

Donna Haber Kornberg 1965–1968, 1970–1975

In 1964, I was a junior at the University of California at Berkeley. I had gone to college because it was expected that I do so, but not with any particular goal in mind. The civil rights and student movements started and I learned about the many injustices in the world. (I had had a fairly sheltered middle-class upbringing.) The nascent attempts to put them right struck me as not only important, but also necessary if the ideals of justice and fairness learned in my Jewish upbringing were to be realized. I joined them with great enthusiasm, starting with the civil rights movement of the early 1960s, and the student free speech movement at Berkeley in 1964.

The early 1960s, in retrospect, were a time of great idealism, a time when we believed that we could cure injustice and generally put the world to rights. I say “idealism” only now, as at the time we saw our goals as eminently realistic. It was, for example, quite illogical and wrong to treat some people differently because of the happenstance of skin color; or for intelligent but poor children to lack opportunities to succeed. We were quite sure that, once we explained this rationally to others who, like us, had been largely ignorant of these evils, they would see the light and equality would prevail. How wonderfully naïve we were.

During the fall semester of 1965, one of my professors told us of a group of people who were attempting to organize a union for farmworkers in California’s Central Valley. They had started a strike against table grape growers. He asked if a few of us would like to go to the strike headquarters in Delano to have a look. I had read about migrant farmworkers in John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* and Carey McWilliams’s *Factories in the Fields*. I knew (or thought I knew) about the poverty in which they lived and the exploitation they suffered and I was keen to contribute to efforts to help, so I joined the expedition.

He drove six of us the 300 miles to Delano in his VW bus—the vehicle of the 1960s. After about six hours, we arrived at a cheaply built tract house painted pink, and therefore known as the Pink House, on the edge of this small, dusty, and rather ugly town. There were similar, but differently colored, houses on two sides of the Pink House. Across the street, on the third and fourth sides of the house, the vineyards began. Delano was surrounded by fields, mostly vineyards, stretching for miles; the town was bisected by Highway 99, which created the wrong side of the highway, equivalent to the wrong side of the tracks, where farmworkers lived, a few permanently, but many temporarily, until moving on to the next job.

I had never seen anything like it. I had always lived in cities, and my idea of countryside was the lush green images of Britain and New England. This was brown, dusty, and flat. One could see for many miles in any direction, as there was nothing of interest (or indeed of no interest) to block the view. There was just flat nothingness. I thought it the dreariest, most soulless place I had ever seen (I would later come to like it, especially the feelings of space and endless sky) and I couldn’t imagine that anyone would live there out of choice. I felt even sorrier for the farmworkers and their families.

We spent the weekend, as I spent many following weekends, sleeping in sleeping bags on concrete floors, eating at the strike kitchen—at that time run by Chicanos (if I had ever liked menudo, which is doubtful, I soon tired of it as a staple diet), and making up a mobile picket line.

The strike area covered about 100 square miles of vineyards. Strikebreakers—*gusanos* (worms) as we called them—could be working in crews anywhere in that area. Each morning we were awakened while it was still dark. “Scouts” had already been out searching the fields for crews of workers and radioed in their locations (there were a few cars with two-way radios). We, the mobile picket line, took off to confront them. Three or four carloads of us formed a picket line at the edge of a field, waved homemade picket signs, and shouted to gain the crew’s attention. If any of the workers showed interest, the farmworkers among us would explain the strike to them in Spanish and ask them to join. People seldom did, but it was sometimes possible to visit them at their lodgings and convince them to join us.

Most of the *gusanos* spoke no English, and most of the non-farmworker volunteers spoke no Spanish, so, looking back, our role was pretty much limited to attracting attention and making up numbers to look as if there were more strikers than there were. It was exciting at first, but after a few weekends, it became fairly routine and tedious. We continued, however, as we believed that *La Causa*, once successful (and we had no doubt of its ultimate success) would establish justice for hard-working farmworkers.

