

Dan La Botz

I was a supporter and casual volunteer for the United Farm Workers when I lived in California in the 1960s and 1970s. While I was never on the paid staff of the UFW, and only volunteered intermittently in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I considered myself a strong supporter of the union. My involvement with farmworkers, with the UFW, and with Mexican-American and Mexican workers had a lasting impact on my life, and that involvement with Latinos and farmworkers continues to this day, some 40 years later.

From the age of 11 on, I grew up in the San Diego South Bay: in Harborside, Chula Vista, and Imperial Beach, California, always surrounded by tomato ranches. My classmates at San Ysidro Junior High School and later at Mar Vista High School had been children of both farm owners and farmworkers. I had always marveled at the labor that went into protecting the tomato plants in our area, the careful tending of the plants, the plastic sheets used to cover them, the smudge pots used to fend off the frost. The Mexican workers in the fields and the packing sheds seemed a model of industry, and at the same time, when I met them on the streets or the stores of my hometown, generally a model of goodwill as well. My mother commented on how hard they worked—and for so little.

Picketing Grocery Stores

After graduating from high school, I attended Southwestern Junior College in Chula Vista, California. I first encountered the United Farm Workers union sometime in 1966, at the age of 21, when my girlfriend (later wife), Barbara Putnam, and I went to our local grocery store in National City and were confronted with UFW pickets. The men and women who were picketing and leafleting the store stopped to talk with us about the workers and their conditions, their union, and their fight for a contract. They asked us not to buy grapes. Our parents were union members: her father worked in a shipyard, my mother in a grocery store as a checker, and we were inclined to support the union. Moreover, we were youth of the 1960s, part of the emerging counterculture and the New Left; we were anti-war and in favor of the Civil Rights movement. We readily agreed not to buy grapes. Then one fellow asked us if we would join in picketing and leafleting, and we agreed to that, too.

Thereafter, we picketed and leafleted with the union pretty regularly, sometimes bringing our friends along with us. We joined union supporters in more militant tactics as well. Watermelons were heaped on scab grapes. We heaped shopping carts with perishable goods, especially ice cream, pushed them to the checkout stand, and then deserted them when we found we didn't have the money to pay. The economic pressure of such nonviolent (though costly) acts forced grocery companies to give up the scab grapes and negotiate with the union.

Egger-Ghio Ranch Strike

We moved out of the state in 1968 and didn't return until 1969. I started studying at the University of California at San Diego, at its beautiful new campus up in La Jolla. At that time, Herbert Marcuse, the world-famous Marxist philosopher, was teaching there and had been joined by his most famous student, Angela Davis. There was a chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and many students had become interested in radical causes. Many of us on campus considered ourselves friends of the United Farm Workers.

Sometime in 1970, probably when I was down in Imperial Beach visiting my mother, I learned of the strike at the Egger-Ghio Ranch in San Ysidro, California. By that time I had joined the International Socialists (I.S.), one of the many leftist groups of the era that supported labor causes. We had a small group at UCSD, some I.S. members and other independent radicals, who felt that we should be more connected to workers' causes. We became involved about that time in aiding a Greyhound bus drivers' strike and in supporting the UFW strike at the Egger-Ghio Ranch.

Over many weeks, several of us went down to San Ysidro to walk picket lines and participate in marches. My mother, Betty Hornke (now Betty Buchanan), who lived (and still lives) in Imperial Beach, sometimes collected some canned goods for the strikers and came along with us. We were enthusiastic backers of the union and also admired the more collective character of the culture of the Mexican and Mexican-American workers.

I remember one event associated with the strike in particular. We went early one Sunday morning to the home of one of the owners, I think it must have been Egger. And the farmworkers and their supporters, perhaps 100 of us, knelt on the lawn, hands clasped in prayer. When the owner came out, he looked at the workers and shouted angrily, "What are you doing here?" Someone from the union answered, "We're praying that you'll see the light and recognize the union."

Our involvement with the UFW also led me and others to become supporters of the new Chicano movement. Some of us also attended Chicano meetings and demonstrations against discrimination. We recognized the Chicano movement as a new Civil Rights Movement and were proud to be in some way a part of it.

At about this time, either at the Egger-Ghio Ranch, or perhaps at some other nearby ranch where there was also a UFW conflict with management, Congressman Lionel Van Deerlin and Cesar Chavez appeared together with INS officials in a field in the San Diego area. As I remember it, a helicopter landed, carrying Van Deerlin, Chavez, and INS officials. Their appearance had to do with a pledge by the INS, under pressure from Chavez and Van Deerlin, to get undocumented workers out of the fields.

