

Roberto De La Cruz 1971–1991

Interview with Roberto De La Cruz

by Anamaría De La Cruz

AD: How did you get started with the labor movement?

RD: Well, it was way back when my parents started getting involved with the United Farmworkers (UFW) movement, back in 1961, 1962. That was the first time I ever met somebody from a union. I was about 16 years old.

I remember going to the founding convention of the United Farm Workers union in Fresno. I believe it was in 1962. The way my parents obviously kept me off the streets was to take me to the meetings. And so I remember not wanting to go, and all of a sudden I ended up at the founding convention of what was then called the NFWA. It was not a union then, but an association of farmworkers that got together in the San Joaquin Valley in California to build the union for farmworkers.

AD: What are your earliest memories of the union's activity?

RD: Well, I remember the strike in '65 because that's the time that I had been drafted, like thousands of farmworker Mexicanos. I was drafted and so I joined the Navy. I spent four years in and out of Vietnam, and I remember my mom used to send me *El Malcriado* to communicate with me about the farmworkers and how it was going. *El Malcriado* was the official farmworker newspaper. It was a way to inform farmworkers of the union at that time. It was a small size, folded up into four pages, but when you opened it up, it was about was 17 inches long.

I remember when we struck on September 16, 1965, because the same day, or a day before, I was put on the bus to go to San Diego for basic training.

AD: What did you do when you came back from Vietnam?

RD: When I came back out of Vietnam in '69, I tried my luck at going to school. I took classes at our local community college, Reedley Community College, in rural California. That was just part time, in the evenings. I was also helping out with the strikes. I was a steward, I remember, in the summer, right after I got out of the Navy. I was in school during the school year, but during the summer when I went back to work in the fields full time, I was a steward with the crew where I worked, picking grapes or pruning or whatever it was.

In 1970 again I went to help out in the strikes with my mom and my dad. I remember winning huge grape contracts. We actually won contracts with the grape industry! But we

didn't even have time to celebrate the victory of that struggle because we were ready to go in and organize in Salinas—the lettuce.

There had been a huge strike against the lettuce growers there by the workers in Salinas, because the growers had signed what they called “sweetheart contracts.” They signed the sweetheart contracts with what was back then a very corrupt Teamsters union. This Teamsters union was not affiliated with the AFL-CIO; they had been kicked out of the AFL-CIO I think, some years before this, for corruption.

I remember going to Salinas because they had put Cesar Chavez in jail, and thousands of us went, not just farmworkers but students and everything. I used to belong to MEChA (*Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán*).

AD: When did you start organizing full time with the union?

RD: In 1972. In 1972, I ended up working full time on Proposition 22. We were trying to defeat Proposition 22 in the state of California. The growers had sponsored Proposition 22 to try to stop the union from organizing, striking, and boycotting. At that time, my mentor was Dolores Huerta; she recruited me to go work in the cities. In Oakland. I was actually driving her around to all the different functions. I remember staying at Mills College, a women's college in Oakland, a private college. And you know, a lot of us farmworkers stayed there. Someone from the Black Panther Party had got us housing there. I think it might have been Bobby Seale or maybe Elaine Brown. Those are the names that I remember. I remember them coming and speaking to us as we came in from the rural areas to work on those campaigns. By then I was working with the UFW full time.

AD: And what kinds of things in the following year did you work on?

RD: In the winter months of 1972 right after we had defeated Proposition 22 ... it was November 12, 1972. I remember it well, because Frank Fitzsimmons, the president of the Teamsters union, went to speak at the American Farm Bureau Convention in Los Angeles, and we picketed because he was selling us out to the growers. There he delivered a speech that said that the Teamsters and agribusiness should set up a partnership because they were a business union, and that Cesar Chavez couldn't even get a job as a janitor in a union.

