

George Sheridan 1970-1978

Patience and Jujitsu

“Will you sign a letter for the farm workers?”

When the National Labor Relations Board moved to stop the UFW from engaging in secondary boycotts, the Union began a brief, intense campaign targeting Senator Robert Dole, then chair of the Republican National Committee. Our message was that the Republican Party was attacking the farmworkers. And our tactic was a massive onslaught of hand-written letters. Working eighteen hour days, each member of the Boston boycott staff scribbled hundreds of letters each night. Each day we went into the streets and asked passersby to sign the letters, which we then mailed.

After visiting Senator Dole’s office, Dolores Huerta reported that bags of unopened mail were stacked in the hallway. Eventually, the NLRB backed down.

This brief episode typifies the way Cesar dealt with powerful opponents. The bigger they were, the more leverage he was able to create with a sort of political jujitsu. The NLRB was a supposedly independent regulatory agency – not directly accountable to voters, the legislature or the executive. But Senator Dole, as a symbol of the Republican Party, was a target vulnerable not only to public opinion, but also to disruption. Buried in those thousands of UFW letters were letters to Senator Dole from constituents and campaign contributors. So the Senator’s staff had no choice but to open every envelope and scan every letter.

The message we spread on the streets was one of fairness. Since farmworkers received no benefits under the National Labor Relations Act, it was unfair to subject them to the punitive provisions of Taft Hartley.

Through the many years of boycotting grapes and lettuce, patience was one of Cesar’s virtues. It was rooted in part in his confidence that in every campaign against great odds, eventually an opponent would reveal its vulnerability. Years later, as president of the Black Oak Mine Teachers Association, CTA/NEA, I was able to draw on Cesar’s example and my own seven years as a boycott organizer to lead successful settlements of contract impasses against intransigent superintendents and school boards.

Truth

In my experience, part of the moral strength behind the UFW’s boycotts was bound up in our reputation for telling the truth. When the lettuce boycott began in 1970, I was assigned to the Cincinnati boycott, led by the Reverend John Bank, a priest of the diocese of Massillon, Ohio. Also helping with the Cincinnati boycott were Merced Valdez, a strawberry worker from Salinas, and his family. Father Bank created the Cincinnati Citizens for United Farm Workers, an active group of dozens of local residents who published boycott leaflets, wrote letters to the newspaper, and walked the picket lines. Father Bank had a poet’s relationship with statistics. In each new leaflet he wrote, the number of children working in

the fields increased and average annual salaries decreased. I made it my business to revise those leaflets so that every number was based on a reputable source.

Several years later, when I had a number of debates with the head of the Farm Bureau in Connecticut, my credibility was greatly enhanced by my strict adherence to fact, and his was undermined when I could demonstrate exactly how he had tried to twist facts to create false impressions. This was another pattern that repeated itself in my local teachers union's conflicts with our bosses.

Tulare County

My first involvement with the UFW was in 1968-69. I was a member of the USC Teacher Corps Rural-Migrant, living in Orosi and working at Stone Corral School in Tulare County. Many Teacher Corps interns joined a march in support of the UFW – a march that was filmed by a man I was told owned the local water district. Immediately thereafter, Teacher Corps was cancelled in one local district. Later I rented a house in Ivanhoe owned by the mother of my Superintendent. On my car was a “Boycott Grapes” bumper sticker. The Superintendent, Mr. Bill Melton, told me that “Our family made our money in grapes” and ordered me to remove the bumper sticker or move. On the day we were moving, old Mrs. Melton told us we didn't need to go, but by then we had another house.

At that time Stone Corral School had many federal programs, which of course meant federal paperwork. There was also a School Site Council, legally responsible for determining how the money would be spent. One spring Mr. Melton asked me, “Who did I put on that Site Council?” He had a report to file, the Site Council had never met, and he couldn't remember who the members were supposed to be.

In his office was a picture of white men with guns surrounding the body of a man they had just shot, looking like Teddy Roosevelt after a rhino hunt. Disobedient students were sent to the office to be paddled. Nearly all the students were Mexican-American; the handful of Anglo and Asian students were the children of growers. Mr. Melton once told us that when students lined up, the growers' children should be at the front of the line, since they would be the leaders when they grew up.

Delano

I joined the UFW staff in June of 1970, in response to an ad in *El Malcriado* seeking a boycott director. I later learned that the Union's Executive Board had made the decision when Cesar was away. I really knew almost nothing about boycotting, and mostly provided the boycott offices with information for leaflets until Marshall Ganz was appointed to take over the boycott shortly before the Giumarra contract signing.

