

Fred Hirsch 1967–1968

Sometime in 1963 or 1964 my wife, Ginny, and I learned that something very special was going on in the San Joaquin Valley. The information came through the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) key list mailing, which Ginny printed on the A.B. Dick offset press in our garage. One day when we needed a car, Ginny went shopping, but instead of buying the needed car, she bought the offset printing press. Ginny said she wanted to upgrade the presentation leaflets, invitations, newsletters, etc. in Santa Clara County's progressive activist community.

It was at a time when the phrase and concept of "community organizing" had swept our collective consciousness. It came upon us like a new mysterious religion. We knew that community organizing made SNCC the spear point of the Southern civil rights movement, but we romanticized the concept. At the time we didn't realize that the term community organizing really described the simple things we were doing in our own town.

We idealized the concept of "community organizing" as the tough and dangerous action of the SNCC workers in Mississippi and Alabama. For us, "community organizing" seemed even more romantic when we also associated it with that mysterious fellow in Delano who carried the name of a Roman emperor. Then, the name Cesar Chavez carried the same mantle of mystical authority for us that the Zapatista name Subcomandante Marcos does for so many people today.

I was a plumber who carried the label "Fred the Red" in my rather right-wing local union and on construction jobs. For better or worse, the label meant that my income was diminished through discriminatory layoffs, which, in turn, gave me considerable extra time to devote to my leftist political pursuits. Those pursuits included political, labor, and community activism in San Jose and came to include frequent trips to the Central Valley to learn about and then participate in the work of Cesar Chavez and the National Farmworkers Association.

When I was out of a job, Ginny's work as a legal secretary filled the income gap. Not only did she go to work every day, but she also did most of the housework and kid care. The entire burden fell to her in my absence. She should never have put up with all that, but she did so willingly. She should never have put up with me all that time, but she did.

As it often happened, a foreman would come up to me on a Friday, tell me how much he liked my work, and say, "Hope to have you back," before handing me a termination check. There were many "reduction in force" layoffs while the companies were still hiring. I'd give Ginny the layoff check, throw an overnight bag in the red box on the back of my Vespa motor scooter, and head to Delano for what seemed to be an endless string of marches, meetings, and conferences. Piece by piece, I was witnessing the ascending power and magic of real organizing under the leadership of Cesar Chavez, Gil Padilla, and Dolores Huerta.

The work they were doing in Delano led me to hope that one day farmworkers could stimulate a transformation of our rather moribund AFL-CIO into a real labor movement. It seemed achievable. The organization of ill-fed, ill-housed, and ill-clothed agricultural workers who truly had “nothing to lose but their chains and a world to win” could change the shape of the workers’ struggle in California. Farmworkers, in their hundreds of thousands, could potentially provide a model of workers’ power that could lead organized labor into a new and militant era. Cesar had lit a spark and I wanted to be part of fanning it into a flame that would burn into the consciousness of our complacent unions and relatively dormant working class.

There were contradictions to sort out. What in hell was all this religious stuff? I could understand the Catholicism. That was deeply ingrained in the people with whom we had experience in East San Jose. But what were so many white Protestant, efficient, and authoritative minister types doing full time in this growing movement? Many of those contradictions were clarified through the guidance of Chuck Gardinier of the Fresno Friends Service Committee. We spent long group nights examining the issues while consuming gallon jugs of Red Mountain wine. Those nights cultivated in me a finely tuned taste for bad red wine and at the same time, an understanding that clergy folk might really have a place in the movement.

One afternoon, while walking toward the Pink House with Cesar, Chuck, and several others, Cesar opened a discussion of Mao Tse-tung and the Long March of the Chinese Revolution. He was deeply impressed with how Mao had raised the level of revolutionary fervor from a series of campaigns to a massive crusade. He wanted to explore ideas on how the thoughts of Mao Tse-tung could be applied in building the farmworker movement in Delano into a crusade for social and economic justice. Strange bedfellows—the pope, the Protestants, and Mao Tse-tung.

I don’t know how many trips I made to Delano, but enough to become something of familiar fixture around the Pink House, Peoples Bar, and the streets of Delano. On those Vespa trips I learned to take the strain and wear off the little two-stroke engine by pulling in about 50 feet behind the eighteen-wheelers and getting dragged along by the wind of their turbulence.

