

Gilbert Padilla 1962 - 1980

I met Cesar Chavez in 1955 at a house meeting at my home in Hanford, California. I joined the Community Service Organization (CSO) that night and worked as a volunteer from 1955 to 1960. Cesar Chavez became the CSO director and hired me in 1960 as a staff member providing service center work in Stockton. I worked there through June of 1962.

At the CSO national convention in Calexico in March of 1962, Cesar told me that if the board did not approve of the farmworker program he proposed, he would resign as director. The CSO convention did not approve his program and Cesar resigned from the CSO on April 15, 1962. I asked him what he was going to do and he said that we should go and organize the farmworkers ourselves, and I agreed with him.

I returned to Hanford in Kings County and began to organize workers with the volunteers who lived in that area, which included ex-CSO members like Julio and Fina Hernandez, Roger Terronez from Corcoran, and Tony and Rachel Orendain and Gil Flores from Hanford. It was understood and agreed that all the staff were to be unpaid volunteers.

In September of 1962, we held our first convention of the National Farm Workers Association, the NFWA. We adopted the eagle as our logo on the flag and we adopted our dues structure of \$3.50 a month, which included death benefit insurance for families. At this convention, a Sanger resident was elected as president, Tony Orendain was elected secretary-treasurer, and Cesar was appointed as director general. Julio, Tony, Roger, and I were appointed area directors. During those early years of 1963 and 1964, we all held house meetings to organize workers, registered voters, and worked on political campaigns. In 1964, Dolores Huerta came to work with us as an office administrator.

In 1963 and 1964, I worked with Fred Ross in organizing service centers throughout the state. The Industrial Areas Foundation paid me and Saul Alinsky funded our efforts.

In January of 1965, I was hired by Rev. Jim Drake to work with the Migrant Ministry in Porterville along with Rev. Dave Havens. In May of 1965, we conducted a rent strike at the Woodville and Linnell labor camps. The shacks were made of tin, which meant they were very cold in winter and sweltering in summer. During this strike, Pablo Espinosa and Ernesto Laredo became involved as tenants of the labor camp. The young college-educated Doug Adair lived and worked there and became part of our staff. We had our first farmworker march from the Linnell labor camp to the Visalia Housing Authority to demand better housing conditions for farmworkers. Marching with the farmworkers were Father David Duran and Brother Gilbert, a Christian Brother also known as LeRoy Chatfield. The result of this strike was that they tore down the tin shacks and built houses for the tenants.

In April of 1965, Epifanio Camacho came to our office and asked for help for the rose grafters from several ranches in the Wasco area who wanted to strike. All the rose workers

walked out and the strike lasted a couple of weeks. The workers came to inform Cesar that the growers were offering the wages they requested and they wanted to return to work. Cesar agreed to have them return. The staff involved in that strike were Cesar, Dolores, Jim Drake, Dave Havens, Wendy Goepel, Chris Hartmire, Bill Esher (Rampujan), and myself.

In August 1965, the first grape strike was held at the Rancho Blanco, which was the J.D. Martin Ranch in Ducor, not too far from Porterville. Working with me on this strike were Candido and Domingo Espinosa, Willie Champion and his family, and Abel Salazar--all members of the Porterville farmworker committee. The workers were from the Woodville labor camp and Earlimart, and were also members of the NFWA. The volunteers included Jim Drake and Dave Havens. Jim thought we shouldn't get any publicity but I wanted some "action," so I talked to the *Fresno Bee* and they ran a story about a "huelga strike." For years after, Larry Itliong, leader of the AWOOC and the Filipino table grape strikers, would screech at me in his mocking pidgin English voice, "Goddamn, Gilbert, it was all your fault! You started all this over there with the Martin thing and I had to pull the Filipinos out."

