

Brien Kinkel 1970-1976

Part I: The Seattle boycott 1970-1976

Seattle had an active office through through the grape and lettuce boycotts. First on the scene were Dale and Jan Van Pelt, who gave presentations around town and organized an intrepid group of picketers who wore out shoe leather for a number of years in front of Seattle supermarkets—Lucky, Albertsons, Thriftway, but most importantly Safeway. Dale taught the picketers, who were a combination of middle-class liberals, University of Washington students, civil rights and labor activists, to be civil, to be aware on the picket line, and teaching by example if not in word, to be fearless.

Once in front of a Lucky store a store manager got into his car, gunned the engine, and raced toward the exit, in the path of the picket line. Dale was in the entrance way at that moment and held his ground. At the last minute the store manager slammed on his brakes, then went around Dale. Dale didn't budge until the car was well on its way. We shared his sense of triumph and his contempt for the cowardice the store manager had shown. I cannot say that under the same circumstances we would have held our position in the path of the car.

Another time, a tough looking chap emerged from a store dangling a bunch of grapes in front of Dale, who obligingly reached out and squeezed the bunch until his hand shook. That was not in the picket line playbook, but it had its desired effect.

Mary and Fred Provo were key supporters of the boycott. When the grape growers signed the first contracts, a victory party was held at the Provo home. Boxes of grapes with the UFW logo stamped on them held the first grapes we'd tasted in years. Mary Provo was another picketer almost run over in a supermarket parking lot. My mother, Lynn Martin, was spat upon by a shopper at a suburban Safeway. It's hard to know how the motivation to help farm workers sustained these folks through their years of service to the movement, but somehow it did.

After the first grape boycott the UFW sent several folks to Seattle, including Fred Ross, Jr., Nancy and Sarah Welch, Isidoro and Rosa Gonzales, Cayetano Nani, and Lydia Torres. [Nancy's essay can also be read on this web site.] It was 1970 and the lettuce boycott was getting underway. There was a great deal of community organizing done by this crew. The boycott office enlisted the aid of volunteer troubadours Mara Schumann and Lou Truskoff, who performed often at UFW-sponsored meetings and functions. Lou's wife Joan Truskoff put together a terrific fundraising cookbook of recipes supplied by the many volunteers who walked the picket lines. Among the steadfast volunteers were Doris and Lenus Wessman, two former members of the IWW. As senior citizens who had devoted lifetimes to workers' rights, they were rightly held in high esteem by the rest of us.

The lettuce boycott and the renewed grape boycott went on for a few years, and in about 1975 Cesar Chavez took a national tour of cities with active boycotts. An evening picket line

in front of the U-District Safeway drew perhaps 500 picketers. Chavez held a “Boycott Grapes” sign hand-drawn by a school girl.

At one point Cesar Chavez gave an address at Seattle University, a Jesuit school whose “introduction” by a school official was decidedly frosty. Chris Hartmire of the National Farm Worker Ministry made an annual trip to Seattle, and the “Hartmire Supper” was one of the big fundraisers the Seattle office held. Lynn Martin published a monthly “Eaglegram” that was sent to supporters throughout the Seattle area with news and calendars of upcoming events.

The Seattle crew of Fred Ross, Jr., et al, eventually were reassigned and were replaced by Rachel Diem, Mary Shaw, Bill Ferguson, Jim Davis, and me. The boycott house moved from its former location in, if memory serves, Ravenna, to South King Street in the International District, a neighborhood now largely Latino but in those days mostly a mix of Asians and African-Americans. The neighborhood also hosted the nearby Jesuit Volunteer Corps house, and the JVC crew members were regulars at UFW events. The boycott work went on, and new and more innovative fundraising techniques were tried, including a big concession stand at the University District’s annual street fair. An annual rummage sale became the biggest Seattle fundraiser for the UFW. Organized by Marco and Francis Romero, among others, this sale netted many thousands of dollars for La Causa each year.

Larry Wagel was a tireless volunteer with a great idea. He made great big signs of removable black wood letters on a vivid bright green background, and volunteers would stand along a busy arterial with the signs lined up, Burma-Shave style, with such messages as:

“I SEZ TO SAINT PETER”
“LET ME THRU THE GATES!”
“HECK NO, SAINT PETER TELLS ME.”
“YOU’VE BEEN EATING GRAPES!”

The last crew of the Seattle boycott staff got called to California for the ultimately unsuccessful Proposition 14 campaign. Upon their return they were asked to submit resignations and reapply for their positions. Exhausted by the Prop 14 campaign, the Seattle boycott office made a collective decision to disband.

Part II El Malcriado 1973-1974

I had avidly read issues of El Malcriado that came to Seattle, and decided, as a freshly-minted high school graduate in 1973, that trying to get a job working for the paper was infinitely preferable to heading to college. I’d received deferred admission to a college, so I drove from Austin, TX, where I’d been visiting my grandparents, to the La Paz headquarters in Keene, CA. I’d written several times to Venustiano Olguin, then the editor of the paper, but hadn’t received an answer, so with the pure optimism of youth I drove up to the front gate of La Paz in July of 1973. I was not admitted.