The red box bolted to my motor scooter related, in a way, to the farmworker struggle. It was made of fiber-glassed plywood by Oscar Gonzalez, our duplex neighbor when we moved to San Jose in 1960. Oscar was a devoutly Catholic autoworker. We’d frequently discuss labor and politics sitting in our driveway after work. Eventually, he became an activist through the

Guadalupe church in East San Jose. When a progressive priest who had put together a farmworker organization in the South County was transferred, he handed the group over to Oscar. When trouble brewed between the UFW and the Teamsters, Oscar delivered his organization to the Teamsters and went on their payroll. Manuel Chavez took me along to Oscar’s Jackson Street office one afternoon to persuade him to bring his people into the

UFW. The Teamster money was pretty good and Oscar could not be persuaded. Manuel cordially told him, "Please, organize all the farmworkers you can, but do us a favor, Oscar, leave 10 percent for us."

When we organized a large meeting in the Labor Temple in San Jose in 1965, our 10-year-old, Liza, got her first taste of anti-union intimidation. Cesar drew a big crowd and packed the place as the main speaker. At about the same time I was introducing Cesar at the Labor Temple, Liza answered the phone and was told "Tell your daddy he better stop or I'll kill him." Liza was shaken but accepted our assurance that we were all be safe. With Liza's help, we discovered that the culprit was Andy Diaz, often a candidate for public office. Years later he was taken by surprise at a Central Labor Council COPE endorsement interview and admitted that he'd been on the FBI payroll and said the call to Liza was just part of his job. He was just taking orders. He was part of COINTELPRO, the FBI's pervasive and illegal campaign to disrupt and destroy every vestige of progressive political activity.

Not long after that, we caught COINTELPRO again messing with our family and the union. When the growers and a state senate committee were trying to run a red smear on Cesar Chavez and the union, they broke into our home and the office where Ginny worked. The only item we could prove they had taken at our place was a fundraising letter from the Berkeley radio station KPFA. Really subversive! The break-in artist was Gerry Ducote, an enterprising former deputy sheriff, who was apparently freelancing for the FBI and the senate committee. Ginny noticed two strangers in trench coats walking away from our home when we arrived late one night. Had we come home a few minutes earlier there would have been a dangerous confrontation.

I believe it was Tim Sampson who called me one day in 1965 to recruit me for a job with the California Center for Community Development. The names I remember from that project were Tim, George (Elfie) Ballis, Chuck Gardinier, Virginia Rodriguez, Manuel Chavez, and Pancho Botello. The project was set up with funds from the "War on Poverty's" Organization for Economic Opportunity (OEO). The CCCD was based in a vacant elementary school in Morgan Hill to, according to its official agenda, train community organizers to work in rural California. The real agenda was to train organizers who would then be available to Cesar and the union. The scheme was to recruit trainees, subject them to three weeks of classroom work, and aggravate them to the point that they would organize themselves against CCCD impositions. I was a "supervisor" and the group I was with graduated with flying colors when they took my body and broke a Laundromat window with it. Other groups graduated with similar dramatic rebellions.

After the three-week classroom ordeal, the "trainees" (some were much better prepared than their "trainers") returned to their home localities for a given period of time to identify problems and issues and organize for change in their communities. We "supervisors" then traveled around the valley visiting them to answer questions, stir the pot, and keep them in hot water until they got something done.

During that period, Manuel Chavez called on me to help him and his people put together a march in Salinas demanding a better deal from county welfare. After a few day's work organizing farmworkers and assorted homeless transients who, in Manuel's words, were "living in the weeds," we turned out several hundred people to make an effective demand at the county building.

South Dos Palos, in that winter season, was a community of poverty-stricken, unemployed African-Americans whose homes—decrepit shacks—were being condemned. The community in every respect resembled any segregated black neighborhood in rural Mississippi. It was as if it had been lifted from the Delta and set down intact north of Firebaugh and south of Dos Palos. Every aspect of life offered a burning issue there, but the county condemnations of their shacks made housing critical. Our trainee was an angry young African-American woman whose mother was pivotal to organizing the community. Doping things out with about a half-dozen people on the morning of New Year's Eve day, we came up with a realistic plan. That afternoon I was deep in thought, working out the details of the plan in my head, when I passed a stop sign. I got two-thirds of the way across American Highway, south of Fresno, when I was broadsided by a fast-moving Chevy station wagon driven by the daughter of the police chief. Pussycat, my small Doberman, was killed on impact. I was thrown from the car and landed in a vineyard. When I stopped flying, my legs were up on the vine and I had seven broken ribs, two broken scapulae, a gash on my scalp, and a ruptured spleen. It felt so good to stop flying. That short flight ended my career with the CCCD. CCCD itself folded soon afterward when the OEO folks in Washington, D.C. found out that CCCD's do-gooder project description was a subterfuge for doing the illegal, and it prohibited the perhaps un-American work of training union organizers.

