

Nick Jones 1966–1976

Hello to the thousands of sisters and brothers who helped build the United Farm Workers Union. Thanks to LeRoy for providing a way for us to connect again and document some important history for future generations.

Since resigning from the UFW, I have spent 28 years working in four other AFL-CIO unions. I worked 17 years with Local 250, the health care workers' union (SEIU) in the Bay Area until I retired in 2001. I continue to work on short-range projects with Local 250.

Some of the things I intend to write here will be controversial, especially for staff who left the UFW before the summer of 1976—before the organization derailed.

I was working for Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in Chicago in the spring of 1966 when I read the recruitment ad from the NFWA inviting volunteers to come to Delano for work there. I stopped in my home town (Fargo, North Dakota) long enough to file conscientious objector papers with my local draft board (I had been drafted) and left for Delano in early June.

The next 10 years were some of the most positive and rewarding years of my life. I was fortunate to work those years with mostly principled, dedicated, and talented people in several cities coast to coast. I am grateful for their friendship and for what they taught me. That includes both staff and hundreds of volunteers in the boycott committees.

As much as I would like to write several pages of “war stories” about those 10 years, I believe that it is more important to look at the political issues that took the UFW from its position of enormous strength and sent it into a suicidal, organizational tailspin. If we who were present don't face these issues honestly and write and talk about our experiences, much good will be lost from the struggle and sacrifice of tens of thousands of farmworkers and non-farmworkers.

After working 10 years for the union, I was appointed as the national boycott director in early 1976. The boycott was strong, well organized, and going very well. By late summer many boycott staff were then in California to work on the statewide proposition campaign. There were rumblings about the boycott staff taking too long to leave their cities and get to California for the prop campaign.

Either Cesar or I asked for a meeting in October. There he accused me of being a communist conspirator. This came completely out of nowhere. For 10 years there had not been a hint of mistrust towards me because of my politics. In total shock, my then-wife, Virginia Rodriguez, and I resigned within days of my meeting with Cesar. During this period it became clear that the union was interviewing boycott staff in order to clean out the leftists and “communists.” The UFW used Larry Tramutola over the next several months to shut down the boycott offices across the U.S. and Canada.

For years after Cesar told me that he thought I was leading a communist conspiracy within the union, I blamed the top UFW leaders for failing to stand up and stop the purging of staff and the destruction of the union. Today I know that we were all responsible for what took place. We are responsible for failing to build a democratic union—the democratic union we talked about in the thousands of meetings and media events as though it already existed. Many of us believed our own propaganda.

Some of us looked the other way when smaller numbers of staff were purged in earlier years for political reasons. It was easy for us to accept the union position that those staff were pushed out because they were lazy and had their own agendas. What some of us thought was loyalty and dedication to the union allowed us to put the finger on staff who were asking meaningful and critical questions about what the union was doing.

Was there a communist or left conspiracy inside of the UFW? Absolutely not. The intervening years have proved that. In all of the books, articles, and oral histories that have been written since 1976, not one points to the slightest bit of evidence of conspiracy or left organizing against the union from within.

There was minor staff criticism of the UFW's position opposing the United Nations' resolution calling Zionism racist, and later the UFW's poorly thought out campaign to report undocumented strikebreakers to the INS. This criticism was never organized to spread to different parts of the union, and as far as I know, it was never publicized or given to the media.

There were always left-leaning fringe groups outside of the union that thought they knew better than the union about what the union should be doing. Those groups amounted to nothing and had no real impact on the UFW.

Unfortunately, the only real disruption of the union came from its own well-meaning leadership who did little to stop the purges because they thought that “there must be a conspiracy if Cesar says there is.”

Were boycott staff and other volunteers leftists? Yes. Certainly 50 percent or more of the hundreds of staff considered themselves left. We came from civil rights, religious, community, and antiwar experiences with a general belief that we could change the world. The farmworker movement was a great place for people with left perspectives to invest their time and energy. We loved the movement and the fight on behalf of farmworkers.

Many top leaders were later pushed out of the UFW by the same insane witch-hunts and conspiracies that destroyed the boycott department in the fall of 1976, although the red baiting was exchanged for other ridiculous charges. Philip VeraCruz, Marshall Ganz, Jerry Cohen, and Chris Hartmire were but a few pressured to leave the UFW in following years.

Gilbert Padilla, Jim Drake, and Eliseo Medina left also, probably due to the ongoing chaos within UFW.

LeRoy Chatfield left the UFW in 1973 after working 10 years as assistant to Cesar and point person on almost every important step the union took from 1963 to 1973. Among other important work done by Chatfield was his work in the establishment of the union's National Farmworkers' Service Center.

Chatfield's departure, although voluntary, certainly had something to do with Cesar telling him the night before the statewide vote in 1972 that he would have to take the "blame" for the proposition loss if it failed.

