

1981 UFW CONVENTION

In the spring of 1981, the workers at the David Freedman/ Travertine Vineyards table grape ranch in the Coachella Valley were excited about the possibility of electing "one of our own" to a position on the Executive Board of our union, The United Farm Workers of America. Rosario "Chayo" Pelayo of Mexicali had been a grape picker in our Valley and at our ranch for a number of years, and her sister, daughter, and in-laws were active members of the union. Pelayo and her sister were documented in the film, "Fighting for our Lives" on the 1973 Coachella grape strike. They can be seen with other women being arrested and herded into a paddy wagon, and leaning out and shouting "Viva la Huelga" as the sheriff closes the door on them.

I had come to know Pelayo in October, 1975, when working for the UFW legal department. Tom Dalzell and I visited the Calexico Field Office where she was in charge. We were there to make legal preparations for the representation election campaign during the coming winter lettuce harvest in the Imperial Valley. Though Pelayo didn't have much English, she was competent at administering her off-season skeletal staff, and had a world of knowledge and information after years of work in the grape and vegetable industries, the key crops (along with citrus) on which the future of the union depended.

Until 1981, elections to the UFW Executive Board had been pretty predictable re-elections of original members, and an occasional open seat with an "official" candidate designated by Cesar Chavez and the others. In 1981, three long time leaders, Gilbert Padilla (a co-founder of the union in 1962), Jessica Govea, and Marshall Ganz, were leaving the Board. In Coachella, these three were highly respected, and we were not quite sure of the reasons behind their resignations. We had no reason to think that their departures were other than honorable, in the eyes of Chavez and the remaining Board members.

In Coachella, we knew that Chavez was comfortable with three new candidates, so the "official" slate was already known. I was familiar with all three of these candidates, Frank Ortiz, David Martinez, and Oscar Mondragon.

I had worked with David Martinez in the Coachella Field Office in 1976 and 1977. He was well known in our Valley, and had many admirers at Freedman, where I worked after leaving the staff. He had boyish good looks and charm and intelligence, and was a favorite of Maria Serano and the middle-aged women "Chavistas", many high seniority, who were an important

part of the Freedman ranch community. He had followed Eliseo Medina in leading the Chicago grape boycott, and had done an outstanding job there, before coming to Coachella; bringing together the unions and lefties and students and Catholics (and middle aged women!) with his sincerity and skills at persuasion. But these all failed him in the representation election campaign at Harry Carian Vineyards in Coachella in 1977, where Martinez directed the union forces.

It was a disasterous loss. Martinez came to the Union from the Catholic seminary, and was especially into the cult of "sacrificios para la Causa," a good line for getting donations and hours on the picket lines in Chicago. But farm workers in Coachella were looking for "beneficios," not more "sacrificios"... Our sacrificios were picking grapes in 110 degree heat. Workers remembered the "sacrificios" of the earlier 1970-73 contract -- the fines for not attending meetings or picket lines after a long days' work; the back dues owed when they hadn't worked for months; the lack of priority and neglect La Paz showed Coachella over the years. These workers needed to be convinced that the union had learned from its previous mistakes (ie. in the new dues system, you only paid when you were working).

I also sensed a Catholic Church/ hierarchal mind set, unquestioning loyalty and obedience to those above him in the organization, and condescending to those below him. And when he came to Coachella as Medina's second in command, he lacked Medina's ear, Medina's openness to ideas, his skill in bringing the staff together and mobilizing maximum productivity. Martinez was better at taking orders and giving orders, a "you're with me or against me" attitude. Most of the grape pickers voting in 1977 had eventually broken the strike by 1974. Those who hadn't, had heard the stories, the pros (and there were many), and the cons. The Coachella grape pickers voted for us when the organizers listed to the workers, admitted mistakes, and convinced the workers that the pros were worth the 2% dues...

I was certainly open to any alternative candidate to David Martinez, and I was also unhappy with the choice of Frank Ortiz. Ortiz was one of the founding members of the union in 1962, and had been in the Community Service Organization, the predecessor of the union, before that, a real pioneer in the Mexican American struggle for justice. He was intelligent, a good administrator, and (unlike Martinez) knew farm labor and the grape industry, first hand. By the time of the grape strike in 1965, he was already a foreman/labor contractor, an organizer of the crew, if you will, and certainly had management skills. But my best friend, Rudy Reyes, a Filipino American, loathed him as a racist against Filipinos, a strong negative in my view. And he

had started to move up in the world and, like Martinez, seemed likely to me to be more attentive to the opinions of those above him than an advocate of those he supposedly represented.