While recuperating in a hospital bed in San Jose, I had a surprise visit from a 13-member delegation, including Jose Luna and his wife from the fields of the Almaden Vineyard near Gilroy, Manuel Zapien, Joe Hernandez, Jessie Gutierrez, AFL -CIO organizing director, Bill Kircher, Cesar and Manuel Chavez, Larry Ithiong, and Dolores Huerta. The get-well, good-natured point of that visit was recruitment. Ginny and I and the kids, Liza, Laurie, and Leslie, soon started making plans for the family to pull up stakes and migrate to Delano as volunteers with the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee.

Our family brought four invaluable secret weapons: Ginny, Liza, our offset press, and our car-battery-operated public address system. Ginny went down in the spring of 1967 to work with Jerry Cohen in setting up and operating the legal department. Jerry, not too long out of law school, already had a reputation for brilliance in using the law in favor of the workers and finding solutions to legal problems uniquely outside the box. Ginny found that he needed help in the mechanical aspects of running a law office. Her secretarial experience in the law was a perfect complement to Jerry's Darrow-linsky approach to the lawyer's trade.

Ginny had been a central figure in organizing legal work and documenting many, perhaps hundreds, of depositions that came into her office from a lawyer's project that backed up the work of SNCC and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. She was able to give fundamental form and substance to the legal department, laying a foundation that has been successfully built upon through the decades.

We rented a house. This tied Ginny, more than any of us, down to the ordinary chores of housekeeping and raising a family. She was the queen-pin of our family, handling the desires and complaints of one 11-year-old and two 10-year-old girls. Outstanding as it was, her work in the legal department was just one of her many duties. Without Ginny, I doubt that Jerry would ever have found his way to the courthouse with all the proper papers in hand and submitted in a timely manner. And without Ginny's work at home, our family would have fallen apart on the spot.

On the other hand, my work was questionable. Nobody, not Cesar or anyone else, could decide what I ought to be doing or give me an assignment. I was told that the problem of giving me a real assignment was that, somewhere in the upper reaches of the union, a decision was taken that they couldn't trust a Red because, as everybody knew, those terrible Reds have their own agenda handed down from Moscow. It was an anti-ideological hand-me-down from the prejudices of Saul Alinsky. One problem with that hangover from McCarthyism was that nobody at the decision-making level ever asked me about my political affiliations. They might have been surprised. Until they came up with something productive, I took on a stopgap chore, working on the totally disorganized boxes of names and addresses of contributors and supporters to send fundraising appeals. We sent one appeal that I remember. One day, Cesar just had me drop that yet incomplete task and put me, along with Manuel Chavez, in charge of the new, so-called "research committee."

It was not a very active season for picketing, and the strikers had less than their usual work to do. Cesar set aside a "war room" for our committee. We had a large wall map of the U.S. on which we were to track the progress of the trains carrying table grapes to the major markets and ports. He assigned me a crew of elderly Filipino workers to follow the transport of the grapes on the map and to whom our traveling "researchers" would report.

Sympathizers in the railroad brotherhoods informed us on a regular basis when boxcars of grapes would leave the Bakersfield yards. We knew on which train to expect them and the I.D. numbers of the cars carrying the cargo in which we were interested. Manuel was in charge of the crew tracking the trains going south and I had the northern routes. Our first day at it, we had the old farmworkers spread out along the tracks to watch for our numbers as the trains came through Delano. It was make work, but it was something to do. Our senior brothers, awaiting the train, stood too close to the tracks, resulting in a mystic, cryptic, arthritic ballet. About a dozen men were spread out for a block or more and as the train came through. Like dominoes falling, each man in turn started lurching and bouncing from one leg to the other with their heads swinging back and forth, trying to note the speeding ID numbers as they went by. They failed to get a single number and, on

debriefing, they collectively concluded: “The train goes too fast.” We weren’t going to be able to slow the train down, so from that day forward, the research crew stood back at a greater distance and effectively made notations of the numbers.

The real work of the research committee was not the self-choreographed performance of our elderly brothers. Among those who participated were Robert _____, Tony _____ (can’t name them without their permission), and a Puerto Rican brother who later testified in court against the union, but never mentioned our activity together in the research committee.

We were to follow the trains to wherever they would stop, locate the selected boxcars, and attempt to sabotage the table grapes on their long eastern passage. We were to call a special number and report our whereabouts to our Filipino brothers who would move pins on the map to follow the progress of the grape. Differences of language, accent, and literacy made their task impossible. Not one of those phone calls was ever correctly relayed. They were wonderful men for the work they knew and loved, but 40 years in fields under the Central Valley sun did not prepare them for work in a telephone center.

