

## Ida Cousino 1965–1967

Mid-September 1965

I arrived in Delano from San Jose, California, to deliver clothes from community organizations. I had heard about the strike from a friend of Luis Valdez.

The first day on the picket line, I knew this was something bigger than any one person, and I knew I was going to stay. I quit my job as a teacher of special education. I had grown up on a small family farm in Michigan and knew how hard farm work was. When the growers would yell at us, “You’ve never worked a day in the fields,” I laughed. I had been working in the onion fields since I was five years old and before that I played in the fields.

Picket Line

On the line I was always shaking inside, because emotions were so strong. I could feel the shame, fear, and sometimes the anger of the people (scabs) working in the fields. Those workers who would walk out would appear suddenly different—standing straighter, their faces strong.

The picketers seemed to have an aura of power and strength, and their faces would glow: Camacho, Julio Hernandez, and, of course, Dolores.

Many of the growers would call these strikers by name, telling them they would never work in Delano again. What courage the strikers had. Many of the workers I saw coming out of the fields later contributed much to the union, such as Mack Lyons, who sang, waved picket signs, and was always laughing and joking. Yes, the growers and their security guards spread fear and made threats, but the union always returned.

The power of reason when someone on the line would talk with a worker for some time and the worker would put down his tools or box of grapes and walk out. Today the hip word is empowerment, but I have rarely seen this transformation elsewhere. It has been many years since Delano but the scenes are so clear as I write this.

Daycare

I started the first daycare for the children of the strikers in a building close to the NFWA office. The first day was full of confusion. The kids had not been in a situation like this before, away from their families, and with a woman who spoke little Spanish. Maybe someday I can do it better. I wonder if parents remember this.

Pink House

The small pink house behind the office was used for meetings and as a place to sleep for volunteers and (in the beginning) for workers who had walked out of the fields and were

going to leave the area. Later it would be used as offices, but I remember wall-to-wall sleeping bags. There was a kitchen. I don't remember cooking because it was also used for sleeping. The only non-sleeping space seemed to be the bathroom. I look and don't remember discomfort. During meetings the walls and floors were covered with people.

#### Cottonwood Road

At around 4 a.m. on some mornings, Cesar, the strikers, and some of us volunteers would go to Bakersfield to a big field where old buses would wait for people to work in the strike area. This was a big recruiting area for the labor contractors or coyotes. Our job was to keep the workers from boarding the buses or to encourage them to get off the bus if they had snuck by us. This took a lot of convincing. I remember the scene as surreal and very dark with the only lights from the pickups and the labor buses. It was also scary as the coyotes were very hostile—we were taking their money away.

#### Walter Reuther

Before Christmas, Reuther came to the picket line by the railroad tracks in Delano promising support from the unions and a turkey for each family on strike. Later as I was helping Esther hand out the turkeys, I envisioned big fat roasted birds. Hah! Everyone made turkey tamales. Not long after, Reuther would be dead.

#### People's

Hollywood could not have dreamed up two characters more colorful and appropriate than Ann and Moche, the owners and proprietors of People's. I'm sure everyone remembers them warmly. At People's, everyone relaxed, shot pool, danced, and, of course, had a beer or two. It was the big night spot of Delano; some of us fell in love there. All were welcome, it was a great place to talk to workers still in the fields. I don't remember a single fight there.

#### Uranday Family—Earlimart Office

I moved out of the Pink House to live with and help Esther and Manuel Uranday in the Earlimart office. One night, Esther, the kids, and I were listening to the radio donated by SNNC. Cesar and Richard started broadcasting that they were being chased by a truck; our people started driving to get to them and help. It probably lasted only 30 minutes, but it seemed like hours of helpless fear. Esther and I are still in touch.

#### Schenley Boycott: 1966

In January, strikers and volunteers were sent around the country to the major cities to promote the boycott and the grape strike and to raise much-needed funds and get union support.

We set out in my old Falcon. Bob Fisher was going to Philadelphia, Sal Gonzales to Chicago, Ed Frankel to Detroit, and I to Cleveland. The car couldn't be stopped or it would not start again, so we drove all the way to Cleveland without turning off the car. Bob and Sal were not able to drive because of Siete. Ed and I drove and fell in love. Somehow my car made it back to Delano, how and by whom, I don't remember.

We had a list of possible supporters and about \$75 each. We were supposed to get someone to put us up and a place to work with a phone. In a few months, I got all over Cleveland, met so many helpful people, and got so much done, as did the others on the boycott. As I write this, I can hardly believe what we did, it's like fiction. Sam Pollack, president of the state meatcutters union, and Audia Romain of the butchers union, provided an office, a telephone, and introductions to all the unions and many of the local community organizations. Sam had many stories from the farmworkers' strike in the onion fields in the 30s in Ohio. Audia had been involved in the violent strikes of the butchers when she was a slaughterhouse worker. They had a very special feeling for our strike because it reminded them of their own labor struggles years before. Help started coming from local musicians such as Phil Ochs, a friend of Audia's, the AFL-CIO, UAW, and even the Teamster locals. I would imagine how my heroine, Dolores Huerta, would handle this and then bluster my way into a union meeting, and always got good results.

Because Cleveland was far away from Delano, the Teamster members were not subject to the strong feelings of their Southern California members; they recognized the morality of the strike. Cleveland's inner-city east side was primarily poor and nonwhite, while the city's west side consisted of poor whites. Community organizers were active in the east and west neighborhoods, this being the 1960s. Both east and west were open to helping the Huelga picket lines and—most important—going door to door before the people were at the grocery stores and state liquor stores. Local people were doing the organizing. I was staying at a community activist home in the east side in the Hough area when the Cleveland riot or insurrection started two doors away from our house. I felt safe the whole time. I was not the target, but a witness—from the first Molotov cocktail thrown to the eventual war zone of gun shots and helicopters. I could only think that war had arrived in this country. Martial law was in effect and there was no traffic in or out for two days. Ed Frankel in Detroit was experiencing the same thing; he and I were trying to get back to Delano for the DiGiorgio Arvin election.

#### DiGiorgio Picket Line

In the spring of 1966, during the DiGiorgio negotiations, we were picketing at the Sierra Vista Ranch. A security guard sitting in a car parked between the picketers and the workers in the field held up a handgun and pointed it at a man next to me. I saw the gun! Our lawyer told me to make a citizen's arrest. I walked around the car, reached in the open window and placed him under arrest. Dick Meyer, a ranch supervisor, pulled me away and in the process knocked me to the ground. A striker came to pick me up and got hit over

the head. This has been difficult to write. I feel like I'm right back on the scene. I can see the time of day, hear the sounds, and feel the body sensations.

### Friendships

Warned not to be sentimental. Delano was one of the three or four most important events in my life. The strike and the people involved contributed to my most educational experience. My marriage to Ed Frankel, and our daughter, Emiliana, came out of the strike. The women's parties that Helen, Petra, Esther, Alice, and Carmen Serda were kind enough to include me in. The women would really let go when there were no men around! I recently saw Esther and it was like 1966 again. The good food at Fish and Petra's (Helen's sister), where I lived for months. "Fats," a friend of the family with a great sense of humor. Peanuts, Dolores's daughter, was also living with Petra. I wonder if she remembers sleeping with me? The water tower where Bill Esher lived. All the kids grown up! Fina and Julio Hernandez. For the first time in about 40 years, I saw Julio at the 40<sup>th</sup> convention in Fresno. He walked up to me and said, "I knew a girl who looked like you but she was much younger." Yes, dear Julio!

Thank you everyone from the Huelga. I see the world with different eyes.