The final candidate on the "official" slate was Oscar Mondragon, totally unknown in the Coachella Valley, but someone of whom I thought highly. A young "lechuguero" or lettuce cutter, he had come out of the fields in the lettuce strike of 1970, had gone on staff, and had married Tina Solinas (one of my favorite staff members, and from a family that had made great contributions to La Causa since 1965). Like Martinez, Mondragon was intelligent, charming, good looking, and a natural organizer. As representative of the legal department I had visited the San Ysidro field office when Mondragon was in charge in 1976. The office was packed with people, the service center dealing with folks needing help with immigration or Social Security; workers' committees meeting to discuss organizing campaigns, folks coming in with news from the fields, and offers to help (and fresh, home-made tortillas and lunch for the staff). Mondragon, like Medina in Coachella, seemed attentive to all that was happening around him, keeping the team humming, listening to ideas and alternatives. And from the view of the legal department, his files were in order and he had a good handle on how to proceed with elections, hearings, and negotiations. For the Convention of 1981, he had my vote.

As the Convention neared, we heard that citrus workers in Oxnard were promoting Bobby de la Cruz, but that he was reluctant to run without Chavez's endorsement. De la Cruz was well known and liked in Coachella. He had been the lead organizer in the grapes at Beckman and Bender, a small ranch with one crew (I worked there in the pruning for a couple of years after we negotiated the contract). He also led at Tenneco, which had citrus and dates, as well as grapes, another victory, though we never were able to negotiate a contract with them. De la Cruz had worked in the grapes in the old (pre 1973) contracts, including at Gallo, and his family were founding members of the union in 1962. I am sure he would have been supported by many members from the Coachella delegations if he had run (and if there had been a free and fair election). I would have campaigned for him, for Pelayo, and for Mondragon.

Finally, just before the convention, we heard that the lettuce workers in Salinas were promoting their (ex-) field office director, Jose Renteria. We knew nothing of him. But like the workers and their delegates from Salinas, we wanted an open vote, preceded with an honest discussion and debate on union

priorities. We wanted farm workers on the Executive Board who could give an honest appraisal about problems in the field offices and in the contract administration.

A critical problem for the Coachella Valley workers, and as it turned out, also for Salinas and Oxnard workers, was the union medical plan. Its provisions were so good, it was a major selling point in union representation election campaigns. But the administration of the plan was horrendous. Workers would be taken to collections waiting for the checks, or would take out expensive loans, and then wait and wait and wait for reimbursement. At one point, my wife Debbie and I volunteered to spend a week at La Paz typing checks to help them catch up. We worked in an over-crowded room in a windowless basement, amazed at how dedicated the tiny staff was, but incredulous that the Executive Board would give such a low priority to getting that work done in a timely manner. Workers even accused the Union of deliberately sitting on the paperwork so that they could get an extra month or two of interest. Someone was not getting the message through to Chavez how damaging this was to the reputation of the union.

In Coachella, we grape and citrus pickers were not familiar with the problems facing the Salinas workers in their contract negotiations, and of the erosion of their bargaining position at various vegetable growers. Their problems, as detailed in Frank Bardacke's book, 'Trampling Out the Vintage', were not easily resolved. The call of their leaders was for a more vigorous organizing campaign, to bring the entire industry under Union contracts. In Coachella, possibilities for winning new contracts in the grapes did not seem bright, though citrus workers were more enthusiastic. But we did feel that a better administration of the 1980 contract at Freedman, which probably gave us the best package of wages and benefits of any grape pickers in the world, would serve as an example to other grape pickers when we were ready to try organizing again at some point in the future. We had ranches like Tenneco, where we had won, and would have liked to see more organizing and attention put into trying to negotiate a contract for those workers.

One of the reasons given by La Paz for calling for a pause in organizing new ranches was that they were overwhelmed with a backlog of ranches where workers had voted for the UFW, but the union had still not won any contract or benefits for the workers. Some ranches used endless negotiations as an excuse to freeze wages, though in Coachella, most grape growers raised their basic wages to match the 1980 Freedman contract.

The UFW Convention of 1981 was held at the Convention Center in Fresno. The Freedman and other Coachella Valley delegations met in the dining area of the Convention Center after registration. Each delegate had a blue plastic packet containing the UFW constitution and leaflets and notices. Rosario Pelayo was talking to groups of delegates, and I invited her over to talk to us. Many friends of Pelayo's greeted her and promised support. We urged her to bring over the other Salinas candidate, Jose Renteria, but he never made contact. Pelayo was also talking to citrus workers, both our Coachella Valley delegates and those from Oxnard. Her basic message was the need for active farm worker members to serve on the Board.

Did I think Pelayo could win? I would guess from the few votes taken, the first day of the convention, there might be 40% open to an independent candidate. Before the opening, I felt excitement, not tension. But I did find out that morning that Richard Chavez had come down to Coachella and held a meeting with our delegates, urging them to back the official slate. Saul Martinez, our field office director, had been instructed to invite all the delegates "except Pato" (me) to the meeting.

