

Jane (Kiely) Yett 1972–1973

Report by Student Intern for Safeway, Claiming UFW Boycott Is Valid and Documenting Teamster Racism, Gets National Press Coverage During the Lettuce and Safeway Boycotts

In 1972 and 1973, during the lettuce and Safeway boycotts, two vice presidents at Safeway hired me to produce an independent report on Safeway's relationship to the UFW and the lettuce labor dispute at the root of the boycott. I was a graduate student intern on Safeway's payroll for a stipend and travel expenses.

My official report concluded that the UFW was justified in its boycott of Safeway. "Teamster lettuce" was clearly the product of a sweetheart contract, in defiance of the clearly stated preferences of a large majority of lettuce workers, who (denied the right to vote) had, in 1970, staged the largest agricultural strike in U.S. history in favor of UFWOC (UFW) representation. Safeway, by refusing the union's legitimate demand that the grocery chain not carry Teamster lettuce, made itself a fair target for a secondary boycott.

The *L.A. Times* made a major story of my report, (which was legally public, being a part of my studies) and AP wire services and CBS news gave the story nationwide coverage. The report was a hot topic of conversation, not just because a Safeway study had concluded that the boycott against Safeway was justified, but because the report quoted from my interview with a top Teamster official, Einar Mohn, who made clear his racism and disdain for the workers.

Excerpts from a 1973 Interview with Einar Mohn, Head of the 13 Western States for the Teamsters:

Question: What role do you see the farmworkers playing in the Teamsters Union, which represents them?

Mohn: We have to have them in the union for a while. It will be a couple of years before we can start having membership meetings, before we can use the farmworkers' ideas in the union ... I'm not sure how effective a union can be when it is composed of Mexican-Americans and Mexican nationals with temporary visas.

Maybe as agriculture becomes more sophisticated, more mechanized, with fewer transients, fewer green carders, and as jobs become more attractive to whites, then we can build a union that can have structure and that can negotiate from strength and have membership participation.

Question: What will happen to the workers displaced by mechanization? Is there any protection in the contracts for them?

Mohn: No, that isn't a problem to solve in this way. Shortage of jobs is the problem. If there weren't such a shortage of jobs, Mexican-Americans could get jobs. I don't know what will happen to the Mexican-Americans. After all, you can't expect whites to step aside and let Mexican-Americans and Negroes have the [machine] jobs they have had for years.

The Mohn quotes came at an opportune moment, as the UFW had a \$2 million lawsuit against the Teamsters, charging them with racism. Mohn's quotes were a gold mine for Jerry Cohen, Ginny Hirsch, and the rest of the UFW legal team. Though Mohn's words enraged farmworkers, many said they felt validated to see in the press what they knew from their experience.

The UFW printed copies of my Safeway report (about 30 pages) by the stack, to orient incoming UFW volunteers on the lettuce dispute and its background history. My name at the time was Jane Yett Kiely, and the report was often referred to as the "Kiely study."

My Safeway-sponsored research became a central part of my Ph.D. dissertation. The full text is available through dissertation-ordering services as "Farm Labor Struggles in California, 1970-1973, in Light of Reinhold Niebuhr's Concepts of Power and Justice" by Jane Marie Yett, Ph.D. dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, May 1, 1980 (about 200 pages).

The study was an exercise in collaboration. Fred Eyster (our departed, beloved farmworker ministry friend), Troy Duster, and Paul Taylor (professor emeritus at UC Berkeley, farmworker historian, Dorothea Lange's husband) helped on the dissertation. Fred Ross, Jr. and Don Watson were absolutely invaluable guides during the research, and Hub Segur, by example, as a researcher. When I visited the Salinas hiring hall, director Jerry Kay put me in front of a large group of workers, telling them I was from Safeway and challenging me to answer their questions! Troy Duster, LeRoy Chatfield, Chris Hartmire and innumerable others helped along the way.

In La Paz I interviewed Cesar, and enjoyed meeting Susan Drake and having long conversations with Cesar, Marshall Ganz, and Jerry Cohen. Driving and flying all over the state, I interviewed farmworkers, growers, grocers, goons, officials and non-officials from all sides of the dispute and levels of authority, from the president of Safeway, to produce workers, from Einar Mohn to farmworkers under Teamster contract, from industry lobbyists to hungry families.

I presented the final report to Safeway orally and in writing. At the oral presentation, the Safeway VPs who hired me were viscerally angry with my conclusions, rising from their seats, coming toward me and literally leaning over me, shaking with fury, as I continued to read them my conclusions. And the corporation (surprise!) didn't follow my recommendation to quit carrying Teamster lettuce. (Safeway did, not long after that, publish full-page ads advocating farmworkers' right to vote for union representation.)

I've since had the pleasure of honoring Safeway boycotts, picketing Safeway, walking 110 miles on the 1975 Gallo march (fun!), helping to stage benefit concerts, joining reunions of old-time UFWers, and generally supporting the union and other organizing efforts of disenfranchised people.

At the gala 20th anniversary of the UFW, Cesar shook my hand and referred to the Safeway study: "We really got them that time, didn't we?" Yep, but it was a straightforward study. Safeway earned the boycott, along with millions of dollars in losses, fair and square.

I'm pleased the research, especially the revealing quotes from Mohn, proved useful to the union. What a fluke, to be hired to freely investigate a labor struggle for a corporation. I don't know what those VPs were thinking, except perhaps seeking a youth voice for Safeway's position. This was an extraordinary opportunity "to speak truth to power," though I never expected the powerful to yield, on this issue, to humanitarian logic. Instead, I had the gift of seeing my work, briefly, being used as an organizing tool for people in a long-term struggle for justice.

But I think it's essential to remember that most certainly it is the workers and their families facing the daily toil and trouble of the fields who have earned every victory, even if supporters help. I applaud farmworkers' and their families' service as producers of our sustenance and creators of a more humane vision for our social structure. *Que viva!*