

Sandra Cate 1970–1974

One Boycotter's Views

Part 1: Los Angeles Boycott, Summer of 1970

Eight-year-old Lucy Vazquez taught me how to picket a grocery store with only two people. At first I was helpless: timid, intimidated, afraid to approach customers at all, let alone to ask them to shop at another grocery store. I stood by awkwardly with an armful of leaflets, watching Lucy charge into the parking lot, stopping customers before they even parked (a key tactic: this made it easier for them to turn around and go elsewhere). She gave the customers the spiel about the farmworkers needing their help. A lot of them left. I watched, feeling even more embarrassed, out of place, inadequate. Then the epiphany came: for Lucy, the child of Alfredo Vazquez, a farmworker from Visalia, this effort was about her life and her future. If she could do it, whatever it was, I could damn well help. She was eight, but I was 20. Time to grow up.

I had come to the Los Angeles boycott for the summer—a respite from Eastern elite college life. Recruited by a church program in Pennsylvania, my friend Holly and I ended up in Delano—the best place to be introduced to the struggle. We arose early to picket grape fields in the blistering valley sun, we slept in sleeping bags on floors of bright pink rented houses, we learned to eat beans and rice and adobo, all foreign foods. We learned to sing the songs of the Huelga and we got tough.

Boycott Structure

That summer I lived with the Vazquez family (Alfredo and his two children) and Paul Johnston in an abandoned union hall in San Pedro. Other pods of boycotters covered territories all over the Los Angeles basin. I had been given the choice of the San Fernando Valley or San Pedro—it took me about two seconds to weigh the relative opportunities each place offered. I wanted the adventure and the unknown. The choice worked out well. The kids were great; Alfredo was tolerant and kind. We got along and learned from each other. And I got to ride to the weekly meetings on the back of Paul's motorcycle, speeding up the L.A. freeways.

LeRoy Chatfield (with Chris Hartmire) coordinated the whole L.A. boycott that summer, the final summer of the grape boycott. His authority, direction, demands, and discipline were easy to take, largely because he bent over backwards to keep us informed, participating, and part of a huge team taking on the Los Angeles grocery chains. I remember having to make daily reports of our turn-aways. Inflating the figures never seemed like an option in terms of dealing with LeRoy, probably because he made certain we knew how real this fight was and exactly what we needed to do to win. His candor encouraged our honesty. Consequently, I always worked really hard to get those customers off the lot.

The weekly meetings gave us a chance to check in with friends, make new ones, and feel part of the larger effort—necessary after a long and often grueling week on the parking lots alone or nearly so. Sometimes we did collective picket lines—the noise and fun made up for the other days of isolation. Of course, our morale was kept high as we began to “win.” Small chains gave in to our demands, then medium chains did. Then I think Lucky’s, a big chain, caved. I don’t remember how we found out (Did the manager of the store I was picketing tell me to call in?), but the news of victory stopped us cold. The entire boycott was over, and I learned the lesson that I carry still: concerted collective consumer action can change the corporate world.

Change from Within

When the lettuce growers signed with the Teamsters, LeRoy and Chris called a mass meeting to give us new assignments. Some were to go to Delano to help sign up workers now covered by the grape contracts. Others would work on a huge march to start in each of the four corners of the Salinas Valley to gather supporters and momentum to confront the lettuce growers. LeRoy read out the assignments. I was being sent to Delano (instead of to Salinas, where I really wanted to go), as were all the other women in the group. Most of the men were being sent to Salinas. I was jealous and furious. I raised my hand and asked LeRoy why only men were being sent to Salinas. Who remembers what he answered? I remember he fumbled, but only slightly. His answer sounded lame.

The L.A. boycott changed after that march—women demanded to be, and became, more visible, taking more leadership roles. When I returned to the boycott a couple of years later, LeRoy gave women equal positions to men as coordinators. I think he had learned something important.

