

## Nancy Welch Ryan 1970–1976

### My Travels with the Union: a Retrospective After More Than 30 Years

We drove up to the University YMCA in Seattle on an October afternoon 33 years ago, a caravan of four vehicles: two blue Volkswagen bugs, a Ford Galaxy, and a vintage truck painted in strike slogans and eagle motifs. There were 12 of us: me, my sister Sarah, Fred Ross, Jr., the Gonzalez family (Isidoro, Rosa, their three children, and another on the way), Cayetano Nani, Juan Cadena, and Lydia Torres. We had spent three days driving from the lettuce fields, stopping in San Francisco, Shasta, and Portland to sleep on church floors. I kissed my mother goodbye on her birthday and promised that we would be home by Christmas. That Christmas came and went. Actually, six of them came and went before I left the union.

We had all been working on the lettuce strike: Sarah was up in Gonzales in the Salinas Valley, Fred and I had come down from Salinas to work in the Santa Maria Valley. Nani, Juan, Lydia, and the Gonzales family were strikers from Santa Maria who had decided to join the boycott. When the injunction came that would stop the picketing in the lettuce fields, Fred went to the first lettuce boycott conference with Cesar, Marshall Ganz, and other high-ranking union officials in Salinas to receive our assignment. We awaited word of our placement, apprehensive and excited. Late that night Fred called. He had garnered a Seattle assignment because, he said, the choice for us had been Pittsburgh or Seattle, and he told them that Sarah and I had lived in Seattle, which was true, though we had lived there from 1952 to 1956 and our contacts were woefully out of date.

And so Marshall sent us off to Seattle with the comment that this city ate so much lettuce that they probably sold it in gumball machines on every corner. We were especially excited about moving to Seattle because of the farmworker organizing going on in the adjacent Yakima Valley, where hop workers had gone on strike that summer.

Our predecessors, Dale and Janice Van Pelt, met us with food and a group of supporters at the Y—people who would later do picket duty in the snow with us. One of them became and remains my best friend to this day. One of the people at the potluck, Hazel Koenig, burst into tears at the sight of us and insisted that we rent her house: a beautiful six-bedroom house in the professors' neighborhood by the University of Washington, for \$150 per month.

My travels took me from Seattle to Portland to Vancouver, B.C., for two different tours of duty. And from St. Louis Missouri, back to Seattle, and finally to San Diego, before dental woes and fatigue got the better of me. I left the full-time staff for a year because I didn't want to risk leaving Seattle, but I gave in and joined up again. During that time, I learned that one really could live on \$5 per week; that people will respond to injustice if given a

clear message and a specific course of action; that I really could get up and talk to a large group of people and not die of fright; and to save receipts for *everything*.

I had lived in Berkeley before going to help out in Salinas. The spring of 1970 brought with it the invasion of Cambodia, the killings at Kent State, People's Park, and the shutdown of the anthropology department at the university where I was a student. At a loss for what to do, I was walking on the northside of campus one day when I came upon a picketer at the Lucky store. I asked her if I could help. She, in fabulous UFW style, dragged me right in, taught me enough to answer quick questions, and was there for more complicated ones. Her name was also Nancy; her last name is gone from my memory. She called me to come back, and I did. It made so much more sense to me than being in demonstrations against the war, which continued to turn to riots with tear gas and massive arrests.

And, unlike the anti-war struggles, we were winning. We saw the grape growers come crashing down during May and June of that year. Every day, it seemed, there were another couple of contracts. Our leaflets listing the union growers became out of date daily. And, finally, after a couple of major grocery chains had agreed to buy only union, and contacts at the San Francisco and San Jose produce terminals kept scab grapes out, all the growers came in at once.

We thought, starting out on the lettuce boycott, that it would be easy.

