

Mark Silverman 1968–1970

Chapter One: Lamont-Bakersfield from April to June 1968

Our first assignment was to use house meetings and other methods to find the names of persons who were legal residents (I think), and who had crossed the border after the strike had started and were therefore were not entitled to work according to some labor department policy. I think we were focusing on Giumarra. I lived in Lamont at first, perhaps with Juan Flores. At any rate, I worked with Juan. I got to know the major urban centers around Lamont, such as Weedpatch of *Grapes of Wrath* fame. In fact, I think I visited an Oklahoman protestant church. I remember meeting an older farmworker of Oklahoma origin who was supporting the union.

On my second day, Martin Luther King was assassinated, the first political assassination of a shocking year. I think we had a march.

Then I moved to small house in a very quiet neighborhood in Bakersfield, about 10 feet from a cemetery in southeast Bakersfield.

Juan (Flores) and I splurged for lunch most days and had a \$1 or \$1.50 lunch at an all-you-can-eat smorgasbord restaurant. We ate so much. And then I remember leaving the air-conditioned restaurant with Juan, and getting blasted by the hot, dry Bakersfield afternoon air.

During this period occurred the first incident relating to the disproportion between my verbal capacity (large) and my size (small). I was yelling on the picket line, and a very large *contratista*, a Mr. Juarez, apparently didn't appreciate my remarks, and he belted me. Well, with the assistance of Jerry Cohen, we sued him. When I went to New York, I had to come back once for something to do with the lawsuit. It settled once the strike was over.

Los Angeles in June of 1968. I remember the shock of being in the hotel when Robert Kennedy was killed. I was with other UFW supporters in a different room from the one that Kennedy and Dolores and others were in. I think we gathered afterwards in a church. It was such a shock. Soon thereafter, we were sent on the boycott.

Chapter Two: New York Boycott from June 1968 to 1969

I remember a retreat when it was decided to send most of us to the boycott.

I was assigned to go to Montreal because I spoke (fairly bad) French. I think Jessica Govea was there. We went across the country by car with Juan Flores, I think to Buffalo. I was going to take a bus to Montreal. Despite our high UFW salaries, the Canadian immigration authorities thought that I didn't have enough money, and in a despicable act of gender/age

profiling concluded I was a risk to be a draft resister/evader. As it turns out, I had turned in my draft card on October 16, 1967, as part of the resistance. I was a draft resister. In fact, it was through Phil Farnham, who knew people in the UFW (and maybe had worked for the union, I'm not sure) that I joined the UFW. But although I was a draft resister, that is not why I was going to Canada. So they wouldn't let me in.

Then the boycott decided to send me to New York City. I think they were short of people then. We had a great group there. There were at least three elderly Filipino farmworkers there with us: George (Catalan?), Emiliano, and Freddy. Also there at various times were Rudy Reyes, Manuel Chavez, Richard Chavez, and Dolores Huerta, and three of her children: Laurie, Emilio, and Vincent. There were probably others from the valley, although I am not sure. Jim Drake, and later Jose Reyes, and their families were in New Jersey. Volunteers included Mitch (actually two Mitches), Peter Standish, Marilu Sanchez, and Barbara and Ray Ortiz and their kids.

We had great volunteers from New York, including Wendy and Julie Greenfield, who are still good friends of mine here in the Bay Area 35 years later. They were Long Island high school students. The Mitches (Mitch Cohen and the other Mitch) started as volunteers from SUNY Stony Brook. There was Sharon Brown from the upper West Side and the Haynes from Long Island, and many more.

I was blessed to have Dolores as my mentor. I remember how overwhelmed I was when she divided responsibility by boroughs, and put me in charge of Manhattan! The method of giving organizers (or others) responsibility worked in my case, and those of a number of other organizers. We worked hard. Now, keep in mind that New York was one of the easiest places to do a boycott. Groups that didn't get along with each other all supported the boycott—liberals, unionists, Puerto Ricans, black people, Jews, and others. So we were eventually able to get all the supermarkets in the boroughs to stop carrying grapes, except for Gristedes (or is it Cristedes?).

In fact, it was here that I learned a lesson about not getting involved in disputes between our key allies. We had strong support from black and Puerto Rican groups, and I knew some well on the Lower East Side. We also had strong support from (Shanker's) AFT teachers' union. Then came the drive for community control of schools, which was perceived by the AFT as an attack against the union. I forget if there was a strike, but there was a lot of hostility between the union and black and Puerto Rican groups. Well, the UFW boycott had a station wagon with a loudspeaker on the top. I agreed to let the groups on the Lower East Side use the station wagon and the loudspeakers to solicit support from the community. Fortunately, Dolores explained to me how this would damage our ability to keep support from the teachers' union, and the activity stopped quickly.

I remember being with Dolores in a building one night, perhaps after a meeting. There was a Puerto Rican janitor who started saying racist things about black people. Dolores said, "Well, you know my grandfather is/was black."

Support from the AFT was great. They encouraged their shop stewards to arrange presentations on the boycott in classes. I did a number of them. I still remember the openness and the enthusiasm of the students. A significant number became strong volunteers for the boycott.

We lived at the Seafarers International Union (SIU) dormitory. It was a dormitory for merchant marine students and perhaps also for young workers between trips, I'm not sure of that. The SIU was a strong supporter of the union. There was a bit of a "culture clash" between the SIU bigwigs and the "influenced-by-the-1960s" younger generation. For example, they didn't think we did a sufficiently good job at making our beds in the appropriate way—I think they wanted hospital corners. We also got to know some great young guys who were merchant marine students, especially young working-class white guys that we, or at least I, had never met until then.

