

Mary Lou Watson 1966–1968

My first recollections that there were problems for farmworkers who worked in the California fields harvesting our food were on family trips through the San Joaquin Central Valley. I was appalled at the poverty of their living conditions: dilapidated shacks and lack of sanitary facilities. I was 10 or 11 years old and was impressed with what a difficult life it must be for the farmworkers who picked our food.

My first personal involvement with the farmworkers' movement began in 1965 when I heard there was a strike going on in Delano and I knew I wanted to someday be a part of working with that movement. I was in school at the time and involved with anti-war and social justice issues in the Bay Area.

In January of 1966, my sister, Donna Watson, visited Delano for a week and returned to our shared apartment. We both talked about sometime going to work full time in Delano. We both continued with our college classes and began joining picket lines at grocery and liquor stores. We also did behind-the-scenes local support work for the boycott.

Sometime in the spring of 1966 my sister and I spent a long weekend in Delano and were taken by the involvement and commitment of everyone there. It felt like it was a movement that we could make a connection with and it seemed to hold the possibility of affecting many peoples' lives for the better. In June of 1966, Delano offered a student summer project for volunteers and I joined in. My sister had already become a full-time volunteer; she and Rodney Freeland became the offset print operators putting out the farmworkers newsletter, *El Mosquito Zumbador*, which existed before *El Malcriado* was born.

The first week or so of the summer project was an orientation for the 40 or so student volunteers. Those of us who spoke Spanish often had a bigger role on the local grape field picket lines, and some of us who didn't speak Spanish were sent out to large cities to build support networks for strengthening the grape boycott.

I was sent to Chicago. Five of us traveling in an old 1953 Chrysler arrived in July after an accident delayed us in Iowa. With my foot in a cast from the accident, I was assigned to run the coordinating office in Chicago. The rest of the volunteers went on to other cities. I worked with some very inspiring people from the cardinal's committee for Spanish-speaking people. Their office was on S. Wabash Avenue on the edge of downtown and the Chicago Puerto Rican community. The cardinal's committee provided me with housing and office space and encouragement for my mission: to set up local supporters to boycott wines. Later, table grapes were added to the boycott. The committee found me a family to live with who also fed me. We volunteers were expected to find such accommodations and were given only \$5 per week for our spending money.

It was hard for me to get out and meet with prospective supporters because my foot was in a cast and I needed to take public transportation. Most of my organizing was done by

phone and I provided a lot of basic education for the people of Chicago who wondered what the farmworkers in California had to do with Chicago. There were some good local social action organizations already in town who were open to the information that their actions to boycott certain food, wines, etc., could be meaningful.

That was my summer activity. In the fall of 1966, I returned to Merritt College in Oakland to continue my studies. While at school, I continued to participate in picket lines at local supermarkets.

When I was in school that year, I had a growing concern about my place with the anti-war movement. I had the choice to stay on campus and become more involved in the anti-war actions, but somehow I knew I needed to do something more immediate to effect changes in the social inequities I saw in my country and in my neighborhood. My interest was more in working full time for the farmworkers than in staying in school.

When the summer of 1967 arrived, I decided to volunteer full time for the farmworkers. I arranged to work for the boycott in Yuba City–Marysville while also working as a teacher's aide in a school for farmworker children. In the evenings I helped the organizing efforts around an upcoming union election on a nearby DiGiorgio ranch. At this time there were a number of local students who picked fruit in the orchards for summer employment. It was useful to have volunteer Anglo students like me do house meetings to organize these other Anglo students. Many of them could see the benefits of belonging to a union even for a summer job. Those who were working in the orchards at the time of the election would be eligible to vote, so we needed all workers to be in favor of unionizing. The farmworkers did win the election in the fields, but the Teamsters won in the packing sheds. It was a start. It was one of the early union successes.

