

Lionel Steinberg

CR 138, SR 66

23:30:02 Mr. Steinberg let's actually start with that story you were just telling me a minute ago in 1969 the boycott was in full swing and you and Howard Margulis went back to talk to ? Can you tell me that story?

30:12 The boycott uh, was probably the most effective boycott in labor history and in my opinion partly because of uh, the zeal of the uh, the people involved but as much because of the uh, Vietnam War. I think people were, wanted a cause. And the cause was don't eat grapes. So Cesar had the advantage of uh, thousands of uh, students who were anti-war and they needed something to uh, uh, tie in to uh, on a day to day basis and boycotting grapes was a good one. So he was able to put groups in the major cities and to intimidate um, um, management of the major chains whose names I won't bother to mention but every chain you've ever heard of. He was able to intimidate them in to taking grapes off the shelves. And he would threaten them and say look if you don't take these grapes off the shelves we're gonna tear your store apart and keep your customers out. Well grapes in the sixties were just one of maybe a hundred commodities in a chain store which they could felt they could do without. So they uh, pragmatically uh, acquiesced and threw the growers to the wolves. Which we felt was not fair of the secondary boycott and uh, one we felt was not altogether justified. So Howard Margulis and I uh, went to New York City to uh, try to talk to the head of one of the major chains in the United States whose name I won't mention at this moment and uh, we sat down with him

and said uh, we're gonna go broke. You know there's a hundred thousand acres of grapes, hundred thousand jobs, and you've gotta give us some help, stop this boycott. So the guy says said to us uh, put yourself in my position. If we put the grapes on the shelves what happens some of the fanatics working for the union come in to the stores with razor blades and cut open the flour sacks and the sugar sacks and dump over the canned goods and hand out leaflets in the front and, and intimidate people and keep 'em out of our stores. And he said frankly there's not much I can do about it. Why don't you go out and try to make peace with the union? And that was the end of that meeting. So I came back and uh, in 69 and tried with the help of uh, Monsignor Mahoney to uh, in Fresno the fall of 69 to uh, reach some sort of a uh, uh, an agreement because Cesar had told the National Bishops Committee some six or seven national bishops that he was willing to take any grower, any grower if they would get a contract. So the bishops said took him at his word they said well here's Steinberg he's ready to go. So we had a uh, meeting uh, in Bakersfield it got nowhere with the help just uh, one minister and I was pretty discouraged so the spring of 70 uh, the bishops tried one more time to see if they could get me to give it another, another go around. So I reluctantly agreed but I said to the bishops that there's only one way I'm willing to sit down and try to negotiate, if you stay in the room and help me write the contract and see that we have fair play on both sides. So we agreed to meet in the, in a motel at the L.A. Airport with these six bishops and we met day and night for two days and as I recall it was, was a hectic meeting. I was there and one other person with me and the union had eight or ten people and there were six bishops there and so forth. And we made very, very little progress. So by midnight the bishops were uh, killing one or two bottles of scotch and it was almost morning before we ever

reached pretty close to an agreement that uh, I said I would accept and Cesar said he would accept.

34:58 Well let me jump in here um, you had run a business

CUT

35:10 Now you signed a contract you were the first person to sign it. What kind of response did you get from the other growers in the grape industry?

35:19 Uh, to put it uh, politely they were chagrined and uh, quite upset about it.

35:32 We're not going to use any of my questions in the interview so

CUT

35:36 How did the other growers react?

35:38 Well the other growers were shocked and chagrined.

35:43 We have to start one more time. How did the other growers react?

35:47 They were shocked and chagrined. And felt that perhaps uh, they were losing their fight against the union.

36:02 And in fact they were weren't they?

36:04 They were so what, what happened much to uh, my surprise uh,

CUT

36:17 The immediate response from the other growers was uh, dismay and there was chagrin and concern that perhaps uh, uh, the union was gonna take over. But to my pleasant surprise and it was very unexpected we found that uh, six or eight of the major chain stores and produce houses in Canada began calling us wanting our grapes and our brand because we had the union bug. So we had an immediate uh, advantage over our competitors of one or two dollars a box which was a fringe benefit I really never expected and once the growers saw that my grapes were the only ones they wanted they rushed to get in the act. So the first grower that uh, decided that this, this is good enough for Steinberg we better get in it too was Ken Larsen and his wife uh, Corky Larsen.

