Tina Solinas 1972–1989

Here is a taste of some of my 17 years in the UFW.

My introduction to the union was in Berkeley in the late 1960s, where I grew up. Every week, when we'd go shopping at the Food Co-op on Telegraph Avenue, we'd pass a Filipino brother at the door, collecting food for strikers. It was always the same brother. He was so positive, with a big friendly smile, ready to talk, and seemed to be eternally present at the door whenever my family would go shopping. His dedication and perseverance continually impressed me.

At home, my father had always made sure that our family knew about and were involved in helping people who were less fortunate than we. We worked with the Quakers constructing homes on Indian reservations in Northern California; we marched in all the anti-Vietnam War marches in the Bay Area, and during high school I taught English to a class of non-English-speaking immigrants. My father, a plumber, was adamantly pro-union. He instilled labor history into us from an early age. The summer before my senior year in high school, I was able to take a trip to Eastern Europe with the Quakers and 15 other teenagers from around the country. Upon returning to the U.S., I found that the ordinary life of school and career no longer held any interest for me. I wanted my life to mean something more, but I didn't know what and I didn't know how.

After graduating from high school, we moved from Berkeley to Visalia, a town in the Central Valley. I attended Fresno State College, where I met lots of different kinds of people, all very new to me. There were "Aggies," Vietnamese, African-Americans, and radicals. The Aggies wore quite an attitude with their cowboy boots; the African-Americans wanted nothing to do with the liberal from the city, so the only ones I could talk to were the radicals. These were people who were supporting the farmworkers' union and who were involved in a medical clinic for poor people way out in back roads of the valley in Woodville.

Not being able to make any sense out of college, I left Fresno to work in that medical clinic. (I had taken five dance classes and broken my two big toes, so I couldn't dance and consequently had nothing left to go to school for.) The clinic was started by the first doctor to work for the union—David Brooks. After he left the union, he worked in the emergency room in Tulare in order to buy a building in Woodville. It was the old whorehouse that John Steinbeck wrote about. It was David's own clinic, funded by him. Gradually, most of the people in Woodville came to help him build it, after realizing that David wanted to be their doctor and meant never to turn anyone away for lack of money or for lack of union membership. This kind of generous service to the community made sense to me, so I joined his staff, worked for minimal salary, and did a plethora of jobs: janitor, medical secretary, newspaper publisher. (David published a newspaper celebrating all the different families in the area, the different races, etc.)

Anyway, many of the farmworkers who used his clinic were members of the United Farm Workers Union. Even though I worked in the clinic, I wanted to know what it was like to work in the fields. The Salazar and the Sanchez families, a couple of the families who helped build and run the clinic, invited me to go work with them. I went out to cut grapes and sometimes to pick oranges with them. We would all go, the adults and the children. The jobs we went on were contract labor, where you were paid by the bushel or the box. I learned a lot about harvesting fruits and vegetables and how hard it was to work fast enough to make enough money for one's self and one's family. I was very, very slow at picking fruit, but it was something I had never done, so I kept at it. I got in-your-face knowledge about what it's like to work around pesticides, because your face is right in the leaves of the grape plant or the orange tree. The leaves are covered with the dust of pesticides, and it gets in your eyes, mouth, and nose the entire time you're working. My friend Clara, with seven children, was the fastest I met at picking grapes, but the tips of her fingers were mutilated from the pesticides.

I have to admit that the best part of the day was waking up at 3 a.m. and going to the Salazar home to get hot chocolate and be part of making the delicious breakfasts and lunches that they would take to the fields: hot oatmeal drinks, homemade fresh tortillas, beans, and whatever else might go into the tacos that day.

Some of the jobs we went on were covered by a union contract. As the union got more sophisticated, workers on union jobs were issued union cards. I remember being thrilled when it was my turn to get my union card. I had heard about the union since I was in high school, had admired the work the union was doing to improve the lives of the field workers, and here I was, a field-working union member with full rights for a living wage and medical benefits. Although I only worked sporadically and never made enough to qualify for benefits, it was still exciting. That was where I met Barbara Macri, who later became a lawyer while working for the union, and was my neighbor at union headquarters in La Paz, located in the mountains above Bakersfield, near Tehachapi. Our children were born about the same time. She was the one who snapped my picture and made my union card.

