

Patrick Bonner 1968–1973, 1976–1980

My First Two Years with the Farmworkers

The First Months

I became a full-time volunteer with the UFWOC in September of 1968. I was assigned to the boycott in Los Angeles. There were eight of us living in a little house off First Street near Evergreen in Boyle Heights. I lived with the Serda family and three Filipino farmworkers, Lio, Julian, and Mariano. Joe Serda was director of the Los Angeles boycott. He had been a foreman at one of the grape ranches. His daughter, Helen, had organized the family into joining the strike. Fred Ross was our teacher and strategist. We met twice every day. The rest of the time we spent picketing stores in East Los Angeles, Boyle Heights, and El Sereno.

All the major supermarket chains in Los Angeles were members of something called the Food Employers Council. No member was allowed by the council to negotiate separately with unions. So we had to take them all on at the same time. Our strategy was to picket individual stores where we had the most customer support, whatever the chain. Some of those chains no longer exist in the Los Angeles area. But I especially remember the Food Giant in City of Commerce, Market Basket in El Sereno, and a number of Safeway stores where we spent a lot of time.

It was in front of the Food Giant that I began to learn Spanish. Helen Serda would give me a phrase to use with the customers, “*No compre aqui.*” The next day she taught me a new phrase, “*Venden uvas esquirolas aqui.*” I would repeat those two phrases all day long to customers. Slowly, I learned a few more phrases. After my pronunciation got better, people thought I knew Spanish and would start to ask me questions. Then I would call on one of the farmworkers to take over the conversation.

Sometimes the individual store would remove the grapes. We told them that was not good enough. They had to take the grapes out of the entire chain. Some customers could not understand why we were picketing a store that didn’t have any grapes. We did not expect the grapes to be removed from the whole chain. But we hoped that our pressure would push the Food Employers Council to put pressure on the growers to settle the strike. In other U.S. cities, major grocery chains had removed the grapes from their shelves. Los Angeles was the holdout.

There were a few small chains and independent stores that agreed to remove the grapes, but we had to keep checking and sometimes picket them to keep them honest. One of those was Big Buy on Brooklyn Avenue. As we stood there with our signs, we had no idea that someday that street would be Cesar Chavez Avenue.

Fred Ross was our teacher. Every day started with a meeting to plan the day and ended with a meeting to critique it. This was the beginning of learning to be an organizer. Early on, I made the remark that time is money. Fred corrected me, saying this is not true when you are working with the poor. The poor have a lot more time than money.

During part of that fall, we worked on the presidential campaign for Hubert Humphrey, who was running against Richard Nixon.

Safeway

After the presidential campaign, we went back to picketing stores. We also began doing presentations to organizations, usually as an agenda item at their regular meetings. The objective of those presentations was not to get the organizations to act, but to find individuals within the organizations whom we could get involved.

Sometimes Helen Serda and I gave presentations together. Helen would tell people about the farmworkers' lives and how they came to be on strike. Then I would follow with the practical application of what our listeners could do to help.

We had a petition, addressed to Safeway, asking the Safeway top management to remove the grapes from its stores. At the meetings, we would give people petitions to circulate and then return to us. At the bottom of the petition was a place for the petition circulator to put her/his name and phone number. As the petitions came back to us, we clipped and saved the names of the circulators. Those names were gold.

Throughout the country, we organized a one-day picket on May 10, 1969, with volunteers at every Safeway store. In Southern California, we were in front of at least 53 Safeway stores that day. Safeway was the second largest supermarket chain in the country, after A&P.

In June, Chris Hartmire and Joe Serda began a fast in front of one of the supermarkets in Los Angeles.

Expansion

The summer of 1969 brought new volunteers. In the fall, Fred Ross decided there were enough volunteers to divide up Los Angeles County and spread us out.

Part of the group, led by Julian, would continue making the rounds of the independent groceries in Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles, keeping them clean.