Part 2: La Paz, 1971-1972

It was difficult to think of returning to university after such an incredible summer, and I nearly didn’t. But I went back in the end, figuring it was easier to finish at that point (I would be a senior). Not long into the fall semester, my friend Holly and I were served grapes in our dorm. We knew what we had to do. We gathered some friends, got some petitions signed, located the person responsible for buying food supplies for the college, and scheduled a meeting. Preparing for a long battle, we made an impassioned pitch—drawing heavily on our summer experiences. The college administration said fine, and that was the end of grapes on campus. It is too bad it couldn’t always have been so easy.

After two years of intense activism (anti-war protests, the boycott, a university strike), getting a job seemed inappropriate. I thought for my politics to be real and meaningful, I had to live them. Going back to the boycott seemed the most sensible thing to do. I went back to Los Angeles, where I knew almost no one. When LeRoy found out that I had returned, he asked me to come to La Paz.

At La Paz I initially helped with the conversion to data processing, keypunching endless amounts of data onto the old-style IBM cards. This experience, and my subsequent attempts to reconstruct the books of grower contributions to the Robert F. Kennedy Medical Plan, revealed in very concrete ways how dependent the industry was on contractors who “handled” the workforce for the employers and how workers were denied long-term benefits of employment (such as pensions, medical benefits, or Social Security, because many workers had no SS numbers or had several). My work taught me how little employers at many ranches knew about their workers, as well as the real difference a union would make to farmworkers. This knowledge and optimism for change sustained me through many of the tougher times that would come.

Once I had finished setting up the ledgers detailing grower contributions to the medical plan, LeRoy sent me around the state on a “collecting trip,” to personally visit growers with delinquencies or accounting messes to see if I could straighten things out. I met with some successes, but some surprises as well. Guimarra Vineyards had contributed regularly since the beginning of their contract in 1970, but had fallen behind for several months. I called numerous times. Finally, one functionary admitted to me that they had been redecorating their offices and had gotten behind on their accounts. I wrote them a letter with all the sarcasm and righteousness I could muster. Since it was just down the mountain from La Paz, Guimarra would be my first stop on my collecting trip. I arrived late morning at their offices, to find a UFW organizer (Robert Garcia from Salinas?) supporting a sit-in of a huge crew of Yemeni workers (issue unknown). Of course I had no choice but to sit down with the crew. John Guimarra, Sr. came in after an hour or so, and regaled the workers with his heartfelt concern for them and their plight. He was Sicilian, they were Arab, and the two cultures were very close, they understood each other, etc. etc. Talk went back and forth and the issues were resolved. The crew went back to work. As I filed out after the group, I found Johnny Guimarra, Jr. and stated my mission and my demands for immediate payment of back contributions. He burst into laughter—and I realized that I was really very young and very nervy. But Guimarra paid. Some other growers were hostile; some were cooperative. One offered me a job, clearly overwhelmed by the accounting and reporting requirements of his new contract.

I liked living at La Paz, especially because of its desolate beauty, the richly bicultural, bilingual aspects of daily life, and the opportunities to see how the union worked close up and from the inside. Getting to know many farmworkers as real and complex people with both virtues and faults helped me to develop new perspectives on the movement and deepened my commitment to continue.

I fell into the category of “Anglo single,” while the community was more oriented towards families. A lot of tensions developed around this divide, that year more so than between Mexican/Chicano and Anglo, or farmworker and volunteer. Having movie nights and organizing Sunday road trips helped some, but basically all we could do there was work. La Paz was isolated; Tehachapi offered little in the way of entertainment, and our behavior

needed to be exemplary, both to keep police away and to keep striking farmworkers from resenting the plush life that many suspected we led. (We did have to stop using the swimming pool; that *was* plush.) Many younger single volunteers grumbled, a lot. Other individuals made attempts to forge a community out of such a disparate group. (I'm thinking of Venustiano Olguin organizing community trash pickup on a revolving basis—a failed, but noble experiment.) I believe the larger struggles and organizing battles always took (and probably needed to take) precedence over resolving internal problems that may have seemed trivial. What I learned from that time at La Paz was that commitment to a political cause alone was insufficient to keep people on track and productively working toward the same goal, especially when engaged in the mundane but essential work of building an effective bureaucracy. The stuff of daily life—getting and making food, having a reasonably comfortable living situation, resolving small-scale personality conflicts, needing to have some fun—will always intervene.