Well, my energy and/or vocal strength outpaced my physical size on a couple of occasions. One was on the Lower East Side when I was very energetically and loudly urging customers not to buy grapes at a stand owned by a Mr. Zimmerman. (We were focusing a lot of attention on the fruit stands, because the major supermarkets had stopped carrying grapes.) Well, Mr. Zimmerman was not enchanted by my efforts, and he hauled off and hit me.

The other involved our shop-in technique. This time it was not really my mouth's doing. I had been very active in a shop of D'Agostino. I was able to fill about five shopping carts around the stores. We didn't forget our mission with grapes, and looked for grapes first, then second a turkey or something similar, which we placed not too gingerly on top of the grapes. At the end of our shopping as many as five of us would be at different registers at the same time. One would shout (perhaps it was me), "These are California grapes? I can't shop here!" And then all of us would leave, and leave our carts—the ones we brought up to the register—and walk out of the store.

Well, the next week we were doing another shop-in at the same store. I was smart enough not to return. But the kids were having a problem with the store, so I went there. A clerk recognized me, and kicked me in the chin. I still have a white spot there. You might wonder how he managed to kick me in the chin. Well, it was not that his kick was that high. The kick to my chin was his second kick. I'll leave the rest to your imagination. I went to the hospital, and fortunately there was no permanent damage.

We did a picket at a Grand Union store near NYU, where people sat and camped on the lawn. We started drawing types who were "footloose," to say the least. People did stay out of the store.

I have recounted a number of incidents. But probably not what was really representative of my experience and how we succeeded. We succeeded because we reached out with our

underlying message. We presented the issue of the boycott in human terms—the suffering and the struggle of the farmworkers. Only in recent years have I realized how much I learned. I think I have hungered to be part of an effective, real people’s movement ever since, and that has pushed me to search to find the same in the immigrant rights’ movement, and to work closely with both organizing groups (most of which base themselves to one degree or another on the model of Saul Alinsky), and immigrant-based groups.

At some point, Dolores went back to the valley for a funeral. Then a few days later, she called me and said something like, “Cesar needs me to negotiate such-and-such contract. So I’m putting you in charge of the New York boycott.” Gulp!

Chapter Three: The New York Boycott (the second part of my experience) and afterward from 1969 until February 1970

This was the period in which I was the coordinator of the New York boycott. We had a great, dedicated staff and volunteers, including my current friends Wendy and Julie Greenfield. We were successful in keeping nearly all the stores free of grapes.

The highlights included two days (or nights) in the Paterson jail in New Jersey. We did it as civil disobedience inside an A&P store. My parents were upset not just because they discovered via a newspaper article in California that their little boy was arrested, but that he was on a fast (a Jewish mother’s horror)!

We had a press event at or near Times Square and Pete Seeger came. What a thrill!

I left in about February of 1970. I went to Cuba with the (third, I think) Venceremos Brigade. Then I went to California. Before I left, I wrote a boycott guide for my successor, Marilu Sanchez, and the staff. I believe it was 150 pages long or more.

Subsequent connections with the UFW and former UFW organizers and volunteers

Seventeen years later, it’s 1987. Congress had just passed the legalization law (amnesty) called IRCA in 1986. By this time I was an immigration lawyer working for the nonprofit organization the Immigrant Legal Resource Center in San Francisco. Dolores Huerta asked me to do a training in Delano of union staff members, or probably more accurately, Martin Luther King, Jr. Center staff people to assist farmworkers who apply for legalization. It was great to be collaborating with the union again. We did the training and during the legalization application period provided technical assistance to the staff people, as well as other agencies throughout the country.

In about 1990 or 1991, we had our first intensive training for paralegal immigration advocates, and there were at least two UFW people in the class. Susana (maiden name

Chavez) was one of them. In the 1990s, we worked with UFW people (and other groups) on a number of immigration legislative issues, including guest worker proposals (opposing), and a family unification provision called 245(i).

I have worked with immigration attorneys and legal workers who have previously worked with the union, including Linton Joaquin.

In 2003, I worked with many people, including former UFWers Dolores Huerta, Wendy Greenfield, Fred Ross, Ken Fujimoto, and Eliseo Medina on the driver's license issue. It's great to be working with people with whom I share the common UFW experience, even though I didn't know some of them during the UFW years. (I knew Dolores, Wendy, and Eliseo.)

Finally, it's interesting and gratifying how my experience with the UFW dealing with immigration issues has developed. Our first job in the Lamont area was finding out the names of strikebreakers who had crossed the border after the grape strike began and therefore were not entitled to work in a place on strike. (I assume these workers were in the country legally.) I assumed their names were going to be turned over to the Department of Labor and maybe the INS.

Now, the UFW is one of the leaders in the fight for immigrant rights. It is probably one of the three most important unions supporting the struggle for immigrant rights (the others are the SEIU, where Fred Ross and Eliseo Medina work, and HERE, the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Employees). For many reasons, including the inspirational example of the struggle of immigrant farmworkers through the UFW, immigrants have never played a more important role in the immigrant rights' struggle than they are playing right now.

I would love to be in touch with former UFW people who would like to be involved in this quest for a just immigration policy. If interested, send me an email at mark@ilrc.org