

Patty (Proctor) Park 1970–1975

Solidarity: The House the UAW Built

The United AutoWorkers and the United Farmworkers

Detroit, Michigan

1972–1975

In November 1972, I arrived in Detroit to head up the small UFW boycott office there. I crossed the country with Janis Lien on Thanksgiving weekend, arriving at the downtown boycott house on a dull November day.

I had been working at the union headquarters in La Paz for about nine months, after six years as a supporter in Toronto, Canada. Marshall Ganz and Jessica Govea encouraged me to join the union full time, and it was an easy decision with both of them working at La Paz.

But in November of 1972 it was time to send organizers back out across the continent to beef up the resources of the lettuce boycott.

In an interesting process that let us have some say in where we would be sent on the boycott we were asked to list three cities in order of preference. I can remember trying to figure out what to write down. I wasn't an American so really didn't have a lot of firsthand knowledge to go on. My first choice was Detroit. I knew it was a working people's city, but most important, that Solidarity House, the UAW International Headquarters, was there. The UAW had been a strong supporter of the UFW. The UAW president Walter Reuther had been one of the first union leaders to come to California in support of the Delano grape strike. It was a progressive and politically active union. If you were going to work on the boycott night and day, the UAW would make Detroit a sensible choice. I have never regretted putting Detroit first on my list. I worked with some of the finest people I have ever known.

There were three boycott staff: Janis, Ray, and me. On our arrival, David Martinez (a law student and later to be an executive board member of the UFW) greeted us like family. He brought along with him David Super, a 14-year-old who was the other half of the support network in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The first people outside the UFW circle to meet us were UAW folk. Paul Morris, the communications director from region 1E of the union, dropped by the office within days. Emil Mazey, the international secretary treasurer, immediately assigned Millie Jeffery from the international staff to be our liaison.

We got down to work right away. We started recruiting volunteers, raising money, and spreading the word. Meetings were set up with the six UAW regional directors, and we talked to interfaith contacts and community activists. At this time the UAW was out of the ALF-CIO over differences with the leadership of George Meany and his support of the war in Vietnam and other issues. We worked hard at making contact with the rest of the

labor movement, but the president of the Detroit Labor Council (AFL-CIO), Tom Turner, made that difficult. In four years he never responded to our request to have a farmworker speaker at a Labor Council meeting.

But we had lots to do with six regions of the UAW and churches interested in hearing from us, so we talked to those who wanted to listen. We were running regular picket lines in downtown Detroit but needed more activity to have any impact.

In the spring, the UFW sent out another wave of organizers—more senior and experienced organizers who had been with the union from the beginning. Richard Chavez came to Detroit as the director. I continued my work with the UAW and the unions. Later that spring, there were more additions. David Martinez invited Janis and me to attend socials of the Chicano students' organization at the University of Michigan, where we met graduating social workers Sam Baca of New Mexico and Arturo ("Arty" to us) Rodriguez of Texas. Both joined the boycott staff. Sam would become the director of the Michigan office and Arturo's decision to join us in Michigan would set his life's course.

David Martinez decided to leave law school and joined up full time (he was as good as full time when he was a student). Annie Moring and Karen Hauenstein arrived from the University of Kansas. With this many organizers we could cover Detroit completely and have offices in Lansing and Grand Rapids.

This meant that the hundreds of UAW locals were visited in a very systematic way. We had standard requests, volunteers for picket lines, financial support, a chance to speak at meetings, plant gate leafleting with local union leadership, and an article in the local union newspaper. And the UAW locals responded generously.

Emil Mazey continued to take a personal interest in the boycott progress and would often ask me to come over to his office for an update. I would bring him regular copies of *El Malcriado*, the UFW union paper. At one of these meetings he asked me for a list of what local unions had been doing to support the UFW. I prepared my list very carefully, not missing anything. The list was pages long and looked to me like quite a lot of support.

When I delivered it to him, he immediately thumbed through looking for his own local—the local at the Briggs plant. The next day I got a call from the local union treasurer asking me to stop by his office. When I got there he told me that Emil had called and told him he thought they could be more generous to the UFW and presented me with a check for \$2000. And that was just the beginning of Emil's work.

Shortly after Richard Chavez arrived, we received an invitation to meet with the international executive board of the UAW. They asked Richard to attend as an executive board member of the UFW, and requested that I attend as well. Richard made the presentation to the UAW about our needs. He was very specific. I remember him saying,

“I don’t need your sympathy, I have enough sympathy to last a lifetime. I need your help.”
And did we ever get their help— \$10,000 per week to the union.