Along with NFWA board members and their families--Roger and Gloria Terronez, Julio and Josephina, Tony and Rachel Orendain--my family and I moved to Delano in September of 1965 to work full-time on the strike. In December, I was then moved to Los Angeles to organize the Schenley boycott. I set up our office in East L.A. I worked in Borrego Springs on the DiGiorgio campaign, signing up workers for the election. In Yuba City, I worked on the DiGiorgio election campaign. In 1966, I also went to El Paso, Texas, to recruit workers eligible to vote to return for the election, which was the first election for farmworkers, that the NFWA WON!

In 1966 the NFWA had its first casualty: Roger Terronez. Because of the lack of access to health care, which was a major problem for farmworkers, the first union clinic, built in Delano on the Forty Acres, was dedicated to him.

I was sent to Rio Grande City, Texas, to be in charge of the Las Casitas Farms strike and organized boycott committees in Austin, Corpus Christi, Dallas, El Paso, Fort Worth, and San Antonio in 1967. The second day after my arrival, Rev. Jim Drake and I were kneeling down praying in front of the courthouse in Rio Grande City because we had workers in jail and could not get bail for them. We were accused of disturbing the janitor from performing his duties and we were arrested and jailed. We had many arrests and no convictions. We were not allowed to post bail and the Rangers were extremely abusive. We sued the Texas Rangers in 1968 (*Pancho Medrano v. Texas Rangers*), and finally won in 1973. The reason for the suit was that we were not allowed to picket unless we were 50 feet abreast. My family joined me there and the other volunteers who worked with me were Doug Adair and Bill Chandler.

As part of our strategy, we brought in the Civil Rights Committee of Texas, headed by Carlos Turan, to expose the injustices at the hands of the Texas Rangers. We also brought the Congressional Committee on Migratory Labor, headed by Senator Ted Kennedy and Senator Yarborough of Texas, to the Rio Grande Valley to observe the injustices. The wages for workers were from \$6 to \$8 per day working 10 to 12 hours a day, and they were hauled in cattle trucks to work. We improved the wages to \$1 an hour, which at that time in Texas was a significant gain.

More important, the people from Texas who got involved in the boycott became more aware of the plight of workers, and later became leaders and organizers throughout Texas. The state senator who assisted us was Joe Bernal. Carlos Turan is now a state senator. Willie Velasquez, Arnold Flores, and Gonzalo Barrientos became involved as chairmen of the boycott committees. Gonzalo Barrientos is now a state senator; Arnold was one of the founders of the Southwest Voter Registration Project, which was later headed by Willie Velasquez. When I left Texas, I closed up the office and packed all of our files. Tony Orendain in San Juan, Texas, later headed the organizing effort.

In December of 1969, I returned to Delano, and, together with Robert Bustos, was put in charge of organizing committees throughout the state. In March of 1970, I went to Philadelphia with my son, Tomas, and Doug Adair to help Hope Lopez and her two teenage sons, who were working on the grape boycott.

After the contracts were signed in Delano, I returned to California and was sent to Selma to help Hope Lopez for the purposes of contract enforcement, negotiations, and staff training. The staff consisted of Hope, Pablo Espinosa, Joe Serda, and Alfredo Vazquez. We had offices in Fresno and Dinuba that were staffed by Higinio Rangel and Juan Benavente. Jose Reyes (Grande) staffed the Fresno office. In the Fresno County area, we had more than 65 contracts in grapes and tree fruit. We won several strikes. One of the major ones was the White River Farms strike. Many arrests were made during this strike when we had massive picket lines throughout the valley. We decided to conduct a boycott of a subsidiary of this corporation: Guild brandy and wine.