I remember that once we were sent out on a job to pick plums by Tony Orendain, a union organizer. He sent us out knowing that the workers there were going to go out on strike, and we would be sure to walk off the job, which of course, we did. Later, when I was on staff, Tony sent me to Richgrove, near Delano, to set up a union office. That office didn't last long.

Chris Braga (who afterward did some organizing for the union and worked on the Agbayani Village, the Filipino retirement village built by the union), and I occasionally went over to the Forty Acres to help out at newspaper office of *El Malcriado* because we had published our own local bilingual newspaper in Woodville.

While working for the clinic, I met members of the *Teatro Campesino*, the theater group formed off of the union picket lines by Luis Valdez to dramatize the living conditions of the field workers and to motivate and energize people. They'd come to see the doctor, stay at our house, and eventually roped me into using my sewing skills to make costumes for a magnificent puppet show they created.

I Love the Way I Joined the Union

Working in the clinic and in the fields helped me immensely. The farmworking families I met and worked with were very kind to me, supportive and protective, while at the same time challenging me to help their families, since I had so much education and knowledge. I worked with then-President Lyndon Johnson's Poverty Program to bring adult education classes to our small town. The Salazar family helped me set up an alternative summer school in their garage for farmworker children, which I ran for three years, and then their daughters ran for more years after that. (One of their daughters consequently became a public school teacher. I met her again 20 years later when she was retiring and I was just starting my own teaching career.)

In September of 1972, a friend and I were pruning grapes (how we got the job is a mystery, because I didn't have a clue what to cut and what not, poor grapes!). We heard that Cesar called a general strike in support of the White River Farms strikers. The strikers had been out on strike for a long time, wanting to work under a union contract so they would have security in their lives: a salary that would actually pay their living expenses, medical benefits, and a voice in how they were treated at work.

So off we go, joining the picket line, and we promptly get arrested for picketing within 20 feet of the grapes. Well, there were grapevines on both sides of the road, we were standing on the dotted line down the middle of the road, and we could not get 20 feet away from the grapes on any side of the road. It didn't matter; we were arrested anyway.

I was so excited because we were put in a cell which Dolores Huerta had just vacated. The indefatigable Dolores was one of the founders of the union. I had been hearing her name for years. Sharing the cell with me were eight other woman, including a wonderfully thoughtful, inspiring farmworker by the name of Jessie de la Cruz. Her husband, Albert, came to bail us out within a few hours. Later I would go to meetings with both of them to set up a tomato co-op near Fresno. I was designated the secretary. My job was to try to write down the proceedings of the meetings, even though my Spanish was in the developing stages.

The following day, I went back to the picket line, having lost my job as a grapevine pruner.

Frank Ortiz, strike organizer and eventual board member of the union, saw me on the picket line and wanted to know what I was doing there. I stood out like a sore thumb, blond among all the farmworkers. I told him I couldn't work because Cesar had called a

general strike. I remember Frank shaking his head at me. He said they could really use my help in the office and took me over to the union's headquarters at the Forty Acres in Delano.

I didn't think the union was any place for a non-farmworker, their struggle not being my own, but the people back home in Woodville were thrilled that I might go to work for the union. Their reasoning was that I would be able to help them better by working on the staff of the union. They hoped I would be able to bring their problems to the attention of the union staff while furthering the goals of the union. I didn't have another job, and I thought I would see if I could actually be of help. I decided to stay on. After all, what was a month or so in the union? (Turns out many people joined the union staff for a month or a year and ended up staying much, much longer.) Frank set me up in the service center, where my job was to help strikers by translating, filling out forms, or whatever they might need in the way of getting support for their families, since they had not worked for quite a while.

