

Robert Datz 1975–1976

“*Si Se Puede*” and Getting It Done

Rinsing cooking pots in a shower stall in the basement of the “hospital” dormitory at La Paz would provoke one of those moments of doubt amid the struggle, a question something like “What the hell am I doing here?” Then again, a permanent state of siege never left much time for discussion about that.

For reasons I don’t qualify to explore, paranoia had penetrated the movement’s headquarters at La Paz by the mid-1970s, so to “Question Authority,” as the bumper sticker says, would bring silence laced with a hint of frost. There were indirect mutterings about “agendas,” and the word *chisme* was invoked selectively to describe not just gossip but *that* sort of gossip.

Yet life working in—or more appropriately for me, “from”—La Paz could leave you wondering a lot of the time about just what value your little piece of the struggle had in the long run. Certainly, there was no shortage of enemies to breed the state of siege. It was at the peak of the Teamsters’ interference in the farmworker movement, and we were up against a nominal union behemoth and the ever-resistant growers (to be needlessly diplomatic).

Those of use who worked with words and considered ourselves “journalists” were born to question. And in the atmosphere already described, on top of the fact that Cesar had already purged and folded *El Malcriado* a number of times, it could leave you especially curious (diplomacy again) about the value of your presence. The cliché hadn’t been invented yet, but it was clear that “it wasn’t about me,” and that was fine. From my arrival with the illusion of helping to revive *El Malcriado*, I would work instead on a succession of projects that showed how information nourished Cesar as much as it convulsed him.

He couldn’t get enough of the incoming kind. He wanted to read news clippings every day not only about the union but also about politics on all levels. He wanted to engage people with all kinds of expertise who came from outside to pay their respects and offer their counsel. He wouldn’t necessarily follow their insights, but he seemed to enjoy milking them. But, man, was he skittish about the information that went out.

Not only did he want hands on the newspaper process and content, but he was obsessive about appearing to project a left-wing “agenda” that looked beyond the multiple struggles against growers and Teamsters at the time. In fact, the press was like the rhetoric of the political left at La Paz, because both were utilized in situations where they could work to the perceived advantage of the union and shunned the rest of the time.

Life has confirmed the impression that everything is more relaxed in field offices, no matter what organization you work for. So in retrospect, it isn’t really surprising that Cesar

provided more freedom and even positive reinforcement for information that was supplied outside the La Paz gate. During a period doing press releases out of Delano's Forty Acres amid the first elections held following the passage of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act, I had complete freedom to interact with all kinds of mass media outlets virtually without supervision from the central office. Of course, it was Richard running that show and, along with Ben Maddock in the field office—well, that's just a whole different texture. The alternative press was alive and well, with Richard or Ben providing a bare rundown of the day's results and incidents of intimidation. It was off to AP to get it spread to supporters across the country.

It was both surprising and refreshing to be asked in to see Cesar about a different sort of project to occupy me between campaigns. I was pulled off an assignment providing staff support to lettuce negotiations in Bakersfield for more direct involvement in a less visible challenge.

All I remember is that the Teamsters and growers were getting some propaganda leverage out of problems with UFW hiring halls. I had considered it some kind of—pardon the phrase—sour grapes. It turns out there was some potency to it, and Cesar knew it. He just wanted to know what kinds of problems we had and what the field office directors thought we could do to fix them. With 70 or 80 new bargaining units in tow and more elections running all the time, they just didn't have time to sit and talk about it. So my job was to hit the field offices from Calexico to Watsonville, interview the directors, and write it up for Cesar.

I never knew whether it led to any reforms, but I do know that Cesar welcomed the report as much as the field office directors seemed to welcome a solution-oriented approach to nagging problems.

La Paz was no place for a generalist or a skeptic, two attributes that were more welcomed among journalists working on the outside. And thus it was that journalism and Cesar often didn't mix well. But that doesn't mean La Paz wasn't a place where solid information had its value and its use. Only that, with more thought given, union information could have been disseminated a lot more effectively both within and beyond our membership.

Of course there was hostile Valley press to contend with, but that paled next to the Teamster and grower interests that were giving humanity a bad name, from Sacramento on down. And the humanity that came to volunteer, myself included, was a well-intentioned, swarming mass—not always as long on qualifications as on *animo*.

Though overmatched at times, we applied ourselves with whatever attributes we brought along, whether it was college training, a farmworker background, or a really great smile. They were all veneer for a core desire to get it done with and for the sake of farmworkers, Cesar, and the kind of justice we knew could be achieved in our time. *Si se puede!* There

were all kinds of trips that brought people there individually, but as a collective the union was like an orchestra, even if it sometimes played in questionable tune.

I expect many others took some momentum from the UFW experience deep into their lives. For me, it's the "get it done" side of things, a facet of work that even loyalists in corporate America often can't comprehend. Getting done the task at hand is always more rewarding if you have some values and bring them into the equation. There was no doubt that despite certain differences, values hung high above the squabbles and hardships. We just didn't talk about values enough, but that's what we were "doing here"—me for a while and others for quite a bit longer. I left La Paz voluntarily near the end of 1976, after a year and a half, when a number of good people, really committed people, were turned out. By that point, communication had moved farther onto the back channels. That was so much more serious an issue at the time than the way we cleaned our pots.