

Jerry Brown 1966–1970

Impact of the Grape Boycott

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“To be a man is to suffer for others. God help us be men!”

Cesar E. Chavez, March 10, 1968

When Juanita and I drove into Delano in the blistering hot summer of 1968, I was an anthropology graduate student who had come to study the farmworker movement. Little did I know at the time that Cesar Chavez’s teachings on organizing, nonviolence, and social justice would profoundly shape my life.

My research almost ended abruptly, even before it began, on the first day I arrived. Delano is the capital of California’s table grape industry and home of the luscious green seedless grape. This small rural town was split down the middle by Highway 99, which runs from Southern to Northern California, passing through the fertile San Joaquin Valley and some of the richest agribusiness farmlands and orchards in the nation. Typically, Mexican and Mexican-American farmworkers lived on one side of the highway. Anglo growers, ranch operators, and business owners lived on the other side, prompting one observer to call Highway 99 the “longest slum in America.”

Driving north from Los Angeles, I turned left to exit the freeway in Delano. I walked into the first bar I found and naively asked for directions to the “farmworkers’ union hall.” It was like a scene out of an old Western movie, when the stranger comes through the swinging barroom doors, and everyone falls silent and stares at him. Well, if looks could kill, I would have been dead on the spot. Obviously, I was on the wrong side of town—the grower side of town—and my hopes of doing a community study of Delano were dashed.

We drove back across the highway and joined the roving farmworker picket lines. Over the next few days, we were chased by dogs, pelted by dirt, and churned up by hoeing machines. But we were not victims of discrimination. This was happening to everyone on the union picket lines.

I had come to Delano because Chavez had recently led 5000 Mexican-American and Filipino farmworkers out on strike. He had also launched a bold national boycott of all California table grapes in order to bring economic pressure on the growers so that they would recognize the fledgling farmworker union. After two weeks of pacing the picket lines on the dusty rural roads that crisscrossed the vineyards, I finally met Chavez face to face and proudly introduced myself as “an anthropologist from Cornell University, who has come to study the farmworker movement.”

“Do you know who farmworkers dislike more than social workers?” Chavez asked, catching me completely off guard. Then he stared at me with those soft eyes that could see deep into your soul, quietly, immobile, for a full minute that soon turned into an eternity, waiting for my answer.

“No, I don’t, Mr. Chavez,” I finally stammered.

“Social scientists,” he replied tersely. “Are you here to do another study to tell us that we are poor? Well, anyone can see that farmworkers are poor by spending a day in Delano,” he retorted. “That’s why we are on strike. Now, why don’t you go back out on the picket lines? Come see me in two weeks and we’ll talk about your research,” he concluded, with a hint of a smile that gave me the faintest hope that I had not totally blown my last chance of ever completing my doctoral research here.

Two weeks later, Chavez summoned Juanita and me to a meeting with the union’s leaders. “Look, Jerry, Juanita,” he began in the most soothing voice I had ever heard, “we need your help to set up grape boycotts in cities around the country where we have no organizers. And to stay in touch with the farmworkers who are already in places like New York, Boston, Toronto, and San Francisco. I want you both to help coordinate the boycott and work with us from 5 a.m. in the morning, when we start the picket lines, until the end of the day.” Chavez pointed to a map on the wall and drew an imaginary line down the middle of the country, just west of Chicago. “Jerry, you take the East; Juanita, you take all of the West.

“If you do this, I’ll appoint you as national grape boycott coordinators. I will arrange for you to live with a farmworker family, the Guajardos, who come from Matamoros, Mexico. And at our weekly Friday night union meeting, I’ll introduce you, Jerry, and tell the strikers that you are writing a labor history of our movement and would like to interview them. They will open their homes and hearts to you.”

To my amazement, barely one month after arriving in Delano, here I was coordinating a national grape boycott, speaking with union organizers, church leaders, volunteers, and reporters from around the country. I quickly found out that I had a talent for organizing and loved it as well. The work was both empowering and exhilarating. Instead of simply studying social problems in the classroom, I was suddenly part of a vital movement that was working to improve the lives of impoverished farmworkers.

Over the next months, Chavez gave me additional responsibilities. I became the union research director, analyzing U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) statistics on grape shipments to 41 North American cities to measure the impact of the boycott. I was appointed International Grape Boycott Coordinator as well, communicating with longshoremens’ unions in England and Sweden that refused to unload freighter shipments of California grapes.

It was my role as research director that gave rise to my first and only conflict with Chavez—one that almost caused me to leave the union.

In order to evaluate the impact of the boycott, I selected the 1966 grape harvest as the “base year” before the boycott started. I then adjusted for the size of the harvest and compared table grape shipments in 1966 with those in the current year, 1968, for each of the 41 cities listed in the USDA’s grape unload reports. More than 50 percent of all grape shipments went to 10 major cities (New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Boston, Toronto, Detroit, Montreal, and Cleveland). But in 1968, the union had effective boycotts in only four of these 10 key cities! Somehow, I had to communicate these findings to Chavez.¹

At the time, Chavez was suffering from severe back pain and was often confined to a rocking chair during the day. But, every time his personal assistant, Marion Moses, let me in to see him, Chavez’s eyes would glaze over when I showed him the dense, handwritten columns of numbers I had compiled. Finally, after my third fruitless attempt to get this information across, I found myself shouting, “Look, Cesar, if you want to win this strike, then you’ve got to get these farmworkers and volunteers off the picket lines here in Delano and out into the cities on the boycott.” Chavez nodded politely, as Marion showed me to the door. Weeks passed, then months passed, and nothing happened.