After Prop 22, I went to work as a farmworker at E&J Gallo Ranch, which is a huge wine company. I was at Ernest & Julio Gallo, and I was a steward there, under a union contract. We knew that the Teamsters were going to come in and sign sweetheart contracts with that industry because they had just done it in 1970 with the growers in the vegetable industry. Our contracts, the ones that we signed in 1970, were going to expire on April 18 of 1973. So I went in to help organize the workers to make sure that if the Teamsters came in we would kick them out. But the Teamsters pulled a blatant anti-union move at Gallo—they actually signed a sweetheart contract, on April 18, and came and told us all that we were now under the Teamster contract, that we were now Teamsters. So thousands of

farmworkers went out on strike, from Coachella, which is near Mexicali, all the way up to Yolo County, north of Sacramento, where we had different contracts with the wine industry, with the table grape industry, with the lettuce industry. We struck everywhere. We had thousands of workers out on strike, protesting what the Teamsters and agribusiness, together with the support of the Nixon administration, had done.

In 1972 Nixon was deep into Watergate, and the Teamsters and Nixon were connected, so the Nixon administration was helping to try to destroy the farmworkers' union, just as they were destroying a lot of progressive movements at that time, including the Black Panthers. So we went on strike from 1973 to 1975.

AD: Did it matter during the strikes whether workers were undocumented or documented?

RD: Well, the immigration, *la migra*, as we knew it, had always used workers' undocumented status against the union to break the strike. In other words, if we went out on strike, the immigration would come and ask us for our papers. They would never ask the strikebreakers. They would actually help open up the borders to have people come in from Mexico, from all over, to break the strikes. And you know there were some *coyotes*, people that would bring in people from Mexico for money, promising jobs, and then take them in to break strikes, and the immigration never did anything to them. But *la migra* would always harass us, the people who were on the picket lines

I remember being on strike and the immigration coming in and asking all of us who were on strike to show them our papers. And again in 1972, I believe, when we had union contracts, the immigration would come in to where we would work. I remember at one point they killed a young farmworker named Avalos. He was born in Texas. He was a U.S. citizen, and some rookie INS guy, *migra*, shot him and killed him in the fields. Romulos Avalos was his name. Romulos Avalos was killed in 1972. His family lived in the Livingston area, but he worked in another area, I forget the name of it. I knew his parents and his brothers and sisters. They had all come from Texas to harvest during the summers, but he was killed during the winter of 1972 by one of those immigration officers. When that happened to Romulos, to Romulos Avalos, Cesar put out a word that every time the immigration would come into our fields, that everybody should stop working. And that's what we did. We would stop working and the grower would freak out, because the grower obviously wanted us to continue the production.

Again, it just shows that the immigration is in the pocket of the employers, because it's the employers that have the INS come in and not the other way around. So whenever the immigration would come to the fields, we would stop working, and the growers would get upset, until finally they told the immigration, "I don't want you to come into our fields."

It was very clear how the government and the INS worked with the growers to break strikes. There were incidents throughout the time that I lived in California where the INS came in to break the strikes, when actual citizens died because the INS came to do raids on

those workers. You know, you hear stories from New York to California, where there were these huge factory raids. Well, they were also happening in the fields with farmworkers.

There was one incident, I believe it was in 1975, 1976 in the Stockton area. There were these farmworkers who were working out in the tomato fields, and one of the kids was born in the U.S., an American citizen. His parents sent him to Mexico to study, but one summer he came to visit his parents in Tracy, California. He was 17. On one of those days he went out to the fields just before noontime to visit his parents during the lunch break. That same day, during lunchtime, the INS brought in these things called *perreras*, paddywagons, and everybody started running. This poor kid didn't know what was happening, and seeing everybody run, he ran also. There were these huge Delta canals there, and people jumped into the river. He jumped, but he couldn't swim, so he drowned ... Those are the kind of fears that the immigration had brought in.

AD: How did you deal with strikebreakers?

RD: Well, we convinced them. We talked to them and we would tell them, "Why would you come in to break our strike when we are trying to better our own families and make better money and have medical plans, pensions, just like every other worker should have in this country?" And they never understood until we explained it to them. We'd tell them, "Look, it's not that we're against you working, we're against you breaking the strike. There's other industries where you can go and find work." And so we convinced them.