That first weekend I also met the union’s leader, Cesar Chavez, and was instantly charmed. As is well known, he later became ultra-pious, praying and fasting to an extent that probably affected his health—he died much too young. At that time, however, he still had a twinkle in his eye, an impish sense of humor, and a penchant for having fun; we would all occasionally share a few beers and laugh together during a couple of hours of relaxation, following a day of tiring work.

In later years, when Cesar grew away from us and toward Catholic piety, I—and perhaps others—felt sad and abandoned. First, because we had lost a friend, whose charm had dissipated into solemn religiosity and who no longer seemed to care anything about us; and second, because we still believed that religion was the “opiate of the masses” and not in any way a force for progress.

Cesar always had his mind set firmly on his goals, and dedicated his entire life to reaching them. I don’t really know why his feelings toward us, and toward religion, changed. Perhaps he used us while he felt that we served his purpose and then found us superfluous; perhaps he dived into religion to avoid facing the fact that his original goals might not be reached. We ignored the obvious fact that Cesar spent little or no time with his young children—we might have realized that if he was willing to sacrifice those relationships for *La Causa*, it would be easier for him to sacrifice his apparent friendship with us when he felt it necessary or expedient.

But these are recent thoughts, aroused by LeRoy's request to write this account. At the time we, perhaps naïvely, took it for granted that we were all on the same page, dedicated to empowering and improving the lot of farmworkers, that we were a team, and that we would work together, led by Cesar, to that end until it was achieved.

I spent most weekends of the fall semester at Delano, picketing and getting to know strikers and other volunteers. Cesar was trying to attract support from more well-established labor unions, with (at that time) little success. However, union locals in the Bay Area were sympathetic, and one task I took on was "picketing" the wholesale fruit depot in Oakland, with the aim of stopping shipments of grapes from getting into the Bay Area. I attended classes during the day and at night I was the sole member of a picket line at the depot. The local Teamsters union was very helpful; they had said that if there was a picket line, they would refuse to unload grapes from the Delano area, but that, in order to protect their position, it was necessary to have a picket line. So every weeknight I trudged out to the depot and waited to be a picket line, should an appropriate truck arrive. The Teamsters members felt sorry for me and allowed me to sleep on a sofa in the room they used for breaks. If a truck arrived with grapes, they woke me. I jumped up, became a picket line (I kept a picket sign there), and the truck was sent away unloaded.

I dropped out of university at the end of the fall semester and moved to Delano to help out. I participated initially as Cesar's secretary, replacing Kathy, who was being sent out with others to organize a consumer boycott of California grapes. Generally, we volunteers did whatever needed to be done. I worked in the office, dealing with correspondence and helping to arrange Cesar's schedule; I picketed; and I visited *gusanos'* lodgings to persuade them to join, etc. I slept on the floor of Dolores Huerta's house and ate at the strike kitchen. We were given \$5 a week from donated strike funds, which paid for things like toothpaste. Occasionally, when an official of another union visited, on an expense account, we were treated to the luxury of a hamburger at a local café.

Dolores was an attractive, energetic woman whom we both liked and admired. She was intelligent, shrewd, and completely dedicated to *La Causa*. She had a number of young children; I cannot remember how many. They were beautiful children and those of us who stayed in her house liked them immensely, but they appeared to us to be much neglected, left by Dolores and absent fathers to bring themselves up. We could not dislike Dolores, but we did wonder at this and tried to fill in the gaps with warmth and affection and as much mothering as we could muster. I was particularly taken with Alicia Huerta, who must have been about five or six at the time, and I tried to spend as much time as possible with her. It is interesting to look back to those pre-feminist days, when we faulted Dolores for neglecting her children, but not Cesar. I suppose that his neglect was softened by his children having a wonderful mother in Helen Chavez, whereas Dolores's children had no other parent present. Still, attitudes (including mine) were different then—and quite unfair to women.

