

## Mark A. Pitt 1972–1977

In an effort to provide the reader with an understanding of the UFW and the activities in which it was involved, I have described my involvement with the UFW and have provided some information concerning the activities that were being undertaken at the various locations at which I worked.

I have some vague memories of the early activities of the UFW and the original grape boycott. From about June of 1966 until September of 1970 I was a member of the Retail Clerks International Union and employed by the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company (A&P). I can barely recall our produce manager and union steward posting information in our store about the UFW and the grape boycott; however, I cannot say with any amount of certainty if the information was in support of the efforts of the union or in opposition.

During the spring of 1972, the UFW was engaged in a boycott of non-union iceberg lettuce. The union had a “boycott office” in Takoma Park, Maryland, which covered Washington, D.C. and the surrounding suburbs. It was during this period when I first became personally involved with the union and its efforts on the campus of the University of Maryland.

In May of 1972 I joined the boycott staff and moved into the boycott house. In addition to the boycott activities, the union was also trying to fight off the efforts of the Farm Bureau and the giant agribusiness to have agriculture workers covered under the National Labor Relations Act. While many people viewed this as a positive move, to the union it meant losing the right to conduct secondary boycotts, one of its most effect weapons. It would also have made it possible for other unions to attempt to organize farmworkers around the country and thereby threaten the goal of a national organization for farmworkers. Therefore, the D.C. area boycott staff spent a good part of the summer of 1972 working with Dolores Huerta as she lobbied congressional leaders and delegates to the Democratic Party’s platform planning committee concerning issues relating to the UFW and the lettuce boycott.

In the early 1970s the UFW was also involved in an organizational effort in Florida. The majority of workers were African-American and from the West Indies. The union had a contract with Minute Maid and had offices throughout the state. The day-to-day activities of representing the union members took place in field offices and hiring halls in Avon Park, Winter Haven, and Apopka.

In addition, there was an organizing campaign being conducted among the workers in the vegetable fields in the Belle Glade area. This area of south Florida, some 30 miles from West Palm Beach was, and perhaps still is, one of the poorest and most depressed areas in the country. The towns of Pahokee, Clewiston, and Immokalee, to name a few, were littered with rundown tar paper shacks. Most of the workers reported to the center of town in Belle Glade for the morning “shape-up” in hopes of connecting with one of the many

labor contractors who were employed by the large agribusiness, thereby securing a day of work and a meager pay.

One of the many obstacles to the organizing effort was the yearly importation of a significant number of sugar cane cutters from the Caribbean. The conditions that these workers faced were almost subhuman. They lived in rundown camps out in the middle of nowhere. Sanitary conditions were minimal at best. There were no laundry facilities. This was particularly significant given that a cane cutter works in fields, which were recently burned in order to reduce the excess weeds and foliage, thereby making it a very dirty job. Typically, a cutter wore the same set of clothing until it became totally destroyed, therefore quickly presenting a sad and humiliating-looking image.

They were paid according to the amount of cane cut per day, in violation of the federally mandated \$2 per hour. They earned an average of \$12 to \$14 a day. Daily, they were served a couple of hard-boiled eggs and some porridge for breakfast and a lunch and dinner consisting of rice and ox tails. Perhaps the most demeaning of all was the way they were transferred to and from the fields each day. In the morning workers were loaded into the back of 18-wheelers and were taken to their respective work locations. As they finished at various times throughout the day, smaller groups were loaded into large open slat-side trucks and transported back to the camp. Most of the time, the route took them through the streets of town for all to witness.

The UFW had challenged the sugar cane industry's use of H-2 labor from the Caribbean, and as a result, the industry was required to make an attempt to recruit domestic workers. The union had argued, to no avail, that the industry should have been required to upgrade the working conditions, levels of pay, and benefits. The industry's only requirement was to make a half-hearted attempt to recruit domestic workers.

Therefore, in January of 1973 I arrived in Belle Glade, Florida, to answer the call of the sugar cane companies for "cane cutters." After passing a rigorous employment application and interview, I was hired to work for the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative as a cane cutter and was housed in the company's camp along with all the rest of the company's Jamaican and U.S. employees.