37:16 Now the other side of the coin was that once you signed, once you signed your operations were changed. How did having a contract effect what you did in the fields?

37:27 Well you had to work with a ranch committee which uh, through the twenty odd years of our experience has been uh, they were hard core arrogant people who were not what you would call rank and file workers. They started out rank and file they gradually became union pros who were

anti-grower and uh, had more of the attitude of the hierarchy of the United Farm Workers. So it became more and more difficult to uh, achieve productivity and quality control and so forth. So it made my job much more difficult and than they demanded that uh, no non-union supervisor could even talk to the workers. Then they reluctantly said well they can at least communicate but they're not to carry a pruning sheer in their hand or a grape clipper

38:30 Well let me jump in. If things then became difficult you had a chance to get out in 73 when everyone else left the UFW and you didn't. Why did you stay?

38:45 Um, I suppose you could say uh, it was three quarters philosophical and secondly uh, uh, to be practical uh, uh, if a vote were going to be taken my workers would have voted for the union so I couldn't have won an election if I wanted to. So I, I was really uh, in a position where uh, I had few alternatives. Either economically or politically or philosophically.

39:19 Well philosophically is one thing but the other folks that signed with the Teamsters didn't own elections, they just said we're going with the Teamsters. You could've done that.

39:27 I could have. In fact I was approached by the Teamsters and, and didn't do anything with them. Because I felt that the UFW had more allegiance to the workers than the Teamsters did. But uh, I'd say over the

twenty-five years experience with the union uh, been more disappointments than uh, than uh, attributes and pleasant things.

40:01 Now let's talk about the next big phase, 1975 the ALRB. Did you think that that was a good solution to the problem?

40:09 Uh, if, if Jerry Brown had put on, put in a well balanced ALRB instead of packing it with uh, pro-union people I think the growers would have trusted it. But Jerry Brown uh, packed the ALRB with uh, uh, all votes that were gonna go in the direction of the UFW and then I suppose to compound the problem although I had a, an academic reputation in agriculture and one of being involved in agriculture for a life time when C, when Jerry Brown appointed me president of the State Board of Agriculture that wasn't too well received by growers either because they knew I had the only contract with Chavez and here, here Brown was making me president of the State Board of Agriculture.

CUT

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41:13 Mr. Steinberg give me some personal responses and recollections of Cesar Chavez.

41:17 I met Cesar and knew something about him all during the 1960's. I followed his career and the predecessor that was a, a farmworkers union mostly led by Philipinos but he ended up uh, taking over and uh, I'd say we

met in passing on a few occasions but never had any uh, substantial conferences till the late sixties. Uh,

41:57 But how did he strike you as a human being once you met him?

42:01 I thought that Cesar a uh, noteworthy person with uh, little formal education but a great deal of uh, accumen and common sense. And more than anything else uh, a great intensity and a desire to uh, prevail and succeed and achieve what he thought were the proper goals for farmworkers.

42:39 Um, his public image was as a man of peace and nonviolence was, do you think that was an image or do think he really was like that?

42:48 I think it was about uh, it was more image than fact. I think that uh, he either aquiced or was aware that the uh, union was willing to use uh, as tough methods as the teamsters or the growers and were just as willing to engage in physical confrontations. So that the Ghandi image was uh, great in terms of uh, Americana and it served his purpose but I question whether he uh, was uh, uncomfortable with the way he actually performed.

43:47 Now you talk about his image you know Cesar was mostly linked with the Kennedys and you were associated with them. A lot of what happened in the sixties and seventies was a question of image wasn't it?

43:57 Please repeat that question.

43:58 Cesar was closely linked to Bobby Kennedy and Ethel and, and you had some connection with the Kennedy family too. Wasn't what farmworkers did wasn't that controlling the image important?

44:11 Well Cesar came along uh, during the Vietnam Era and that was an era as we all know of uh, great distress to uh, if not the majority of young people at least a considerable number of young people who felt that uh, it was the wrong war being fought in the wrong way and now even McNamara laments that uh, he encouraged the war.

44:44 So Cesar offered them a good fight, a good battle.

