

## Doug Adair 1965–1971, 1975–1977

My name is Douglass Adair, and I am a card-carrying, dues-paying member of the United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO. I joined the union in the summer of 1965, when I was 22 years old, and am now enjoying a union pension, while growing dates (organically, naturally!) on our 5-acre farm in the Coachella Valley of California (patosdreamdategardens.com).

My wife, Debbie Nelson Adair, was working in the union clinic in Coachella and I with the legal department when we met in 1976. We were married on our farm—a liberated union territory—by Father Joe Tobin and the Reverend Leo Nieto, farmworker union priests. Our daughters were born at home, and delivered by union nurses/midwives Caren Jacobsen and Beth Gery. Doctors Pat Dowling and Dennis Markowitz, and Ruth Shy were in attendance. Our comadres and compadres—Gilbert Padilla, Rudy Reyes, Tom Dalzell, Caren Jacobsen, and Geri Archibald—are all members of our extended UFW family.

Thank you, thank you, thank you, all who contributed to this special moment in history and the amazing experiences it has given me and my family. I feel so tremendously grateful to all who supported that alternate vision of justice for farmworkers.

I was organized by Gilbert Padilla in June of 1965. I was picking peaches and plums in Tulare County in California's Central Valley and I was enjoying the experience. I enjoyed the life in the crews, the singing and joking, the overripe plum fights when the foreman was gone, the guys sharing their home-grown at the breaks. I was young, single, and in good health, and I liked physical labor and being outdoors. The Linell Farm Labor Camp, where we lived, was pretty miserable housing and it was there that Padilla began to organize me. If you want to do this kind of work, go ahead, why not? But things could be much better if you had a union. It seemed like a no-brainer. But there was so much more that he and the Reverend Dave Havens (and his wife, Suzanne) of the California Migrant Ministry began teaching me about a possible alternative lifestyle.

I had intended to work in the grapes in the fall of that year and also to help out the folks in the union office down in Delano: Cesar and Helen Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and especially Bill Esher, who was putting out the union newspaper, *El Malcriado*. But the grape strike began on September 8, with the (predominantly) Filipino workers of another union, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) walking out.

Eugene Nelson, a writer passing through Delano, and I, open to the possibilities, eagerly volunteered to help out, as the UFW prepared to join the strike. And like a magnet, the struggle in Delano began drawing to itself the most amazing waves of people of all racial, ethnic, religious, and political persuasions, both from the city and from the farmworker and ex-farmworker communities.

It was Epifanio Camacho, an evangelical Protestant, who urged our members, in the meeting of September 16, 1965, to join in the strike, and who quoted Emiliano Zapata, "It is better to die on your feet than to live on your knees." Cesar Chavez was much more cautious in his remarks, warning of the difficulties, the hard road ahead. But he was no less certain that we had it in our power to change the course of history. And in the weeks ahead, I began hearing about the Mexican Revolution from people who had been there (or whose parents had been there), and also that the land, like the air and the water, should belong to the people. (Hey, I had no problem with that!) I was hearing the opinion that the people who produce the food and feed the world should be just as honored and respected as anyone else.

Workers were asking why should we be paid less than someone who sits in a chair and talks on the phone and reads and signs papers all day, and in a whole year produces nothing tangible, while we are feeding him? Farmworker wisdom was soon sharpened by people like Luis Valdez and Phillip Vera Cruz, who could connect the dots for us with political theories of change and revolution. In spite of my many years of college education, I always think of Delano U. as giving me real insight into how the world works and could work ...

In addition to the experiences of the Mexican Revolution, there were many Filipinos with experience or awareness of the Hukbalahap movement in the Philippines. When the Pagliarulo packing shed burned down in the first week of the strike, we joked (with pride) that it was done by our Huks. And people like Fina Hernandez would tell stories of strikes of the 1930s, such as the 1933 cotton strike in Corcoran, when more than 30,000 workers were on strike, living in a stockade and guarded by the strike militia; and of the Pixley massacre when growers attacked a union meeting and murdered dozens of workers.