The “game” came later as a means of dealing with some of these issues; I am glad I was gone from La Paz by then.

Part 3: Los Angeles Boycott, Redux, 1972-1973

The lettuce boycott in Los Angeles provided a simple lesson in endurance. I am sure there were various targets and short-term campaigns against different chains, but my memories have condensed to one: a Year on Safeway Parking Lots. I was one of the coordinators, assigned largely to West Los Angeles, Santa Monica, Venice, and sometimes the beach communities further south. Having a car, I would deliver my crew to their various stores and then settle in at the Safeway on Lincoln Boulevard in Venice. I was often alone there or with one other boycotter. At that point I never seemed able or willing to spend much effort recruiting volunteers to join me (a real mistake on my part, I think). It seemed like I had to do it all myself. After eight hours on the parking lot and a long drive back to the house, I just couldn't or wouldn't put out much more energy, although I did do some calling and following up with volunteer lists.

The most important lesson I learned on those parking lots was to be quick, always friendly, funny, and persevering. It was simple to turn away the casual shoppers, as well as those who knew and had sympathies for the boycott—and West L.A. was pretty easy in that regard, with the exception of Brentwood and the beach towns. What really challenged me was finding ways to connect with the committed Safeway shoppers who loved the store, thought they had no time to go elsewhere, and resented my very presence. I kept at it, always approaching them, never letting them off the hook, but always polite and cheerful. Some never wavered, but many did; after several months, they would stop and ask me just what it was I was really doing there. We would have a conversation, making a connection that transcended picketer/customer; they had never before really considered what the boycott meant. Sometimes they left, never to return. Sometimes they continued to shop at the store but became friendly.

This determination paid off at the Lincoln Boulevard Safeway. It was an old small store and a large Lucky's was located up the street, providing a reasonable alternative. We turned away a lot of customers and the store always lost money when we were picketing. At one point it distributed coupons, trying to entice neighborhood customers back with reduced prices. We responded by printing up a leaflet thanking those same customers for their continuing support and asking them not to be taken in by Safeway's ploy. We went door to door in the neighborhood around the store to distribute our response to the coupons. I don't remember how long it took or if we, the boycotters, could really take credit, but that particular Safeway closed. But the perseverance failed us on the larger campaign.

No Victory

We picketed all over the Los Angeles Basin. Sometimes we would go en masse to Safeways in Orange County, sometimes to the San Fernando Valley. Customers in those areas seemed excruciatingly hostile compared to those in West L.A. We had some limited victories against some small chains (I seem to recall), but Safeway would not budge. We continually shifted our message to try to find new ways of swinging customers to our side. It was difficult to explain "Teamsters vs. UFW" as opposed to "union vs. non-union," and customers used the Teamster contract as an excuse for continuing to patronize Safeway. ("It's a fight between unions," they'd say, or "Farmworkers *have* a union contract.") We also tried to tap into emerging concerns about food safety by emphasizing rampant use of dangerous pesticides—to little avail. At one point rumors abounded that Safeway was selling Australian beef—that became a central message on the store parking lots. Was it tainted beef? I don't remember why it mattered. What did matter was the sense that we were not going to win this particular campaign.

Diversions

That year boycotters also got involved in political campaigns, which many volunteers resisted. LeRoy always took the time to listen to our concerns and work through the issues, to his credit. Our on-the-job education in the realities of California politics continued in different contexts.

Human billboards, first used on the No on Proposition 22 campaign, emerged during that boycott year and became one of my favorites. They required really early hours, as we needed to get into position for the 6 a.m. rush hour; sometimes we stayed overnight in church halls close to the freeway entrances or exits we were targeting. The obvious public support through honking and waving always gave us heart. It was a chance to see other boycotters, and represented a change from the daily grind of picketing Safeways. The tactic lives on in political campaigns—and still represents to me the kind of personal engagement with issues and candidacies that TV ads and door hanger attack ads will always lack. Recently, in San Francisco, I passed two guys standing at the freeway exit that dumps cars into downtown. They each held up homemade No War signs. They were not part of an

organized group or action, just two guys transformed into human billboards, their statement made more powerful by their willingness to stand publicly in that way.

