

Steve Jones 1976–1977, 1979–1980

The UFW asked for my help at a time when it was easy to be disillusioned—Nixon had been president, the war had wound down, but so much in the world seemed impossible to believe in. Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and many of the folks who ran the boycott and were volunteers were an antidote to this hopelessness.

My brother, Peter, brought me in. He had been at McGill University and learned of the union's need for volunteers. I held off for a year, but I would watch him being totally absorbed, committing himself so fully, and having a good time on the picket lines we walked together that he finally persuaded me to join. Gil Padilla was leading the boycott then in D.C., and Stephanie Caiola (now Bowers) ran the office. It was a great group. I'll never forget Lalo, a striker from Delano, walking the picket line in Silver Spring, Maryland. He was playing a fantastic D9 chord on his guitar, and his wife and six children were all walking together—lined up tallest to shortest, I think. All of this was just so outside of my experience, I had to get more involved. There was nothing more exciting happening in the D.C. area than to help out the boycotters. And I found that if you play it 1000 times, you really get the hang of the chords to *De Colores*.

So I dropped out of music school at the University of Maryland—four hours a day of scales in cubicle practice rooms suddenly lost their relevance.

In the summer of 1976, I leafleted and picketed and helped raise funds for the boycott. Here in Washington, we leafleted the outdoor performances of *Grapes of Wrath* at the American Folklife Festival on the mall. I saw the movie again two nights ago, and it struck me how powerful the farmworker movement is in the American psyche—Chavez, Huerta, and all of us who helped gave hope to poor people and confronted the growers and powers that be in a profound way.

A month after watching *Grapes of Wrath*, 20 boycotters and I caravanned to California in five cars leaving from Baltimore, D.C., and Philadelphia. The second night we arrived in Kansas City. A fellow with the last name of Duncan had been running the boycott, and he told mesmerizing stories about fasting and how publicity helped win the boycott there. We continued on in our beat-up Plymouth Valiants and other jalopies disintegrating as we moved west. We must have had four flat tires in one 400-mile stretch one day. The third or fourth night we were in Arizona, camping under the stars. We were tracing the route of the Okies in the 1930s.

Each campaign I was involved in—Prop 13, the Hemet Wholesale boycott, Red Coach lettuce—opened up new worlds of understanding about the way the real world works: political power is people power. They had the money, but we had the people, we told ourselves.

It's the people who made the boycott so much fun, and so powerful to be a part of it.

I'll never forget one moment. I had never spoken in front of a group in my life for more than 60 seconds. In the spring of 1977, I was 22 and trained by Fred Ross and Rob Everts and others to give house meetings. The first house meeting I was to give was being organized by some hardcore activists who had been doing labor organizing since the 1930s. I was never more nervous in my life and was convinced that these folks had heard it all before. I walked in the door, and Juan Chacon was very gracious. He introduced me to an old-timer who had organized the meat packers union in the 1930s—and whose hands were gnarled and clenched with arthritis from a life of working in meatpacking freezers. He shook my hand. He was on a fixed income. I gave my house meeting, and with each step of my talk I heard gasps of surprise at the “way it was”—how growers had brought in large numbers of workers to be able to divide and conquer. There were shouts of support when I got to the “good parts” where the union was starting to win. At the end of the talk—I looked around—some of these folks had been at it for 40 years and I hesitated to ask for their help, but it was my job. Fred Ross would have killed me if I came back empty-handed. I asked for their help. And darn if each one of the 10 people in the room volunteered their time and put money in the hat we passed around. I was astounded—and humbled.

We learned glorious music. *Brown Eyed Children of the Sun* by Daniel Valdez; new verses to *Which Side Are You On*, written by Dianna Lyons.

“We’ve got to build a union
So all the world can see
That if they want to step on you
They’ll have to deal with me.
Which side are you on?
Do you want to build a union?
Which side are you on?”

Verses that would have made Florence Reese proud.

There were strong, articulate women that taught me so much about changing the way we use language. “Hold the Fort for we are coming, union men be strong ... “ became “ ... union folk be strong...”

Not everybody got this exposure to using inclusive language, I learned. I met and worked with Pete Seeger a few years later. We were singing at a rally to support victims of Brown Lung in Washington D.C., and we sat around sharing a picnic at one point. Pete’s wife, Toshi, was there as well. I shared how we sang Union Maids in the UFW. Woody Guthrie’s original went: “She couldn’t be fooled by the company stools, she’d always organize the guys...” I said we would drop off “the guys” because that implied that only men were on the job. Pete responded, “Yeah, but I just love the alliteration...” Toshi leaned over to Pete and said, “He’s right, you know...”

I had read Cesar's words for years before actually meeting him. I had stayed up way into the night memorizing phrases that still guide me 30 years later. Although they say it's not healthy to elevate leaders in the movement to too high of a level—the “cult of personality,” it's called—I certainly dreamed of a day when I would actually meet him. I saw him several times at rallies, and then one day at a meeting in La Paz, I was leading music with a guitar during a lull in the meeting. He came up to me and said, “Do you know *Hold the Fort*?” He shared with me that it was his favorite of the old union songs because it was the official song of the British dockworkers, and he had a special place in his heart for them; they had refused to unload scab grapes, and as a result, people of the British Isles boycotted grapes 100 percent.

This was before I'd learned the song. I had to sheepishly respond, “No,” I didn't know *Hold the Fort*. It was six months before I had an occasion to see Cesar again and you can bet in those six months *Hold the Fort* had been added to my repertoire!

We recently had a small reunion of some of the boycotters in L.A. We met at the house of Larry Frank and his gracious wife, Katherine, and he brought together a group including Steve Rivers, Gretchen Laue, John Brown, Peter Jones (my brother), Lester Silverman, and Clara Solis. It was great to meet the partners of these boycotters and see young kids romping around together—new Chavistas are being born every day—and to recall the fun and hard work we put in 27 years ago.

!Que Viva la Causa!