

Ed Chiera 1966–1969

Boycott Letters to Giumarra

The scene is New York City sometime in the spring of 1968. I was one of 30 farmworkers and volunteer organizers whom Cesar had sent there from Delano to start the infamous “Grape Boycott,” the boycott of all California table grapes. Fred Ross, Sr. was placed in charge of the boycott organizing drive. Dolores Huerta was made director of our New York Boycott Office and chief spokesperson for the union.

Months before leaving Delano, I had been working with Cesar, Jim Drake (his personal assistant), and Jerry Cohen (our legal counsel) to gather data on Giumarra Vineyards’ grape sales. Giumarra Vineyards Corporation was at that time (and I believe still is) the largest table grape grower in the world. Our union—United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO—had been out on strike against Giumarra since August 1967. Over 1500 of Giumarra’s grape workers walked out on strike that summer. We had set up boycott committees around the nation to stop the grapes Giumarra shipped, but our boycott had stalled. Giumarra Vineyards had cut a deal with over 40 other growers and was soon shipping their table grapes under various growers’ labels. Our only choice, then, was to boycott all California table grapes. Another strategic decision was also made to focus our entire boycott campaign first on New York City. Significantly, New York and its metropolitan area accounted for nearly 24 percent of Giumarra’s market. We figured that if we could cut a hole in that market alone, Giumarra and the rest of the conspiring growers would lose so much business we could force them to the bargaining table.

So, in February 1968, we left Delano for New York in a caravan of a few beat up cars, circa 1950s, and an old donated yellow school bus, which ran okay but lacked a heater to keep us warm in the winter ride across the country. Stopping each night at cities along the way, we rode for seven days, wrapped in blankets, eating cold sandwiches of salami, cheese, and peanut butter and jelly, yelling ¡*Viva la Huelga!* ¡*Viva César Chávez!*, and singing many rounds of *De Colores* and *Huelga en General* to keep us warm. Cesar had sent Fred ahead of us via air to make arrangements for the organizers to live at the Seafarers International Union headquarters and dormitory in Brooklyn. (Paul Hall, SIU’s president, had offered to put us up in their dormitory, feed us at their cafeteria, give us late-model vehicles to run around the NYC area, and office space—all for free! I don’t think Paul really knew what he was getting into or how long we were going to stay!)

The morning after we arrived in Brooklyn, Fred called us to a meeting. Standing there in front of us with his signatory brown clipboard and yellow legal pad, notes all scrawled over it, Fred gave us our marching orders. Our daily schedule would start around 4:30 a.m. at the Hunt’s Point Produce Terminal in the Bronx, where we would set up picket lines in

front of any grape stalls. We then would return for breakfast and spend the day picketing produce shops elsewhere in the city or reaching out to any group we could enlist to support our cause. Each evening at 9, Fred would reconvene us to discuss what we had achieved during the day and what our schedule would be for the next day. These were not idle BS sessions, Fred demanded results!

Fred had divided up the work of reaching out to various kinds of organizations to get support for the boycott: unions, churches, synagogues, news groups, student organizations, and ethnic social clubs— whatever organization we could reach for support. One task that Fred assigned to each organizer was to ask each support group to write a letter on their organization’s letterhead to John Giumarra indicating that they would not buy table grapes until he met and settled with the UFWOC. As a way to measure our work, Fred had charts posted on the wall with the name of each organizer and next to it, a numbered thermometer, which would rise each time a letterhead letter was collected. The challenge was on! Which organizer could collect the most letters to send on to Giumarra?

While some organizers were assigned unions, others church groups, I was assigned the Italian-American community! I think it was my surname—the only Italian in the group—that got me that assignment. So I looked in the various NYC phone books for Italian-American clubs and organizations and started calling. I got many rejects—some polite, others not so polite! I sought out Italian-American priests, got some promises to help, but no results. So, unable to find any groups to meet with, I was relegated to picket produce stores in Manhattan during the day.

Meanwhile, the results of other organizers started to come in. As one observed the “thermometers” on the wall, the first scores looked something like this: “Muñoz 5, Taylor 4, Serda 4, Chiera Zero,” and so on.

Weeks went by and I had still not made any headway into the Italian-American community. I was losing faith in my organizing ability—maybe I just wasn’t cut out for this type of work? Maybe I should go back to Delano and just do research again for Cesar? No! To do that would be to say I had failed. Failure was not a word in Cesar’s vocabulary. And to Fred, it was just a matter of not working hard enough and trying new approaches to get the job done.

