

Jeff Fromberg 1970–1972

I'm Sticking with the Union

I had come from New York to work for the union in Delano, California, in late December of 1970 and stayed into early January of 1972. It was during 1971 that the union moved its headquarters from Delano, where the grape strike had broken out, to La Paz in Keene, California, a tiny town in the mountains near Tehachapi, about 30 miles east of Bakersfield. The union had been offered what had been the premises of a tuberculosis sanatorium and took it over to use as its new headquarters. That seemed to make sense, as the union had aspirations beyond the grape and vegetable fields of central California. In that year, we signed contracts on behalf of citrus workers in Florida and were organizing in Arizona and Texas.

The year 1971 was a relatively quiet year in the early life of the union. By 1971, the grape strike had been settled and strife had subsided between the Teamsters and the farmworkers' union. Our ally, the seafarers' union, had stood by the farmworkers against the growers in the Salinas lettuce fields. More violence came later between the farmworkers and the Teamsters union in the Coachella Valley near the Mexican border in the mid-1970s.

If you were Cesar Chavez, however, 1971 was not a tranquil period. I doubt he was fortunate enough to ever have a quiet year. There were rumors of a Teamster plot on his life, and Cesar spent a good portion of the year moving around. While La Paz was a beautiful setting, rail lines of the Southern Pacific went right through the headquarters, and if Cesar had stayed, he would have been vulnerable.

I had come to the union to take over for David Duran, a priest who had been trained as a CPA and who was handling the union's accounting only until a replacement could be found. I was that replacement. I had worked for five years as an accountant after graduating from college in 1963, then took off to travel in Europe and the Middle East from 1968 to 1969. A year or so after coming home, I found out about the union's activities in New York City and volunteered to help with the lettuce boycott. A match was made when my background and the union's need were revealed to both of us.

I wish I could provide some historical insights about the union's activities. Unfortunately I can't. I was with the union for a short time and only know what I saw and personally experienced. But I have impressions and recollections that remain with me still. I was young, 29 years old, and my time with the union made an impression. I remember being at a meeting with Cesar and several members of the union's board of directors. Someone mentioned a short-handled hoe. It wasn't that as a city kid that I didn't know what a hoe was. I did. But I had never heard the term "short-handled hoe." Short-handled hoes were used to force workers to stoop over the furrows in the lettuce fields; a worker who was stooped over would not be resting or relaxing. If you add the lack of toilet facilities and the

brutality of straw bosses to the crippling injuries caused by stoop labor, the horrible working and living conditions of agricultural workers in the Salinas Valley come into focus.

When I first met Dave Duran, he told me that if the union had never accomplished anything else, it had cleaned up the worst labor camps in the Central Valley. By the time I came to California, many of the horrors that Steinbeck had chronicled had been mitigated by the union's efforts. Should anyone be unclear as to why streets are named after Cesar and postage stamps have his likeness on them, a conversation with a farmworker of 65 years of age should quickly resolve all doubts.

As far as I know, union members are now covered by HMO-type plans. That is now. In 1971, a clinic was under construction and finally became operational in Delano. It wasn't the only union clinic; there was a clinic operating in Salinas and one in Mexicali, Mexico. I live now in Los Angeles and when driving through the Central Valley, I try to stop at Delano to see the old headquarters. On one trip I was amazed to find that the clinic was no longer in operation, but I suppose and hope that medical services offered through union contracts are as good, if not better, than what the Delano clinic was able to offer.

There were other concerns besides health and working condition. U.C. Davis was working on automated equipment that could replace workers. I think that is why the skins of tomatoes have been hardened. It made it possible for automated equipment to harvest the crop without damaging the fruit. Produce from Mexico and other countries, while perhaps not a threat to agricultural employment in 1971, undoubtedly has had some discernible impact in the California fields in today's economy. Training and education were thus concerns for Cesar and the union.

Cesar was a visionary, a brilliant organizer, and an exceptional leader. And while he was the face of the union, there were many others who helped make the union what it became. As I recall, The United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, the union, came into being as the result of a merger between NFWA, the United Farm Workers Association, and AWOC, the Agricultural Organizing Committee. Cesar led one of the organizations and Larry Itliong led the other, a predominantly Filipino labor group. Many Filipino men had come to the United States to work. Filipino women did not come and, as a result, many older Filipino workers remained lifelong bachelors. The union saw to it that Agbayani Village was built to house some of those older workers in their retirement years.

Larry was memorable. He had ridden the rails, been torpedoed during World War II while serving in the Merchant Marines, and later headed up an agricultural union movement. While I was in Delano, he was scheduled to deliver a talk in San Diego, a trip of about four hours. I rode with Larry and Ben Maddock, an ex-Marine and middle linebacker for Fresno State, to San Diego and back and was the designated driver. On the return trip, we drove back through a tule fog where visibility is barely 5 feet in front of your face. The day before, there had been a 100-plus vehicle pile up on Highway 99 just outside of Delano.

Lobbying trips to Sacramento and Los Angeles come to mind, as does standing on a picket line when workers were striking Basic Vegetable. Union picnics, touch football games, the Fiesta Campesino concert in Salinas to benefit farmworkers (I think Joan Baez sang), a trip to Mexicali to check on the clinic's accounting system, and spending time with some of the rubber workers are all memories.

I met my ex-wife at the union. Before moving to a cottage in Keene, we shared a dormitory room at La Paz with our three dogs. At night, we left our door open. Our neighbor across the Hall, Pat, slept with his door closed. One morning, after having gone to the bathroom during the night, he awoke to find two mangy dogs staring down at him.

Mexican music and labor songs permeated the time in Delano and La Paz. There was Radio Campesino (Radio Farmworker) broadcasting from Fresno. We'd start Friday evening meetings in Delano by singing union songs in Spanish. I vaguely remember Cesar saying how important music was to organizing. Jessica Govea had a beautiful singing voice. Alfredo Figueroa, who was in charge of the field office in Blythe, wrote *El Corrido de Cesar Chavez* ("The Ballad of Cesar Chavez"). He came to La Paz often and always brought his guitar.

I spent a year with the union. During that time, we felt we were involved in something important, doing something great, and it was. As Dave Duran had said, if the union had done nothing more than that, it would have accomplished plenty.