One morning as I was walking out to the 40 Acres to work, Cesar had his driver stop for me, offered me a ride, and introduced himself. I had a corner office just down the hall from his. When reporters called when Cesar was away, the switchboard would transfer them to me. When I talked to an L.A. Times reporter about progress in contract negotiations, something that had been shared with all the staff, Cesar made it clear that reporters are not always our friends and that it was important not to make public any information that would make

people think the boycott could be over until we had actually won. After a similar mistake (This time I had talked with Sam Kushner of the People's World) he fired me. But I simply kept showing up for work and so I wasn't fired.

At that time Larry Itliong was still Vice President of the UFW. Larry had a strong accent, and he was infuriated one day to call a big city boycott office and be asked repeatedly by the volunteer who answered the phone, "Larry who?" A number of the original Filipino strikers were living in Agbayani Village and I got to know them, as well as Philip Vera Cruz and Pete Velasco. Some of these workers had a history that went back to the Seattle General Strike of 1919. Philip was the first person I knew for whom the ideal of one big union of all the workers of the world was not just a phrase in a history book.

At one time Cesar asked Fred Ross, Sr., to train organizers in doing house meetings. Fred took a group of us out to the old Sunset Labor Camp in Arvin. He had been superintendent of the camp at the time of the Grapes of Wrath. He showed us his old house, the lawn where Woodie Guthrie slept, the platform where the migrants held their dance and the fence they threw the scabs over in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

My first picket line was in Delano, one day in the early summer of 1970. We heard that labor contractors were bringing in a caravan of strikebreakers from Texas, and everyone went out to intercept them. We stopped the cars at the entrance to the field, and strikers and volunteers fanned out to talk to every driver. The driver of my vehicle was explaining to me how he had driven a long way. His family had been without work or food. I was asking myself whether it would be OK for them to work just one day when a veteran *huelgista* joined us and in few words persuaded him to turn around.

Courts and Picket Lines

I walked many picket lines in the next seven years, sometimes with hundreds of companions and sometimes with one. At an A&P store in Hartford, Connecticut, security was provided by an off-duty policeman still in full uniform, badge and gun. Our boycott substantially affected the store, and one day the officer arrested me. I was released without a court appearance and with a public letter of apology from the Chief of Police. But Nick Jones, New England boycott director, thought I should have stayed in jail to put more pressure on A&P.

I had witnessed a similar incident with a somewhat different outcome. When we were boycotting Napa Valley wines, one of the boycott staff had been arrested outside a liquor store after the store owner asked the cop, "What am I paying you for?" I went to the courthouse with my colleague and Andrea O'Malley, at that time the Boston boycott director.

We saw the end of a trial involving a juvenile who was accused of stealing a radio from a car. He had in fact been in jail at the time of the theft, arrested by the same officer for drinking on his own front step. The prosecutor asked him what he thought of the policeman when the cop told him he was being arrested for theft. He replied, "I'd rather not say." The judge instructed him to answer the question, and he replied, "I thought he was a son of a bitch."

In his concluding argument, the prosecutor physically wrapped himself in the American flag, and asked the jury to convict the young man for being disrespectful of the police. The judge informed the jury that the actual charge was being incorrigible, and that therefore they could find him guilty of a bad attitude even if they didn't think he stole the radio. He further went on to say that "guilty beyond a reasonable doubt" does not mean that they are sure he is guilty, but only that they think he might be. The jury found the young man guilty; his lawyer begged that he not be sent to the reformatory.

The judge replied, "I told you before this trial began that if you insisted on going through with the trial he would be found guilty and he would get the maximum sentence" and sentenced him to incarceration.

Our case was next. The judge invited us to a conference in his chambers, and told us that if we insisted on proceeding with a trial, the boycott staffer would be found guilty. He suggested Mike plead guilty and pay a small fine. Andrea replied, "We're poor people, your honor. We can't afford to pay a fine." The judge asked how, if we were so poor, we could afford a lawyer. When Andrea explained that the lawyer was working *pro bono*, the judge was enraged. He hated *pro bono* lawyers. Mike ended up pleading guilty, with no fine.