During their transit across the country, the grapes were to be kept at a specific temperature (I believe it was 56 degrees F). At the end of each insulated boxcar was a diesel engine that powered a heating and cooling unit and was controlled by a thermostat in the cargo compartment. If that unit failed, the grapes would tend to freeze in the Sierra or the Rockies or cook in the heat of the deserts. If the grapes were either cooked or frozen, they could be more easily boycotted in the produce markets of Chicago, New York, Montreal, and other major cities.

We tried to accomplish our goal by passing as hoboes in the train yards, identifying our targets and cutting the fuel lines to disable the diesel engines. On one expedition we did so well that, rapidly following in our wake, the Fresno yards were bustling with other hoboes. It was as if a hobo convention had been spontaneously organized, with hoboes carrying concealed weapons and sporting IDs from the FBI and other federal agencies. Our “submarines” in the railroad brotherhoods were extremely quick to report the presence of the federal “hoboes” so that we were able to keep out of harm’s way. Had we been caught, the harm we might have suffered could have been a penalty of 10 years in federal prison and a \$20,000 fine.

That scare resulted in Robert _____ and me holing up in a fleabag hotel room in Stockton while federal agents swarmed at the railroad yards and in the transient community. We were there for several days, never venturing outside, supplied with provisions by our good farmworker brothers in the Stockton area. The only pastime that Robert and I shared was playing simple card games under the single ceiling light bulb. He invariably beat me at War. There was not even a radio in the room.

Another scary episode took place with our Puerto Rican brother. On that occasion, we found it impossible to take effective action until we found our train at rest in Sparks, Nevada. There, we cut some lines before authorities in a patrol car caught us in the beam of their spotlight. We ducked behind trains and got away from the road they were on before we discovered that there were at least two cars coming after us. We dodged away from the public area and the lights of Harrah's club, ran parallel to the tracks until we had an opportunity to cut back, leaving the cars behind by crossing the tracks and running like hell until we got to Harrah's to escape them by mixing in with the crowd. On our return to Delano, I was berated for not pursuing our prey at least to Salt Lake, if not further.

Driving conditions were often less than ideal. Several times, while keeping an eye or ear on our trains and speeding north on Highway 99, we faced dense fog. Sometimes, all that was visible were the white line at the side of the road and the dim lights of the vehicle ahead of us. On one occasion we were unprepared for severe winter conditions in the Sierra. We left Delano in light clothing and found ourselves up to our shoulders in snow on the way to Sparks. On the trip, we found an upgrade where the train moved very slowly and was close to side road. We prepared for the ensuing trip by practicing with and carrying a high-powered rifle. An accurate shot at the diesel compartment could, at the very least, destroy the cooling fan on the engine. It might even disable the block or the lubrication system. Tony _____ and I planned to do just that.

When we arrived at our appointed spot, we parked the car and waited for the train in the fierce cold. We finally took potshots at two rail cars. The frightening sound of the gun echoed beyond our expectations against the sides of the surrounding mountains. The possible danger from making such an unexpected noise scared the hell out of us. We put the gun on the floor behind the driver's seat in order to get out of there as fast as we could before anyone came looking for us. The car did not understand our urgency. It would not start. I ground the starter for a few minutes until the engine was flooded, Tony got out to look under the hood and jiggle around with the carburetor. Just then a Highway Patrol cruiser came around the bend and stopped. I got out of the car, took off my coat, and threw it down in the back to cover the rifle. The cop sympathized with our mechanical difficulty and, with his great big rubber-covered bumper, pushed us to the nearest service station. We thanked him for his services and swallowed hard. He may have thought we were trembling with the cold, but we were just plain scared to death. Oh what a relief, to uneventfully return to the valley and home to Delano.

One night in Sparks, Tony and I wriggled out of another tight spot, convincing the cops who came upon our parked car that we were not the men for whom they were searching. They were looking for two men who were traveling east. We convinced them we were on our way back to California having lost our bundle in the casino. They weren't totally convinced and followed us a short distance until we crossed the state line. We held our breath to see if they called ahead, but they didn't.

Ginny made the case that we were pressing our luck and another close call could put us away for a long time while draining the union's treasury and damaging its reputation in the public eye. The short life of the research committee was terminated before we shot ourselves in the foot.

Perhaps not each morning, but most mornings, everyone, regardless of their regular work, was up very early to breakfast at Filipino Hall and get out to the picket lines where scab crews were working. We would call to them with various appeals to join us on the picket line, always watching out for the patrolling sheriffs who tried to enforce an injunction limiting picketers to stand 40 feet apart. In the frequent thick fog of dawn we could hardly see one another and the sheriffs had as hard of a time seeing us. We could hear the scabs as they came to work in the vines. They could hear our calls, and often replied with curses. Some days we would throw stones into the fields to punctuate our verbal appeals. The scabs would then move farther into the field. Some of us adopted a unique method of communicating with the scabs who worked farther away. In fact, the organized farmworkers were locked in a historic confrontation with the Goliath of California agribusiness. It seemed only right to put David's biblical approach into practice. We made slings of doubled nylon cord about 2 and a half feet long tied to leather pockets. Thus, using the ancient technology, a modern David could throw a convincing argument far into the vineyard to disrupt the work of the scab crews. A dozen or so slings simultaneously winding up for the toss created the wail of a banshee, invisible in the dark fog of dawn. It was a wonder that we were not caught by the sheriff.