Daily Life on the Boycott

Living communally in a house with a number of miscellaneous folk (10? 15? It always seemed like lots) with a strict budget offered lots of challenges. Andy Coe, local area coordinator (I think) did a masterful job of managing household affairs and keeping up spirits and discipline. The room and board and \$5 a week seemed adequate. Because we worked six days a week anyway, we didn't need much in the way of money. To save the union money, some of us applied for, and received, unemployment. I was never comfortable with that strategy—primarily because I had no intention of applying for work and thus felt like I was perpetrating fraud.

To supplement our food budget, we aggressively sought donations of food. I remember one bakery in Venice that specialized in very healthy whole-grain products and let us pick up its unsold inventory a couple of times a week. I can still taste those whole-wheat English muffins. I ate millions, it seemed. We also conducted food drives, leafleting a neighborhood one day asking for canned food donations and then returning later to pick them up. Picketing Safeway for so long, we saw the incredible amount of food stores discarded: slightly bruised fruits and vegetables, slightly stale packaged pastries, and other products just past their sell-by dates. Andy instituted a Dumpster-diving project in which teams visited groceries regularly to “collect” excess discarded foods. I did it, but hated every minute of it and not just because of the “yuck” factor. Coming from a comfortable middle-class background, I found it awkward, at times emotionally painful, to invest so much effort in activities related to keeping our own selves fed and housed (instead of “helping the farmworkers”). Now we were the people needing help; it was really hard to ask, especially since we were choosing voluntary poverty. Those experiences (and some of what happened in Toronto) did change forever how I understand the homeless or those who seek help from food pantries; the social distance between us has shrunk a bit. Much, much later when I needed to understand Buddhist concepts of making merit (which resemble, to a limited degree, American forms of giving to charity), those experiences came to mind: providing people with an opportunity to give and be generous generates merit in itself.

Part 4: Toronto Boycott, 1973-1974

The UFW leadership decided to open up new fronts and to swell the boycott with farmworkers from the valley. Given the seemingly futile situation with Safeway in L.A. (and because of some personal issues), I jumped at the opportunity to join the group going to Toronto.

The Toronto group, led by Marshall Ganz and Jessica Govea, included some families and young male and female strikers. And me. Families were provided with housing; the single

male farmworkers went to a monastery and the single female farmworkers to a convent. Structurally I was an anomaly—single but not a farmworker. I moved around, in temporary stays on supporters' couches. At Christmastime, I found myself essentially homeless. At a mass meeting of the boycotters and supporters, Marshall solicited housing for me. What if no one offered? I lucked out—Joanne Radford (a New Democratic Party activist) said she'd house me for the duration of the boycott. She insisted I sleep in her bedroom while she took the living room couch. Her only condition was that I join the NDP, so I became a card-carrying socialist during my stint in Toronto.

At first I worked as a field coordinator, assigned to the northwest sector of the city. I was "in charge" of a couple of guys, both young farmworkers from the Dinuba/Reedley area. Early on, one of them visited a local priest soliciting support for the boycott. He returned with the priest's endorsement and a winter coat as well. That young fellow, Miguel Contreras, clearly demonstrated his natural gift for organizing. He is now secretary-treasurer of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO.

Unlike the Los Angeles boycott, we invested a lot more time and energy in recruiting and developing local volunteers. Miguel's (and mine, I'll take some credit) most impressive achievement, as far as the Toronto boycott was concerned, was organizing an entire Catholic girls' high school. Dozens of students and many of the teachers became regulars on our picket lines, even in the worst of winter weather. At one point, after some contracts had been won, we learned that the teachers had posted the contracts in the school hallways; these students were really learning something.

