

J.M. “Pancho” Botello 1966–1974

Un Cuetea La Luna: A Firecracker at the Moon

“Organizing farmworkers was like
shooting a firecracker at the moon.”

—J. M. Botello

I first learned of farmworkers’ attempts to form a union from Chris Bergholdt, a rancher in Yuba City. He came over to where I was working on my old Dodge and asked if I would be interested in attending a meeting that was to be held in Sacramento. He informed me that a certain Cesar Chavez was the main speaker. Chavez was organizing farmworkers and recruiting help and funds for the farmworkers who had walked out on strike in Bakersfield.

I hesitated at first because I was of the opinion that organizing farmworkers was like shooting a firecracker at the moon, without direction. But I agreed to go.

The meeting took place at a school in Sacramento. Cesar Chavez was not very well known yet, but we farmworkers had been hearing more and more about this man. We listened to him speak of the need to organize the workers. The organization was known as the National Farmworkers Association. He told us that the members were affiliated with a Filipino group of farmworkers, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, which was under the umbrella of the AFL-CIO.

Cesar mentioned that they were on strike against the large growers Robert DiGiorgio and Schenley Industries. After the meeting, we approached Cesar and told him that DiGiorgio had property in Yuba City also. This was information that he did not have. Thus DiGiorgio in Yuba City was also included as part of the strike action.

Cesar gave us pointers on how to start recruiting members by talking about the union. In those days we had nothing, in terms of property, a fixed job, housing. We had nothing to lose, so organizing the workers was no big deal. Most of us workers were eager to cooperate and volunteer our time. We knew there were no money or gifts involved, but we collected food, money, and clothes for the striking farmworkers.

When it was time for the elections, the company used so many devious methods to kill the votes that it was impossible to conduct clean elections. False Social Security numbers were presented by the company, and the valid numbers were missing, thus making the count invalid. The workers were not allowed to speak with the organizers, even though we were local representatives.

In the meantime, many of the large cities were joining in to help the farmworkers. It became the people’s cause. They didn’t mind joining in on the marches, demonstrations, and picket lines, even in their suits and ties.

We also had to deal with a lot of verbal abuse as well as manhandling by the police, security guards, and field bosses. This only served as fodder for the bonfire of energy generated by the people. The insults and the discrimination added to the energy to obtain justice. It took a lot of determination on our part, because we were not used to speaking out or exerting our rights, but little by little we began to gain confidence that the union was giving us strength to speak up to the field boss, the supervisor, and even the grower.

Strikes that followed included ones against the Newhall Land Company (owners of Magic Mountain) and Sierra Gold Nursery.

In those days we were receiving one cent and a half for weeding with a shovel. Pruning came to \$1.20 per hour. The companies were confident that we could live on this pay.

Jose Luna was one of the men assigned to work with me. We traveled from Santa Rosa to Mendota, Delano, and Fresno. The strikes were spoiling the perishable products. One grower in Tranquility begged me to cancel the strike. "No. I can't. I'm nobody. I'm receiving orders, that's all." He lost all his melons, and had to plow under all the fruit.

The Half Moon Ranch was another case where the fruit was picked during the day and the owner would dump it in the afternoon. He had a mountain of peaches. The trucks would merely come and unload what had been picked that day. The rancher preferred to hire workers who had no idea which fruit was acceptable to the markets. They picked the fruit either too green or too ripe.

The greatest personal satisfaction was to finally see these powerful men fold under the pressure of the poor. We saw some gains, but we also faced suffering, deprivations, and tears of anger, but this was appeased by the increasing respect for the farmworker.

The Grape Boycott

In 1968, Cesar called me and asked if I'd be willing to help out in the boycott. This meant I would have to travel to Chicago with another group of boycotters. I agreed, packed my few belongings, and prepared to make the long trip.

All the volunteers going on the boycott met up in Three Rivers, north of Delano. We were introduced and given our assignments. I was told that I'd be going to Chicago, but when we left in February of the following year, I was assigned to help Hope Lopez drive all the way to New York.

In New York, I was introduced to the coordinator, Mark Silverman. Mark was a product of California. Most of the volunteers were students. I was told that I would be working out of Yonkers in Westchester County. I knew as much about Yonkers as I did about New York. The goal was to get table grapes out of the cities, wherever they were. It was a big challenge for me. I knew the task was going to be hard and indefinite, and what's more, I

knew very little English. Though I could understand the language, I had a lot of trouble expressing myself. But I was game. I would stumble through.