It was a critical contribution that I believe helped keep the union alive as we faced the grower-Teamster alliance, consummated with sweetheart collective agreements designed to destroy the UFW.

Mazey was determined to beef up our resources on the ground as well so he sent a letter to every union steward in Detroit calling on them to join a UFW picket line at a supermarket. With over 500 people leafleting, we shut down the supermarket for four hours.

We knew the picket line had had an impact when about a week later we were summoned to the office of the president of the Labor Council, Tom Turner. Millie Jeffery and Russ Leach, the national director of UAW CAP (the political action department of the union) came as the UAW representatives.

It became apparent at this meeting that one of the reasons that we had never been asked to the Labor Council was that one-third of its membership was from the retail clerks’ union, which had contracts with the local grocery chains and close ties to the Teamsters. Like the UAW, the Teamsters were birthed in Detroit. Alliances forged on the loading docks of grocery stores between the retail unions and the Teamsters during strikes and organizing were not going to be disrupted by an upstart union like the UFW. The Teamsters knew how to use their muscle, and they could make or break any strike against a supermarket by how they treated your picket line.

So as we sat in the Labor Council office, we were roundly chastised about the Mazey-organized picket line. Millie and Russ were told that if the UAW didn’t stop, the Labor Council would tell its members to buy Volkswagens.

I was lucky that my mom and dad had been union and social activists all their lives. I had learned from them to expect more from the trade union movement. The grower-Teamster agenda was at work here.

After this meeting I didn’t worry about getting to speak to the Labor Council. We approached AFL-CIO unions directly, bypassing the traditional protocol. We found supporters especially in AFSCME and the Communication Workers of America. What we had in our favor was that the UFW was an AFL-CIO union and so the Labor Council had to pay lip service to us. What we had against us was the strong relationships between some of the unions in the Labor Council and the Teamsters.

The Teamsters continued to pull out all the stops in their efforts to thwart the UFW. In Detroit, they even went after the respected labor priest of Detroit, Monsignor Kern. Monsignor Kern had been there for every union during their organizing campaigns and strikes. He was universally respected. A supporter of the UFW from its beginning, he

continued his support during these years by chairing the boycott interfaith support committee. His church, one of the oldest in Detroit, was located in what was called "Corktown," after the Irish who settled there to escape the potato famine. It continued to be the home of working-class Irish in the 1930s and 1940s when unions were being organized in Detroit. The church had been the parish of Frank Fitsimmons, the president of the Teamsters in 1973. In fact, Monsignor Kern had performed Frank Fitsimmons's marriage. Jimmy Hoffa's adopted son, Chuck O'Brien, had attended the church's parochial school.

Every St. Patrick's Day, a fundraising mass was held to support the church. It was called the "Sharing of the Green." Every union, Democratic Party, and progressive community leader attended. It was a chance to give back to Monsignor Kern and his church. But this year the Teamsters, after promising the money to repair the church roof, reneged. In a very public move and with typical Teamster bravado, they said there was no money because of Monsignor Kern's support of the farmworkers. They should have known Monsignor Kern did not respond to threats. The UAW, other unions, and the community raised the money and the roof was repaired.

As a front for the growers, the Teamsters thought they might defeat the UFW by convincing the public that the boycott was a fight between two unions and not a fight for the rights of farmworkers.

The UAW and Emil Mazey recognized this and used every avenue they had to try to persuade the Teamsters to back off. Mazey had a relationship with Einor Mohn, the director of the western conference and international vice president of the Teamsters. The relationship, I understood, had been forged in their early days of organizing. Emil thought it was worth a try. I don't know what was said at their meeting, but the Teamsters didn't let up and continued to front for the growers.

In the fall of 1974 the union sent hundreds of farmworkers out on the boycott. We had received a call from La Paz on the Friday before Labor Day informing us that in five days 80 farmworkers and their families would arrive in Detroit. Half were going on to Canada with Marshall Ganz and the rest were assigned to Detroit. Temporary food and shelter were the first need. The churches were amazing. We were able to get accommodation for everyone. The parable of the loaves and the fishes played itself out with donations of food far beyond our need.

Shortly after everyone arrived, I got a call from Emil Mazey. He asked me to come to his office. This meeting, like others, involved stories about the organizing of the UAW. What a privilege to get the history firsthand. I think Mazey shared this history with me because he believed the organizing we were doing was like the organizing he did in creating the UAW 40 years earlier. It was a bond of values and belief.