A month had passed. Letterhead letter score: “Muñoz 24, Taylor 19, Serda 21, Chiera Zero.”

Fred said nothing. Clipboard and yellow pad at hand, he just had that look, the one that sent fear through one’s bones. Peering over his half-rim glasses, he gazed down at me and waited for me to report. That look told me that he wanted no excuses, but rather an explanation on what I had done and on what I planned to do next.

Quietly and firmly, he made suggestions. One was to talk to Dolores. She had just learned who was leading the local Longshoremen's Union in Brooklyn. "He's Italian," said Fred. "Go ask Dolores for the contact." I did.

The union official agreed to see me the following day at his office. Dolores said she wanted to come along. I was delighted because I needed whatever help I could get to persuade this guy about boycotting a fellow native son, John Giumarra.

When we arrived at the union office, this tall, dark, and handsomely built man with slightly graying hair extends his hand, first to Dolores and then to me. Yes, he had heard about the grape strike in California. Yes, Giumarra's name was known in Brooklyn. Many Brooklyn Italians made wine and bought wine grapes that John Giumarra, Sr. shipped just for them. So the conversation started.

Then, as the conversation drifted on, Mr. X had clearly become more and more infatuated by this young, exotic, vivacious woman next to him. Rather than to me, he directed his attention, questions, and comments to Dolores.

"What was it like in California?" he would ask Dolores. "...Oh, you used to teach? My mother was teacher too." Etc.

After 20 minutes or so, I was getting fidgety. I needed to get to the point—I needed this guy to give me leads to local Italian-American leaders and organizations, and fast!

"Mr. X, excuse me, but..."

"What do you want, kid?" he said, glaring down at me, obviously perturbed that I had interrupted his friendly interlude with this most alluring woman from California.

I quickly explained the purpose of our visit. I had the task of reaching out to Italian-American organizations, said I. I just wondered if he would give me names to call and introductions to the leaders of these organizations. "What for?" he asked.

"Well, Brother...er Mr. X, we want to ask these groups to support us by writing on their organizations' letterhead paper, letters to Giumarra supporting our boycott."

"How many letters do you want?" he asked.

"Well, you see I need to meet with these groups and..."

"Look, kid. You are not answering my question! How many letters do you want?"

"Well as many as I can get," said I.

“Come back Tuesday morning. I will have your letters,” he said, this being the Wednesday before. He then gave me the cold shoulder and continued his lively chat with Dolores.

Seeing that I would be getting nowhere by arguing with him about the process we organizers were to follow, I thanked him as we left and said I would return Tuesday for whatever letters he had. I figured I would get one or two letters from him, and then have time once again to ask him for leads and introductions to the Italian community.

Just before noon that Tuesday, I returned to Longshoremen’s Union headquarters and asked to see Mr. X. His secretary greeted me saying that Mr. X was busy in a meeting at that moment, but that she had something for me and handed me a letter-sized cardboard box. I stopped at her desk for a moment and peaked inside. Within the box were dozens of letters addressed to John Giumarra, Sr., all on different letterhead stationery. Many were written in Italian and all saying that they would not buy any grapes from California until the strike was settled. I was shaking with amazement and wondered how I would explain this to Fred.

I decided no explanation was necessary although I was feeling just a bit sheepish about how I gotten the results. I presented the letters to Fred without comment and later that afternoon gazed with satisfaction at the thermometers. Letterhead letter score: “Muñoz 40, Taylor 28, Serda 29, Chiera 37,” and so on through the charts of other organizers.

I know Fred really wanted to know how I had gotten these letters all in a bunch, but he didn’t ask. Dolores obviously was pleased, but was not wasting any time on Bother X. She had other leaders to capture for our cause.

As I recall, I met up with Brother X at union function. I wanted to get his attention for a minute or so. I wanted to tell him that Giumarra was particularly upset about the boycott support letters he received in Italian. Also, I was curious about how Brother X had gotten dozens of letters in less than a week’s time. How could one reach so many Italian-American organizations so quickly? In thanking him again for all the support letters, especially those written in Italian, I told him how amazed I was that he had gotten so many organizations to write letters on their letterhead stationery.

“No problem, kid,” he said. “We make their letterhead stationery in our basement print shop. Oh, and the letters? I told our business agents to call union retirees and got them to write to Giumarra on letterhead we had in stock.”