44:46 So Cesar offered them a good clean, allegedly a good clean wholesome American uh, goal. Let's uh, kick, kick those rich growers around and help the poor farmworkers get a better standard of living. So he did have a, a very important appeal to young people who uh, who well intentioned and rightly so.

45:16 Well if you thought there were so many problems with working with the union what tell me why you, you stuck with them and you still have a union contract today? Why did you stay so long?

45:26 Well I think I first worked with the union uh, at the behest of uh, Ted Kennedy and the late Congressman Phil Burton and Monsignor Roger Mahoney and uh, uh, a few farmworkers I knew Philippino farmworkers I knew that uh, felt that there was a place for a union among farmworkers. So

I'd say philosophically and intellectually uh, I shared some of their views not all their views. I didn't share their uh, techniques or their methods.

46:10 But that was the start. You stuck it out for twenty-five years.

46:16 Um, I suppose you might call that Steinberg tenacity and maybe in that degree I was just as stubborn as Cesar. I uh, was reluctant to uh, uh, perhaps to admit I made a mistake and to start all over again. And uh, I don't know if my reputation is a so called liberal is important to me or not but it had some pleasantness but it certainly wasn't something that ruled my economic uh, decision making.

46:56 Well when all this started back in the sixties did you think that farmworkers needed to be unionized?

47:01 Yes I felt that the farmworkers needed to be unionized as early as uh, the early 1950's. I made a uh, recommendation to uh, former governor Earl Warren that they start considering uh, decent housing for uh, farmworkers and uh, uh, adequate labor camps and uh, better conditions, toilets

47:33 And the union was part of that

47:34 And the unions uh, were part of that. And I did admire through the years of course Franklin Roosevelt and Francis Perkins and, and the history of unionism. I thought the time had come perhaps for a uh, a good union operation to come into agriculture. Unfortunately uh, Chavez had the

opportunity he might have had a hundred or two hundred thousand farmworkers if he'd been uh, uh, more willing to listen to um, uh, more experienced leaders within organized labor such as George Meaney who offered to give him uh, uh, experienced trade union people to help establish uh, organizations throughout California. But Cesar adamantly said we're gonna do it my way and his way was with uh, uh, priests and nuns who frequently had mini skirts not that I'm opposed to mini skirts and hundreds and hundreds of Ivy League students who were out here for the fun of fighting the growers and some Protestant ministers and a few Rabbis and Cesar failed to take advantage of the um, his early victories. Which is unfortunate in terms of labor and Cesar and the workers.

CUT

49:26 Uh, ironically enough uh, the signing of my contract made the front pages of the Miami newspapers, Washington D.C. , New York Times, the Alaska papers, L.A. Times and it was considered a uh, historic occasion and I was hopeful that uh, Chavez was going to achieve uh, my highest expectations so I was very uh, optimistic and hopeful that things were gonna go very well and they didn't.

50:06 And when you talked early about a sense of disappointment is that, is that what you're referring to?

50:11 Yes I felt that the he could have taken a totally different tack. He could've accepted the help of George Meaney and other leaders in the AFL-CIO and uh, professionalize and form a trade union rather than a social

revolutionary movement. Uh, with it's base being uh, uh, uh, priests and nuns and students that, that came and went. There was no continuity to 'em. Every year you'd have a new group of antagonists. It was not a uh, uh, continuous relationship which some unions have for ten and fifteen and twenty years.

50:57 That's what you think it really needed.

50:59 That's what needed, that's what he needed to achieve uh, um, the confidence and respect of the other growers that subsequently signed because they felt that uh, we didn't want to sign but now that we have let's hope we've got a good relationship. So they were probably uh, angrier than I was. And certainly vastly more disappointed than I.

51:26 But, but even though you chartered your own course your, your feelings are certainly representative of the industry I think in this regard.

51:36 I don't quite follow your question.

51:39 I'm saying you're disappointed but they were even more disappointed so you're, you're in step with everyone else on this.

51:45 Um, I think I have to go back to what I said were his overall achievements. One, he brought dignity to the individual farmworker. A worker was a name rather than a number of a person. Two, he brought better uh, housing conditions and three, he brought uh, sanitary conditions to the fields and four, he brought higher wages and five, he brought some recognition of seniority rights. And to me those are all very important to the

individual farmworker and uh, I feel that those are the pluses and of course the minuses were he, he failed as a uh, builder of a great union.