Eliseo's departure was tragic and a real blow to building a democratic structure within the UFW. For the first time in the union's existence, Eliseo led in establishing a stable, democratic ranch committee organization. This gave farmworker members a structure in the different corporate ranches for electing their leaders, addressing their grievances, and connecting with the union's executive board.

The expulsions and resignations of Ganz, Cohen, and Hartmire were also critical losses to the farmworker union. As the organizing director, Ganz led in the union's mostly successful field organizing campaigns in the grape, wine, and vegetable industries. His final "sin" was to stand with leaders in the vegetable companies in Salinas who were demanding democratic treatment from the UFW.

Cohen is recognized as a legal genius who ran the UFW's legal department for many years. The legal department's defensive and offensive legal strategies resulted in several major victories. Probably the most important legal campaign caused the Teamsters union to back out and abandon dozens of sweetheart contracts in the lettuce and vegetable industry. To the best of my knowledge, Cohen was run out because he wanted the UFW to consider better wages and benefits for legal staff.

Chris Hartmire was forced out with a phony, trumped-up charge of knowing that one of his staff in accounting was stealing from the UFW without Chris turning him in. Everyone who knows Chris knows how outrageous that charge was. One of the key pillars of support over the years came from the churches. Chris was largely responsible for building and holding that support over 20 years.

I hope that all of the above leaders share their stories in this essay project. After all of these years, don't we owe the farmworkers an accurate record of what took place?

Beyond the damage done to the UFW by its purges and destruction of critical departments, some farmworker leaders were abused and blackballed for attempting to build their union organization in the fields. If they decided to run for the executive board or ranch committees without Cesar's blessing, they were attacked and called enemies of the union.

For more information about the impact upon union members and leaders, see *Nation Magazine*, July 26 - August 22, 1993, written by Frank Bardacke, and responses from the UFW in the November 22, 1993 issue.

Would the thousands of UFW members have voted to shut down the national boycott if they had had an educated vote on that question? I don't believe so.

In 1976 the UFW boycott department had about 300 full-time staff in more than 30 U.S. and Canadian cities. At least 100 of those staff had four or more years of full-time boycott experience.

After all expenses for pay, housing, offices, cars, and transportation for those staff, the boycott department was raising more money for the UFW than it was spending. Besides my personal knowledge of the money being raised in the boycott cities, the executive board records document that fact. The UFW boycott department could take on any large grower label and put extreme economic pressure on that grower within weeks. Also, many of those same staff could be pulled into political, field, and strike organizing in California as the need arose in the union.

In early 1976 the Dole Corporation was the last target of an effective boycott operation in which hundreds of grocers took Dole products off their shelves over two to three months. At that time probably 50 of UFW's boycott staff had the individual skill and experience to go to any large city and put together an effective boycott in a matter of a few months.

Even if one were to support the union's position that it was time to return to organizing the workers for strikes in the fields, why would any union give up such a strong tool as the boycott—a tool that was paying for itself? I believe that that was a purely political decision.

To this day, there continue to be hundreds of union contracts that could not be negotiated or renegotiated by the UFW because the union just didn't have the power to force the growers to bargain in good faith. When the Teamsters finally abandoned their sweetheart contracts, the UFW was too weak and disorganized to move in and organize those workers. The boycott was gone, as were hundreds of talented staff.

Many other things were going wrong for the UFW in this period. Soon after the 1976 to 1977 staff purges, UFW headquarters began what they called "the Game"—an insane organizational, loyalty tool that would pull all of the staff together in an auditorium once a week and pick out individual "assholes" for group criticism and attacks. Assholes was the preferred name of targets in the games. This so-called "innocent psychodrama" often led to staff being traumatized or driven from the union in disgust.

Where did the Game come from? From Synanon—the people who put a rattlesnake in their attorney's mailbox in an effort to stop his public criticism of that organization. In order to understand the type of crap going on at UFW headquarters, look up Fred Hirsch's

essay about how his daughter Liza Hirsch Medina was treated after years of dedicated service.

As though the internal organizational mess was not enough, Cesar took things public with his trip to the Philippines, where he was wined and dined by the martial law dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Internationally and nationally, Marcos was looked upon as a murderer of Filipino religious people, union leaders, farmworkers, and students.

In recent years I have come to know a wonderful schoolteacher from the Philippines whose priest brother was kidnapped by the Marcos military and never found again. You can imagine the personal heartbreak for the family of the priest. This kind of terrorism happened to countless other families during the Marcos dictatorship.

Many of the UFW Filipino leaders and members and other non-Filipino UFW staff were opposed to any visit to Marcos by Cesar. I am told that UFW vice president Philip VeraCruz attempted to persuade Cesar not to go. Philip had great integrity and was known to often challenge many of the positions and decisions of the UFW. (Check out Philip's book on his life and union experiences, edited by Cherlan and Villanueva, UCLA Press.)