In December of 1972, we took 50 farmworkers to Wisconsin for the Guild brandy and wine boycott because that was the largest market area for Guild. Rev. Gene Boutillier and his family provided us with housing, food, and warm clothes for the heavy snow that greeted us. We set up offices in Milwaukee, Racine, Green Bay, Madison, and Appleton. Most of these workers were from the Kern County area and they had little to no experience driving and living in the snow. My wife, Esther, and my son, Tomas, were part of the staff. In mid-January of 1973, my family (including Tomas, Esther, our daughter, Adelita, and me) headed to Washington, D.C. with Bernice Rincon and other staff to conduct the boycott. The union had a boycott house on Piney Branch Road. in Takoma Park, Maryland, where we lived and worked. We picketed the Safeway stores and other chains that carried grapes and lettuce, and also conducted the Gallo boycott of liquor stores in the area. Esther and I were lobbyists on farmworker issues, testifying before

Senate committees, and leveraging the influence of the California congressional delegation when the strike was heated in California. We collaborated with the other unions, which were very supportive. We had many supporters and volunteers from the local churches and community groups. In the summer of 1973, we received two busloads of farmworkers to help on the boycott. We sent some to different areas along the East Coast, including Norfolk and Virginia Beach, Virginia, and Baltimore.

In September of 1973 the UFW conducted its first constitutional convention in Fresno, where I was elected secretary-treasurer. More than 7000 workers, volunteer staff, supporters, and other union members and community members attended this convention.

In June of 1975, we returned to Fresno to organize and conduct the elections as a result of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act.

In October 1975, we were moved to La Paz so that I could administer the secretary-treasurer's duties. I was also in charge of field office administration and contract negotiations. During our time at La Paz, we became part of the "community" of UFW staff. One of the significant changes in early 1977 was that of the involvement that Cesar had with Synanon leadership and the introduction of the "game." This game was a method used by groups like Synanon to work with their patients who were either addicts or people who had some kind of criminal background. Staff were trained to participate in the game and it was sometimes used as a method of reprimand. This use of the game caused internal controversy and many loyal volunteers including some of our attorneys left the union. Cesar felt that these were disloyal people and did not acknowledge that this method was destructive.

Another important factor was the loss of Proposition 14 in November of 1977. Cesar had become very suspicious of volunteers, whom he blamed for the defeat of this proposition. Cesar voiced many times to me that he felt there were people in the union who were out to destroy the union and working against us. I recall one evening in La Paz when we were walking to our homes, he told me that our union was "full of Communists who came to destroy the union." Cesar also told me that he knew who it was who had brought in these people. He said it was Nick Jones. The first people to be purged from the union were Nick Jones and his wife, Virginia Rodriguez Jones, and he asked them to leave the union. Nick and Virginia had been with the union since the early days and were very dedicated and committed. Thereafter, many volunteers were purged as a way of "cleaning house" of people who were thought to be "suspicious" or disloyal to the union. Many volunteers left the union during this time.

In 1978, our first board member left. This was Eliseo Medina, who had been with the union since the early 1960s as a farmworker from Delano. Eliseo had many successes as an organizer in the boycott cities and in the field offices. He was also a successful fundraiser and negotiator. During this same period, Jim Drake, who had been with the farmworker movement since its beginning in 1962, also resigned. Jerry Cohen, the union's general

counsel since 1966, left the union in 1979. Then I left. Marshall Ganz and Jessica Govea left in 1981. At the beginning of the strike in 1965, Marshall came from the Mississippi voter-registration projects and Jessica Govea and her family had been involved with CSO from the 1950s. Her father was a very dedicated unionist, a CSO member from Bakersfield. Jessica was still a teenager when she came to volunteer. Later she worked with me in the service center along with Bonnie Chatfield. Later Marshall and Jessica became a couple and worked the boycott in Montreal and other cities. Both worked tirelessly in every effort and organized many political campaigns. Needless to say, when these leaders left, there was a great loss of their expertise in organizing and the passion that they had for farmworkers.

During these years, much attention was being placed on the administration of the union, and there were various organizing efforts in the Salinas and Imperial valleys in the vegetable industry. Cesar also became interested in federal funding for some special projects.