It was probably December, and pruning was the only work to be had in the vines. Comparatively few scab workers were required in that operation. I was called to the Pink House for an unusual task—a job that I think Cesar really would have liked to do himself, but which would have been foolishly dangerous for him. The plan was to discourage scab workers, especially undocumented immigrants, who were undeterred by our picket lines by showing them that their foremen and forewomen were in legal trouble and would have to grapple with the long arm of the law. The legal department had drawn up subpoenas calling upon the scab crew leaders to appear for court-ordered hearings. Whoever tried to serve those subpoenas was automatically an officer of the court and had legal access to the fields in which the recipients might be working. The idea was to enter the field and talk to as many workers as possible, to describe to them the questionable legal predicament of the boss, then to finally find the boss and hand over the document. Essentially, it was to frighten the workers by showing that the boss was now in a fix and they might be next in line if they stayed in the crew. Jerry Cohen discussed having me wear a Smokey-the-Bear hat so I could be taken for an immigration agent, but Cesar didn't want to wait a day or spend the money to send someone to Bakersfield to buy so classy a sombrero.

Knowing the fields well, Cesar drove and dropped me off to perform the appointed task while he waited for me in the station wagon. The idea seemed effective in the first fields, but then we came to a vineyard that put Cesar on edge because I took much too long.

On entering, I immediately found the men's crew and talked to a good number of workers, who pointed out the crew leader. When I could no longer avoid the foreman, I served the subpoena. The women's crew was next. I managed to have some good exchanges with four or five women before they broke for lunch. We had no plan for that. I decided to stay with the group to deliver the papers. As they sat down to eat, some women asked what the court papers and the strike was all about. This impromptu union meeting must have angered the woman in charge and she sent someone to get the men's crew. I tried to serve the subpoena and leave graciously, but as the men arrived they would have none of that. The foreman started yelling and pushing. Before long I was encircled and getting shoved and punched from all sides. Two men, one on each side, grabbed my arms and a third, to the amusement of all, came at me with a pruning shear directed at my crotch. When I struggled loose, they piled on, knocking me down. While I was down, they kicked and punched and one even walked on me. I screamed so fearfully that perhaps nobody wanted responsibility for striking the final blow. It only ended when a woman who had been friendly in our earlier conversation started yelling at the men to stop before they killed me. They did and she gathered up my shoes, helped me up and gave me a push to get out of there. I limped away and when I was—fortunately—out of sight of the scabs, Cesar came up the road, inside the property. Had the scab crew caught Cesar in the field that day, he might not have survived. Nonetheless, he ventured into the forbidden territory to see that I was all right. He saw my condition and wanted to know what happened. He did crack a smile when I said, "You and your goddamn '*el gente humilde!*'" Cesar sometimes spoke of the farmworkers as the "humble people." But they were not so *humilde* with me.

Back in the car, he started to go get help, then he decided it was best to leave me at the scene as he went for medical help and a contingent of pickets. He also wanted to get reporters and shine a spotlight on the brutality used against the union's "officer of the court." One problem was that, although I'd been beaten and stomped, I didn't have any visible injuries. He said I needed to have some bruises on my face, so I asked him to hit me in the face. He raised his fist, but then wouldn't do it. He decided to have me stay hidden behind some bushes near the field while he went for help. He said, "Maybe you should hit yourself in the face with some clods." He drove off for what seemed forever. I tried the clods but I could not hit myself hard enough to leave marks. The best I could do was make a few shallow cuts with my pocketknife. When Cesar returned, it was with nurse Peggy and a contingent of picketers and a few cameras. An ambulance carted me off to a local medical facility where just a knowing wink calmed Ginny's anxiety. It took a little more convincing to assure a frightened Liza that I was okay. When Mark Day arrived, wearing a serious look and his priest outfit, the gathering crowd thought it was for last rites. But he wouldn't give the rites to a Jew who still had gas in his tank and miles to travel.

Not long after that incident, in a general meeting at the Filipino Hall, Cesar called me forward and dubbed me, under the authority of the constitution and bylaws of the union, a "regular member." I felt moved and honored and have carried the card in my wallet, with the signatures of Cesar and Larry Itliong, for 35 years.