The problem is that in the rural areas, especially in California and Arizona and Texas, all of which border Mexico, it's real easy to bring in people from Mexico to break the strike. We'd convince the strikebreakers not to strike, and as soon we had, they'd bring thousands more, and we would have to convince them too. But once that group would stop working, the growers and the immigration would just bring in a whole other group of immigrants. So we finally decided to go out on the boycott. We figured that if we went across the country, to New York, Canada, and all the major cities in North America to talk to people about not buying certain products of agribusiness, then we could win. Because in California in the rural areas, the growers control everything. They control the courts, the police, the politicians. But in the cities they don't. And people in cities generally don't know a lot about farmworkers. You know when I'm talking about the cities I'm talking about the middle class and the upper class in Boston, New York, Philly, all those major cities, Quebec *hasta* Toronto. Some people think food is produced out of thin air; they don't understand where this food is coming from. And so once you came and explained to the unions and to the church people and told them why we literally said that there was blood on those grapes, these people would help us by not buying them. It was a pretty strong commitment from people in those times during the 1960s and 1970s.

AD: When did you start working on the grape boycott?

RD: I started working on the boycott in 1973 and worked on the boycott until 1975. I was assigned to Los Angeles.

AD: What happened after 1975?

RD: In 1975 the Agricultural Labor Relations Act was passed into law. For the first time in this country, farmworkers had the right to organize into a union. Back then, we had a very liberal governor, Jerry Brown.

AD: How did the Act help?

RD: Well, it encouraged workers to organize. We had a march the next day, a march from the southernmost tip of California. We started in San Ysidro, California, which is right on the border of Tijuana. Cesar started a march, just as Gandhi did during the time of the boycott that he did on making salt in India, and he went through every farming community from the south to the north and all the way past Sacramento, and then back down through the San Joaquin Valley, ending up in Central Valley with a huge convention. He marched hundreds of miles, spreading the word to farmworkers that they were now going to have a law to choose a union. Because as you can see, the Teamsters had come in, signing sweetheart contracts. When that law was passed, we started having elections and we kicked out the Teamsters. The overwhelming vote went to the United Farm Workers.

As a matter of fact, there were so many elections and victories in the months following September 2, 1975, that by February of 1976, the law ran out of money to conduct elections. When they built this law, they put something like I believe \$7 million to administer it, but there had been so many more elections than they had ever thought [there would be]. We had more elections than the AFL-CIO did during the CIO's 1930s history of organizing, in terms of the actual number of elections. The workers had been dying to have a union since the time of *Grapes of Wrath* that John Steinbeck talked about, and as far back as when Chinese and Japanese were used in this country, in California. So they came out and voted for us.

I remember that particular march, and the rally, up in a little town just east of Livingston, California, on Highway 99, a town named Planada. Thousands of workers came because we would rally workers there as Cesar was coming by. I was working as a security guard for Cesar. I was in working at Stockton, and that was my whole area at that time.

I remember that there were a lot of Arab farmworkers, Portuguese farmworkers, Filipino farmworkers, Mexican farmworkers, Japanese farmworkers, Hindu farmworkers, and Punjabi farmworkers.

They came because they had heard about this Cesar Chavez. I remember this Arab guy kept bumping into me, because there were thousands of farmworkers waiting for Cesar to come in this park in Planada. Cesar was supposed to be getting there at 4 o'clock in the

afternoon. And the Arab guy asked me, "Is Cesar coming?" and I said, "Yeah, he's coming pretty soon, here he comes," and we could see Cesar leading the crowd in, and I was directing where they should go. The guy asked me, "Where's Cesar?" and I pointed him out. The guy looks at Cesar Chavez, this Arab immigrant farmworker, and he said, "That's not Cesar Chavez," and I go, "Yeah, that's Cesar Chavez," and he just glowed. "That's the best thing I ever seen," he told me, "I thought he was going to be in a tie." He expected to see this giant of a man, because that was his concept of a labor leader. But then when this farmworker saw who he was, and the great leader that Cesar was in dealing with workers, he became even more convinced that this was the union of the farmworkers' choice, their choice. And it was just incredible, I mean it was just amazing, and that's just one little story, you know, as I grew up in the labor movement, about the dedication and commitment that farmworkers had, because they had somebody who stood up for them.

But [the momentum that was created with the Act] was short-lived, because by February of 1976, after we had won the vast majority of the elections we held, they ran out of money. The Agricultural Labor Relations Act was running out of money, and as it was running out of money, we were filing hundreds of more elections. The board couldn't keep up with the work that we were doing. Sometimes we would have three, four, five elections just in one day, in just one area. You can imagine the whole state of California having elections. By February of 1976, the growers lobbied and blocked the funding of the Agriculture Labor Relations Act. So it was short-lived—September, October, November, December, January, February. It functioned for six months and then it got de-funded because the board ran out of money.