Discouraging Scabs on the Border

Those of us from the university who were volunteering with the UFW were shocked by this event. We were aware of the UFW position calling for removing undocumented

workers from the fields, but somehow the appearance of a helicopter—so identified at that time with the Vietnam War—carrying the congressman, the INS officials, and Chavez appalled us. While we all admired Cesar Chavez and the leadership he had provided for the union and for the broader Chicano movement, we strongly disagreed with the union's position on undocumented workers. We thought the union should organize both documented and undocumented workers, and that, if necessary, it should organize on both sides of the border. We were absolutely opposed to working with the INS and the Border Patrol to exclude or expel undocumented immigrants.

Still, though we were critical of Chavez and the UFW for that position, we wanted to see the union win the strike at Egger-Ghio. We decided that we could make a contribution to the Egger-Ghio strike by distributing leaflets in Spanish at the border, urging workers not to scab. We wrote up a leaflet, translated it into Spanish, and on several occasions over the next few weeks went down to the border early in the morning and distributed leaflets to border-crossers heading north. Whether or not our leaflets discouraged many workers from scabbing I don't know, but we had some good conversations with the workers and did our best to direct them away from the struck ranch.

With Teamster Supporters of the UFW in Chicago

Like many radical youth of that era, I decided to get involved in the labor movement. I moved to Chicago in 1971, and after working in various jobs, in 1974 I got a job driving a truck. I became active with truck drivers and dock workers in the Chicago Truck Drivers Union and in the International Brotherhood of Teamsters who wanted to reform the union, to make it more democratic and more responsive to the members.

While working in Chicago, my friend Ken Blum, a former UFW staff researcher who had also moved to the Windy City, told me about a group of Teamsters he had met at a UFW demonstration. He introduced me to Ray and Marcy Lopez, Bob and Mary Grant, and Bill and Mary Sullivan, all Chicago Teamsters who supported the farmworkers. Ray Lopez, a Mexican-American, said he resented the Teamsters using his dues money to try to break a Mexican-American farmworkers' union. I became friends with this group of dissident Teamsters, and together we formed a Chicago group for Teamster reform. We later became some of the Chicago founders of Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), a national reform movement within the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.

While it was not a prominent part of TDU's platform or activities, many TDU activists opposed the Teamster role in the fields in California and supported the UFW. While I was a Teamster activist (from 1974 to 1980), I continued from time to time to participate in UFW activities in Chicago, whether they were local rallies, picket lines, or boycotts. Richard Grossman, a UFW supporter in Chicago, kept me and others informed of UFW activities. I sometimes took my son, Jake, along to these events, and he grew up knowing about the farmworkers and the UFW. I don't think he tasted a grape until he was an adult.

After leaving the Teamsters, I worked as a union organizer or staff person at various times for the House Staff Association of interns and residents at Cook County Hospital, for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), and for the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) at UCLA. I also became one of the founders and the organizer for the Comité Latino, a Latino group on the Northside of Chicago. I think I would never have done such work had it not been for my early experience as a supporter and volunteer for the UFW.

I believe that there were thousands of people like myself, young activists who both supported the UFW and were profoundly influenced by it. The UFW not only organized and improved the lives of farmworkers, it also transformed the lives of working-class and middle-class youth, imbuing in us ideals of sacrifice and solidarity. At the same time, being youth of the counterculture and the New Left, we maintained our critical outlook.

We supported the union but also evaluated its program and actions. Many of us understood the appeal to Catholicism and Mexican nationalism, but we did not necessarily approve of appeals to religion, race, or nationality which could exclude others. We were definitely critical of the UFW's close association with the Kennedy wing of the Democratic party, which we saw as the party of the war in Vietnam. We viewed Cesar Chavez not as a saint, but as a leader whose policies and actions could be critically evaluated. We believed we could support the union and disagree with Chavez, and we did both.

Today: A FLOC Supporter

When I left community and labor organizing work, I continued to support labor causes. To help support and promote TDU, I wrote *Rank and File Rebellion: Teamsters for a Democratic Union* and in passing told of the Teamsters union's despicable role in the attempt to break the United Farm Workers union in the 1970s. Working with *Labor Notes* in Detroit, I wrote *The Troublemaker's Handbook: How to Organize Where You Work and Win!* The book has a chapter dealing with the organization of immigrant workers. My early experience with the UFW made it possible for me to better understand the role of the UFW and of immigrant workers with or without documents.

For the last 18 years or so, I have lived and worked in Cincinnati, Ohio, most recently as a professor of history and Latin American studies at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. As a local community activist, I have worked with Dick Wiesenhahn, the local organizer of the support committee for the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), the farmworkers' union in Ohio. My wife, Sherry Baron, and I and our sons Traven and Reed participate in local FLOC activities and have hosted FLOC founder Baldemar Velasquez at a fundraiser in our home. The UFW made me a lifelong supporter of farmworkers.

I have recently written a biography of Cesar Chavez to be published in the Living American Biography series of Longman. I believe it is written in the same spirit as my early activism: supportive of the union, but not uncritical. I would urge others to support the

UFW and FLOC and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and other farmworker organizations. More than ever, farmworkers and other workers need allies to support them in their struggle for a better life.