

Assemblyman John Burton Talks To Tiny 1966

Early in 1966, I was fundraising for Cesar Chavez's dream of building farmworker cooperatives. I worked the professors at UC Berkeley and San Francisco State, the Berkeley Co-Op members and various church groups. I was making financial progress because people in the San Francisco Bay Area were more open than anywhere else in California to investing in the dreams of poor people.

Cesar Chaves called and asked me to put some instant boycott pressure on Schenley Liquors.

I met with a small group of farmworker strike supporters who came up with the idea of picketing Tarantino's restaurant at Fisherman's Wharf because it served Schenley liquor products at the bar. What they didn't tell me was that the restaurant was owned by State Senator Gene McAteer.

So on a Friday evening, a group of perhaps 20 supporters showed up with signs, picketed the restaurant directly in front of the main doors, all the while shouting at the top of their lungs pro-farmworker and anti-Schenley slogans and chants. It caused quite a ruckus and must have sounded like a mini-riot had erupted to the hundreds of tourists milling about. The police showed up to find out what it was all about, moved the group of demonstrators away from the entrance, and stood by to keep watch over this wildcat boycott group.

After an hour, most everyone in the group was hoarse from all the shouting, and because it was Friday night, it was time to start their weekend activities. And besides, the message had been delivered, so we all dispersed.

On the following Monday, in the late morning, I was sitting at a desk in a Mission District street level office, using the telephone. I looked up to see the front doorway occupied by the largest man I had ever seen. If he wasn't at least 6 feet 8 inches tall, and weighing more than 300 pounds, you could have fooled me. He hulked in the doorway and glowered at me across the small room. At first I thought he was too large to come through the door, but he managed to squeeze in. He looked all around the room, took a step or two toward me, and grunted something. I couldn't understand his grunt but I figured out he was looking for someone, and that someone was me.

I remained seated, looking at this baby-faced giant as he stood in the middle of the room glowering. He grunted some more, but I could not understand a word he said, if they were words at all. This standoff continued for a minute or two, although it seemed much longer than that. He took one more step toward me, and I figured this was it. Standing 6 feet 1 inch tall and weighing in at 155 pounds, I knew there was no point in trying to defend myself, but for some reason I wasn't frightened. He stared at me. I looked at him.

Suddenly, John Burton burst onto the scene and shouted at the top of his voice, "J-E-E-S-S-S-U-U-S-S C-H-R-I-S-T-T, TINY, WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE??!! WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING ??!! THERE IS NO NEED FOR THIS SHIT!! GO ON BACK TO THE OFFICE AND I'LL TAKE CARE OF IT.

Tiny looked at Burton with a startle, hesitated for a second, and then shuffled toward the front door, squeezed through it, and was gone. I realized I had met my first labor goon, courtesy of the San Francisco Labor Council and Senator Gene McAteer.

To this day I don't know why John Burton showed up when he did, or who called him, but he saved my hide, that's for sure.