

Mila Pefianco Thomas 1984–1987

In 1984, when I began working for the union and living in La Paz, Cesar eagerly recounted that he had visited the Philippines. I could not help but let him know that Filipinos (in the Philippines) did not welcome his visit and held protest marches against it. While Filipino students and activists there admired his leadership of Filipino farmworkers in the U.S., they were shocked that he would align himself with and be hosted by the dictator Marcos.

I asked him why he allowed himself and the farmworker movement to legitimize the Marcos regime. Cesar admitted that he didn't realize that he was being used. In fact he vowed that he would not visit another foreign country and be vulnerable in this way again, although he had been invited to visit several countries since. He had trusted his Filipino lieutenants in Stockton to make the arrangements. Larry Itliong had made the contacts.

Cesar said he deeply regretted his visit. He told the story about his visit to the Dole plantation in the southern island of Mindanao. He was invited by the white American officials to have a meal in the managers' clubhouse. The Filipino farmworkers hesitated in the doorway because they had never been allowed in the club before. Cesar told the Dole officials that he would not come in without the Filipinos.

Then Cesar wanted to know about the Marcos dictatorship. I told him stories of how students were fired upon and killed in the marches and protests; how students and workers disappeared into "safe houses" and were never seen again; about the countless torture victims told of being abducted in the streets and from their homes with the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus; about the thousands of political prisoners who objected to the loss of freedom of the press and other human rights; and about how the Marcos regime attempted to whitewash its indecency by issuing executive proclamations and claim they were lawful to preserve Marcos' place in history. Cesar appeared grateful to hear firsthand accounts from me.

In 1986, when the Filipino people's power toppled the dictatorship and Corazon Aquino was proclaimed the rightful winner of the (previous) presidential elections, Cesar was elated to show me the news in the newspaper. It was early morning and we met on the road to work at La Paz. In fact, he was dancing with joy, saying "Corazon, my heart!" Later Cesar wrote a letter to sponsor a very good organizer friend from the Philippines to work for the UFW (regrettably, the INS denied the visa), and hired another Filipino organizer to work in Delano.

Two footnotes to Cesar's visit to the Philippines: first, I recently learned from another activist and good friend in the Philippines that during Cesar's visit, my friend and others repeatedly attempted to set up meetings between Cesar and urban poor and labor groups there, but were rebuffed by Cesar's aides. Second, in 1984, I was part of a UFW-led social research project in Delano. It found that Filipino farmworkers were largely unaware of

Cesar's visit to the Philippines, but older Filipino farmworkers felt very strongly that the union hiring halls of the 1970s discriminated against them.