

Flo Kelly 1971–1972

I worked on the boycott in 1971 and 1972 in San Francisco. What did we do? A group of five or six staff and volunteers went to the small stores in the Mission District and got the storeowners to remove Gallo from their shelves. If the owner was uncooperative, we immediately set up a picket line in front of the store and asked people not to shop there. We had flags, signs, and leaflets. We sang songs, and, of course, talked with potential customers to explain to them why we were there. Most small stores could not stand the pressure of losing customers and quickly agreed to take Gallo off the shelves. Rarely did we have to set up a picket line. We returned to each store often to make sure the Gallo wine was not visible to the customers.

Gallo agreed to a union contract, so then we had a lettuce boycott. We used similar tactics to get the small storeowners to remove head lettuce from their shelves. I remember distinctly one storeowner showing me his baseball bat that he kept by the register. I shouted loudly at the customers that they should leave because the owner was going to begin hitting the other union people and me. The store emptied quickly, and we set up a loud picket line in front. After two hours, the owner agreed to not sell lettuce.

Small produce stores were a new idea at the time. One owner of a store on Mission Street in the Excelsior District asked me to walk upstairs with him to his office. I naively went with him by myself. He sat down by his desk and we talked about the boycott and union. He pulled open a drawer and showed me that he had a gun lying in the drawer. I slowly backed myself out of his office—watching him carefully—and walked downstairs to the main part of the store. The boycotters left that day, but returned the next day with at least 10 people making lots of noise. In a short time, the lettuce was removed from his store. Lettuce contracts did get signed.

Safeway was the big problem. My understanding is that Safeway was the only large chain store that never cooperated with any boycott. I stood for many hours on many days at the Safeway at Mission and 30th Street and personally could not shop there for decades because of my loyalty to the union. At a San Francisco UFW commemorative parade for Cesar Chavez in the spring of 2003, I saw that Safeway was sponsor of the parade and had a float there.

In spite of Safeway, the boycotts were successful. The number of victories that the UFW was experiencing was “heady.” It seemed that little could stand in our way. Then we were told that secondary boycotts were illegal and that we could no longer ask customers not to shop at a store for carrying a product. The focus of UFW offices in the city drastically changed.

The work of UFW could suck some people into a massive “dark” life change that they had difficulty undoing. Staff had to be willing and ready to work 12 to 16 hours a day. There was always an emergency that needed attention. In fact, people needed to be in a state of

high alert. I remember one young staff person who would become ill and bedridden whenever he had a day off. His adrenaline may have run out, or perhaps he could not face life without the frantic structure the UFW gave to him.

How did this work affect me? I experienced how powerful an individual can be when joined together with other individuals, all working toward the same goal. This experience has definitely led me to pursue other struggles. From Fred Ross, Sr. I learned the value of house meetings to organize more volunteers for the union.

I have made lifelong friends. My most solid friendships began when we worked together in the union.

I realize the beauty of Cesar Chavez. He devoted his life to the union and symbolizes the struggle, a person who inspires souls to believe in their strength to undo the massive injustice in the fields. I also realize the dangers of having a revered person whose work becomes that of a person not to be questioned.