While staying at Dolores's, I became fascinated with another inhabitant, Luis Valdez, and we began what was to be my first serious romantic relationship. Luis was the son of migrant farmworkers who had settled in San Jose. He had been through university (we were both the first of our families to attend) and was interested in agit-prop theater. He was immensely talented—dramatically and musically. We eventually moved into a small apartment together, paying the rent mostly on my savings, as I recall.

Luis had founded El Teatro Campesino (the Farmworkers' Theater), which was already popular. He had gathered a cast of six to eight farmworkers, including the very talented Augustin Lira, who played guitar and sang beautifully. Somehow, Luis transformed this motley group into a successful theater company. They improvised *actos* ("skits" is the closest English translation, but seems inadequate) in English and Spanish around strike themes, such as persuading strikebreakers to come out of the fields and join the union. The *actos* were a propaganda tool for the union, but were also such knockabout fun that the didactic elements were received painlessly, and the Teatro performed to great effect at organizing rallies.

The Teatro became a huge success, playing both on flatbed trucks in the fields of the Central Valley and to boycott supporters in cities to raise money for the union. After the March to Sacramento in 1966, I joined them as a sort of business manager, planning performances, setting up fundraising events, and doing all the paperwork. I enjoyed the work, and was pleased that I could make a contribution, but I never felt part of the group.

I was an outsider. I took this very much for granted. My background was not Mexican, Filipino, farmworker, or even working class. I was made to feel—and at the time absorbed the attitude entirely—that as a middle-class *gringo*, I was there as an outsider to support the others. In a sense, I was a member of the oppressor race who was making atonement for its sins. That may or may not have been how others saw me. At the time I was unaware of the importance of cultural differences and their effects on thought and communication. Our differing cultural backgrounds could well have led us to see things differently from each other.

I had been raised to believe in America as a "melting pot," a place where all descendants of immigrants—the Teatro members and me included—would become Americans of equal status, and I considered that a desirable goal. On the occasions when I was at odds with some of the others, I thought that it was because they were, on the whole, young men whose attitudes and concerns I didn't share, not because there were any fundamental differences between us. With the wisdom of hindsight, I now think that our cultural differences may have been just as important as the differences in age and gender, although the others may have been as unaware of that element as I was. The cultural nationalism of various ethnic groups in the U.S. was still in the future.

I thought our work was important and didn't see anything wrong with our attitudes. Of course, we were all quite young, with the heedlessness of youth. Looking back, however, I

find it sad that there was so little kindness—if not appreciation—shown by Cesar, the NFWA, and the Teatro toward those of us who had left behind our normal lives to devote ourselves to the farmworkers' cause. I also think it sad that I had so little appreciation of the cultural differences between us and made no allowance for them.

In 1967, we—the Teatro Campesino—left Delano and the union, and opened a farmworkers' cultural center in Del Rey, just outside Fresno. The “Centro” was in a large, airy building, with plenty of room for rehearsing, making props and sets, etc. It consisted mostly of the Teatro, but there were also children's art classes (run by a charming young woman, Kerry Ohta, also a non-farmworker volunteer) and probably other activities that I do not remember. I still handled all the administrative responsibilities.

I had always been interested in the theater and as a teenager enjoyed performing in amateur theater groups. I eventually got a chance at acting with the Teatro in a play that Luis wrote. It was called *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa* and we were all very nervous about it. It was Luis's first full-length play, written and first performed while he was at San Jose State College. It was also the Teatro's first non-improvised piece (there was a script). I was doubly nervous, as it was the first time I appeared on stage with them. The rest of the cast had been quite skeptical about me acting, and conveyed the attitude that they thought me unworthy of appearing with them. I was reassured at a rehearsal when Luis, standing at the back of the theater, said that I was the only cast member whose performance reached that far. The play opened in San Francisco and was a huge success, confirming Luis's enormous talent.

In 1969 the Teatro was invited to perform at an amateur theater festival at the University of Nancy in eastern France. The invitation came through a French couple (journalists, I think) who had visited us in Del Rey, and with whom we had got on extremely well. They must have published a favorable report when they returned to France, for we received the invitation soon after. The festival organizers said they would pay our expenses, and we were off.