Jerry Cohen tried to get the Kern County district attorney to bring charges against my assailants. His reply was that if the union didn't lay off, he'd bring charges against me for attacking and molesting the women's crew leader. He said he had 22 witnesses who'd testify that they acted against me in self-defense.

I was offered one long-term task and I refused to do it. The assignment was offered by Richard Chavez, a carpenter and an unsung union hero. I'm a plumber, a member of the Plumbers Union (United Association) since 1953. Richard asked that I work with him on the village that was in the works to be built on the Forty Acres. There was no way I could refuse—until I saw the drawings. The village was to be encircled by the Stations of the Cross. Not my cup of tea. I told Richard that I worked on churches for a union wage, but that's not how I wanted to use my time as a volunteer. I was a conscientious objector on nonreligious grounds. I wish I could have, in good conscience, worked with Richard on that wonderful project.

In an incident that predated and probably inspired formation of the short-lived research committee, Liza did some fancy and heroic antics with outstanding results. It occurred one evening when a trainload of table grapes was due to pass through Delano. Cesar gathered us at the tracks with a circling picket line to stop the scab cargo. Our whole family was there. After picketing with about 30 or 40 people for about a half-hour, Cesar told me to take charge of the line and keep it going. He had other work to do and went back to his office. The train slowly approached, casting the long shadows of our meager picket line in the glare of its headlight. The picketers looked at me for leadership and none of us knew what to do. Cesar didn't say stop the train, but he did say don't stop the picket line. Ginny had our girls Laurie and Leslie and our dog, Coco, in tow, but Liza was nowhere to be seen. A few of us kept circling as the train came upon us, slower and slower until, amazing us all, it came to a halt. We quickly learned that it was not our skinny picket line that stopped the massive engine of the train. When we finally saw the engine looming behind the glare of its headlight, there was Liza, up on the side, imploring the engineer to stop before he ran over her daddy. He stopped to the applause of the picketers. Chalk one up for the people's spirit.

Had Liza been charged and convicted under federal law for interfering with that train, she wouldn't have gotten out of prison until she was 32 years old.

Ginny was famous in the Delano volunteer community for making the best spaghetti and meatballs in captivity. As a child, she learned to make it from her immigrant neighbor, Mrs. Focarella, in Altoona, Pennsylvania.

As respite from the daily nutritious but uninspired fare at Filipino Hall, Ginny had invited some folks over for a pasta feast. Dinnertime was to follow a general meeting Cesar had called. Cesar, however, showed up at the house before the meeting and downed several plates piled high with Ginny's Sicilian specialty.

The meeting that followed was special indeed. Cesar spoke calmly and thoughtfully about why nonviolence had to be the theory and practice by which the union must live. He all but shook his finger at the sinners who had done violence. He left Filipino Hall and we followed him to the Forty Acres for the unexpected onset of what turned out to be his 26-day fast for nonviolence.

Cesar was set up in a small room of the unfinished adobe gas station structure. In the ensuing days, the place became more of a shrine than a simple automobile service facility. Farmworkers came from everywhere with blankets, sleeping bags, and tents in order to be near Cesar in his days of saintly solitude and meditation.

As word went out across the valley and the state, more and more people kept showing up. We had an outdoor mass and public meeting every afternoon, and each day the crowds grew larger. The movement was indeed turning into a crusade, fueled with religious fervor. But for the pervasive Catholicism of it all, Mao would have been proud. It must have been difficult for Cesar and his top staff to come up with new daily discourses on the themes of nonviolence and the rights of farmworkers.

My role was to operate the sound equipment. Faulty as they were, our amplifier and car top speakers served well but for one problem. When the microphone was switched on, unless someone was talking or singing into it, the speakers blared the martial cadences of "Columbia the Gem of the Ocean." None of us knew enough electronics to cope with the rather simple problem. As it turned out, the unwanted music blared through the airwaves from the neighboring pasture across the road from the Forty Acres. That 40-acre land parcel was home to a herd of sheep and the skyscraping transmission towers of the Voice of America. Those towers reached to Asia and the Pacific islands extolling the virtues of the "American Way of Life" and glorifying the "justice" of our military massacre of the people of Vietnam. Our patched-together, homemade public address system competed with what was reported to be the most powerful radio transmitter on the planet. We later learned that we could have rid ourselves of the unwanted Americanist music by tightening and insulating our wire connections. Without knowing that, I had to stand by and switch the equipment on when people were speaking into the mike and off when they would pause or stop. Ginny joked that running the public address system for those afternoon masses made me a practicing Catholic for at least the duration of the fast.