In the service center, I worked with Pancho Botello who was quite the teacher. One of our jobs was to help farmworkers get financial aid from the Welfare office. Pancho and I were quite a sight when we would arrive at the Bakersfield Welfare office. He was usually in rolled-up jeans, with shirttails half tucked in, and the enormous book of welfare regulations under his arm. I was the quintessential hippie in my bellbottom pants or flowing handmade skirts, and sporting bandana-covered hair and rimless glasses. Pancho had this air of knowing exactly what he was doing. He would march right in the front door, walk up the stairs, ignoring all the secretaries who tried to intercept him on his way. He would smile at everyone, nod, be very friendly, and never deviate from his course. He simply ignored anyone who tried to stop him. He would walk right into the office of the director, interrupt any meeting, and begin talking about his case as if he had been personally invited to do so. He usually got what he wanted. He knew those regulations upside down and backwards, knew what to fight for and how to get it. I was the foil, of course, sweet and innocent thing that I was. He made sure I wrote down everything that happened, who said what and when. People in those offices did not know what was happening when he walked in!

Then we'd go to workers' houses, eat and talk, talk and eat. Spend time with people. I don't know what people thought of this little white girl working with this short Mexican, but I guess people in Delano were used to it by that time. I learned a lot about organizing, bluffing, standing your ground, and more. Funny thing, Pancho said he had once been to a weeklong workshop on how to organize in Morgan Hill, south of San Jose, where he had met my father, who was one of the instructors!

While in Delano, Philip Vera Cruz, a Filipino brother, member of the union's board of directors and one of the original strikers, asked me if I knew of anyone who would help them build the Agbayani Village, the retirement village for the Filipino brothers to be built at the Forty Acres. I thought of my Uncle George, my dad's brother, a contractor and a carpenter, who had done work with the American Friends Service Committee. George

jumped at the chance to work on the village. He moved from Santa Barbara and organized work crews, taught young eager folk all about plumbing, carpentry, electrical work, etc., and thus grew the Agbayani Village. My dad came down to put in that beautiful kitchen at the Village. George's wife, Rita Solinas, also joined and did organizing when the two of them moved to La Paz.

There were two of us working in the little office in Delano—the young lady who took care of the accounting for the union expenses of the strike at White River Farms and me. I began to help her with the books. I pretty much taught myself what to do to keep track of the finances. Marshall Ganz down in Calexico needed someone to help with the financial accounting for the strike against the D'Arrigo Farms, so I was sent down south. I loved being in Calexico. Being on the border was very different than working in the union's Delano office at the Forty Acres. We would get up at 3 a.m. to be in the office by the time the workers got there. I would watch with amazement the flow of workers crossing the border in the pre-morning darkness to get to the buses that took them to the fields, often hours away. It was like watching parades and parades of people going by. Once they were on the buses and gone, the town reverted to its normal, quiet, dusty self. Those of us doing the administrative work for the strike would work in the office all day, meet with the strikers in the afternoon after they got back from picketing in the fields, have meetings in the evening, and finally go get something to eat in Mexicali about 11 p.m. Being in Calexico during a strike was very exciting. The office was full of strikers and organizers, religious folk, lawyers, paralegals, volunteers from the cities, families of strikers, and reporters. Also coming in and out were workers who were not on strike, getting dispatches from the hiring hall to go to work on ranches where we already had contracts. Among all the other action, I got to meet the *Obispos Verdes* (the Green Hornets), as they were called, Manuel Chavez's team: "Kalacus" (Eduardo Garcia), "Compis" (Gilberto Rodriquez), Gustavo Romero, and Oscar Mondragón.

(That was when I fell in love with Oscar.)

In February the strikers were sent out on the boycott. Two huge buses were loaded with lettuce workers and left for points East: Chicago, Detroit, New York City. These workers, many of whom had never been in a big city before, were now going to "organize" these cities. They went to convince members of labor unions, churches, and other organizations to abstain from buying lettuce, all in a language they didn't yet speak. Quite an adventure. Oscar was in charge of the trip out.

Meanwhile, I was in charge of taking care of their families in Mexicali. It was to be simple: the families would list their expenses and I was to issue them checks. But the checks were useless in Mexicali. So instead I was to take cash across the border, meet the families at the union clinic in Mexicali, and disperse the money.

Picture this: a large waiting room crowded with women and children, standing room only. They have been running out of food for their children, out of gas for their stoves, and it's

February and cold! In bounces a short blond girl with her limited Spanish and thousands in cash for 60 families (or was it 30?). I sit at a small table to begin. Reading their lists, I present each family with what I thought was the required amount of money. All of the sudden, an angry grandmother is yelling at me. How could I possibly think that I'd given her enough money? What about the medicine for the grandchild? The deposit for the empty gas tanks …this problem… and that problem…? Other women started speaking up, telling me, questioning me, demanding help.