I was becoming desperate. Finally, I took the bold step of asking my friend, the Rev. Chris Hartmire, director of the California Migrant Ministry, to call a board meeting, so I could explain my data on the grape boycott impact to all of the union leaders. He agreed. Nearly every member of the UFWOC executive board attended: Cesar Chavez, Gil Padilla, Julio Hernandez, Larry Itliong, and Philip Vera Cruz. Andy Imutan, Tony Oredain, and Dolores Huerta were away on the boycott at the time. I ended my presentation by announcing that, if the board did not take immediate steps to strengthen the boycott, Juanita and I would leave the union. Again, everyone listened patiently, but nothing happened. As promised, Juanita and I soon departed for her parents’ home in Miami and prepared to take a research trip to Mexico.

To my surprise, three days before we were to travel, I received a call from UFWOC vice president Larry Itliong, who said “Cesar has decided to strengthen the boycott and would like you to come to a general meeting he is calling at the Catholic mission in Santa Barbara, so that you can explain your research to everyone. He’s asked LeRoy Chatfield to help you make the presentation.”

¹ This grape boycott data can be found in Jerald B. Brown, *The United Farmworkers Grape Strike and Boycott, 1965-1970: An Evaluation of the Culture of Poverty Theory*. Cornell University, Latin American Studies Program, Dissertation Series, Number 39, August 1972, 348 pages. This thesis publication is available at the Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

More than 100 strikers attended the meeting in Santa Barbara. LeRoy explained to me that Chavez had never been able to read my tiny columns of figures, and as a result was not sure that I really knew what I was talking about.

LeRoy wisely suggested that we draw large, simple colored charts for each major city, and pin them up around the room, so that everyone could plainly see the boycott status for each area—where grape shipments were up and where they were down.

Chavez presided over the meeting with his two German Shepherd guard dogs, Huelga and Boycott, constantly at his side. (Although most people did not know it, Chavez's cousin Manny had learned that there was a contract out to assassinate Cesar, and, as a result, he was guarded 24 hours a day.) During the meeting, Chavez recalled his childhood as a migrant worker. "We were so poor in those days that for several winters we had to live in a tent without any light or heat. Richard and I used to eat wild mustard greens and go around looking for tinfoil so we would roll it up into balls and sell it."

When a volunteer from the Los Angeles boycott team complained that the Anglos there were too conservative, that some even spit on the picketers, and told them to "go back to Mexico," Chavez urged him to be patient. "There is a key to every door," he said, "and if you haven't opened the door it is because you haven't found the key. Your job as an organizer is to keep looking until you find it." Some one else asked in Spanish, "just what is this *paciencia*?" Chavez swept the air downward with his hand in a gesture of "peace" and then put two fingers to his temple and said "science." "*Paz ... Ciencia ... the Science of Peace,*" was his reply.

Then Chavez went around the room asking for volunteers to reinforce the union's efforts in those key cities that I had identified as crucial to the success of the grape boycott. Nearly everyone in the room signed up on the spot. Juanita and I volunteered to go to Canada, where we would work closely with farmworker organizer Jessica Govea. "An organizer draws a picture, so that the people can color it in," Chavez told us, as Father Day, a Catholic priest, blessed our VW van with holy water and sent us off to Toronto.

During the last year of the boycott, 1969 to 1970, we lived in a decaying four-story brownstone located in Toronto's East End, which we shared with Chavez's *compadre*, Manuel Rivera, his wife, and their eight children. Like so many farmworkers on the boycott, Manuel had little formal education, but he was passionate about *la Causa*.

At a meeting with Leon Weinstein, the liberal president of the giant Loblaws supermarket chain, Weinstein expressed his personal sympathy for the farmworkers and even commented that he wouldn't serve grapes at home. But he affirmed that it was company policy to give customers "the right to choose to buy grapes." He then gave Manuel a box of Cuban cigars as a gift. Without hesitating, Manuel looked Weinstein directly in the eyes, handed him a farmworker photo calendar showing the poverty and poor housing conditions, and eloquently said, "And this, Mr. Weinstein, is my gift to you, so that every

day you continue to sell grapes in your stores you will remember the suffering you are causing my people.” With that Manuel stood up and left the meeting, as Weinstein sat there flabbergasted. Two weeks later, Loblaws announced that it had stopped selling California grapes.