At one point in the spring, some of the students had been threatened with arrest at one store by a particularly uptight store manager (I don't remember picketers having the same legal protections as in California). At a boycott meeting, Marshall wondered aloud if this manager would really arrest nuns and young students. We assured him the manager would. He wondered aloud if this manager would arrest even the Easter Bunny. Brilliant idea. We recruited several of the girls to dress up as bunnies and hop through the store simultaneously, distributing leaflets from their Easter baskets. Pandemonium ensued. The manager went ballistic; he screamed at me for what seemed like an hour, but no arrests were made that day.

Rather than foster team spirit among the boycotters, Marshall worked on the principle of competition. It seemed like no matter what our group accomplished, we would have to explain why we had not done as well as Lupe or Paul that day or week. They had easier areas to organize? More volunteers? We didn't work as hard? I don't remember why, but I do remember resenting this particular kind of pressure and finding it demoralizing instead of stimulating. I shifted to managing the office with Jessica, which most of all meant producing leaflets and buttons and thinking up slogans (e.g., "This Canadian Cares"). My subsequent career as a graphic designer derived from this experience. It was thrilling (in a tiny personal way) to visit an exhibit of political buttons some 25 years later in San Francisco and to find on display a couple of buttons I had designed while in Toronto.

Our Christmas in Toronto remains a very special memory, a testimony to the kindness of Canadians. We were far away from home, all of us, and desperately homesick. The weather was brutal. One boycott sympathizer organized a wish list, having each of us write down what small items we most wanted and/or needed, but couldn't afford to buy. I needed a wool scarf and a pen. She raised money among the supporters and made certain that each of us received exactly those gifts—and they were high-quality versions. I still have the beautiful white wool scarf from that year. Also, Marshall had just returned from California and a board meeting. We had a party upon his return with our core supporters, eating the tamales and jalapeños and tequila he had brought back with him. The priests got drunk on the tequila, everyone burned their mouths on the jalapeños, and we had a wonderful time. Jessica, of course, sang, and her singing was incomparable.

Later that spring I burned out—physically, mentally, emotionally. One day I failed to get up and make a picket line. I had never, ever missed a picket line. In subsequent days it became clear to me that I needed to move on. For me, working with the UFW had been an incredible journey, and, as it turned out, was just the beginning.

Postscript

I returned to San Francisco to live in the Excelsior area with other former L.A. boycotters: Andy, Kathy, Irma. I didn't stay long there, as I had gotten a job working as a legal secretary for Frank Denison and Chuck Farnsworth, so I moved to Oakland where their offices were located. One thing led to another, as does happen. I joined a group organizing farmworker elections in Santa Maria for a short time; I went afterwards to visit friends in Los Angeles and ended up meeting my future husband, a photographer who had done some work for the boycott. I moved back to L.A. (for the last time, I swore). We ended up getting involved in union insurgency politics—we both worked in Chicago on the Sadlowski campaign, challenging the established powers for presidency of the steelworkers. Building on my leaflet-making talents, I did graphic design for the campaign. Later, back in Los Angeles (*really* the last time, I swore) I learned it as a trade, training in typesetting and camera work in a hot metal type shop downtown. Connections led me to New York City, where I worked for several years as the art director for the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, and then freelance for many national and local unions and nonprofit groups.

We returned to California in 1983, after a reunion of the Toronto boycott folk at Marshall's place in Monterey convinced me that San Francisco would be an ideal choice for a next move. Pulling out what was left of my old organizing skills, I worked as the director of a foundation established by some San Francisco labor leaders to set up a labor archive at San Francisco State University. In some ways it felt like old times: I visited local union meetings, seeking endorsements and money, lobbied representatives in Sacramento for

support, and organized letter-writing campaigns and volunteer efforts. We were successful; the labor archives at SFSU opened in 1985.

Working on that project put me in touch with the academic world I had left long ago to join the farmworkers. I decided to go back and worked on a master's degree at Cal in folklore (writing my thesis on tipping), then a doctorate in anthropology, which I finished in 1998. I teach now. My students are often the children of immigrants or are immigrants themselves. Many are the children of farmworkers and the first to attend university in their families. I often pull out examples and lessons learned from the farmworker campaigns in discussing issues of globalization and resistance to its negative effects. The lessons still hold and the struggles still continue.