

Nancy Elliott 1972–1976

The Battle of Indio 1975 Or How Fast Can a Picket Line Grow?

The spring of 1975 was a very important time for the UFW. While organizing a massive boycott against non-UFW grape growers and the huge Gallo winery, the union was intensively lobbying in Sacramento to win union elections for farmworkers. The UFW had been squeezed out of its labor contracts by sweetheart deals between the growers and the Teamsters in 1973. The Coachella Valley in Southern California had been a major battlefield in the strike that ensued, with 1500 workers picketing in the fight to win back their contracts, a strike that eventually moved north to Lamont and Delano in the San Joaquin Valley. It was there that the strike was suddenly suspended by Cesar after the tragic murder of two striking farmworkers, Nagi Daifullah and Juan De La Cruz. I had been the strike administrator during that battle in Coachella and Lamont, organizing a strike assistance fund of \$1.6 million given to the UFW by the AFL-CIO to help support the thousands of workers who walked the picket lines in the 120 degree desert heat. But then the union moved the battlefield to the boycott and sent farmworkers and staff across the country to the cities to wage a boycott campaign against Teamster growers and the massive Gallo winery in Modesto.

It was in March of 1975 that I was reassigned back to Coachella from the boycott to be director of the Coachella field office. The union still had two contracts with growers who had not switched to the Teamsters, with a peak of over 1000 members working under contract during the height of the grape harvest. My job was to keep the membership united, oversee the union's hiring hall, administer our contracts, and reach out to nonunion and Teamster workers to build for union elections if the lobbying effort in Sacramento was to succeed (which it did, later that year).

The Coachella field office, like other smaller union "field offices," was a tiny little storefront, which had seen its share of turnover of union directors. That turnover in some ways seemed to make the local leadership stronger, because they were the ones really "in charge" and setting the local agenda. As a novice director, I was pretty overwhelmed with the administrative tasks of running a field office and hiring hall: dispatching workers regularly for pruning and other seasonal work, going out to the fields daily to communicate with each of the stewards on the 13+ crews, overseeing the service center that assisted with other community problems, working on grievances and disputes, etc. So I was thrilled when a group of Filipino brothers, led by longtime union member named Fred Abad, came forward offering to organize after-work picket lines at local stores to rid the community of Gallo wine.

Filipino Brothers Lead the Charge

Most of the Filipino brothers lived in labor camps in the valley, knew each other well, and had historically had years of support for their union. Much has been written about how these Filipino immigrant men were brought to California to work the fields and were not allowed to marry due to miscegenation laws and the lack of Filipino women, and not allowed to own land due to restrictive anti-immigrant California land ownership laws. In any case, in spite of (or maybe because of!) all that had been done to them, the Filipino brothers were the backbone of my emotional support in dealing with the conflicts inherent in union contract enforcement, and I often went out to the camp at their invitation to share meals and union gossip.

So, the brothers started recruiting for their boycott picket line. At first it was “slim pickings,” just 10 to 15 workers, after working all day in the fields, walking the line two hours a day at the local Coachella liquor store. The picket line was uneventful in sleepy Coachella, a small, farmworker-dominated town in the lower Coachella Valley. The store finally caved and removed the Gallo wine, and, flush with victory, the group set its sights on nearby Indio.

Indio

I had grown up in nearby Palm Springs, so I was vaguely aware of the Indio political social scene. That southern part of California has a longstanding tradition of racial segregation, by city in addition to neighborhood. The valley has two “black” towns, Banning and Perris, and Coachella is the “Mexican” town. Indio was “white,” although there is a large labor camp in Indio where a lot of our members lived. I knew we were headed into hostile territory, but I had no idea how hostile!

The first target the workers decided to picket was a 7-Eleven-type store right along Highway 111, the main drag between Indio and Coachella. I was unable to go to the picket lines because of office responsibilities for the first day or two, but I started hearing reports each day that the lines were getting contentious and the Indio police were giving the picketers a bad time, and the workers asked me to be present to help them handle the police.