The U.S. employees all lived in a separate section of the camp, but everyone shared a single dining area and was given the same meals. I was the only U.S. employee in the camp working as a cane cutter. The rest worked in other aspects of sugar cane production. The majority worked with a few local employees and replanted the fields after the cutters had finished harvesting the cane.

Almost all of the U.S. workers had been "recruited" through the U.S. Agriculture Extension agency. Most were poor whites from Appalachia who thought they were responding to a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to work in the great outdoors of sunny

Florida. You can imagine their great shock when it became clear to them they would now be working and living in a labor camp with over 300 Caribbean sugar cane cutters.

My stint as a sugar cane cutter lasted only a few weeks. While we were never able to organize any of the workers, we were able to gather significant information concerning the conditions and the treatment of the workers and violations of the law. This all came to light after we gave a labor reporter for *The New York Times* a tour of some of the camps and introduced him to some of the workers, and he wrote a major article for the Sunday *Times*.

In early 1973, two major events took place that summarized the plight of farmworkers in the U.S. There was an outbreak of typhoid fever in a farm labor camp in Homestead, Florida. A few weeks later, there was a discovery of a “slave” labor ring. Indigent black men were “kidnapped” from streets in North Carolina cities and brought to a labor camp in Florida and kept under armed guard. They were not able to leave until they earned enough money to pay off their “debt” to their capturers.

These two stories played an integral role in the UFW campaign to defeat an anti-farmworker rights’ bill, which had been introduced in the state’s legislature in Jacksonville. The union was able to bring workers from both locations to testify against the bill, which never got out of the committee. The newspapers proclaimed that the Senate bill died of typhoid fever in a slave labor camp.

The union’s attempt to organize in Florida was cut short as a result of the efforts of the California Grape Growers and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. The UFW found itself fighting for its survival, and much of its energy was again focused on a national boycott of grapes. Therefore, almost all off the union’s Florida staff were reassigned to various locations throughout Ohio sometime around March of 1973.

Eliseo Medina, who had been heading up the union’s organizing efforts in Florida, was now running the boycott throughout Ohio. Eliseo, Dorothy Johnson, Hugh Teague, and I supplemented the existing Cleveland staff. Others from Florida went to Dayton, Akron, Cincinnati, and Columbus. Shortly after our arrival in Cleveland, a large contingent of “huelgistas” from California joined us. We now had 50 to 60 farmworkers, their families, and boycott staff living and working in Cleveland.

Many of us lived in a former nunnery provided by the archdiocese of Cleveland. Throughout the summer of 1973 we lived and worked together in an effort to reestablish the boycott, while the workers and the union struggled in California in an effort against both the employers and the Teamsters.

By the end of 1973 most of the strikers had returned to California, and it was becoming clear that the union was in for a long and difficult struggle. In January of 1974 I was assigned to the Columbus office and eventually became the director. Columbus is not only

a large metropolitan area in Ohio, but also the state capital and the home of Ohio State University.

Our efforts in Columbus involved working with the local and state AFL-CIO and UAW leadership, the governor's office, members of the state legislature, campus activists, and the peace and justice movement, to name a few. In addition, because Ohio had a significant migrant farm labor community, we became involved with many individuals who were involved in the local efforts to support these workers, as well as supporting the efforts of the UFW. Most significant among this group were the priests, ministers, nuns, and lay members of the National Farm Workers Ministry.

One of the most memorable events of this time was a statewide tour by Cesar sometime in the summer of 1974. He was welcomed all over the state, and large support rallies were held in every major city. The outcry of support can best be summarized by the reaction of the union support group at Ohio University in Athens when it became clear that the schedule would not allow for a rally at their campus. They persisted until they finally persuaded the university to provide the president's plane in order to allow Cesar to be able get to and from Athens and Columbus and remain on schedule.

By the end of 1974 or early 1975, Eliseo and Dorothy and Hugh relocated to Chicago. I followed them in February of 1975. Again, as in Ohio, boycott support groups had been organized all over the state, but here all of the staff was located within the metropolitan Chicago area.

As in Ohio the union again received significant support from the Catholic Church, which provided the boycott office and additional support as needed. The boycott activities were again mainly supported by the AFL-CIO, UAW, peace and justice groups, and student activists.