So here we were with a law that didn't work anymore. And then that law became a political football. And you know workers aren't stupid, they understand politics and they understand who has the power. Because once the law was passed in 1975, September 2, when the growers tried to fire workers for no reason, they would be prosecuted. They were forced to take those workers back, to pay them back pay, to apologize in front of all the workers for doing what they did, and workers thought, "Boy, this is a good law. 'Cause they're actually protecting me and they're getting my job back. This is a great union." But once they de-funded the National Labor Relations Act, the workers kind of lost hope, once again, about having a real union.

AD: So what did you do?

RD: We went out to the cities to start a petition drive on a proposition that would make it constitutional, an amendment that would make it constitutional that that board, and that law, always have money. Because remember, this is the only law in California for farmworkers, it was the only law in this country that ever gave farmworkers the right to organize. [Still], you know, a law is a law. The important thing is organization and the enforcement of the law. Because if you don't have anybody to enforce it, then the law is meaningless to working people.

We knew it and I knew it, having grown up knowing what it meant not to have rights, working in the fields since I was six years old. How they treated my parents and how they treated my grandparents, and how they treated me working in those fields. Where they would spray pesticides, they would fire you, you would travel a hundred miles, wake up at 2 or 3 a.m. in the morning, being eight, nine, 12 years old, and then getting to the workplace and then there's no work and then you would have to be driving back, and so all those things, all those abuses...When we had the union, we felt that, boy, we were really building power for workers. And we really believed that. And we were...

Cesar always used to tell us: "There's two contracts—one is the collective bargaining agreement between you and the employer. And that collective bargaining agreement deals with your bread-and-butter issues in the workplace. It protects you with your wages, your working conditions, your benefits. The other contract is what you call a social contract, with the community." The social contract deals with everything outside of the workplace.

We used to work from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., under union contract, and for anything over eight hours they would give us time and a half, just like every other worker was getting at that time. But once we got home ... So the social contract that Cesar talked about was about protecting workers outside the workplace. To be involved in the civic participation of their life outside the workplace. So the union was very active in the community, with the church, with community organizations, with businesses that disrespected these workers. Sold them things that didn't function.

With schools that were racist toward the kids, didn't have bilingual teachers, we fought and elected school board members. I remember one of the biggest political fights was in the town I come from: Parlier, California. The union was the hub of being in Parlier. There we were, a town of 2000 to 3000 Mexicans, 98 percent were farmworkers, 2 percent were the businesses, the growers, the Anglos, the Japanese owners, and none of us, none of that 98 percent, had any power. So we would start a civic participation and register everybody to vote. I registered, my mom registered, all of us did, and we went to the school board, and said, "Look, we want to have a Mexican run for school board." And the city council and the school board of Parlier told us that we were racist for wanting that. And so we said, "Well, we're gonna run," and we ran a guy named Tony Muñoz. We struck at the high school, we shut down the high school, we did all kinds of stuff, and we eventually elected him.

Then in 1970, 1971, we wanted to elect a city council person. So again, we went to the city council and said, "Look, we want a sit-down with the city council and try to work out a deal where we could elect some of our people too." And again we were called racist and threatened with arrest, and so we said, "Well, you know, screw you." We ran five people, and we ran the youngest mayor in the history of California. Benitez was last his name.

There was a great cop by the name of Johnny Martinez. He was a regular cop. The chief of police in the late 1960s was fired out of there and sent to Fowler, California, which is real

close to where I grew up, because he used to beat up farmworkers and farmworker kids all the time. So they brought in another chief of police who was also Anglo. But Johnny Martinez was the cop who communicated with us; we all knew him. Johnny Martinez and another guy named Camino—we knew these guys; they were cops who would deal with us because they were Mexicanos. But the chief of police was always Anglo because the business community and the growers had control in these little towns. This rural town really shows you how rural California was set up at that time.

What happened is that that chief of police died of a heart attack, and instead of giving the chief's job to Johnny Martinez, who had been in the force for 20 years, they passed him over and went to Fowler. They brought back the same racist chief of police who used to beat us up, all of us. We were mad, and we started voter registration and ran people.