Then, one day, in the summer of 1970, Chavez called our office in Toronto. The growers’ association had invited the Archbishop of Fresno to step in and negotiate a settlement with the union. On July 20, 1970, John Giumarra, Sr., one of the largest table grape growers, would lead a group of 26 Delano-area growers out to the Forty Acres, the union headquarters at the edge of town, to sign a contract that would end the nearly five-year long strike. The new collective bargaining agreement covered 60,000 California table grape workers—the first farmworkers’ union contract in the table grape industry in U.S. history. The union was calling off the boycott. We could come home. The farmworkers had won. “*Que viva la Causa!* Long live the Cause!” Chavez joyfully exclaimed to end the call.

When I compiled the past year’s grape report, I realized that the boycott had become tremendously effective. In the top 10 North American markets, table grape shipments were down by 24 percent overall. And much of this was due to the incredible success of the New York, Chicago, and Boston boycotts, which were coordinated, respectively, by Dolores Huerta, Eliseo Medina, and Marcos Muñoz. Chavez’s strategy of using the grape boycott as a nonviolent tool for putting economic pressure on the growers had succeeded brilliantly.

In March of 1968, when Chavez broke his first 28-day fast for justice, he said “I am convinced that the truest act of manliness is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice. To be a man is to suffer for others. God help us be men!”

Inspired by Chavez’s life and the farmworker movement, in addition to teaching about social movements at Florida International University in Miami, I have dedicated much of the past 30 years to working with public interest organizations that seek world peace and positive social and environmental change.

More than ever, in the post-9/11 world, we all need to heed the teachings of those great souls—Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, and Cesar Chavez—who walked the path of peace. We must unite the peace workers and “peace cells” of the global community and *find the key* to show that nonviolence still works.

Addendum

Tables 16 and Table 18 are reproduced from *The United Farm Workers Grape Strike and Boycott, 1965-1970: An Evaluation of the Culture of Poverty Theory* by Jerald Barry Brown, August, 1972, pages 192 and 212, respectively.

Table 16 shows that during the last year of the grape boycott, the union had active boycott committees in 31 of the top 41 North American table grape markets, including boycotts in all 10 of the top 10 markets, which accounted for more than 50 percent of table grape shipments.

As Table 18 shows, by the end of the 1969-1970 harvest season, California and Arizona table grape shipments to the 10 major North American markets were down by 24 percent. Extremely effective boycotts in New York, Chicago, and Boston accounted for more than half of the 2768 rail and truck carloads of table grapes that had been locked out of traditional markets.

Table 16.

Grape Boycott Committees Organized by UFW or by Local Supporters in the Top 41 North American Table Grape Markets, 1969-1970 Season

City	Boycott Committee Organized by:	Background of UFW Boycott Leader:
1. New York	UFW	UFW Board Member
2. Los Angeles	UFW	Farmworker
3. Chicago	UFW	Farmworker
4. San Francisco	UFW	Farmworker
5. Philadelphia	UFW	Farmworker
6. Toronto	UFW	Volunteer
7. Boston	UFW	Farmworker
8. Montreal	UFW	Farmworker
9. Detroit	UFW	Farmworker
10. Cleveland	UFW	UFW Board Member
11. Pittsburgh	UFW	Farmworker
12. Baltimore	UFW	UFW Board Member
13. Minneapolis	UFW	Farmworker
14. Seattle	UFW	Volunteer
15. St. Louis	UFW	Farmworker
16. Atlanta	UFW	Volunteer
17. Cincinnati	UFW	Farmworker
18. Washington, D.C.	UFW	Farmworker
19. Buffalo	UFW	Farmworker
20. Dallas	None	None
21. Miami	UFW	Farmworker

22. New Orleans	UFW	Volunteer
23. Portland	UFW	Volunteer
24. San Antonio	Supporters	None
25. Vancouver	UFW	Volunteer
26. Denver	UFW	Farmworker
27. Houston	UFW	Farmworker
28. Kansas City	UFW	Farmworker
29. Salt Lake City	None	None
30. Columbia, SC	Supporters	None
31. Birmingham, AL	None	None
32. Winnipeg	None	None
33. Indianapolis	UFW	Farmworker
34. Louisville	Supporters	None
35. Albany	Supporters	None
36. Providence	Supporters	Farmworker
37. Ottawa	Supporters	None
38. Milwaukee	UFW	Farmworker
39. Ft. Worth	UFW	Farmworker
40. Memphis	UFW	Volunteer
41. Nashville	Supporters	None

TOTAL UFW CITIES - 31
BOYCOTT

Table 18.

Car Unloads of All California-Arizona Table Grapes in 10 Major North American Markets, 1966 and 1969 Seasons Compared

City	1966 Unloads	1969 Unloads	1966 - 1969 Difference	% of Change
1. New York	2,733	1,979	-754	-27.60%
2. Los Angeles	2,360	1,983	-377	-16.00%
3. Chicago	1,275	730	-545	-42.80%
4. San Francisco	932	749	-183	-19.20%
5. Philadelphia	818	650	-168	-20.50%
6. Boston	764	449	-315	-41.20%
7. Toronto	737	570	-167	-22.60%
8. Detroit	735	517	-218	-29.60%
9. Montreal	729	754	+25	+3.40%
10. Cleveland	472	406	-66	-14.00%

TOTAL:	11,555	8,787	-2,768	-24.00%
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