

Michael Johnston 1970–1971

The Impact of the UFW on the Teamster Food Processing Unions

It's one of my stranger memories. In late 2001, at a symposium on the effects of Cesar Chavez on popular movement, I am speaking on the impact of Cesar on the Teamster food processing unions. I am a little nervous, as Dolores Huerta will be there, and I am not sure how she is going to feel about what I have to say. My fears are not realized, as Dolores shows up but has to leave for a TV interview during my talk. Before she leaves, however, she passes out fliers advertising a march in San Francisco commemorating Cesar's life and death. On the back are the logos of the sponsors who have donated to the march ... including Safeway! Whew! If I needed a reminder that lots of things have changed, this was it.

It was the summer of 1970, and I had just escaped, three days earlier, from high school. I had no idea whatsoever what I wanted to do with my life, but I knew that I had no interest in college, so I headed from San Jose to Delano to volunteer for the UFW. (I have used “UFW” throughout the article, rather than try to distinguish between NFWA, UFWOC, UFWA, and UFW.) The pay was not great—all the room and board that I could hustle plus \$5 a week—but they were willing to take anyone. My brother Paul, on summer vacation from college, had gone down a few days ahead of me, so, carrying a duffel bag with everything that I thought that I would need, I hitchhiked down California's Central Valley into Delano.

When I arrived, I asked around for the UFW office. Imagine my dismay when I learned that Forty Acres, the union's headquarters, was in the fields a couple of miles outside of Delano. I shouldered my bag and started walking again, but I had not even cleared the edge of town when a beat-up old car driven by an old Filipino man with a beat-up looking German shepherd in the back picked me up. He said, “I can tell just by looking at you that you are heading for Forty Acres.” This was my introduction to Philip Vera Cruz and to the UFW.

The summer of 1970 was a time of intense activity for the UFW. After five years of struggle, the first grape contracts had been signed in the spring in Coachella, down by the Mexican border, and now the harvest was moving north to Delano, the center of the table grape industry. The big push was on to capitalize on the victory in Coachella and get contracts with the Delano growers before the end of the summer harvest season. The Delano growers had lost much of their national market for table grapes and were trying to avoid a total loss on their crops by dumping the grapes at rock bottom prices in Los Angeles. Paul and I arrived and said that we wanted to be sent anywhere outside of California, and were both immediately dispatched to Los Angeles, where more than 200 volunteers were working under two key UFW staffers, Chris Hartmire of the National Migrant Ministry and LeRoy Chatfield.

At the end of that summer, with virtually no notice, we were all bused to Forty Acres to witness the Delano grape growers signing their historic first contracts. We were hardly through celebrating when we learned a few days later that the Teamsters had signed contracts with virtually all of the Salinas Valley vegetable growers in a preemptive move to

save the growers from having to deal with Chavez. The workers' reaction was awesome. Tens of thousands of farmworkers went on strike and, in four marches, converged on Salinas from every corner of the Central Coast. Within weeks the union had won a contract with Interharvest, one of the largest lettuce growers, and had settled in for a long war with the Teamsters' union over the rest of the farmworkers in the region.

The lines could not have been clearer in my mind. It was a battle between good and evil. The UFW was on one side, along with the workers, and the growers and the Teamsters were on the other.

Now let's fast-forward to 2003, to a situation that I could never have imagined in 1970. I am working at Teamsters Local 890 in Salinas, which still represents thousands of farmworkers at Bud Antle, now the largest shipper of fresh vegetables in the world. Local 890 is one of the leading Latino unions in California, a union striving to be community based in the fashion that defined the UFW at its best. Local 890 is a respected force in the Latino community of Salinas. The Salinas Teamsters have a citizenship project doing community organizing and citizenship services among undocumented workers, led by my brother Paul, who had headed to Delano with me in 1970. It has a progressive Latino leadership headed by Frank Gallegos, a Teamsters international trustee whose parents were staunch Chavistas, and nearly half of the staff comes out of the UFW. Most amazing of all, Local 890 has a decent working relationship with the UFW. Thirty-three years later, no one in Salinas sees the members of Local 890 as (and certainly they are no longer) the agents of the growers that I remember from 1970.

I have had a front-row seat for this remarkable transformation, first as a Teamster cannery worker and activist in the pro-UFW cannery workers committees from 1973 through 1982; then as the West Coast organizer for Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), a national reform caucus opposed to the Teamster leadership, from 1983 through 1986; as a key player in the reform administration of Lucio Reyes in the Teamster Cannery Workers Local 601 in Stockton in 1987 and 1988; and finally as a staffer at Teamsters Local 890 for the last 16 years.

From that front-row seat, I have watched the transformation of the Teamster food processing unions, probably the largest organizations of Latino workers in California, and I have seen the tremendous impact that the farmworker movement had on that transformation.