[It was during this time] that the mayor burned down his own liquor store. He had a supermarket and a liquor store. He burned his liquor store down and blamed the Mexicans, and the whole town was soon surrounded by the Parlier police department. The Fresno County sheriff came, and they were blaming us, but then they caught the mayor with two five-gallon cans of gasoline, trying to burn his supermarket and blame the Mexicanos.

And so that was the beginning of the end for them. That year we elected the youngest mayor in the history of California, Andres Benitez, a student and a graduate of Fresno State College. But that really was the union's work. Both the collective bargaining agreement at the workplace and the social contract, asking for equality and justice. Because the powers that be never want to give up the power; that's always been the case.

In California, agribusiness is that number one industry, so they have power. It's bigger than oil, bigger than the auto industry, bigger than any industry. They have all the water, they have all the land, and they control. It didn't matter if you were a Republican or Democrat, because as we were growing up, we used to picket at both sides; we picketed Republicans and Democrats, Mexicanos and non-Mexicanos, we picketed anybody that didn't deal with our issues. Obviously the Republicans were worse to us than the Democrats. That doesn't mean that the Democrats were angels, though.

It's like the south, you know, the southern Democrats they talked about in the 1960s, how they worked against the blacks. Well, we had the rural Democrats in California and we still do. Some of them still go with agribusiness, or they don't want to rock the boat in dealing with issues, even now, by not providing drivers' licenses for undocumented immigrants in this country.

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AD: What do you remember about the Immigration Act of 1986?

RD: It was a huge issue because at that time 60 percent to 80 percent of our membership was undocumented. We, in our union, never asked for papers, because we represent all workers the same. So in that sense the issue of undocumented, not documented, was not an issue for us. It was a non-issue because they were all equal as workers. But we wanted to make sure that they legalized all of the workers. So we helped, and the vice president of our union, Dolores Huerta, who was the political director at that time, helped lobby for and got the immigration reform in 1986. The unions that were a part of the AFL-CIO compromised. Employers wanted employer sanctions before they gave the legalization. Obviously we weren't for employer sanctions, but everybody was signing off on it and so we also said, "Fine."

You know, to date, you can count on one hand all the violations of supposed employer sanctions. Employer sanctions meant that employers who knowingly hired undocumented workers would get severely punished and fined. Well, employers never really did get punished and fined, because again, it's the employer who controls that system. And everybody knows it.

AD: What do you think were the biggest challenges that the UFW faced during the years you have talked about?

RD: The biggest challenge is to always keep the focus on the nonviolent. How to be creative and innovative, using strikes and boycotts and a combination of all those things. And more important, building coalitions. You know, if anybody ever taught anything about organizing, it was Cesar. Cesar taught us how to build coalitions in this country. Those boycotts were done by labor, faith-based groups, community groups, businesses that supported the union, everybody. And other countries, too! We went in Canada, we went to Europe, we went different places to do the boycott. Coalition building is the key. Cesar always knew that the union could not survive by itself. Unions in this country cannot survive by themselves. No one single group can win legalization in this country unless we all do it together. Because you can't separate those things. Cesar always said, "We're in the union, our kids go to school, we all go to church, we belong to these organizations, they belong to these businesses. It's all one and the same, so how can you separate it?" He always knew that unions should be connected at all times with the community. He taught a lot of the labor people in this country who are still organizing. In my generation, many people remember their first political act as boycotting grapes in the 1960s, 70s, 80s.

AD: Were the grape boycotts something that was ongoing, or were there boycotts only in certain periods?

RD: Certain fights. Certain periods. 1965 to 1970 and then 1973 to 1975. For about 10 years we were at peace and then we went back out on the boycott in 1986. In 1986 we went to Boston.

AD: Were you always organizing workers?

RD: No, I also organized and administered contracts, because I was a steward. I had to understand the language of the contracts, how to do grievances. In 1977-78, I was sent to Oxnard, California, where I worked as the office director. We had about 6000 members, vegetable workers. I used to do what we call collective bargaining, which is to organize political actions, negotiate, and administer the contracts.