In the late summer of 1967, I returned to Delano after the election win. My job then was to be the picket captain at the fresh grape packing sheds in Arvin. For those who don't know, Arvin is in the middle of nowhere. We often felt very vulnerable out there alone in the middle of the night, maybe eight or 10 of us, half of us women. One time, a large group of workers came out and waved their packing shed axes at us. We stayed on our picket line and they finally returned to their shed. We sang louder and were more determined than ever to stay on our picket line.

Later that summer, the farmworker union leaders held meetings for all the union strikers and volunteers to explain the next phase of the action. The plan was to send boycott crews to a wider area across the U.S. and Canada to step up the boycott targeting fresh grapes. A group of us were being sent to major cities in the Northwest: Vancouver, British Columbia for me, Seattle for Bill and Liz Taylor, and Portland for Fran Ryan, a friend I had met through the boycott.

Nick Jones had done some prior organizing in Vancouver, but now it was time for a more intensive push. Much of my effort was focused on gathering union backing for the boycott.

The Woodworkers Union was the most helpful and they also gave me housing. I gave talks at many union meetings and I organized picket lines. I remember being intimidated by one fellow standing up at a union meeting who asked, "What do you know about picking grapes? When did you ever pick grapes?" I replied that I didn't have to pick grapes to understand what the living and working conditions were like for the workers. I described the conditions and explained what I knew from having lived in California and having visited the San Joaquin Valley many times.

In contrast, at another union meeting of the Woodworkers Local, I had requested a donation and a member from the floor proposed \$25 to be given from the local. This was immediately challenged by several others who said: "Let's make it \$50," and then, "Do I hear \$100?" People were very enthusiastic and they felt solidarity with the farmworkers who had been left out of the collective bargaining process. In Vancouver and its outlying areas, there was a real militancy among the rank-and-file union members in support of the farmworkers having the right to organize. I stayed in Vancouver until the end of December when all boycotters were called back to Delano.

The Guimarra table grape strike had begun and a new assignment of volunteers was sent to spearhead the boycott efforts in New York. This was a unique city because about 10 percent of California table grapes were funneled to the East Coast through the Bronx produce terminal. We had an interesting crew going back in this old school bus. The bus heater was up in the front and was directed at only the driver. The January trip involved wrapping ourselves in sleeping bags to survive the cold. I managed to come down with a terrible case of bronchitis that lingered for many weeks.

We were well received all across the country. We stayed with Reyes Tijerina's group in New Mexico. A number of churches welcomed us at nightly stops with open arms, food, and shelter. We were able to feel the real support and community that was present across the country. It was a bitter trip, more than a week of travel, before we finally arrived at our destination: the Seafarers International Hall in Brooklyn, New York.

The routine was to rise early and go to the Bronx terminal in the morning to see what we could do to stop the grapes. We were on picket duty from 4 a.m. to 8 a.m. because that was when trucks loaded at the terminal. Upon returning to the union hall, we made phone calls to grape brokers as concerned consumers: "We don't want you buying grapes from California because the farmworkers need better working conditions." The grape brokers became enraged as we tied up their phone lines. We had to listen to quite a bit of profanity as we continued to talk with them as they swore at us. As long as they were still on the line, they weren't able to receive any new grape orders, so listening to foul language was just fine with us.

One morning at the Bronx terminal the police came and arrested us on some trumped-up charges that we had an illegal picket line. About 10 of us were hauled away to the Bronx jail. It was my first time being arrested. Dolores Huerta was with us and led us in singing

and chanting strike and civil rights songs, which kept morale pretty high. The charges were dropped, though it took them a while to release us; I believe we didn't get home until the following day. Also, we were told not to show up at the terminal the next day. We started doing roving picket lines at various small supermarkets and mom-and-pop grocery stores. Our boycott director, Fred Ross, held nightly meetings with us to educate us about organizing tactics and to give us assignments for the next day.

This was the first time I had ever worked with Dolores Huerta and it was inspirational to see how she worked with the powers that be, whether it was at the fruit terminal, the union hall, or the picket line. She was not intimidated and she didn't let their opposition ruffle her emotions. This allowed her to be clear-thinking when it came to choosing the right strategy for that particular situation. She had a deeply felt understanding of the rights of the farmworkers to organize, and this seemed to give her strength to speak out clearly. She continues to be an inspiration to me.