I met people who to this day are my heroes and others who were disappointments: a labor leader in Vancouver, B.C. who was willing to go to jail over our right to picket, and a labor leader in Seattle who felt the UFW was "just a little too pink for him." I met hippies who would cross our picket lines, and little old ladies ready to walk, with their grocery carts, to another store several blocks away because "they were brought up union." There were volunteers (and staff) who manipulated the union for their own ends, and strikers and volunteers who understood the power they carried to change the lives of farmworkers across the county, and were willing to engage that power.

Seattle was a Teamster town, which inhibited our ability to draw support from the unions. While groups like the retail clerks' union and other service unions were tremendously supportive, we never made the inroads into the building and construction trades, nor, for years, into the King County Labor Council. What a contrast I found when I got to Vancouver. One of my first meetings was with the B.C. Labour Council's representative, Colin Gabelmann. I explained the circumstances of the lettuce strike and the fact that the workers had no desire for nor input in the Teamster contracts. I had hoped for support, but the support that came exceeded my wildest expectations: the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU) refused to handle the lettuce, eliminating it from all Safeway stores in the province.

Working for the UFW taught me about fundraising, community organizing, campaigning, remedial graphic design, and legislative advocacy, all of which have turned out to be fundamental elements of my life's work. I learned a fantastic lesson about the legislative

process and how it works in the spring of 1971, when a bill was introduced in the Washington state legislature that would have outlawed all farmworker strikes and secondary boycotts. With help from sympathetic Democratic legislators, we thought we had “killed” the bill, only to get a call late one night at the very end of the session from our landlord that it was coming up on the calendar.

On his advice, we went to Olympia the next morning, and met with one of the budget staff people, Mike Lowry (who later became the governor of the Washington state, but that is a different story). Mike’s boss, Martin Durkan, the budget leader for the senate, had vowed to help us kill the bill, he said, but we needed to write hundreds of budget amendments for him to use. Knowing nothing about amendments, this seemed daunting, but Mike gave us all the forms and told us: “Every time you see a number, change it.” When we had developed 400 or so amendments, Martin took them all to the floor, waving the sheaf of papers above his head and promising the senate that they would vote on each and every one of them unless they let the farm bill die. Which they did.

Some of the things we did were simply outrageous, others were foolish, many were dangerous, and a lot were probably illegal. In an attempt to get QFC to stop using scab lettuce, a group of us from the Seattle boycott office followed the owner everywhere he went one day, starting from his home in Medina (an extremely wealthy suburb of Seattle) to his office, to lunch at the Seattle Yacht Club, and picketed him at each site. We picketed the home of the Gallo representative. We hung homemade banners made of bed sheets from the freeway overpasses and ran off when the disruption caused a fender-bender. We recruited all the “normal-looking” volunteers we could find and snuck onto the Army base at Fort Lewis to talk to soldiers and persuade them not to eat lettuce. We had a campaign called “Why Do Republicans Hate the Farmworkers?” with instructions to picket Republicans everywhere they went. We were so effective that the owner of the Hamilton Turkey Farm, known for its “U.S. out of U.N.” style billboard on Highway 5 in Centralia, featured us for weeks with the slogan “How Can Democrats Stand Farmworkers?”

While working in Portland with the boycott, there was also a group starting up in the Willamette Valley to the south organizing a house-meeting drive. Our teams were inseparable. We picketed the strawberry machines brought out by the farm bureau as a demonstration project (yelling “*Manos Sí; Máquinas No!*” as the machine operated like a huge lawnmower, creating a mush of plant matter and berries). We followed Mark Hatfield and Bob Packwood across three counties with picket signs, inadvertently shutting off the lights during one of their speaking engagements in McMinnville. When Cesar was fasting in Arizona to protest the anti-farmworker legislation that had been passed down there, representatives from both Woodburn and Portland all jumped in a series of cars to be present when he broke his fast. We packed up all the food we had: celery, carrots, peanut butter, cheese, etc. and spent all our money on gas. It took 30 hours to get there and 30 to return. For the last 15 hours on our return trip, all we had to eat were carrots and peanut butter.