Stepping Over the Line

So on day three of the picket line, I went to Indio to check things out. The picketers were on the sidewalk next to the busy highway across the parking lot from the store, because the police had told them they could not picket on the store’s property. They were discouraged and frustrated because they couldn’t talk to the customers. A new “legal eagle” from the union’s legal department named Dan Boone was passing through Coachella, and he advised me that we *did* have the legal right to picket on the store’s property by the front door. So armed with that advice, I moved the picket line back across the parking lot to the front door.

The Police Arrive

Well, within a short time, the entire Indio police department arrived, and under the threat of arrest moved us back by the road, setting up a phalanx in riot gear in the parking lot between our line and the front door to make sure we stayed there. Even though we had lost our spot, we realized gleefully that the riot police were now deterring *everyone* from crossing our picket line into the store, and made the picket line 100 percent effective!

Few Become Many

But another curious thing was happening. It turns out many of our members took Highway 111 home from work in the fields to the Indio labor camp and saw the scene of union flags and riot police in front of the store. Memories of the strike of 1973 and abuse by the local police must have run deep, for within a very short period of time after the arrival of the police, carloads of workers started arriving at the picket line to lend their support. Within 30 minutes, the line went from 10 Filipino brothers to 150 flag-waving farmworkers of all stripes.

Waving the Flag

So I called a meeting of all the picketers there on the sidewalk, and together with Dan Boone we told everyone what our rights were to picket by the front door. The workers felt it was important to assert our rights, because after all we had to clear the rest of Indio of Gallo wine, and how could we do it without picketing next to the entry of the stores? I asked for volunteers, and 18 workers stepped forward to volunteer to cross the police line and go picket by the front door.

So I decided to send five workers at a time to picket across the parking lot. The first five went across and were quickly swooped up by the Indio police and carted off to jail. Then the next five crossed over and were similarly handcuffed and taken away. Then the third group of five crossed over.

The Police Do Their Part

At that point, the Indio police chief sought me out on the picket line. He looked worried. I realized later he thought all 150 workers were waiting to get arrested, and as the press and was taking pictures, he was nervous.

So the Indio police chief said to me, "Would it help solve this problem if I asked to storeowner to remove his Gallo wine?"

I nodded my head and said yes, I thought that would be *very* helpful. But of course we would need to send in a delegation to inspect and make sure everything "made in

Modesto” was removed. So at the behest of the Indio police department, the store was quickly cleared of its Gallo wine, and we had won our first Indio victory.

Going for Total Victory

But the workers were not ready to go home! We gathered in a far corner of the parking lot to meet among cries of support to go picket the jail and support our arrested comrades. Dan Boone was horrified at the prospect, and strongly advised me to convince the workers otherwise because this would make his job of getting people released much more difficult, and we should leave it to him. But the workers were not convinced; they did not have the same faith in the local legal system, and they were determined not to leave their union brothers and sisters at its mercy. I was nervous about going against the advice of our attorney, but the workers were not about to be deterred. So a compromise was reached: the workers voted to begin a “silent vigil” in front of the jail instead of a rowdy picket line as a show of support, while Dan worked from the inside to free our members.

It didn’t take long! All 150 of us arrived in front of the jail and began our disciplined, silent, but flag-waving picket line. Dan went in to negotiate our members’ release. Within about an hour, all of our jailed members were released and charges dropped. Our new attorney confided in me later that the workers had really taught him a valuable lesson that day: Direct worker action can make the legal system jump!

The boycott picket line led by the Filipino brothers continued throughout the spring with several more adventures and misadventures that could fill a book. Suffice it to say that its success was propelled for a long time by our Indio victory on the sidewalks of Highway 111. The ALRA was passed later that year, giving the workers the right to have elections, and the union won elections all across the valley. Sadly, however, reaching the goal of winning contracts for the union’s ever-hopeful and determined farmworker membership has turned out to be elusive to this day.

Written as remembered 28 years later by Nancy Elliott, with editing help from son, Patrick Johnston. Nancy worked for the UFW from 1972 to 1976, as an organizer and reporter for the union’s newspaper, *El Malcriado*; as a field office director in Coachella, King City, and San Jacinto; as organizer of the Marin County grape boycott, and as one of 100 organizers in the L.A. grape boycott; and as strike administrator of the 1973 grape strike in Coachella and later in Lamont, California.