One of the major focal points during this time was the boycott of Gallo wine. The company had become the symbol of what was wrong with the agriculture system in California. This was graphically presented in a union leaflet picturing a rundown labor camp belonging to E&J Gallo and calling for a boycott of the "Real Boone's Farm," which was a popular inexpensive wine of the day.

When the union was successful in getting the Agriculture Labor Relations Act passed in August of 1975, it began mobilizing for the historic organizing efforts, which would follow. The ALRA provided California farmworkers a mechanism for union elections. At that time Eliseo and Dorothy returned to California to take on various roles in this new effort. I, along with many others, remained in Chicago.

In the spring of 1976 the union geared up for a statewide effort in California to amend the ALRA to allow union organizers the ability to communicate to the workers by providing

“access” onto the employers’ property. Proposition 14 was initiated and staff were brought from all over the country to help secure the necessary signatures.

Union staff from throughout the state and across the country was assigned to this effort, including three or four of us from Chicago. We all spent two or three months living in an old, rundown monastery near Los Angeles. Almost every daytime hour was spent in nearby shopping centers, major downtown intersections, and other locations throughout the state that would attract large crowds, where we collected signatures for Proposition 14.

Local Hollywood celebrities such as Kris Kristofferson, Ralph Waite, Will Geer, and others would occasionally provide evening entertainment. However, more often than not, we would call on some of our own, such as Jessica Govea, to keep us motivated and our spirits high. By the beginning of the summer, the union had collected enough signatures and the proposition had qualified for the November 1976 ballot.

Most of us from outside of California returned to our assignments and continued our efforts on behalf of the boycott through the summer before again returning to California in September for the election campaign.

I recall a major march and rally organized in Chicago during that summer as one of the more exciting events. At that time the union’s contract with the Minute Maid orange juice company in Florida was expiring, and the company was making the renegotiations a difficult process. This was the only contract in the state and I believe the only one outside of California. There was a concern that given all the issues the union was involved with, the company might see this as an opportunity to run away from the union and refuse to sign a new agreement.

In order to avoid a big fight and the possibility of losing the contract entirely, the union started a publicity campaign about farmworker conditions in Florida and the UFW’s efforts in the state. This was aided by a newly released documentary entitled *A Day Without Sunshine*, which was a follow-up of Edward R. Murrow’s earlier exposé of south Florida farmworker conditions, *Harvest of Shame*. Both documentaries prominently featured the daily shape-up in Belle Glade.

As a part of the publicity campaign the above-mentioned rally and march was planned for Chicago. The featured speaker was Mack Lyons, an African-American member of the UFW’s executive board and the state director in Florida. The presence of Mack and the plight of the workers in south Florida gave the union a different image than the heretofore one of the immigrant Mexican migrant laborer. The event was a big success with well over 1000 people marching through the streets of Chicago. A new Minute Maid contract was signed shortly thereafter.

Staff from all over the country returned to California in the late summer or early fall to campaign for the passage of Proposition 14. The agribusiness interests throughout the state

ran a very effective campaign centered on the theme of protecting individual “private property rights,” and the proposition was soundly defeated.

The union staff regrouped, and after a series of meetings in La Paz, many received new assignments. In early November of 1976 I arrived in Santa Maria, California. After a short stint in Santa Maria I went to Delano sometime in early 1977.

The union was gearing up for another run of organizing campaigns among the workers in the grape industry, and I went to Coachella and was reunited once again with Eliseo and Dorothy. The organizing campaign was extremely intense with a large number of staff assigned to Coachella. Unfortunately, dealing with the ALRB had become as difficult and frustrating as the NLRB and the organizing efforts became bogged down with unfair labor practices, election challenges, and all sorts of legal maneuvers, and the election campaign never was able to take hold.

In September 1977 I left the UFW. Looking back it is clear that this period of time was an amazing experience full of high hopes and ideals. Whether or not these were met is for others to decide. I can only say that for me personally it was an enriching experience that I will never forget.

There is no doubt in my mind that during this period of time an incredible group of people passed through the farmworker movement. There were many sacrifices and disappointments, but I suspect that everyone gained as much as they gave.