It was inspiring to see farmworkers from everywhere swarming to the site. Many came to join the struggle out of their conscious awareness of the need to stand together, and others came in anticipation of a miracle in the offing. The sight of women approaching the gas station, joining *La Causa* as an act of faith and religious obedience, crawling on their bloodied knees, made it hard for me to keep from giving up my lunch. That image is etched forever in my brain. Contradictions!

The point of the fast and the masses attending the masses soon became clear. The union was charged with many counts of using violence, mostly violence against property. The first court date arrived during the first weeks of the fast. For all the vaunted independence of the “justice” system, the judges in the valley can be depended upon as faithful servants to the pervasive political control of the growers. That control came into question when thousands of union-conscious farmworkers were drawn to Delano by the charisma of Cesar Chavez. The workers’ potential power was underscored dramatically on the day of Cesar’s first court appearance. An unprecedented number of orderly, silent farmworkers crowded the grounds, lined the walks and halls of the courthouse, and filled the courtroom. At a dramatic moment, Cesar, weakened by the fast, emerged from a car supported as he walked by two clergymen. With each step, as he approached the entrance and entered the courthouse, workers fell to their knees, one group after another, like dominoes, in total silence. The effect was a nonviolent assault on Kern County’s citadel of agribusiness power.

I don’t remember the specific charges, but the pillars of the power structure had to decide if they wanted to risk triggering what they must have seen as a revolution by prosecuting Cesar who, if convicted, might awaken a dormant, unknown potential of farmworker militancy to avenge his legal martyrdom and that of the union. It seemed very clear to me that no matter what went on in the courtroom with these charges—which could have finished off the union—the victory that prevented such an outcome was won in the barrios and labor camps of the Central Valley, at the Forty Acres in Delano, and on the courthouse steps in Bakersfield.

There was a weakness in what I saw in Delano that kept gnawing at me. Yes, the workers were getting organized, but they were not necessarily organizing themselves. Aside from Cesar, Gil, Dolores, and family, the most obvious people at the pinnacle of the process were white Anglos, some with collars, others with clipboards, most with capabilities cultivated in the universities. There seemed little space for leadership development among the farmworkers themselves, and, in some instances, there seemed to be distinct obstacles to such development.

I was fortunate to strike up a friendship with Philip VeraCruz and often spent time with him. Philip’s dog and our Koko got along well together. We’d hang out with them in front of his place near the Pink House. He talked about all the experts around the union who came from anywhere but the fields and labor camps. Philip had nothing good to say about the developing *raza* nationalism that seemed to be marginalizing the interests of the Filipino workers. On those afternoons, before Philip would say anything even remotely critical of Cesar or the operation of the union, he’d want assurance that the conversation was strictly between the two of us. He was totally unafraid to take responsibility for his point of view, but he didn’t want his remarks to ever damage internal unity or have a negative effect on the union’s external image. He also wanted to be able to choose the time and place to speak his mind.

Such conversations, the emphasis on image and public relations, and our own observations of the expendable manner in which so many people were treated, caused Ginny and me to consider returning to San Jose. Then, when the union fell in behind Bobby Kennedy with full strength, moving every available hand to Los Angeles for the primary election campaign, that sealed it for us. I could not, in good conscience take part in the Kennedy campaign.

First impressions count. Ginny and I viewed Bobby Kennedy in a rather static manner and didn't trust that he had changed. He had good support to offer the union, but we remembered him as an aide to Senator Joe McCarthy, then as the U. S. Attorney General who targeted the labor movement by persecuting the Teamsters. One of our greatest heroes at that time (and still) was Harry Bridges. Under his leadership, the ILWU was powerfully successful in organizing farmworkers in Hawaii. Harry, for whom we had great respect and in whom we had great confidence, knew the Kennedy-Teamster tangle up close. Kennedy's actions in that anti-union campaign caused Harry Bridges to announce himself a Republican, no longer a Democrat.

Today, I think that the union's action in supporting Bobby Kennedy was the right thing to do and as productive a political move as could be made. Bobby Kennedy's victory in the California primary all but guaranteed the Democratic presidential candidate slot. Getting out the vote in L.A. turned the tide. It established the union and the Latino community as forces with which to be reckoned. Had history been different and had Bobby Kennedy taken the White House, he would have had Cesar and the union to thank for it. Such a development would likely have helped establish the union as a strong, self-sustaining national organization of tremendous consequence. The union would have been capable of both serving the needs of its members and jolting the AFL-CIO out of its doldrums of business unionism. In other words, that single action, during a few months in Los Angeles, could have made the union into everything I wanted to see it become. I couldn't see it that way at the time, but the assassination of Bobby Kennedy was a horrific blow to the union and to the nation.

Our narrow view of the Los Angeles election strategy sealed the decision for Ginny and me: It was time for us to leave Delano.