I also did political work and community work in both Ventura and Santa Barbara. Since we were so close to Los Angeles, whenever there was a political election, I would recruit workers and we would take vans and buses to get out the vote or register people.

I was also the field office director in 1976, in the tomato industry for Stockton, and your mom was the field office director in Tracy.

AD: How were you trained to be an organizer?

RD: We were formally trained by Fred Ross and Cesar. You know, how to talk to workers, how to set up organizing committees.

AD: What kinds of things did they tell you?

RD: Well, how to break down a meeting with a worker into four parts. Number one, the history of farmworkers and agribusiness in this country. Second, the hope: what we could do if we acted collectively. Third, coming up with concrete things we wanted to do, actions we wanted to take. The fourth was doing that work—organizing ourselves, signing cards. Before 1975 there was no law that said that we had a right to organize, so we just struck. We won by sheer power of numbers.

We knew how to set it up—with a strike coordinator and strike committees. How to have community organizers, workers—men and women who would go out and speak in churches. We had a committee called *El Comité Talón*, from the word *talonear*, which means to hustle, and we would send them out to raise money and food to keep the strike going. It wasn't easy; sometimes strikes lasted years. But people supported us because we didn't do it for or from money. The farmworkers' union was built by commitment, real commitment and sacrifice. It was based on a nonviolent tradition and Cesar's philosophy that workers have to do it themselves; we can't do it for them. So we used to make \$5 a week plus room and board. We eventually got a 100 percent increase; we got \$10 a week plus room and board. I think that happened in the 1980s, later on, but at the beginning it was pretty tough all the time.

The work I did was broken down into different areas: organizing, collective bargaining negotiations, contract administration, political organizing, etc. At one point, I also became the political director for the union. From 1982 to 1986, for four years before I left to go to

the boycott in Boston. So I used to do lobbying in California, Texas, Arizona, Florida, and Washington, D.C.

AD: What kinds of lobbying?

RD: We were trying to protect farmworkers, trying to make sure that there were no anti-farmworker bills introduced and supporting legislators who were giving support for the different boycotts that we had.

In 1978, for example, I was administering contracts in Oxnard, where we already had union contracts. And once in a while, there'd be a small grower that hadn't signed 100, 150 workers, so we'd send organizers to organize them. I remember one morning, Eliseo Medina—he was executive vice president for United Farm Workers Union under Cesar Chavez and was really the next Cesar Chavez. He would've been Cesar. Everybody knew that ... He was in charge of the division of crops, whole union contracts. He came to visit me at our office at Oxnard. And we were meeting with our staff and we're going over stuff, and then Jose Manuel Rodriguez, [my close friend], said, "Look, there's a couple of guys from the citrus workers." "*Las tres S's*," they called them. A huge company, 1500 lemon workers under one roof, one labor camp. It was a citrus company, Cal Coastal they used to call it. A couple of workers from the company were knocking on the door.

We ended up telling the guys, "Aw, wait," because as soon as we would help them win an election or a contract, and they would get a wage increase, they'd go right back to work, and they'd abandon the organizing drive. So we said, "Let them wait, we want to finish the meeting." They kept on insisting, so Manuel kept on going out there. Finally, when we finished the meeting, Jose said, "Let's go see what they want." So we went out and talked to them, and they said, "We've got everybody on strike, we just turned off all the buses."

There were 33 to 40 buses that would go out of there. In the morning, on a 50- to 60-mile radius from that labor camp, all around Ventura and Santa Barbara, they would work in the citrus, in the lemons. Once they told us that they were on strike, we went into their labor camp. They had chained the doors where cars come in, they had chained them down. And since these labor camps had barbed wire and razor wires on top [of the fences surrounding the camp], the workers helped us up. First they hid us, so the cops couldn't see us, and then they helped us put their lemon sacks— [the sacks] they would pick [with], they're made out of canvas, hard canvas—over the fence. They put them over the fence and we climbed across. We stayed there for two or three days with them during the strike, and the cops couldn't come, and we built our own camp, we built our own town inside there.