In 1965, it was assumed that the growers would attack, jail, even murder us, and part of the invitation for the outside volunteers was to provide witnesses who could testify to and hopefully prevent the expected violence. Padilla and Chavez and Huerta, while not renouncing the experience of the Mexican Revolution or previous farm labor strikes, were calling for a nonviolent struggle, with the same radical vision as previously sought through armed struggle.

They argued that the Mexican Revolution had devastated the country (as had the Russian and Chinese revolutions). And they argued that the armed struggle, in unleashing such violence, had corrupted the winners as well as the losers, the good guys as well as the bad guys. After winning the armed struggle, the Party (the PRI in Mexico, the Communist Party in Russia and China), decided that they, no less than the capitalist elite before them, wanted cheap food for the cities, for the workers. Soon white shirts were dispatched from Party headquarters to tell the peasants what and how to produce, setting prices, and valuing farm labor at the bottom of the economic system.

Nonviolent struggle, as practiced by Gandhi and the Southern civil rights movement, offered an alternative route to change. In the early 1960s, the Kennedy Administration was giving lip service to land reform in Latin America and the Philippines, and we saw no reason why we could not seek, through nonviolent struggle, those same benefits in California's Central Valley. The Plan of Delano, read nightly on the March to Sacramento in 1966, called on the current social order to dissolve.

The evolution of the Schenley contract, between its signing in 1966, and its loss in 1972, showed the direction the union could have gone, had we not lost the strikes of 1972 and 1973. Many of the Schenley workers had begun to build or buy their own homes. The little town of Richgrove was being transformed by self-help housing, before- and after-school programs, health insurance (serviced by the UFW Clinic in Delano), and the union service center, which helped workers with immigration, taxes, Social Security, and all the intersections of farmworker life with the outer world. And there was no doubt in our minds that the Schenley Ranch Committee could eventually run the ranch, through a lease or whatever, and negotiate directly with the winery and corporate headquarters for a better price for the grapes. It was this vision, more than just an extra nickel or dime, that drew people to support the farmworker union struggle.

After six years (1965–1970) of working on union staff at *El Malcriado*, the union newspaper in Delano (and a year in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas in 1967), I went out on the grape boycott to Philadelphia, with Padilla and a crew including Harriet Teller, Evans Garcia, Lilly Sprintz, Tom Dalzell, and Hope Lopez and her two sons. In Philadelphia, as in Delano, an amazing group of people rallied to the cause. Hope Lopez and the Saludado sisters and Carolina Franco from Earlimart (and before them, Marion Moses and Eric Schmidt) had established a broad coalition of supporters and contacts in the area. Padilla methodically put together all the pieces, with up to 30 picket lines a week, delegations, as well as phone-ins, marches, and meetings. Everything focused on trying to persuade Acme Markets, the dominant chain, to stop buying non-union grapes. Finally, Acme Markets agreed in full-page ads in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* to buy only union-harvested grapes. We had the mechanism in place and figured we could now take on any segment of agribusiness.

The lettuce strike broke out almost immediately. I returned to Delano in December of 1971 (after also serving in the Philly lettuce boycott under Richie Ross, and then with Harriet Teller in St. Louis). I went to the union hiring hall and got a dispatch under the new union contracts in the grape industry. I got a job pruning vines at the Ducor Ranch owned by Tenneco, the oil-and-gas multinational conglomerate. My UFW friend, Rudy Reyes, was on the ranch committee, and another UFW friend, Macario Bustos, was a worker there. While the union was putting top priority on winning the lettuce strike and boycott, and the headquarters had moved to La Paz, near Tehachapi, a real revolution on the ground was taking place under the new contracts from the Coachella Valley to Napa.

Delano still offered a tremendously vibrant community with the clinic and service center, gas station and credit union, all offering benefits that vastly improved farmworkers' lives. The farm labor camp that I lived in was predominantly made up of Arab workers (from North Yemen) and Filipinos (though we were minorities among Tenneco's thousand-plus workers). But the union representative from the field office, Juan Flores, made a special effort to serve and include the minorities as well as the majority Latinos. And the real organizing, one-on-one with other workers, was going on under contracts all over the Central Valley. Tenneco and Roberts Farms of McFarland (Ray Olivas led the ranch committee) were the most liberated farms by 1972, and others were rapidly mobilizing and exercising their rights.