Hundreds of U.S. church leaders entered the debate with heavy criticism of Cesar and the UFW. These of course were the same people who had contributed big money, staff, and support for the UFW over the years. Cesar's response was basically that "we can take any position we want and any outside criticism of me or UFW is racist."

Several of these church leaders had defended the union within their own church structures over the years, sometimes resulting in the loss of their jobs. They felt that Cesar would listen to them on the Marcos debate and see the error. He didn't.

I have some thoughts of why Cesar took the union off its mission and towards organizational disaster.

Cesar liked to find scapegoats for organizational failures. See Chatfield's and Cohen's essays and documents in this project. The accusation that the boycott department sent staff too slowly to the proposition campaign goes hand in hand with the conspiracy theory and provides an excuse for the failed 1976 proposition vote.

Although Cesar used plenty of left rhetoric and actually carried Mao's *Little Red Book* into George Meany's office in his camera bag when picking up the national AFL-CIO charter, Cesar was probably fearful of communists and the left. The CSO had some history of anti-communism and I have heard that Cesar had some earlier confrontations with communists in his CSO organizing.

Certainly, the AFL-CIO must have been putting pressure on the UFW to clean out the left after it affiliated. Look at the AFL-CIO's history to see what they did to many of their "left

unions.” The United Auto Workers Union (UAW) was built with major support and staff with communist and left backgrounds. Following their historic successes in the car industry, the UAW moved the leftists out.

There are several unions that were destroyed or greatly handicapped by red baiting in the 1940s and 1950s. The AFL-CIO maintained offices in their Washington, D.C. headquarters through the 1980s that were connected to the CIA and had the prime mission to work against union organizations in Africa, Central and South America, and Europe that were thought to be communist or leftist.

Several left organizations were infiltrated and sabotaged by the FBI during this period. I’m not a conspiracy nut, but I believe there probably was some anti-union work done within the UFW by the FBI. It was done to the Black Panthers, to Dr. Martin Luther King’s organizing efforts, and to multiple peace organizations. Why not the UFW? There are stories floating around about police infiltration in the New Orleans and Chicago boycotts. I once heard that the FBI had visited La Paz to ask some questions about me. I never followed up on that to know if it was true.

The UFW should do an extensive Freedom of Information inquiry with the government to see what we can learn about FBI infiltration and sabotage of the UFW.

According to the late Paul Henggeler of the University of Texas, the initial accusation of me leading a conspiracy came at Cesar’s house following a meeting of department directors and officers of UFW in the boardroom in the summer of 1976.

Henggeler says that he has an executive board tape that details how I was the only person defending the *El Malcriado* editor Joe Smith whom Cesar had accused of deliberately sabotaging the recent articles in the union paper. Henggeler told me that Cesar said, “Jones never reports or criticizes the mainliners.” Thus, “Jones must be leading or allowing the communists to operate within the UFW.”

More details on this were to have been published late this summer or fall (2004) in Henggeler’s book. Henggeler told me that Joe Smith has died of cancer. I am proud to have recruited Joe to the UFW. He did great work for farmworkers and the UFW!

Do I have anything good to say about Cesar? Yes. I could fill a book with the good things about Cesar, but those books have been and are being written. Many of the essays for this project speak of the leadership, skills, and nature of Cesar.

Again, one of the important problems that led to the disaster in the UFW was its lack of democracy for its thousands of union members. This is a systemic problem in most U.S. unions. The organization, with no democratic structure, allowed and encouraged Cesar to make many important decisions without effective criticism. When Cesar was right, things went well. When he was wrong, it led to chaos and wasted energies.

Clearly, there was much debate in the executive board meetings, but that doesn't equate to a democratic organization for the thousands of other farmworker members who had only a limited organizational voice or vote in the fields.

Some other thoughts:

Boycotts work. They can be a tremendous tool for unions, peace, and community organizations. I hope that someone out there does some major work on the history and mechanics of boycotts. It is still an untapped power that has only now and then been used.

Think about the economic boycott against South Africa. It broke apartheid. The Montgomery bus boycott launched the civil rights revolution. Think about the threatened boycott of Idaho potatoes a couple of years ago when Idaho was going to pass an anti-abortion bill. After several women's groups threatened to boycott, the state of Idaho killed that bill overnight.

How about a national boycott of Wal-Mart until they let their workers vote on union representation. If we could cut into Wal-Mart's profits by only 5%, a union would soon have neutrality from the largest retailer in the world. How about a boycott of Fox News until they become an honest source of real news instead of right-wing propaganda? A boycott of Chevron to bring down the price of gas? A travel boycott of Israel and the Middle East until they establish a Palestinian state and stop the killing?

Like many, I am disappointed that the union did not reach its potential. The UFW was on its way to becoming a quarter-million-member union that would have had much greater impact upon farmworkers' lives. It failed like many other unions.

Solidarity forever.