They had totally paralyzed the company, and within two, three days, every crew had an organized captain, with two other ones supporting them. Each of them was organized according to their local county. And we had an election in 48 hours. We said, "We want an election in 48 hours, and we want the employer not to challenge the election. We want both the employer and us to send a letter to the Agricultural Labor Relations Board, telling

them that we want our certification right away so we can start bargaining right away.” Because you know, the employers can stop the election and bargaining processes for two, three, any number of years. We moved it; within a week we were negotiating and having an election. We won that election. It was 1300 and something for the UFW to 50 for the company, or something like that.

[As soon as that happened] we went out and organized all the other growers, and then Cesar sent us a whole bunch of organizers. But it was Eliseo and me, Jose Manuel, Artie Rodriguez, and Frank, at the beginning. And then everybody started coming in. Eliseo and I were doing the direct bargaining and organizing with Coastal Bell, which was the big one. Limoneria, Santa Paula, Fillmore—all these areas around Oxnard where other companies were, we started organizing. By the time we finished, we had organized close to 5000 citrus workers. And then we would also pick up some vegetable workers who heard, because it became this whole rallying point, of, “We’re fighting!” We had these huge marches where we would march 4000 to 5000 workers through La Colonia and Oxnard, demanding wages. But those are the kinds of things that can happen when opportunities come up. It all depends on what kind of mood the workers are in. As Fred Ross used to say, “Strike while the iron is hot.”

When we negotiated Coastal Growers, we went with that contract to the other companies and we called it a “Me, too.” In other words, it’s an industry contract.

AD: Did you always use an election process?

RD: Sometimes we used an election, but we used it combined with a strike. We would rather have workers strike and then have an election, because then workers are all united, right? But if you wait, normally the way you do the election is you file the election. You’re going to have the election in seven days, and then the company has the right to appeal or not appeal the election results. They set up a date for a hearing, then you have a hearing to decide how the hearing is going to go, and who’s out. You have to have the hearing, then both parties file briefs of what happened, and then the board has to have a decision from the administrative judge, so the administrative judge issues his decision. But it could be appealed to the board, and then the board has to set up a hearing to hear if they’re going... so this process can be run over years! And that’s what the Republican Party did for the Agricultural Labor Relations Board, and for that matter, the National Labor Relations Act. Now, all those laws are really employer laws, ’cause Agricultural Labor Relations Board is stacked with the employers’ sympathizers.

AD: Does the board run elections through regional offices?

RD: Right. After 1976 they started closing them down. That was part of the political work that I did. Showing how what they called the General Counsel of the Agricultural Labor Relations Board, a guy named Dave Stirling—an ex-Republican assembly person, a Republican named to be the general counsel for the board—sold out the workers on 10

cents to a dollar. In other words, the workers were going to get \$100,000, and he would settle at \$1000. Ten cents on a dollar is what he would settle. So then the employers would violate the law. They said, "Well, hell, if I'm going to get a union contract, and that union contract for three years is going to cost me \$3, \$4 million, on benefits and everything, if I can stop the union, if I can pay lawyers and everything and I have the law in my favor for a million, I'll spend the million." During that time the top seven or eight law firms in the country, from New York to California, every conceivable anti-union law firm, came to California to break the farmworkers' union. Littler, Mendelson, and Fastiff, a San Francisco law firm notorious for breaking strikes since the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, came. So did Seyfarth Shaw from Chicago, notorious for breaking strikes in Hawaii against the pineapple workers, and way back in the 1930s and 1940s against the longshoremen. All these anti-union law firms came to agribusiness to make millions on how to destroy a union in agriculture. And the Republicans helped them. Employers would fire workers with no problem. There's books written about this. *The Anti-Union's Consultant*. He starts off saying, "What you destroy in a union campaign is hope. The union is hope. So you attack hope." That's the worst thing to destroy in people. 'Cause if anything, that's all you have.

AD: Was power through voting, power through numbers, always emphasized in the UFW?

RD: It was a necessity. Cesar never liked politicians, but we needed them. It's the social contract, because remember, Cesar through the CSO helped elect for the first time the first city councilman in the history of Los Angeles in the 1950s, who was Eduardo Roybal. His daughter is now Congresswoman Roybal. At one point she was chairman of the Latino Caucus, for the congressional delegation, and yet in turn, she was afraid to rock the boat on immigration reform. And so they say, "It's not the right time." To them, it's never the right time. They want to play politics with people's lives, and what we're saying is deal with our issues.