When the strike ended in the Imperial Valley after the death of Rufino Contreras, we returned to the Washington, D.C. area in February of 1979 to conduct the Chiquita banana boycott, on which we worked for a year and a half. I felt that I needed to return to assist with the efforts that were being undertaken in organizing and contract enforcement. After I applied much pressure on Cesar, we returned to California in June 1980 and were sent to the Coachella Valley to conduct the negotiations with the David Freedman contract. We also negotiated other citrus contracts in Blythe and Coachella.

During the organizing efforts in the Coachella Valley in the summer of 1980, it became apparent to me that many members were dissatisfied with the inefficient administration of the RFK Medical Plan, the lack of focus on servicing our contracts, and other worker-related issues. Disagreements occurred at the executive board level because of the change of direction that Cesar was taking at that time. Cesar became interested in the "game," in the use of "mind control" and in developing "*young minds that were not corrupted.*" Cesar started a school to train these "young minds" to negotiate contracts and to organize. Unfortunately, none of these people were successful in negotiations of labor contracts. The staff members who were successful in negotiating contracts were David Burciaga, Ann Smith, Marion Steeg, Eliseo Medina, Gretchen Laue, Jim Drake, Ruth Shy, and Liza Hirsch Medina.

In October 1980, I spoke with some of the board members and Cesar about the concerns I was hearing from the workers in the Coachella and Salinas valleys. Cesar refused to acknowledge that there were problems. I wanted the union to continue to be worker-focused, service our contracts, administer the medical and pension plans, and provide services that workers needed. I brought these issues up at our October board meeting, voicing my concern over the philosophical change in direction that Cesar was taking.

The following day, we had a meeting of the credit union, of which I was president. Before the meeting started, Dolores wanted to speak, and I acknowledged her. Dolores told me

that I should resign from the union because I was talking to other board members about the direction that Cesar was taking the union. Dolores made vicious—and unfounded—allegations against me. Dolores made this vicious attack with Cesar’s blessing—he sat quietly, did not intervene, and said nothing.

I was extremely upset and disturbed that my loyalty to the union was questioned and challenged. The next morning, I called Cesar and told him that I would honor his request and I would resign. All he said was “OK.” I wrote my letter of resignation, saying that I was resigning for personal reasons, because I did not want to hurt the union. I informed all the board members and staff directors of the field offices, and Jerry Cohen, of my resignation.

After we left the union, I never spoke with Cesar again.

When I left the union as the secretary-treasurer, there was more than \$10 million in the RFK Medical Plan; \$17 million in the Juan De La Cruz Pension Plan; and over \$6 million in the MLK Service Center fund.

From 1955 to 1977, it was a joy for me to work with Cesar. It was a significant part of my life’s work to serve the farmworkers in my various capacities in the CSO, NFWA and UFW. It gave me the opportunity to fight the exploitation and abuse of farmworkers by the growers. I was born in a labor camp and worked as a child in the fields alongside my father and brothers and sister under harsh and abusive conditions.

Organizing farmworkers, who are the most disenfranchised workers of the labor force in this country, gave me the ability to change the working conditions and the system of agriculture—a change that, unfortunately, lasted only for a short period of time.

The union was my *whole life*—I gave it more priority than my family, often uprooting my children from their schools and friends to unknown destinations. I never thought of leaving the union, and I wanted to grow old working in the union on behalf of farmworkers.

One of the great positive experiences of this work was meeting the wonderful people who came to help us during the most difficult struggles—during times when the union was operating on a shoestring budget. The union attracted many good-hearted people from all walks of life, who came to help make conditions better for farmworkers. These were very ordinary people who worked under extraordinary conditions for \$10 a week and room and board. Most of these people made lifetime friendships and have continued to have contact with one another. They have grown and developed into professionals, union leaders, and organizers—leaders in their own right. To this date, the camaraderie and deep bonds among the ex-UFW staff members continue to flourish.

Farmworkers and their children earned access to housing, a more stable lifestyle (out of the migrant stream), and gained access to higher education for their children.

These are the some of the positive outcomes that made my life's work worthwhile.