

## Farmworker-Style Political Action 1970

I remember the case of the liberal state senator who refused our request to publicly call for an investigation about the misuse of police power against striking farmworkers. In our view, his public statement was deemed essential because if he spoke out publicly, it would be taken seriously by the media, but if we, a rag-tag group of activists, raised the issue, it would be considered self-serving and easily ignored. I pleaded with him. He said no. His office said no. He made it very clear that he had helped us on many occasions but this time it was final, his answer was no. And stop bothering me.

I asked five people, farmworker staff and supporters, some of whom could barely speak English, to visit his Los Angeles office and wait there until he agreed to meet with them. (I knew, of course, that state senators are rarely in their district offices because their daily work keeps them in the state capital. They return only to their district for speechmaking and ribbon-cutting events.) I instructed the volunteers to carry with them thermos bottles, blankets or sleeping bags, and a picnic cooler filled with food and drink. They were not to agree to any meeting with an aide or the office receptionist; they would say instead that they would wait until the senator had time to meet with them.

Less than two hours later, I received a call from the senator's office in Sacramento asking me what it was I wanted the senator to do. I spelled out the items I thought should be in a press release and I stressed how important it was to raise the issue in the media. Less than an hour later, I heard the senator quoted extensively on the two Los Angeles 24-hour radio news stations. Speaking forcefully, he said it was vitally important that government agencies investigate these allegations raised by the striking farmworkers, and he himself would be monitoring the situation, etc. He could not have been more helpful.

I ask myself: how could this brief, nondescript "sit-in" bring a powerful senator to reverse himself and come out swinging for the rights of farmworkers when he swore he would not do so? It must be the geometry of the situation that changed the relationship.