I think that the farmworker movement's influence on the Teamster food processing unions has been huge. This influence has been exercised primarily in indirect ways, through the overall social impact of that movement on Latino workers and on the institutions in which they work. I have also seen a more direct impact by the farmworker movement, a result both of the dispersion of hundreds of former UFW volunteers throughout the labor movement, and to a lesser extent, by past and ongoing contact between UFW leaders and activists and leaders and activists in the Teamster food processing unions.

When the UFW rose to national prominence in the late 1960s, it was as a key component of a Southwest-wide Chicano movement, a movement that was certainly influenced by both the labor and civil rights movements, but one that had a character all its own. The

first place that I personally saw the broad reach and diversity of this movement was at the Chicano Moratorium in Los Angeles, on August 29, 1970. This was something completely different from any of the dozens of antiwar demonstrations that I had seen and participated in.

Opposition to the Vietnam War was the catalyst that had drawn the demonstration together, but the two most striking things about it for me (other than getting attacked by the LAPD) were the number and scope of organizations that participated, and the extent to which the UFW was a symbol of the movement for those present. Although scores of organizations had participated in putting the demonstration together, the icon that was everywhere was the black eagle, carried as a symbol of Chicano pride.

At the time of the Chicano Moratorium, the Teamsters represented nearly 100,000 food processing workers in California. They were in local unions whose membership was dominated by seasonal workers, overwhelmingly Mexican and Chicano; slightly more than half were women. Besides food processing workers, the Teamsters represented several thousand farmworkers at Bud Antle and somewhat fewer than a thousand truck drivers who hauled out of the fields. The Teamsters had already begun an attempt to become the key union in California's fields and, objectively viewed, they were a weapon against the movement represented by the UFW. The Teamster organizing was aided by their historic base at Bud Antle and among the produce drivers, by the relationships with the growers, and by the growers' powerful fear of and hatred for the UFW.

In 1970, the leadership of these Teamster locals was largely composed of first- and second-generation "Okies" and Italian immigrants. These were the people who had been the masses of workers in food processing before that role was taken over by Mexicans and Chicanos. They were nearly all male, mostly coming from skilled year-round jobs like truck driving, warehouse work, leading crews, and maintenance. They had negotiated contracts with some extraordinary benefits for seasonal workers, such as year-round medical insurance and pensions. However, the contracts also basically preserved the status quo between different groups of workers, offering significantly better benefits and a separate seniority system to the mainly white and male year-round workers, while providing few opportunities for Latino males to advance to year-round work, and no advancement opportunities to females of any race.

Within a year of the Chicano Moratorium, in late 1970 and early 1971, independent organizations of Teamster cannery workers sprang up in Oakland, Hayward, San Jose, Sacramento, King City, and Modesto. Although these groups initially had no knowledge of or connection with one another, they were virtually identical in their beliefs and goals. Inspired by the UFW and the civil rights movement, they all formed to fight for internal union democracy and militancy and for equal promotional rights for women and Latinos. All challenged both the employers and their own unions' leadership, and all were explicitly pro-UFW in the developing war between their union and the UFW. Amazingly, at least three of the groups independently adopted the name of Cannery Workers Committee (CWC) before they had heard of the others' existence.

These groups, separately and in concert, launched several affirmative action lawsuits against their unions and their employers, which forced dramatic changes in the seniority systems, training for skilled positions, and the manner in which promotions were given. They also did community organizing, set up UFW-style service centers to help workers with a variety of problems outside of the workplace, led marches of Teamsters supporting the UFW, and politically challenged the leadership of their locals. Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, the UFW continued to inspire both CWC leaders and food processing workers, sparking criticism of the Teamsters' local and national leadership and fueling the desire for Latino leadership of their unions.

Because of the strong family and community ties between Latinos in California's urban and rural areas, connections abounded between the farmworker movement and the growing movement of food processing workers. Practically everyone working a cannery in San Jose or Sacramento had a friend or a family member or a friend of a family member who had been a grape striker or a *lechugero* in Salinas.

In addition, much of the early CWC organizing was influenced by young Chicano activists such as Manuel Diaz, Tony Estremera, and Jaime Gallardo, who had come out of the MEChA student movement, which had been deeply (and consciously) influenced by the UFW.

There were many more direct contacts as well. Here are some specific examples:

- Fred and Virginia Hirsch, who had worked with Cesar in the CSO days in San Jose and had moved to Delano to work for the UFW for several years in the late 1960s, played essential roles (particularly Fred) in establishing the San Jose CWC. Other key participants were me and Maria Fuentes, whom I had met when we both worked on the L.A. boycott in 1970.
- The King City group was started around an affirmative action suit filed by workers at Basic Vegetable Products, a Teamster-represented dehydration plant, who had been active UFW supporters in the Salinas Valley organizing of the late 1960s and early 1970s.
- The San Jose CWC had quite a bit of contact early on with a group of cannery workers in Hollister led by Crescencio Diaz, a former UFW activist at Almaden Vineyards. Diaz would go on to become the vice president of Local 890 and a key member of Frank Gallegos's reform group.
- In 1984, workers at Gilroy Foods, another dehydration plant located in Gilroy, went on strike against the wishes of the leadership of Local 890, who were by now a coalition of the old "Okie" truck drivers and the Latino organizers who had cut their teeth in the battles against the UFW. They had great internal unity but received no support, and even vocal opposition, from their union. After nearly a month of striking, Emilio Haro, one of the workers leading the strike, called the UFW's headquarters in La Paz to ask Cesar for advice. It speaks volumes about the way that the UFW was viewed by active workers in food processing that it was so natural a thing for Emilio to pick up the phone and call Cesar, a perfect stranger, for advice. Cesar talked to him and later called

him back and advised him that they were going to lose without union support, and that they should end the strike, go back into the plant, and regroup to fight another day, which they did.