Whoa! What had I gotten myself into? There was barely air in the room to breathe, let alone for all our emotions: confusion, anger, consternation, hope.

Most of the women were very kind, took what I offered, and left. I'd handed out extra money to some, but after checking my list, found that several families hadn't shown up. The following week, they didn't show up again. So off I go, to their houses, using a car left to me by one of the boycotters, a huge boat of an aging Cadillac. That car takes me dipping and swooping up and down the dirt roads and innumerable alleys of Mexicali. To find someone in Mexicali, a street address is not enough. You don't ask about house numbers, you describe who you are looking for. I get the knack of chasing down neighbors to make inquiries, and people were always able to help me find my way.

One family, way out in the country, had nine children, two or three sets of twins, all under the age of nine! The mother, one of the sweetest women I have ever met in my life, was sick, without transportation, and unable to get into town. Kind, understanding, and totally grateful that I came and found her. I was lucky that I had to visit them often. Her husband, Heriberto Perez, wrote to me several times from the boycott, to make sure that I was taking care of his family.

Then there was Amelia's family. In the middle of that huge city, I found a small house on a big lot, full of kids, from a toddler to an adolescent. But no adult! The aunt in charge had left the seven kids, under the age of 12, all alone. I was 24 years old, single, with a sudden wild surge of mothering instinct! Together, the children and I organized that household pretty quickly. We cooked together, took care of problems together, did homework together. I would often spend the night. We happily came to be quite the temporary family. And we were all overjoyed when their mom returned from the boycott.

I grew up pretty quickly while working with those Mexicali families of boycotters. These women were quite adept at getting money out of a turnip (I often felt like I was that turnip). And they did a great job of taking care of me. I ended up renting a house in Mexicali. In biking to work, I would be stopped along the way a couple of times; first by a woman who insisted on doing my laundry (by hand of course), then by Josefina Panduro, who would come out to the road as I passed by to hand me a *liquado*, a nutritional smoothie, for breakfast. Lupita would bring lovely blouses to the office that she had sewed for me. The family of "Kaliman" invited me often to share meals. After almost a year together, we had grown to be a tight-knit group of women.

I think that working with those women and exploring Mexicali prepared me for the much harder work that was to come with a tragic bus accident. In 1974, a labor contractor's bus went over into a ditch near Blythe, killing 19 workers, many of them drowning in the less than 2 feet of water. Now, remember, the workers on a labor contractor's bus are not working under union contract, and thus do not have any of the benefits that come with being a union member. All work in the fields is hard, and theirs was a very hard life.

Ricardo Villapando, one of the union members who was very supportive of me in my service center work, came running into the office that day yelling at me that I had to get to Blythe, that there were people to take care of.

(This is hard to write. Reliving it through this writing is still shocking.)

Angel Quintero, the office director, Villapando, and I hopped into Angel's truck and drove to the hospital. Evidently, in a previous farmworker bus accident, the families of the deceased and the injured had been ill-used and ignored. The union members were going to make sure this didn't happen again, and I was the one being pushed forward to make sure of it.

Sure enough, when we got to the hospital where some of the families were waiting, the Teamster lawyers were already getting them to sign papers. We feared that signing those papers meant they were signing their rights away. Too often, farmworkers have been denied their rights to have doctors when injured while working, their families have been denied any recognition or compensation when someone has died while doing agricultural work. Our job was to make sure none of that happened this time. We gathered as many names of the injured and deceased as we could. Then I was to visit the families to make sure they were receiving their rights under the workers' compensation laws.

Prior to the bus accident, I had been working mainly with families of strikers, people who worked under union contract and thus were much better off than those workers who had to rely on labor contractors for jobs in the Imperial Valley. Now, I was finding families whose homes had dirt floors (I also learned from the women how to keep those houses clean, quite a feat), and often only partial roofs. One family lived in the desert hills with sticks, blankets and newspapers as walls.