Before leaving, I wrote what I thought was a constructive and rather detailed assessment of the union. It's been 35 years since I laid my eyes on that document, but as I remember, it put considerable emphasis on the disproportionate use of Anglos in high positions and the disregard for people who became arbitrarily expendable. Using the copy machine at the CRLA office in McFarland, Ginny and I made just enough copies of that document for the executive board and the officers of the union and distributed it to them. It was a strictly internal paper that would not have helped the union at all if it became public. Each copy was slightly different from all the others so that, if anyone made it public, we could identify who might have used it destructively.

Quite fortunately, nobody made that document public. As I remember, the only officer who commented to me about it was Philip VeraCruz. He thanked me for it. Other than Philip, nobody responded to the document. Nobody asked for further detail. Nobody took issue against or for the criticisms it raised. The document itself was expendable. Does a tree falling, unheard in the forest, make any sound?

By leaving, we made it easy on Cesar. I'm sure that, like so many people since then, he would have found that I had to go. Kicking me out wouldn't have been easy without losing Ginny and Liza, who were invaluable to the union. They knew how to get things done and also how to get along without causing unwanted friction.

Since then, Ginny and I have always been firm friends of the UFW and the struggles of the farmworkers. Neither of us has ever been treated with anything but respect and warmth by the leaders of the union.

Liza disagreed with our decision to leave Delano. She stayed and worked with the union and the boycotts every spare moment of her time throughout her high school and college years—weekends, holidays, vacations. After the passage of the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act, Liza, at Cesar's request, took two years off from law school to organize, negotiate, and work with the legal department. Liza lived and breathed the union, probably spending as much time growing up in Helen and Cesar's family as in our own.

As a young teenager, Liza set her sights on becoming a lawyer for the union. She worked to near exhaustion toward that goal—and when it was almost in her grasp, it was snatched from her.

As it was told to me, Liza went to La Paz for the wedding of a friend. Upon her arrival, she learned that she had become persona non grata. Cesar told people that Liza was a communist who was counter-organizing against the union and she was no longer welcome in La Paz. It broke her heart. With a single irrational and false accusation, Cesar denied her the fruit of her labor—all that she had worked for, her future of service to the union.

As her father, I know it was preposterous to say that Liza was a communist. As her father, I know that Liza's sense of loyalty was so strong that she would never "counter-organize" or do anything to hurt the union. There was absolutely no truth in Cesar's accusations. There was no explainable reason for what he did to our daughter. It was irrational and inexcusable.

Liza was tied to the farmworkers with every fiber of her soul. She had given 10 years of extraordinarily talented, effective, and devoted work to the cause of the farmworkers—almost half her life! Even though she had been like a daughter in the Chavez family, Cesar cast her aside with total disregard. In a single act of contempt for her years of labor, Cesar cancelled her past and denied her the future for which she had struggled. In the same

stroke, the union and the farmworker movement she loved were denied the experienced , talented work of a loyal, beautiful, and bright champion of *La Causa*.

Not long after that terrible time, Ginny and I were at a reunion of UFW people that took place in Sacred Heart Church in San Jose. Sacred Heart was home to most of our community and political work in San Jose. The pastor, Cuchulainn Moriarty, and I were very close friends. I had my back to the main entrance and was relating the above incident to Father “Kook” when Cesar arrived with an entourage of bodyguards, accompanied by a TV crew. When I turned toward him, Cesar offered his hand and asked, “How are you, Fred?” I replied, “Better than Liza” and did not shake his hand. That was the last time I saw Cesar face to face.

I’m grateful for having had the privilege to work in the union alongside so many people with whom we developed relationships of lifelong friendship and respect. Our work with the UFW helped shape the life of our family and its members in dedication to the struggles of the working class. Cesar, Dolores, and Gil Padilla created a consciousness, a movement and a structure that, whatever its failings or accomplishments, nurtured and developed a generation of organizers and activists who continue to make a positive impact on trade unionism and the political life of our nation.

I’m proud to have known Cesar. He was a vital force whose power and memory as a symbol of labor organizing and farmworker struggle will continue as a vital element of our national heritage. He belongs to the people.

Our time in Delano, 1967 through 1968, came back to us in February of 2003, when after her death, we celebrated my Ginny’s life. The profound importance of her Delano days was articulately and warmly expressed by Dolores, Freddie and Richard Chavez, Eliseo Medina, Luis Valdez, and, most eloquently, by Jerry Cohen with whom she worked so closely. Had Cesar still been with us, I have no doubt that he would have joined those wonderful movement heroes in honoring Ginny’s work, life, and memory.

Que viva la Causa! Que viva la Union! Hasta la victoria siempre!