- One of the initiators of the TDU chapter in Stockton in 1982 was Lucio Reyes, who had known Dolores Huerta from Stockton and had been a workplace leader of the Stockton tomato strikes of the 1970s, in which the UFW participated.
- By the early 1990s, Local 890 also came to employ Fritz Conle, who had spent years as a UFW organizer, and Juan Aguirre, a former UFW staffer and vineyard activist from the Central Valley.

By 1984, the cannery workers' committees in San Jose and Sacramento, food processing-based chapters of TDU in Watsonville and Stockton, and the dehydration workers at Gilroy Foods in Gilroy and Basic Vegetable Products in King City had coalesced into a loose network, putting out a regional newspaper and trying to help each other in contract fights and local union election campaigns. At the same time, the 1977 pact between the UFW and the Teamsters that ended their war in the fields had expired, and several of the Teamster locals, including Local 890, which still represented thousand of farmworkers, were pushing hard to go back into the fields.

So when the workers at Basic Vegetable and Gilroy Foods decided to run a slate against Local 890's leadership, it was the most natural thing in the world for them to take the slate down to La Paz and meet with the UFW's leadership, and it was just as natural for the UFW to look for ways to support a slate coming out of the food processing workers' movement. The slate was led by Frank Gallegos, who had grown up in a pro-UFW family in King City and whose parents had been leaders of the affirmative action suit against Basic.

That slate's victory in 1985 was truly a turning point. For the first time, one of the giant Teamster food locals had an entirely Latino leadership that had grown up in opposition to the manipulative, anti-UFW strategy of their union. That new leadership, with virtually no experience running a giant union in an extraordinarily difficult industry, faced years of struggle to stabilize and build their local, but they came into office with a connection to the workforce that had not been seen in that sector of the Teamsters since the late 1950s, when the workforce in food processing changed and the leadership in their union did not.

Since 1985, Local 890 has continued to struggle to make itself the kind of worker-oriented, community-based union that the UFW strove to be. We are now the largest Latino labor union on the Central Coast. We have had our arguments with the UFW, but more and more, both have struggled with increasing success to define and work together on a common agenda.

The victory in Salinas was followed by a similar one in Stockton, where a slate led by former UFW activist Lucio Reyes took its own trip to La Paz, and succeeded in building a movement that ousted the old officers of Cannery Workers Union Local 601 and replaced it with a progressive Latino leadership.

In recent years, the Teamsters and the UFW have stood strongly together in many arenas. They supported each other in the Basic Vegetable strike, the Diamond Walnut strike, and the Watsonville strawberry organizing campaign (where for a period of time, a sham union based among the crew foremen had a contract, and sought to merge with the Teamsters but were turned down in solidarity with the UFW). We find ourselves working side by side in Salinas on political campaigns and on issues like citizenship rights and the recent driver's license campaign.

Looking back today, I think that we underestimated the power of a social movement that takes deep root in the hearts and minds of a community—the power that a rising tide of organization and popular sentiment among a whole people can have on the whole world around them and all of its institutions. The farmworker movement, its leaders, and the thousands of rank-and-file activists that it produced, and most important, the pride that they engendered in the masses of Latinos in the southwestern United States, were such a tide. It was a movement that had a profound and lasting impact on the Teamster food processing unions, as well as on every other popular institution in the region.

I was at a barbecue in Mountain View with a group of pretty radical Chicanos in the summer of 1974. The country was in turmoil. As far as we could tell, the power structure had moved from killing Robert, Martin, and Malcolm to killing Black Panther leaders in their homes. All of us felt watched and threatened as activists (and not without justification). Ronald Reagan was governor of California. The Watergate crisis was in full swing. None of us really knew what would happen. Would the revolutions happening around the world come home to the U.S.? Would Nixon impose martial law on the country? We felt like we were in a war, one that had been going on for years.

We were talking about the Teamsters union, about whether it was an institution that was capable of any sort of change, or whether our goal should be simply to disband it. My response was that the Teamsters were like the U.S. Army, and that after the revolution we would have to take those institutions completely apart and rebuild them from scratch. Today I work both for the Salinas Teamster Farmworker Union and for the Teamsters International Union, and I truly believe that they are both, on balance, positive forces in the world, in many ways as a result of the influence of the farmworker movement.

Who knew?