I checked into a Bakersfield motel and called and called, just asking for an appointment, but Venustiano apologetically explained that they were in “the crunch,” and he hadn’t had the

time to get back to me.. Finally I received a return call that Cesar Chavez wanted to “see me right away,” so I drove back to La Paz, met Cesar, met Venustiano, and was hired. It was about 6pm. I said I had to return to Bakersfield to check out of the hotel. Venustiano admonished, “Well, hurry up, man, we’re in the crunch!” I got back to La Paz about 8pm. My first working day at La Paz lasted until about 2:30 am that night.

I was to discover that “the crunch” was the pre-publication time when all the work had to be done, leading up to the triumphal placing of the laid-out paper in a box and driven to the printer, whom I knew only as “Max.”

The paper used some awfully antiquated equipment. Headlines were made in a darkroom on white strips of film, and cranking one letter at a time. The chemicals were awful, and one mistake meant that the headline had to be redone from scratch. There were two editions to publish, the English and the Spanish. Typesetting was painstaking. Even after printing all the papers had to be delivered back to La Paz to be counted, bundled by some wire-wielding contraption, then labeled and sent off. Each of us had specific tasks, yet each of us wore many hats as well. “The crunch” typically lasted four to five days, each day consisting of 20 or so hours of work. Max the publisher contributed to the chaos by informing Venustiano at the last minute that the papers publishing time had been bumped, or that he had to cut the size of the printed page by an inch, so we would have to redo the entire layout. We were all glad when we fired Max as our printer.

We had a fine staff. Venustiano was the editor, Pedro Baird and Bob Barber wrote most of the stories. Maria Rifo kept the books, Hope Lopez did a lot of the administrative work and a lot of typesetting, Nancy Destafanis was charged with increasing circulation, and with the reporting of Barber and Baird the paper was definitely a good read. Glen Percy supplied some great photography when not working on his documentary *Fighting for Our Lives*, Carlos Almaraz of the Los Angeles artist collective Los Four often came to La Paz and created graphics. Carlos also painted a mural of farm workers in the entranceway of the Administration Building. Sam Kushner, author of *Long Road to Delano*, occasionally came to the El Malcriado building to lend his journalistic guidance.

With every issue Jose Varela packed a van with El Malcriados and distributed them to farmworkers far and wide, ably assisted by a network of supporters, including Igeino Rangel and Winnie Arballo. Jose was a particularly funny guy, and often wore a too-small brown beret with a UFW eagle patch sewn on it. He was also the only person I ever saw wear a sombrero at La Paz.

Relations between El Malcriado and “the board” were contentious. On those rare occasions when we had an audience with Cesar, we would make the case that we were doing the best we could with the antiquated equipment we had. Cesar would reply that he was reluctant to invest in new equipment until we could demonstrate that we could put out a better product. Somehow the board seemed to be the final arbiter of just how good El Malcriado was or wasn’t. If I recall correctly, Gil Padilla and Eliseo Medina were generally sympathetic to us, Marshall Ganz not at all, But with one urgent priority after another, there was ultimately no budget available for an El Malcriado upgrade.

Life at La Paz was busy and pleasant, if a bit spartan. The staff took advantage of a WATS line to make evening long-distance calls, the ability to do so considered a real luxury at that time. There were lines for the WATS, and lines for the washers and dryers. On his birthday Jerry Cohen said at a staff meeting, "Last night I dreamed I could have anything I wanted and what I wanted was a new switchboard." I became friends with many nice people, especially Noni Lomax and her daughter Justine, whose kindness and friendship kept me happy and well fed. Sue and Glen Percy took me in on Thanksgiving Day, 1973. Helen Chavez always had kind words to say and fixed tomas and other delicacies for the few staff who spent Christmas Day at La Paz. It was on that Christmas Day I had the experience of listening to Cesar talk about the UFW's beginnings, and he proudly showed us an NFWA button. I have an NFWA button that Nick Jones sent me many years ago, and I cherish it.

I also enjoyed the friendship of Mandy and Jerry Cohen, who asked me to dog-sit their black lab Sabra while they were vacationing (a rarity for Jerry). As it would happen, one evening Sabra cleverly pushed his way out the door as I tried to push my way in, whereupon ensued a marathon of running, yelling, coaxing, of perhaps two hours or more, all the while I tried not to imagine Jerry's kids' reaction if Sabra were to disappear, and how Jerry's legendary ferocity would be unleashed upon me if I didn't get this darned dog back in the house. Luckily Sabra eventually cooperated and my life was spared.

Residents of "the hospital," of which I was one, paid a modest rent to the National Farmworker Service Center. There came a time when our plumbing ceased to function for a week or two. We organized a rent strike. At the next staff meeting the NFSC head Anna Puharich announced that no effort would be made to fix the plumbing until the rent was paid, whereupon Jerry Cohen said to Anna, "You sound just like the growers." Life at La Paz did have its amusing moments.

I left La Paz in August, 1974, to begin college. I owe much to my work with the UFW, its wonderful members and supporters, particularly the magnificent farmworkers who made La Causa possible.