After the opening procedures, as I remember, the keynote speech was by an AFL leader from Arizona, a Mexican American who began what I remember as a foul-mouthed racist rant against the Anglos and traitors within our unions who were trying to steal the movement... and anyone against the leader is a traitor. Hmmmmm... not an auspicious start for a free and fair convention.

Then came the first contentious order of business, a resolution in our packets about petitions and binding delegates to the petitions. We had heard that Dolores Huerta and others from La Paz had gone down to Salinas and had collected signatures from workers... "If you are for Cesar Chavez, sign the petition..." I'm guessing most everyone at Freedman would have signed such a petition. But the petitions also endorsed the entire official slate. The resolution in the packet, supposedly from the credentials committee, was to the effect that these petitions were to bind the delegates from these ranches to vote for the entire official slate. In effect, it negated the elections of the delegates by their fellow workers. There had never been any charge that there had been any fraud or misconduct in those elections by workers at the individual ranches. In fact, the backers of the official slate had lost at the local level, and La Paz apparently wanted to negate that fact before any votes were taken at the convention.

Long lines stood up at the microphones to support and oppose the resolution. Would the properly elected delegates be free to choose how to vote? After my years in the legal department, my questions were technical -- who verified that these signatures were even workers at the ranches they were claiming? Who verified that they were the percentage of the total work force they claimed to be? (There was some kind of formula in the resolution)... and more basically, why hadn't these workers attended the meetings where the delegates were elected? Why didn't they give these petitions to their properly elected ranch delegates for consideration?

When the voice vote was taken (my memory is not quite the same as recounted in Bardacke's book), it sounded like it had been defeated, the loudest "No"s from the back of the auditorium, where the Salinas delegates were seated. But there was plenty of "NO" sentiment where we were sitting on the left, and from Oxnard delegates on the right. Chavez ruled that the outcome was in doubt and that there would be a second vote after lunch.

I personally do not remember any specific political organizing by the Salinas folks during lunch. The Coachella delegations were "out of the loop" as to what was happening. But now the issue was being discussed in stark terms -- are you for Cesar or against him -- that there are Anglos and traitors and (the first time I heard this argument) JEWS trying to take over the Union, that Marshall Ganz had a cadre of paid reps from Salinas who were part of his plot to depose Cesar and seize control. This seemed to far removed from our reasons for supporting Pelayo, it seemed like ludicrous conspiracy theory. But no one from the Salinas ranches approached us to explain their position.

After lunch, a vote was taken again on the resolution, and this time, as I remember a show of hands showed a majority support. The dissident Salinas delegations may have walked out at that time (and of course, there were also delegates from some Salinas ranches that supported the slate). Because the Salinas delegations were seated behind us, we were not aware of their actions.

NOMINATIONS, 1981 UFW CONVENTION

As I remember, the nominations for the Board were the following morning. After the official slate was nominated and seconded, and individuals gave testimonials, Chavez asked if there were any more nominations. I assumed the Salinas folk would put forward their candidates, but there was silence. So I stood up and went to the microphone. The last words Cesar ever spoke to me were, "Brother Adair", his voice icy. But I went ahead and

put Rosario Pelayo's name in nomination . My little speech stressed her experience in the vegetable and grape industries, and her administrative experience in the field offices. And where she lacks experience, I said, she has great teachers in Cesar and Dolores...Pelayo's brother-in-law followed me to the microphone to second the motion and put in a good word for her. But the discussion was cut short by Freddy Chavez, Cesar's nephew, a lawyer acting as constitutional watchdog. He announce that the rules specified that a candidate had to be physically present in the hall, and was Pelayo present? Again there was silence. She was not there. The nomination was ruled "out of order." I then dutifully moved to make the election unanimous..

In the final wrap-up of the convention, I remember Cesar specifically cautioned against using the word "traitor" for those members who might disagree with each other. I was hopeful that this might be a reaching out to the dissidents and that a future convention might be more democratic and open to honest debate. But the convention voted to send letters of reprimand to the delegates who had walked out, supposedly because they had failed to represent the workers who had elected them. Though I hadn't walked out, I also received a letter tarnishing me as one of the "malignant" elements seeking to destroy the union.

At the time, I did not see the 1981 Convention as a turning point in the UFW's evolution away from building a democratic union. At David Freedman Co., the workers were better organized and stronger than ever, and had just won our best ever contract. Every other grape grower in the Coachella Valley raised their wages to match us. Our Service Center and Clinic were a tremendous benefit to our members. We supported Cesar Chavez as our leader, responsible for the big picture, for balancing the priorities of different areas and crops, the push and pull of politics and other union allies (and enemies). Our focus was admittedly narrow, and perhaps selfish. But we felt empowered by seeing one of our own running for the Board, someone who knew the fields and the effects of the contracts from the ground up, someone who could sit next to Cesar and "tell him like it is..."

Doug Adair
UFW pensioner
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