

Tasha Doner 1970–1972, 1976–1978

I am from an Eastern-European Jewish immigrant family with a strong orientation toward peace and social justice. My first contact with the United Farm Workers union was in 1969 when I helped out—sporadically—with the Lucky’s boycott in the East Bay.

In 1970 I graduated from UC Berkeley and was hired as a Headstart teacher in the town of Gonzales in the Salinas Valley. Once I started riding the school bus home with the children, visiting the labor camps, seeing the conditions and talking with the parents, a deep despair enveloped me that the Headstart program, for all its good intentions, could not ameliorate. The changes needed to be big and address economic inequalities. It occurred to me that only the UFW was capable of such an undertaking, but they were still in the thick of the grape strike in the Central Valley. And then, a scant two weeks later, like the answer to an unspoken prayer, the grape contracts were signed and the union arrived en masse in the Salinas Valley.

I went to the headquarters. They gave me a receipt book and asked me to solicit funds, which I did with great success. On my way to school in the mornings I would deliver hot coffee to the strikers. The knowledge that people were taking the ultimate risk— withholding their labor and forfeiting their paychecks—for a greater future good, and the sight of 10,000 black eagles flying, was, for me, a transformational experience. Once the summer Headstart program ended, I volunteered with the UFW legal department, but it was the dynamic Marion Moses, who ran the strike clinic in the adjacent shack (the union had taken over an old labor camp and converted it into strike central) who really organized me to work for the union. She saw I wasn’t being sufficiently utilized by the legal people, and, task by small task, she drew me in.

My first assignment was in Cesar’s office in Delano doing general clerical stuff. I was told that this was where new recruits were often placed so he could assess their skills firsthand and assign them accordingly. My first real job was evaluating volunteer requests for expenditures over and above what their \$5 weekly stipend could buy. I had to research the requests and then present them to Cesar for a decision. The requests seemed so reasonable—a pair of work boots, new underwear, etc., and yet Cesar said no more often than yes. This was the time before the word “micromanage” was used, but that’s what it seemed like. And yet I think Cesar considered it his responsibility, from his big-picture perspective, to safeguard the union’s meager funds and to keep the level of idealism high, which for him went hand-in-hand with restricting consumption. It was very stressful for me, and one day I had a mini crack-up and was taken to the clinic and given Phenobarbital.

From there I was put in charge of boycott budgets. I felt supremely unqualified, as I had minimal personal experience in money management and no time on the boycott. Again, I felt caught in the middle. In preparing the monthly budgets, I was to consult with boycott heads. Invariably, and what seemed arbitrarily, Cesar would slash their requests, and then I was left to convey the bad news as if it had originated with me. This was painful for

someone who likes to be liked. I was told later that the question asked from one boycott city to another was, “Who is Tasha Doner and who the hell does she think she is?”

I was spared further administrative and fiscal embarrassment in the late summer of 1971 when I was sent from La Paz to L.A. to work on a short-term campaign (under the direction of Jessica Govea) to defeat a bad piece of farmworker legislation. I was put in charge of mobilizing the student sector to write their legislators. It was my first experience of organizing and I loved it.

When I returned to La Paz I summoned up my courage and asked Cesar if I could become an organizer. He said yes despite his concern about my ability to withstand pressure. (I refer you back to the Phenobarbital.)

The union was gearing up for an organizing drive in the California orange groves, and I was attending the first day of training, when suddenly Jerry Cohen appeared and announced that the lettuce negotiations had broken down and we’d have to resume the lettuce boycott. Three of us were rerouted as a team—Ruth Shy was sent to Oxnard/Santa Maria, Jan Peterson to the Imperial Valley, and I to L.A. Ruth and Jan would recruit farmworkers to come to L.A. for boycott weekends and I would be responsible for the logistics of housing and feeding them (for free, of course).

Proverbially, I was given the name of a single UFW supporter and the challenge of building a network to sustain the farmworker weekends. Toward that end, I did what everyone did—public speaking, house meetings, phone solicitations, etc. And then, on the farmworker weekends, I would patrol the church (until Ricardo Villapando organized a much more effective committee to replace me) and ensure that the excellent cooks (who came from the labor camps) had ample provisions. I generally stayed up, half-crazed, for 48 hours straight (ah, youth).

In the spring of 1972, the L.A. boycott staff was assigned to work for the election of Art Torres to the state assembly. I, however, had become agoraphobic. I began having panic attacks while driving the freeways, then the back roads, and finally even on people’s front lawns while walking door to door.

It was time to leave.

For the next four years, though I held “outside” jobs, my heart and energy still belonged to the union. I helped to organize Monterey Peninsula UFW supporters, assisted Margaret Murphy in recruiting volunteer physicians to staff the new Salinas clinic, worked there as a receptionist and interpreter, and finally took over processing RFK Medical Plan claims. It finally made sense—in 1976—to go back on staff. In 1978, without warning, I was fired. I recognized it as a blessing in disguise: it was time for me to leave, but I lacked the incentive because the union provided me with a web of friendships, a purpose, and a familiar, productive way of life.

I have no regrets about my years with the UFW. I received so much more than I gave. The union truly educated me. I learned skills (including semi-fluency in Spanish) and had in-depth exposure to Latino culture, both of which served me well in future endeavors—as a clinic administrator for Planned Parenthood, as a social worker with the elderly, and also in the staging of large-scale events for various political causes. I did come to believe that one can learn to do anything if the need is there and that anything is possible if people band together in an organized fashion to take collective action. In addition to the skills and the enduring friendships, I was given a once-in-a-lifetime chance to be part of the making of history.

I was extremely enriched and inspired by many farmworkers I came to know over the years. They were more philosophical about defeats along the way because they were in it for the long haul. They also seemed to understand that not everything was under their control. I used to have trouble with the expression, “*Si Dios quiere.*” It was only years later that I finally got it. The union was the one truly multicultural environment in which I’ve lived and worked.

The negatives I associate with the UFW are more in retrospect. At the time I was young, gung-ho, a superloyal idealist with no concern for my own future well-being, all of which dovetailed to perfection with the union’s needs. The discrepancy between what the union was fighting for—and achieving—and the conditions of employment for its volunteers were, at the very least, unhealthy, especially with regard to accruing Social Security. It’s not something I’m bitter about—it’s in the nature of social movements to be riddled with contradictions. I am also not convinced that something as complex and demanding as a medical plan can function adequately when it is dependent on the vicissitudes of volunteer labor and competing union priorities.

With regard to achievement, I think the union was brilliant in the way in which it fired up the imaginations of and recruited (at any one time) several hundred committed people, covering their basic necessities and thereby freeing them to work full time, heart and soul, for *La Causa*. Those several hundred were able to energize millions and make a lasting difference. I believe the rather amorphous, on-again, off-again, peace movement might benefit greatly from a UFW-type structure.

The union also succeeded in greatly improving the wages and working conditions and lives generally (especially in education and health care) of the farmworker population. However, it seems the struggle will always have to be re-imagined and renewed as political and economic circumstances erode hard-won gains. But this ongoing struggle will be aided, I believe, by the powerful contribution the UFW made to the nation’s consciousness. Where once farmworkers were invisible, disregarded, and despised, the union made the public aware of them not only as those who brought the food to our table, but also as human beings with rights.