I performed with the Teatro at the festival and then, for a number of reasons, parted ways with them. I had little money, but cashed in the return half of my air ticket (we had been given round-trip tickets by the festival sponsors) and knocked around Paris for a bit. I made a few friends, but my French, although passable, was too poor to engage in very interesting or deep conversation, or indeed to find work. When I started running out of money, I went to London to look for work. Although I found London much less beautiful than Paris, I was a lot more comfortable there; I found the British friendly and welcoming, in contrast to most of the Parisians I had met.

I settled in London and reestablished a connection to Cesar's union, now the United Farm Workers. The consumer grape boycott was still on (there were children who reached the age of six or seven without knowing what grapes tasted like), and growers were apparently attempting to sell the occasional shipment of grapes to European customers. Based in

London, I lobbied longshoremen's unions in Britain, France, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and the Netherlands, asking them to "black" (refuse to unload) table grapes shipped from the strike region.

Most labor unions are affiliated in some way with international labor organizations, the longshoremen's unions with the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF). The general secretary of the ITF had met Cesar. He sympathized with the California farmworkers' organizing efforts and gave me letters of introduction to the European unions I visited. But even with this help, I was both astonished and impressed by the sympathy and solidarity shown this small group of workers 10,000 miles away in a foreign country—of whose plight they had no personal knowledge, other than the information from the ITF and me. It is perhaps roughly equivalent to the American International Longshoremen's Association being approached by a small group of people attempting to organize a union for tea workers in an unknown part of rural India and asking the union to refuse to unload shipments of particular brands of tea. A worthwhile effort, perhaps, but a long distance away, only one of many worthwhile efforts going on in the world at the time (e.g., the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa), and potentially involving the union in a lot of trouble.

French unions were sympathetic, but lacked the appropriate membership. Most of the shipping in the Netherlands arrived in containers (it was more unusual in the early 1970s) and the longshoremen had no way of knowing which, if any, contained American grapes. The Scandinavian unions agreed to help almost immediately. They were not only supportive, but also kind and welcoming, traits that I had not met, up to then, in American mainstream unions. British union representatives were friendly and sympathetic, but it took a longer campaign before their unions agreed to help. When they did, however, they were extremely effective, with the union representatives in the wholesale fruit markets negotiating agreements with their employers to stop ordering American grapes, so it would no longer be necessary to ask longshoremen to refuse to unload them. Approaching the German union was a waste of time.

I suspect that the main goal of my work in Cesar's mind (although it was not explained to me at the time) was a psychological impact on the California growers. The shipments I stopped or prevented may not have caused much financial damage to the growers, but we did show the growers that they couldn't escape the UFW, no matter where they went.

While running this European campaign, I of course had to work to support myself. The UFW sent me expenses for traveling around Europe, which I could never have afforded otherwise, but nothing for myself. I didn't expect anything, though, as we had always worked as volunteers for the union. Through boycott contacts, I eventually landed a secretarial job with the British union that represented longshoremen, the Transport and General Workers' Union. This was particularly fortunate, as the job not only provided me with a reasonable income, but my employer was tolerant of the time that I used to

represent the UFW—and also of the fact that I was not a very good secretary, never having done that sort of work before, except for Cesar.

Cesar said that he would like to visit England in order to thank those who had helped the union, and I organized a sort of state visit for him. He met union officials and Labor Party leaders, and thanked them for their support. He gave public speeches and I got as much publicity for him as I could. It was a small, remote campaign to the English, and although I had been doing my best to publicize it in England, it still wasn't widely known. Cesar's visit was a success, and increased our public profile tremendously, but pretty much everything that could be done there had been done. It would have been impossible for one person—me—to organize a consumer boycott, and, in any case, there were no California grapes in England because of the support of the longshoremen and market workers. I became interested in British unions, eventually got a job as a labor organizer and negotiator with another union, the Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs. I established a career for myself in London and my work for the UFW came to a gradual and natural end in the mid-1970s.