Working on the boycott gave me the opportunity to live in places other than the West Coast of the United States, where I had been born and raised. After a summer in St. Louis that was so muggy I was convinced my hair would mildew, and a heartbreakingly beautiful one-week autumn, it was cold—colder than I had ever known in my life. Standing in parking lots, I could feel the gray, damp cold seeping through my quite-inadequate shoes right into my bones. I knew that some people did get used to it. A wonderful supporter of ours from the autoworkers' union who picketed with us was fond of saying, "If it gets any colder than this, I'll have to start wearing underwear." But I never did get used to it, and as the second winter started coming on, the grayness, loneliness, and desire for my people drove me back to Seattle, where I knew my sister would take care of me (again) until I got my feet on the ground.

In St. Louis, the boycott was housed in a huge brick house on McClellan Street, near the Catholic cathedral. A central city neighborhood, it included pockets of gated communities and large areas where the neighborhood was degenerating rapidly. The boycott house had been, at one time, quite spectacular. It had six bedrooms, some with suites, a formal sweeping staircase, and a maid staircase to the kitchen. In 1972, however, it had been occupied by a series of renters for at least a decade. Not more than a month after arriving in St. Louis, we got a notice on the door from the health department stating that they would condemn the house if we didn't remove all the trash. So we borrowed a truck, loaded up boxes and boxes of other people's trash, and set out to try to find a dump open on Labor Day. Feeling like a rerun of *Alice's Restaurant*, we canvassed all the dumps in St. Louis and went all the way into Illinois before finding one. When we did eventually move out of that house (after losing countless batteries out of our car because the chain was unlocked on the hood as it needed water in the radiator on a daily basis, and seeing a man going into the back yard with a shotgun), it mysteriously burned down. "Landlord lightning," explained our friend Eddie, who lived on our block and often had batteries for sale.

The union offered little training, few resources, and sometimes an appalling lack of information, but, sometimes, it did offer all the loyalty and support a person ever could want. It was not until I arrived in St. Louis that I learned that the women preceding me had been raped at knifepoint in the boycott house. And yet, when I was having horrible challenges with a staff member running her own agenda, Dolores Huerta came personally to St. Louis to back me up.

The whole Welch family had a role in the United Farm Workers. Shortly after we left for Seattle, my sister Liz organized a food drive for the farmworkers among her sixth-grade class. One morning in about 1974, my mother wrote me of how honored she was to have gotten a call from Fred Ross, Jr., now back in San Francisco, to tell her that Cesar was doing two speaking engagements in Palo Alto, "and, could he rest at your house in between?" And, so, with Huelga and Boycott, the two German Shepherds, and several large men, Cesar came to our house to have tea and a rest. He said to my mother that, yes, he knew Sarah and me, that we worked very hard and that "we had class."

LeRoy refers to the farmworker movement as one of the most amazing social movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and I feel privileged to have been part of it. The boycott grew progressively more difficult to maintain. People felt they could give up grapes, but that lettuce was a staple. The growers became increasingly more sophisticated and, looking back now, it is clear that there were times when the union had to struggle to find something for the boycott machinery to do.

For me, the end of my full-time involvement with the union came after the Yes on 14 campaign in 1976. The Seattle team had been assigned to San Diego to implement a human billboard campaign, a project that began before morning rush hour and ended with a 10 p.m. staff meeting. It was an exhausting schedule that led to chronic nosebleeds from inhaling carbon monoxide, not to mention a brutal defeat at the polls. We spent the next couple of weeks at La Paz while the union tried to figure out what to do with us. Each of us was interviewed and told that the “best of us” would be assigned to farmworker organizing. Being offered an assignment to the city support staff convinced me it was time to take a breather. I knew I would always hold the union dear to my heart and be immensely grateful for all that I had learned, but I understood that my full-time days as a boycott organizer were over.