

Irwin DeShetler's View of Contract Language 1969

Irwin DeShetler walked on his toes—tilting slightly forward, he barely touched the ground. He looked to me like he might have been a lightweight boxer or an accomplished dancer. Irwin's grooming was impeccable and his wardrobe fashionable but slightly understated, so he did not look out of place in the farmworker union board meetings. He was a good-looking man, fit and trim, and well along toward retirement age.

In truth, DeShetler was an AFL-CIO organizer from Los Angeles who was assigned by Bill Kircher, the national director of organizing for the AFL-CIO, to work with the United Farm Workers in Delano. Aside from the fact that he would serve as the eyes and ears for the national AFL-CIO, I am not sure he had any specific assignment, but that did not mean he did not make himself useful. For one thing, he had a reliable late-model car and a gasoline credit card, which meant that our union negotiators could be ferried up and down the state. Irwin was also a walking repository of labor union history and experience. In this day and age, I think we would refer to him as a resource person or consultant.

I still experience flashbacks now and again about the interminably long and heated meetings we had among ourselves, board and staff members, about our contract proposals to the growers and their attorneys. Hour after hour (and sometimes carrying over into the next day) was spent arguing about one word, one nuance, one clause that, according to the differing views of our negotiators, was a life and death matter for the farmworkers themselves and the future of the union.

On many occasions during these heated and oftentimes accusatory discussions with raised voices, Irwin would make references, in his soft-spoken manner, to labor union history wherein fledgling unions would initially settle for union recognition, better wages, some benefits, and then over a period of time work out with the employers more complex and sophisticated protections for the workers and the union. Because I was bored much of the time with these arcane and seemingly never-ending discussions, it always struck me as good advice, but I don't believe we ever followed it. I suppose we knew better.