In March of 1967, some of our New York crew were sent off to other boycott centers. I went to Chicago along with Eliseo Medina, Maria and Antonia Salgado, George Catalan, Tony Hohl, Judy and Mike Gittland, and Paul. We rented an apartment in a tenement next door to the cardinal's committee office, 1300 S. Wabash Ave., where we had our headquarters. Once again the cardinal's committee was one of our greatest supporters.

I was in charge of rallying the religious community to support us. It was interesting for me because I had grown up in the Congregational Church but was no longer active because I hadn't seen the church being connected to relevant social issues. Now I was connecting to the church ministries that focused on bettering social conditions both for local and for global communities. I was trying to pull in the Protestant, Jewish, and Catholic communities to work on a joint effort to boycott grapes in the city. We developed interfaith boycott committees. I remember talking to the Presbytery of Chicago and ranting a bit about the conditions in the fields in California. After I sat down next to Eliseo, he asked me what I was so mad about. I replied that maybe I thought I was talking to my own childhood congregation and needed to wake them up. After this talk, however, lots of people came up to our boycott table to say, "What can I do? How can I help out?" Obviously, something about my talk had worked. I made a big effort to get as many priests and nuns as I could on our picket lines. Chicago was the type of city where this made a difference. Customers didn't want to cross a picket line with religious people on it. It was a big payoff. We had a lot of success with the boycott.

My family had always been very supportive of my sister's and my work in the union. They visited me that summer in Chicago on the picket line and showed their church friends back home in Sacramento an article I'd written in the "Christian Century" magazine about the farmworkers' struggle.

After Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, in April of 1968, the city of Chicago became an occupied town with armored personnel carriers on many street corners of our

neighborhood. My personal grief at King's death was made worse by seeing how the city overreacted to some episodes of looting that happened during the outrage being expressed by the African-American community. I personally found it difficult to work during this time; I was in shock and grief.

The other dramatic event during my stay in Chicago was the Democratic National Convention that summer. Dolores had some delegate badges and she gave one to me and to another volunteer, Joan Schnabel. We were instructed by her to work the convention floor and target the Southern states' delegates, urging them to throw their support to the grape boycott and to be contact people for future boycott work in their states. We were up against a time line because Hubert Humphrey was about to give an acceptance speech and we had a limited window of time to reach delegates before their attention would be totally diverted. Those delegates I did talk with were sympathetic. I was down on the floor when Dolores unfurled a Huelga flag in the balcony and it was a big boost to our visibility at the convention.

Our efforts continued throughout the summer after the convention. We brought together the unions, community organizations, and the religious community, so we ended up with a much larger group working collectively together.

By the fall of 1968, I realized that I was wearing thin from the pace and intensity of the work. I now had increased my ability to speak Spanish (thanks to a lot of encouragement from Eliseo, Maria, and Antonia) and was interested in pursuing this and some other projects. I told Eliseo, our boycott leader, that I was going to return to California; I had been working with the union for more than a year and a half and needed to return home to figure out what the next step was for me.

Once back in California, I connected up with local boycotters and walked the picket lines of my hometown. It wasn't until many years later that I realized how much this whole experience had changed my life. By the age of 21 and 22, I had matured quite a bit with all the responsibility I had. The people I met were an inspiration for me and this could never be duplicated. I am indebted to the time that I was able to work in the farmworker movement. People like Dolores and Eliseo, whom I continue to see, have been an inspiration in my life for many years. Some of my closest friends I met through the farmworker movement and we continue to be influenced by our involvement in those days.

Just recently, while at Father Bill O'Donnell's memorial service, I realized that I have grown and embraced many new challenges since my volunteer days. But it was all the farmworker organizing principles that prepared me for subsequent involvements: nonviolence, solid organizing, trust in your coworkers, and the heartfelt strength of being in a community.