

## Kevin O'Connor 1975–1977

I once picketed the wrong liquor store.

It actually was before I was on staff. I was a student at St. Patrick's College Seminary, where a number of us volunteered with the union. Jim Hirsch was our organizer out of the San Jose boycott house. We had been doing fairly regular picket duty during the Gallo wine boycott.

Jim called one day to say he had gotten into a tiff with a liquor storeowner and could I help by picketing the place. Sure, I said. The store was at the intersection of two major roads in Mountain View, California. I told him we'd do it that night.

One of my seminary cohorts and I found the intersection all right, but we didn't immediately see the liquor store. Finally, in a strip mall in one corner of the intersection we found a large liquor store. We parked and walked inside to delegate the owner. It was only fair to talk with him before we started picketing his store.

Well, when we walked in the door, we were confronted by the largest mountain of Gallo wines we had ever seen. It was a giant display directly inside the door. We were outraged. We waited to talk to the owner. He was busy with one customer after another. We waited like what seemed like forever. Finally, my partner and I said the hell with it—let's just go start picketing. So we did.

We grabbed our UFW flags and leaflets and set up shop in front of the store and started talking to customers. After we were there for about three minutes, the owner came flying out of the door screaming and yelling at us.

“Get away from my store! You're a buncha goddamned communists. Get the hell outta here!”

“Well, sir, if you just take down that Gallo display and stop selling Gallo wines, we'll gladly leave.”

“I'll do no such thing. This is a free country and I'll sell any goddamned thing I want. Who are you to tell me what to do?”

“We're asking you to do the right thing. And if you won't, then we are free to tell people about your decision and ask them to shop elsewhere.”

“Well, we'll just see about that, you assholes. I'm gonna get the police to throw your asses in jail.” And he stomped back into the store.

At least now we were sure that we were in the right place. What a jerk! We got back to our picketing with renewed fervor. In the next hour we turned away several people. Many others assured us that they wouldn't buy Gallo wine or any other wine made in Modesto. A few others told us to "Get a job." or get something else. All in all, a thoroughly normal picket line. We were waiting for the police, but they never showed up.

Just when we were quite settled into normalcy, the owner came out. He calmly walked up to me and asked, "So, what's this all about anyway?" I told him it was about the workers at Gallo and their union. I handed him a leaflet. He asked some more questions. I gave him some answers. We went back and forth in an animated but amiable manner for probably 15 or 20 minutes. I said he really should get rid of the Gallo. He said he'd think about it. We thanked each other for the conversation. He went back in to work. We picketed for another hour or so.

The next morning I called Jim Hirsch to tell him how the picket line had gone. "Yeah, Jim, we were there about three minutes, and the owner went nuts! He came out screamin' and yellin' and swearin' at us. He said he was going to have us arrested."

"That's him," said Jim. "He always goes completely crazy."

"But then about an hour later, he calmed down and came out and talked for about 20 minutes. He asked a lot of questions about the boycott. I think, by the end, he was really thinking about getting rid of the Gallo."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I told him that giant display of Gallo was the wrong thing for him to be ... "

"What giant display of Gallo?"

"The giant display of Gallo right inside his front door. You run into that humongous mountain of Gallo as soon as you walk in."

"Where the hell were you anyway?"

"At the corner of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. Like you said."

"The little place on the Southeast corner? It just a hole in the wall."

"No, we were on the Northwest corner. A big place in the strip mall."

Some time later Jim recounted to us how he was quite the star of the boycott morning staff meeting when he told the story of how his crack picketing squad had declared war on the wrong liquor store.

Of course, most UFW campaigns were a tad more efficient. One small campaign that I had an up-close view of was when the ALRB ran out of funding in early 1976. Floyd Mori was the assemblyman from Hayward (at the time, my boycott turf). He proposed a “compromise” ALRA, which would fund the board in exchange for some changes in the law. For example, Mori’s “compromise” ALRA would exclude nurseries, of which there were many in Mori’s district, some of which contributed to his campaigns. We did a series of leaflets exposing Mori’s duplicity. We produced a new leaflet each week for three weeks in a row. I had found the apartment building where Assemblyman Mori’s aide lived. Each week we would leaflet his aide’s apartment building and one block around it, a little bit in downtown Hayward, during lunchtime at Chabot College – where Mori used to teach – and the rest of the leaflets I would dump in the Hayward BART station.

When Dolores Huerta led a delegation to meet with Mori in Sacramento, I was told an outraged Mori had a copy of each of the leaflets on his desk. Mori’s bill died shortly thereafter. That was a good early lesson for me in power, or, at least, the perception of power.

Other fun memories for me: facing down my first cops in Fairfax (Marin County) over the temporary restraining order regarding our picketing of Lucky Supermarkets in the summer of 1975. Totally harmonious nonverbal communication with Jerry Garcia about his not crossing our picket line in Mill Valley (also Marin). Being part of the crew who blitzed UC Santa Cruz for a week; our crunch: “The farmworkers need you now. Drop out of school today! No, today! If you finish the semester, it will be too late! Are you willing to do what it takes to help the union win? Then we need you to drop out and come to work for the union today.” Oh, Mama, can this really be the end: to be stuck in Portland, Oregon, on the Brown campaign again! In a version of harmony. The Oakland boycott house with Paul (Field Marshal) Milne, Mike (Dr. Huevos) Egan, Mark (Turtleman) Henry, John (Juh Buh) Brown, Richard (the Turbo-Charged Tongue) Young— “All wag the tongue!”—Ann (Ms. Bo) Arbogast, Paul (Commander) Belz, and Wes, our cook and quite mad musician. And lots more fun memories.

Like when I ran into Bill Granfield on the street in North Beach, San Francisco. Happy UFW reunion! Bill had just started running picket lines for a union. I, of course, said, “I can do that!” Two days later I was chasing delivery trucks at 5 a.m. on Pier 39. That was 25 years ago and I still work for HERE Local 2 in San Francisco.

Which, of course, never would have happened if Jim Hirsch hadn’t sent me to picket the wrong liquor store.