I was in jail (37 days) during the 1973 strikes, when we lost most of the contracts and I left the union service for two years while I was on probation. It seemed like a low point for the union, with a return to violence, the campaign against illegals in the lemon strike, and resentment and racism against Filipinos. The Gallo March and the new California Agricultural Labor Relations Act in 1975 opened up new opportunities for organizing, and I returned to the union staff in August of 1975, printing leaflets in Delano and Calexico and working for the legal department in Calexico, Salinas, and Coachella in 1975 until 1977.

I returned to the fields in December of 1977, working mostly in grapes at the David Freedman Company in Coachella. My 10 years of work under union contract (1978–1988) included vesting for my union pension. After losing our contract in negotiations in 1988, I continued working for a year without a contract, but put more and more time into my own 5-acre farm, where a fellow UFW member, Francisco Paniagua, helped me plant date palms and market the crop in farmers' markets and by mail order.

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Part of the ideology surrounding the recruitment of volunteers for the farmworker union was *Sacrificios para la Causa* (sacrifices for the cause)—the idea that college-educated Anglos (for the most part) had given up lucrative job offers to come serve the poor farmworkers in Delano. But remember that this was the 1960s, and many of us were looking for something more than lucrative job offers. We wanted to serve the people, but we also found out that Delano had plenty of sex, drugs, and rock and roll. The gay-owned Peoples Cafe, where we would party on Friday and Saturday nights, featured dancing and drinking with plenty of opportunity for pot and sex for those looking for them. Many did make sacrifices and union life was especially hard on families. People lost cars, furniture, and homes, and personal relationships suffered under the stress. However, that was always true for farm laborers.

It seemed natural to me that people could and would offer and make a commitment of time and energy, for which we were grateful, before moving on, hopefully continuing to help us from their new situation. Those obsessed with sacrifices would sometimes scorn such people as quitters, saying that they couldn't handle the sacrifices. To me, much of our

success came from encouraging people to give what they could, an hour on a picket line, full-time work in a staff position, or even just one phone call to an Acme Market vice president.

Later, I came to view the emphasis on sacrifices and discipline, and demands that the union speak with one voice, as threatening to rob the movement of the vitality that came with that early, all-inclusive invitation to come and help us. From the first, various ideologues, especially anti-communists, campaigned against the communists and other radicals who came to volunteer. They have their own agendas, argued the anti-communists. Others worried about the monks and priests subverting the union into a hierarchical, top-down structure like the Catholic Church. Anti-clericals railed against the Church's role on the side of the elite in Mexican history and its support of imperialism and the war against the farmworkers of Vietnam.

Of course, people did come to Delano with their own agendas. Workers from various supporting unions wanted us to join the UAW or AFL-CIO or remain independent. Democrats wanted us to support their politicians. And agendas could be personal, as well as political—an escape from parents or a bad marriage or a dead-end job or boring college classes. And for many, union service did offer that escape: fun and excitement as well as meaningful work; a chance to serve others but also a great opportunity for personal growth, education, culture, intellectual challenge, and responsibilities, and a feeling that we really were making a difference.

Sadly, in the late 1970s and 1980s, the union leadership grew increasingly hostile to this diversity of voices and opinions that fueled such a vibrant dialogue within the union. They seemed to want unquestioning and blind obedience and a focus on discipline, fearful that any diverse opinions would weaken the movement. I supported Rosario Pelayo, a fellow grape worker, who was running as an independent for the union board of directors at the convention in 1981. The union leadership branded her and her supporters a malignant force seeking to destroy the union. After the convention, a flunky came down from La Paz and told the union clinic staff in Coachella that my wife, Debbie, was being fired because she was married to the traitor Pato (my nickname in Coachella). In the 1990s, the UFW was only a shadow of its former self in the Coachella Valley.

For the farm labor community, the greatest legacy of the union struggle has been to inspire the younger generations to improve their lives. That usually means getting out of farm labor. New generations of migrants have taken their places, working without union contracts, medical insurance, pensions, and all the other benefits we were beginning to win 30 years ago. But for those of us who had the chance to work under union contracts in the 1970s, a radical vision of justice for farmworkers was a reality being offered, being created by a democratic union of, by, and for farmworkers.