

Oscar Mondragon 1970–1990

I joined the union for three reasons.

In the beginning I joined the union to correct what the Teamsters were doing, to counter the growers' efforts to force us to join their union. Their organizing was not done right. They never asked us for any participation, decisions, they just told us to join. That was it. It was an imposed system. There was no democratic participation at all.

I decided to become a UFW staff person for a different reason. I wanted to do something for many people, to continue the struggle.

The third reason was to learn new things.

The person who talked to me in the fields while we were working was Jan Peterson. What she told us in the fields made sense. She had a lot of energy; she was talking about the growers and the contract. Her approach was to the point. She was friendly, talking to us as workers, rough; her foul language was kind of funny and non-conventional. She talked to us as men.

We met Cesar in Watsonville in 1970. Later, he called a rally in Salinas in May of 1970. He talked to all of us and asked us what we wanted to do. We decided to go on strike. They asked us to form our own strike communities. I was part of the first workers' committee. This was my first experience with union activities in my life. One reason the workers asked me to be on the committee was because I used to argue with the Teamsters about their contract. I didn't like it.

We were on strike for about a month. Cesar had to call off the strike, a lettuce strike, and asked if anyone wanted to join the union for the famous \$5 a week. Some of us were making more than that in the field, about \$150 a week, which was a lot of money in 1970. I laughed, said, "Sure, I'd join the union." We had a meeting in Salinas where all the organizers were picking and choosing who they wanted to be assigned to them. Someone wanted me to go to New York, and Vivian Drake wanted me to go to San Francisco. At that time I didn't speak any English, so it was kind of hard for me. I decided to go to San Francisco, especially because it was closer to home. I stayed in San Francisco for about a year.

In 1971 I was asked to join the Watsonville strawberry strike. There I worked with Jan Peterson.

Then we came to L.A. to work in a wine and grape boycott. We were boycotting Trader Joe's. I went to Santa Ana in Orange County to work under Chris Hartmire. In Santa Ana I had my first direct experience where someone knocked me down in front of a family-owned liquor store in Newport Beach and sent me to the hospital.

After working in L.A. for about a year. I was assigned to help with the D'Arrigo strike in Calexico and in Brawley in 1972. They assigned me to be in charge of the day-to-day organization of the picket lines of the strike. Marshall Ganz was in charge. That's where I met Christine Solinas. She was in charge of the financial accounting for the strike. We worked together in the Casa de Amistad in Brawley with some of the local people there. That job lasted for a few months.

Then I was asked to go on a special caravan to New York City with Cesar. The D'Arrigo strikers were to travel in a caravan of buses to major cities in the U.S. to have rallies and to ask people to support their strike. My job was to travel with the workers and be in charge of the entire journey.

We loaded everybody up into two old Greyhound buses and went through the Southwest, the Midwest, and on to the eastern cities of New York and Boston. We had rallies in Phoenix, Albuquerque, Kansas City, San Antonio, Oklahoma City, St. Louis, Chicago, New York, and Boston. Then we went back to New York, where I worked for six months under Dolores Huerta and Richard Chavez. The first time I ever went to jail for anything was in New Jersey, for a union-related activity.

I was quite burned out from the journey and working in New York. I hardly got any sleep. I didn't really have a place to live and was moved around a lot. There were some differences of opinion with Dolores Huerta. She got me fired! She bought me a ticket back to the Imperial Valley in the summer of 1973.

I got there and was picked up at the airport by the beautiful Christine Solinas, who was waiting for me at the airport, saying "*¿Qué pasó?*"

Then I went to talk to Cesar to see if I could do some other work in the Imperial Valley. He said he couldn't really hire me back because Dolores had asked me to leave the union, and he couldn't go against her. As time went by, I would accompany Tina to visit the strikers in the Coachella area, with some D'Arrigo strikers working under Marshall Ganz. I did that for one or two months. I talked to Marshall and he asked me if I wanted to work with LeRoy Chatfield in L.A. I did and worked in Los Angeles for a few months.

I was asked to go work on an organizing team in the Imperial Valley with Manuel Chavez, so I went back there. We had a melon campaign going on at that time. There was a team of us working with other people, among them were Calacas and Gilbert Rodriguez. We would go talk to the workers and ask them not to break the strike. We also talked with labor contractors and had a lot of arguments and fights with them.

Then I was assigned to some work in the San Luis Field Office. That was the first office that I was in charge of. I was there for a number of months, working with the workers of Interharvest in the lettuce fields. Late in 1973, we had a call for a lemon strike in the

Arizona area. When the strike started, Manuel Chavez asked me to help him run the strike.

Before the lemon strike is when I got arrested in Calexico. We were accused of three counts of arson and 11 counts of attempted arson. We were arrested, tried, and sent to jail for 11 months altogether. At that time Tina and I had a home together in Mexicali. After I came out of jail, we were assigned to work with Eliseo Medina in Oxnard.

The new farmworker law was passed by the California legislature, the Agriculture Labor Relations Act of 1975, and our first daughter was born: Tonatzin Solinas Mondragon.

From Oxnard we went to Coachella. I was there for a very short time. Then the whole family was assigned to Calexico. I started running the Calexico field office. We were there for a number of months until I was asked to run the San Ysidro office. We stayed in San Ysidro for a few months, organizing the tomato workers and administering contracts.

After San Ysidro we went back to Calexico to run the field office again in 1977. At that time, our second child was born in Brawley: Angelo Solinas Mondragon. After Angelo was born, we went to Salinas and rented a house in Watsonville. In 1978 we went back to Calexico. The union started the vegetable strike with all the contracts in Calexico in 1979.

I wasn't part of the strike. I was part of the contract administration. I was sent back to Salinas to do contract administration.

The convention was held that year in Salinas. In the convention it was decided to call off the strike and go on the boycott. Our family went to the Chicago boycott in September of 1979 for about 10 months. We were asked to come back to California to La Paz, in 1980. Almost immediately we went to Calexico where I ran the field office again. I was there for one season only.

Then Gilbert and Lupe Bautista and I were assigned to work with the medical plan and help resolve problems in Calexico, after which we followed the workers and the route of the lettuce harvest to Salinas. There were people fighting Cesar, and there were lawsuits against Cesar for firing representatives who were challenging Cesar's right to hire and fire staff.

In 1981 I was asked to be a member of the board of directors of the union. We were assigned to La Paz. Our third daughter, Anja, was born in Delano in 1981. I was asked to go to Salinas and direct the offices in that area: Salinas, Watsonville, and Greenfield. I had lots of confrontations with the staff there.

In 1982 the union changed the structure wherein the work was organized by commodities. Those divisions were assigned to different board members. Our responsibilities were to organize, administer, and negotiate contracts. My family lived in La Paz while I ran the

horticulture division from 1982 to 1986, traveling all over the state.

During those years, I learned how to negotiate a number of contracts—from Monterey Mushrooms to Campbell soup. When I was in Salinas I got my first contract in the grape industry with J and L farms. At the end of 1986 we were asked to go on the boycott again. I was put in charge of the L.A. office. I worked on the grape boycott from about 1987 to 1990.

It was in 1990 that I resigned from the union.