There was a lot of support by different groups in New York and the surrounding areas. The unions, especially members of the retail clerk union, were always there for me. The AFL-CIO assigned Joe Lopez to work with me. The League of Women Voters was very helpful, as were the Catholic churches and schools, especially the sisters and other teachers. They would take turns confronting the stores that had table grapes on their shelves. After a few words were exchanged, the grapes came off the shelves. The farmworkers had plenty of sympathizers—from the store clerks as well as the consumers. The task was made easy for me. Yonkers knew what it did not want on its shelves: table grapes from California.

In the middle of the winter, I started coughing up blood. I had a history of bleeding ulcers. I didn't want to discuss it with anyone. What did those kids know of health disorders? Maybe it was malnutrition, the weather, the fast pace, the lack of sleep, who knows. I decided to go to Philadelphia and speak to Hope Lopez. If I was going to bleed to death, I wanted to be with caretakers who would pray a few Hail Marys over my dead body.

I received a very warm welcome from the three boycotters: Hope, Antonia Saludado, and Carolina Franco. I stayed with them three days, at which point I recovered and went back to New York. We were all determined to stay with the boycott until every grape was off the shelves.

All my fellow travelers to the East were able to keep that promise, but Cesar Chavez had other plans for me. As in every war, one has to obey orders. I received orders to return to California, because there were bigger and juicier grape battles to be fought.

In May 1969, I returned to California and was sent to Arizona to start organizing the grape workers. I was glad that my coworker was Jose Luna, a hardcore organizer. He had collaborated with Ernesto Galarza of the Labor Forum. Manuel Chavez, Cesar's brother, had a lot of confidence in Luna's capabilities.

From Arizona, Jose Luna and I were sent to Miami, where 98% of the citrus workers had signed with the union and wanted to strike against Sun Maid, property of Coca-Cola. Not wanting the adverse publicity, the conglomerate agreed to negotiate with the workers and signed a contract.

Next stop was South Bay, Florida, to help Jamaican and Cuban sugarcane workers out on strike. Of sad note is that we lost one of our volunteers: Nancy Freeman was killed by a truck while on the picket line.

In Portland, Florida, Jamaican workers ran the strike against Talisman sugar. The boss was William C. Pauley.

After the strikes in Florida, we were reassigned back to California. I took a break and went

home to Yuba City, while Luna went to Mexicali for a breather. We didn't rest long because the strikes were hot and heavy in almost every county in California. I hopped from Coachella to Delano, Fresno, Tulare, Hollister, and Salinas, taking charge and coordinating the picket lines.

I landed in jail time and again. In Yuba City, in Coachella, in Hollister. It was impossible to avoid the violence on the part of the growers and their hired goons. It was even more difficult to convince the police and the courts that one reacted in self-defense.

Cesar Chavez was completely and absolutely against any type of violence, and at times it was hard to reason one's actions. The union lawyers were there to speak on my behalf, but you win one, lose a couple. As organizers we learned to advocate for the workers, the strikers, and the volunteers on the picket lines, as well as ourselves. We spent a good part of the time trying to reason with the field bosses, the supervisors, and the growers, as well as the police. As time passed the police became friendlier to the strikers and we were able to discuss an issue as human beings.

In 1970, the growers came to the conclusion that if they didn't sign a contract with Cesar Chavez, the grapes would rot year after year. Consumers refused to buy grapes. Contracts were finally signed, but the battle was not over because growers had no intention of abiding by their signatures.

In 1973, the Coachella growers signed behind-the-door contracts with the Teamsters, causing the farmworkers to lose all those contracts. The workers walked off the fields. There was brutality and violence on the part of the hired goons. Many members were killed in their efforts to seek justice for themselves and their coworkers.

I write this 30 years later. The union still exists with a different leader. I have a small farm in my hometown of Jerez in Zacatecas, Mexico. I maintain the same spirit of support for California's farmworkers. They may be different workers, but they are facing the same abusive, exploitative problems. I am happy with the knowledge that farmworkers are no longer society's joke.

(Taped by J. M. Botello; transcribed, edited, and translated by Hope Lopez.)