This day, however, the reflection related to Canada. He proudly told me that he had been born in Saskatchewan, the home of Tommy Douglas and birthplace of socialized medicine. (Saskatchewan is a midwest prairie province in Canada.) In 1944 it elected the first social democratic government in North America. Tommy Douglas was its first premier and one of the first acts of the government was to bring in public hospital insurance.

Mazey then asked me what we were doing for health care for the Detroit boycott staff and their families. I explained that when we were in California we had the Robert Kennedy Health Plan and the clinic in Delano but nothing in Michigan. He then told me that he had arranged for all of us to be covered by the UAW health plan. In Detroit it was run out of one of the hospitals on a community health center model just like the clinic in Delano. When we went to the hospital or needed to see a doctor, we should tell the hospital staff to “bill Emil Mazey.” What a difference this meant to all of us—especially to farmworkers with children.

In December of that year, I received a call from Emil’s secretary, Louise Sarafian, asking me to come and meet with him. She didn’t say what about and I didn’t ask. We chatted a bit when I first arrived and then Emil said, “I know that you have to send all the money you raise on the boycott back to California, but I don’t want you to send this money back. It is for Christmas for the boycott staff.” He then presented me with a check for \$1000. It didn’t get sent back to California. We agreed as a staff to divide it up—\$19 for each adult and \$17 for each child. I still remember what I bought myself—shampoo, conditioner, and socks.

Emil Mazey collected turtles. I remember seeing them on his desk. Many had been given to him as gifts. One day I decided to ask about their significance. He told me that while turtles might be considered slow moving, they had one important characteristic we could all learn something from: “They didn’t get ahead without sticking their neck out.”

As a farmworker organizer there seemed to be few opportunities to repay the overwhelming support you received from the community. But in Detroit an opportunity arose. In the 1974 mayoral election, the Democrats had two frontrunners in the primary, Levan and Young. The UAW backed Levan, who lost the primary to Young.

The stakes were high in this mayoralty election. Coleman Young was a progressive black Democrat. His opponent was a white right-wing former police chief. Black and white voters made up about an equal proportion of the electors. The black-white divide was reflected in broad strokes in how people voted, but the turnout was always higher in white precincts. The Chicano community made up about 10 percent of electors and was a critical voting block. It did not have a voting pattern of automatically supporting black candidates.

I was approached by the UAW about an endorsement for Coleman Young from Cesar Chavez. It was not the practice of Chavez to endorse municipal candidates. Los Angeles

had been the only exception. I made the request, and the answer came quickly and it was yes. Chavez would come to Detroit and personally endorse Coleman Young.

Negotiating the stage arrangements was interesting, as every local politician who had Chicano voters wanted to be on the stage and get a picture with Chavez. We said no. This was a Coleman Young endorsement and only the two of them would be on the stage together. Young won a very close election and Detroit had a Democratic mayor at city hall.

There are many other UAW stories to tell. Olga Madar, UAW international vice president, getting the boycott resolution passed at the founding convention of the Coalition of Trade Union Women in spite of a threat from the Teamsters to walk out of the organization; Paul Morris getting arrested with farmworkers on a picket line protesting an injunction that would have ended leafleting at supermarkets; Sam Fishman, the Michigan director of CAP, who never blinked when I asked for \$1000 as seed money for a bingo fundraiser but did gulp when I paid it back; Jorden Rosen and Bill Mazey, who helped us with all things legal.

The fight for farmworkers to have their own union was supported by many people in Michigan and across the U.S., Canada, and Europe. The UAW was a very important part of our efforts in the early 1970s when I was in Detroit. Others also made significant contributions: the faith communities, Catholic Vicariates, supporters like Maria Runk, who joined us on picket lines, and university students like those from the Chicano student organization at University of Michigan. The boycott organizers were an eclectic group of committed and energetic volunteers who were ready to work seven days a week for \$10 a week for food and spending money and accommodation provided by the union. In Detroit some of them were: Janis Lien, Ray, Sam Baca, Jesse and Margaret Mirelez, Dolores and Alex, Annie Moring, Carl Paris, Karen Hauenstein, Arturo Rodriguez, David Super, Lala and Roberto Escutia, Linda Chavez, Dolores and Henry Uranday, Blair McGowan, Sylvia and George Delgado, David Martinez, and David Schopick . We learned from each other about organizing, politics, and life.

When I found out about the documentation project, I knew I could only tell one story. I decided to tell the story, as I remember it, about the solidarity of the United AutoWorkers with the United Farm Workers and that “turtles only get ahead if they stick their necks out.”

Que Viva La Causa!