In the hallway outside the courtroom was a newspaper clipping. An editorial writer for the ***Boston Globe*** had done jury duty in this court. He had noticed that after a jury was selected, almost all defendants pled guilty. His conclusion, however, was that they really were guilty and simply had gone through the motions of seeking a trial as a kind of bargaining leverage. He never suspected that the judge was extorting guilty pleas with the threat of stiffer penalties for those who insisted on a trial.

Maybe the most dramatic picket line incident was in Long Beach, where a drunk with a gun approached the picket line. As picket captain, it was my responsibility to deflect him. The other pickets went on with their boycott work. I talked to him long enough that when he went away I had forgotten about his gun until one of the other pickets reminded me.

Orange County

Around 1976-1977 I was boycott coordinator for Orange County. We were boycotting a nursery chain owned by a billionaire friend of Ronald Reagan that was selling roses from struck farms in McFarland. One Saturday we had a good turnout for the picket line in Newport Beach. A vehicle approached, waited in the street, and as I crossed the driveway it accelerated and hit me from behind. The driver then sat in his vehicle in the driveway. He was approached by one of our pickets, a white-haired retired lawyer, and asked for identification. After a few moments he sped off. Of course by then we had the vehicle description and license plate, which we reported to the police. It was a Mercedes Benz with a 6.0 liter engine. Initially the police told us there was no such car in existence. Later we learned that there were exactly two in the United States. The police called back to say that the owner of the store (President Reagan's friend) had called them to report being attacked by pickets who jumped on his car. They arrested me for an unpaid fix-it ticket. Eventually the billionaire paid a few hundred dollars to settle the personal injury suit brought by a volunteer lawyer on my behalf.

My Family

When I first joined the Union my mother was very impressed. She had read of Cesar Chavez and the title of “Boycott Director” sounded important. But when she found out that the pay was room and board plus five dollars per week, her practical nature rebelled. She sat down with me and my wife Catherine, quizzing us on what we expected to spend each month for toothpaste and underwear. She tried to enlist Catherine in her campaign, saying it was for her own good. Finally Cathy had had enough. She had plenty of doubts about this plan, but she stuck by me and made my mother mind her own business.

In Delano the Union rented a house for us. When we left for the lettuce boycott, we left furniture, clothes, books, etcetera in the house. Other Union staff were staying there, and we thought we’d return in a few months. At some time the Union closed the house. Most of our things disappeared. But years later we found some at the old Schenley labor camp. The one thing Cathy missed most was her grandmother’s rocking chair.

My children grew up at union meetings and on the picket line, sleeping under the table in church basements and handing out flyers before they were old enough for kindergarten. Elizabeth was still small enough to be carried most of the time when she embarrassed me on a Sunday, my one day off. We were in the Stop and Shop store on Park Avenue in Hartford when she spotted someone in the produce section. “Don’t buy grapes!” she belted out. “Those are boycott grapes!” When we adopted Peter in Connecticut, the eligibility worker had trouble with our finances. But in the end, she decided to overlook the irregular numbers. It was Michael who suggested I take time to write these stories for the possible benefit of future organizers. There may be some he hasn’t heard.

Everything we needed was donated. The first several years I worked for the Union, we actually saved part of my five dollars weekly allowance. In Cincinnati I was given several purple shirts and pairs of pants by a young man joining the Franciscans. I wore the purple clothes for years. In Connecticut it was apparently impossible to give away anything of value, so I was sold a car for one dollar.

Cars

Cars were one of the union’s biggest expenses. Some were donated; many were Dodge Darts and Plymouth Valiants purchased from utility company fleets. Many of the boycott volunteers were young. Some had never owned a car of their own, and many did not know how to care for cars. Cesar was constantly frustrated by the expense of repairs.

When Marcos Munoz became director of the Boston boycott, he decided to teach all the UFW staff how to care for our cars, starting with changing the oil. One volunteer followed the procedures he had been taught, but didn’t quite know the purpose of. At the end of the process, he refilled the car with the same oil he had drained out.

In 1977, Cesar asked every boycott office to put one person in charge of caring for cars. Then he went to Los Angeles to do an inspection. When he checked the oil in some cars, he could see that they had been topped up the night before. The fresh oil was not mixed with

the old dirty oil. Because I had put oil in the cars, he invited me to move to La Paz to be in charge of the Union's transportation department.

Cesar often suspected sabotage. Once the oil drain plug dropped out of my car on the freeway. He was sure someone had loosened it intentionally. When I wouldn't fire a staffer who had damaged a car, Cesar fired me. I confronted him in a session of The Game, and the next day I gave him a letter of recommendation to sign for me.