

A Labor Union Attorney Talks to Larry Itliong 1966

Some time later, it may have been shortly after our visit to the San Francisco labor convention, Cesar Chavez and I were present at a meeting in Stockton, California, with Al Green, the regional director of AWOC, and Larry Itliong, the AWOC strike director, along with a handful of other AFL-CIO organizing staff members.

Ostensibly, the purpose of the meeting was to better coordinate the strike tactics used by the NFWA and the AWOC in the Delano grape strike, and to work out strategy differences between the two groups. Cesar and I barely said a word. Larry Itliong launched a barrage of militant-sounding strike tactics that AWOC should undertake, but he was soon interrupted by the regional director, who said he needed to consult with the AFL-CIO labor attorney, the one who advised all the trade unions about labor strike tactics. He phoned the attorney and put him on the speakerphone.

After the introductions were made, Larry continued his strident advocacy for the use of tougher strike tactics in the Delano grape strike, but seconds later, the AFL-CIO attorney shut Larry up, and began to lecture him about federal labor law, the threat of employer injunctions and lawsuits, and the legal risks that might be incurred by AFL-CIO-affiliated unions. He paused for a minute, the AWOC regional director remained silent, and the attorney continued, but this time he ordered Larry around as if he were a rebellious teenager and spoke to him in the most condescending manner possible. Larry said nothing. The labor attorney summed up his final orders to AWOC and hung up. The meeting was over.

This labor union staff meeting was a real eye-opener for me, and I was stunned by what had transpired. I knew that if the AFL-CIO attorney had spoken to Cesar Chavez that way, Cesar would have simply said, "Fuck you," and he and I would have walked out, and made our own decisions about what was best for the NFWA and its strike. We didn't need an overpaid labor establishment lawyer who didn't give a shit about farmworkers to tell us what we could and could not do.

As a result of that meeting, I understood that Larry Itliong was not a free man, that he had been hired by the AFL-CIO, and that whatever personal opinions he might have about this or that course of action, he was required to get permission from others who lived hundreds, perhaps thousands, of miles away from Delano. Fair or not, in my view, Larry's role as the Delano AWOC strike coordinator was forever diminished.