The rest of us were assigned new areas. My area was the San Gabriel Valley. We were to find ourselves free lodging and a place to work from in our area. At different times during the following year, I found lodging in Pasadena, Arcadia, Claremont, and Irwindale. I was given the use of office space in the Northeast Peace Center in Highland Park, in the American Friends Service Committee building in Pasadena, and in the Communication Workers of America local office in Alhambra. Each was available to me at a different time of day, so I did a lot of driving around.

As soon as we branched out into our areas, the boycott coordinators in Delano noticed a drop in the daily grape shipments to Los Angeles.

House Meetings

The other component of the 1969 expansion was on-the-job training in organizing house meetings. Fred Ross laid out every detail, even the format of our contact cards.

No step was to be skipped. First call the prospective house meeting host. Make an appointment to go and visit that person. "We are starting a new campaign and I'd like to come and talk to you about it." Right before the visit, call again to remind her or him. At the visit, ask the person to do two things: first, join us on a Saturday picket line, and second, host a house meeting. "You invite the people, I'll run the meeting." Before leaving the personal visit, set the date and time for the house meeting. Then there were two more reminder calls and finally the house meeting. At the house meeting, we made the same two requests of the guests: join us on a picket line Saturday and host another house meeting.

We were supposed to concentrate on one part of our geographical area to set up a strong ongoing set of picket lines before moving on. I was not able to do that. My contacts were so widely scattered that I found myself with one picket line in Highland Park, one in Altadena, one in El Monte, and one in La Puente. In each of those places I had one strong person who could anchor the picket line. As I found more people, I sent them to those four lines. I also had a friend, a substitute teacher, who spent a lot of his time helping me organize. He was sometimes able to get an additional picket line going.

The Boycott Machine

With the summer of 1970, things changed. Cracks appeared in the unity of the growers. A few growers signed contracts before the summer, making some union grapes available. The Food Employers Council allowed its members to make separate deals. One hundred full-time volunteers were assigned to the Los Angeles boycott. LeRoy Chatfield and Chris Hartmire developed the L.A. boycott machine that finally brought the grape growers to the table.

First the 100 volunteers were assigned to 100 stores in the major chains, one person to a store. We did not have picket signs. We had only cards that we gave the customers, asking them to give those cards to the store manager. The card was a simple request to remove the non-union grapes. We did this for two weeks.

Meanwhile, LeRoy was contacting the headquarters of the chains, telling them that all 100 of us were going to start picketing one chain, beginning on a certain day, and that we were in the process of deciding which chain. This shaking-out process got a couple of the chains to capitulate before we began picketing.

The day before we started picketing, LeRoy announced that Ralph's would be the target. Ralph's was prepared with cameras and lawyers to get an injunction against the mass picketing that they expected. But we only had one person, sometimes two, at each store, in most cases the same person who had been there for two weeks and had gotten to know the customers.

We did not have picket signs. We simply approached customers individually, told them Ralph's had not yet responded to our request, and asked them to go to a different store that day. We didn't ask them to stay away indefinitely, but only for a few days. The customers

turned away in droves. After four days, Ralph's said that it would provide only the best quality produce to its customers and it had discovered that the grapes with the black eagle on the box were the best quality.

Again we went to the remaining chain stores and handed out cards. Again LeRoy told the chains we were deciding on another target. Again a couple chains discovered that union grapes were of the highest quality.

Lucky's was our next target. It was tougher than Ralph's. We kept a tally of how many customers we turned away. Every day, Chris designed another leaflet for us to pass out at the stores saying how many people had turned away from Lucky's up to that point. After we were at Lucky's for two weeks, Giumarra and the other major growers in Delano capitulated. The great grape boycott was over.

But simultaneous with that victory came the lettuce strike in Salinas. The 100 volunteers in Los Angeles were divided into three groups. One group went to Delano to help with the first days of administering the new contracts; one group went to Salinas to join the lettuce strikers on the picket lines; and the third group stayed in Los Angeles to begin the lettuce boycott. After a few days, we were all in Los Angeles again and the lettuce boycott was under way.