

Stephen Matchett 1978–1981

The union was a school where you learned by doing. A lot of what I know about politics, organizing, solidarity, human relations, auto mechanics—you name it—I picked up working for the farmworkers. Never mind that the organization had cult-like aspects and a bad foreign policy, that there was no pay, and that the people we served thought we were crazy. We were changing the world, and you didn't get that opportunity every day.

Of course, sometimes your enthusiasm could carry you places you hadn't intended to go, but there was learning there too.

Which is how I came to lead my first sit-in. I was 21 in the spring of 1979 when the big vegetable industry strike came to Salinas from its winter starting place in the Imperial Valley. I had been directing the union service center in Watsonville, a placid backwater of low-key vegetable ranches and apple orchards on Monterey Bay (my commute was along the scenic coast highway), and I was called away from there to Salinas to work as a paralegal on the strike.

Talks had broken off, and the union had lodged a bad-faith-bargaining charge against the struck companies with the state Agricultural Labor Relations Board. When an employer illegally declares an impasse in negotiations, as these growers had done, any unilateral change in wages or working conditions that should have been a subject of bargaining constitutes an unfair labor practice, or ULP for short, for which the employer can be held legally liable. You didn't have to be a lawyer or even a college graduate, which I wasn't, to prepare and file such charges. So I was put to work taking affidavits from strikers, documenting all the changes they observed in their companies' operations from across the picket line, and we peppered the struck employers with ULP charges that in turn bolstered our charge of industry bad faith at the bargaining table.

But laws are effective only if enforced. And, as Saul Alinsky taught Fred Ross, who taught Cesar and many after him, a government bureaucracy won't necessarily do what it is supposed to do just because it has been asked. There needs to be some kind of organized pressure from below. And this wasn't just any government bureaucracy we were talking about. The ALRB was set up to protect farmworkers' right to organize and have a union, and union farmworkers felt with some justification that it was *their* agency. So when the board was responding too slowly to the barrage of charges we'd laid in front of it, the time came for a protest by striking farmworkers seeking vindication of their rights. And guess who got to organize this event and accompany the demonstrators to the local office?

There we stood in the lobby on the appointed afternoon, demanding a meeting with the ALRB's regional director. We were so many and so boisterous, we overflowed the counter and found ourselves in the nonpublic areas of the office. When 5 p.m. rolled around and we still had no commitment to stepped-up enforcement or investigation of our charges (perhaps because the regional director wasn't there), we announced we weren't leaving. I'm still not quite sure how that decision was reached, but I was very excited and proud when I

got on the phone to report to my superiors back at the strike office that we were settling in for the night. Strangely, they did not share my enthusiasm. Instead they wanted to know what the hell I thought I was doing. This action had not been discussed, couldn't possibly succeed, and risked disillusioning everyone taking part. I was supposed to organize a demonstration, not an occupation. There was a lot happening and we couldn't afford the energy and attention it would take to sustain something like this. And so forth.

I did my best to hide my dismay while I got chewed out, since there were a lot of people watching me who assumed I'd soon be relaying to them congratulations on a job well done. What I was told on the phone was: you started this, you figure out how to end it without letting everyone down. But call it a night before anyone stays too much longer.

I don't remember what I said when I got off the call. I do remember that we stayed another hour, and, our point made, declared victory and went home. I feared another tongue-lashing back at the field office, but people only joked about it the next morning and it was on to the next thing. It was another day in the life of the strike.

Postscript: When the strike was settled a year later, the withdrawal of our scores of still-pending ULP charges was part of the agreement, so I like to think they played a part in our victory. I left the union a year after that (another story), and eventually finished college and became a lawyer. But the union was my best school.