expensive suit was probably in his mid-60s.

He went pretty nuts seeing where I had positioned the table. I had no clue who this guy was and figured dear Louie would defend me. At one point, he ordered me to move the table and I stood my ground, saying that if he did not stop harassing me I would call the police. The dapper gentleman made a slight turn of his head, and right near him was a Philadelphia police officer, who seemed to appear out of nowhere. The man in the suit said to the officer, "He is calling the cops," at which point the cop said, "That is right, Judge, he is calling the cops."

I did a quick visual check to look for my loyal compatriot, Louie. He had slithered away to points unknown. Reality set in, I realized I had zero cover or protection, and I said, "Sir, where would you like this table moved to?" His last words to me were, "Over there, kid." I complied, the judge and the cop drove away, and Louie came back. He informed me that this guy was a local Republican judge who just drove around town on Election Day getting his kicks. Louie told me to put the table back as he put his arm around me and said, "Welcome to Philadelphia politics, kid."

That day we carried our precinct for the Democrats. In Rizzo's home precinct in South Philadelphia, Nixon won by 100%. The rest is history.

Shortly after the November election, the Philadelphia teachers' strike started. Dolores Huerta came and spoke at one of the rallies for the striking teachers. It lasted a few months. We did all we could by joining them on picket lines and lining up support for the strike. We were one day away from closing down the city. The garbage workers were going to surround City Hall with garbage trucks. The transit workers were willing to go out as well. We had four marches planned to come into the city and converge downtown. I think

Cesar and Dolores had agreed to be part of the marches. But the school board caved, the citywide shutdown did not happen, and the teachers claimed victory.

Cesar's Visits

Cesar came to our part of the country a couple of times during that period. One of the most memorable times was when he attended the anniversary ceremony of a mining strike deep in the heart of rural Pennsylvania. He was there to honor the struggle that took place near Wilkes-Barre on the anniversary of the death of a number of union strikers at the hands of company goons.

Cesar was the main speaker at this outdoor ceremony. Also in attendance was the local congressman, Dan Flood. This guy was quite the character and was loved by his constituents. At the beginning of the ceremony and right before the Pledge of Allegiance, Mr. Flood landed right in the middle of the crowd in a helicopter. Dressed in a perfectly pressed gray suit, he stepped out of the helicopter and went up the stage. He featured a dark, slicked-down moustache with a "snidely whiplash" design.

After being introduced, he walked up to the podium and his first words were "I have come here today to praise Cesar." He kept saying that over and over again. Cesar smiled—a little embarrassed, one might surmise. Cesar's speech that day to the assembled union families was very inspiring. He talked about our common struggle and thanked the members of the coal miners' union for their support. He also talked about our common need to keep the union movement strong and united. This was a pure union town. Chimes rang every hour, each time with a different union melody from the town tour.

On another occasion, Cesar came east to address the autoworkers' convention in Atlantic City. This was a very important address because Senator Ted Kennedy was going to address the same convention. I traveled as part of the security team and spent the night in the car to make sure no sabotage was done to the car Cesar was traveling in.

From New Jersey, we took the turnpike up to New York City. I think at the time that Richie Ross was the NYC boycott coordinator. I recall that Richard Ybarra was the main bodyguard with Cesar. Richard and I knew each other from the San Diego days.

We all stayed near Central Park at the apartment of a boycott supporter. That evening we held a birthday party for one of our main organizers, Marcos Muñoz. Somebody had purchased candles for the birthday cake that were impossible to blow out. We all got a lot of laughs out of that.

Having Cesar come east was always something that we enjoyed. It was a great morale booster. He spent time with all of us talking about organizing, about how things were going in California, and about what our work meant to farmworkers and poor people in general.

January to March of 1973

I do not remember the exact moment I decided to leave the union. Frankly, I do not even remember why. Ruth Shy had arrived from California as the new coordinator. She and I knew each other from California and were good friends. By then, the office had moved to West Philly.

Anyhow, I think it was in March of 1973 that I flew home. I just left my car with a friend in Philly and flew to San Diego. That year I took a job with a church in Ocean Park as a community organizer. That job started in December of 1973.

Postscript

Thirty years have passed since my days as a full-time boycott organizer. The faith and hope I felt still remain. Things I will never forget include:

- Taking Cesar to New York and Atlantic City, talking about the *Godfather*, taking Cesar to coal mining country, getting Dick Schapp to boycott lettuce in Pennsylvania.
- Philadelphia Mayor Rizzo saying, "Tell them to go eat lettuce."
- Labor guys.
- The corrupt Election Day in the Philly precinct.

Lessons that I learned, gifts the union gave me, and people I remember:

- Love of grassroots.
- Knowing that victory was possible.
- Chris Hartmire, LeRoy Chatfield, Margo Cowan, Richard Trejo, Richard Ybarra, Cesar Chavez, Andy Inmutan, Gil Padilla.
- The farmworker in San Ysidro whose husband beat her.
- How to understand the rich—the depravity of life without meaning and struggle.
- Lessons from the poor.
- A lesson Marcos Muñoz in Philly taught me.
- Always work hard, always give, always stay on message, always stay directed, and always keep organizing (Boycott lettuce, Boycott lettuce, Boycott lettuce ... Cesar's idea).
- This country really is class-based and anti-poor.
- Knowing farmworkers.