To help these families of the deceased and injured, we worked closely with the union's lawyers. I also went to hospitals and fought with doctors to obtain continual care for those who needed it. Donations of food and clothes from other farmworkers flowed into the office and we distributed them to people's homes. It was an involved and complicated situation. The most impressive was that farmworkers from all over kept coming in to ask how they could help and to make sure that we were staying on top of the situation for each person and family involved in the accident.

On the day of the funeral for these 19 people, Cesar created a huge march with thousands of farmworker families and supporters, union and church leaders, that started at the Calexico cemetery, crossed the Mexican border and ended up at a funeral parlor in Mexicali. Anna Puharich, the head of the union's service centers, took over the ceremonial part of my job on that day.

I thought my work was done at the end of the Mass that was held in the streets. However, when the services were over, Villapando told me to change clothes and come right back to the funeral parlor for the *velorio*, the all-night vigil with the families for the viewing of the bodies. Many union members, people not related to the families of the deceased but connected and supportive nevertheless, stayed that long night.

What a night. There were several situations in which there was more than one widow to claim a body. One fellow left three widows, all going at each other. For a while, chaos. Eventually, the quiet of the night and the starkness of the tragedy took over.

Then, in the very middle of that night, Villapando saw that individual families were being called into the funeral's office. He shoved me in there right away. The funeral director was telling each family that there was not enough money to cover the burial expenses, that their loved ones were to be buried in the pauper's cemetery without gravestones. He was illegally and cruelly demanding a great deal of money from each of these families in the middle of the night. All of the gravesites and headstones had been paid for ahead of time, due to the insistence of the union. Boy, did we settle that one in a hurry and with lots of noise!

During those early years, before my children were born, I got to work with the most amazing organizers—farmworkers and others who were drawn to the movement: in Arizona with "Mr. Moon", Jose Luna, doing the accounting and running the strike office; in Calexico with Dan Boone and Deborah Peyton, lawyers extraordinaire; in Sacramento lobbying with Dolores Huerta; in the Calexico field office working with each of the brothers Guicho, very kind men, both incredibly patient and wise; and in El Centro translating at court. That court case was where Oscar, Gilbert, and Kalacus were on trial for burning labor contractor buses. The men spent a lot of time in jail awaiting trial and were later convicted. They each affirmed their innocence in the situation. Oscar was in the El Centro jail during most of my pregnancy with our first child.

In San Luis, Arizona, while pregnant, I worked in the strike office, which happened to be a motel room. There wasn't a lot in San Luis: homes, the union office, and a motel. Oh, and lots and lots of sand. You needed a snowplow just to get down the streets after a windstorm. We'd be doing strike business in the motel room, using the beds as tables—workers, phones, and noise everywhere. During the day when I'd get completely tired, as happens when one is carrying a baby, Anna Puharich would shoo everyone out and close the doors. I'd crawl under the bed and go to sleep. They'd open the doors again and continue with all the strike planning, paperwork, and phone calls.

Since this narrative is mainly to cover union events until 1975, I'd like to briefly fill in subsequent events. In September of 1975, Oscar's and my first child, Tonatzin, was born in Ventura. In 1977, Angelo was born in Brawley. In 1978, Oscar was elected to the board of directors of the union. In 1979, we were sent to Chicago for the boycott. Anja Maija, the youngest, was born in Delano in 1981. I did my best to make a home in each of the cities where Oscar was sent. We moved 26 times by the time Tona was six years old.

Finally, we stayed in La Paz for eight years where I got to work with the children of staff members. I loved it. I worked with Gordon Williamson in day care, with Elogia Castillo in Montessori, with the ever-dynamic Pudge Hartmire, Chris's wife, at the pool, with Dr. Marion Moses in her office. I tutored children and adults, took vanfuls of kids to science camp, did Halloween, Christmas and Easter events, and helped cook for 50 to 200 people with Helen Chavez as my mentor.

All this while, my husband, Oscar, was on the road, usually coming home on Sundays. He did stay close to home at the time of the births of our children and was home every night while we were in Chicago, as well as during the year when he was actually assigned to be in La Paz. Our Sundays were joyful days spent dancing, cleaning, cooking, and resting altogether as a family.

I'm writing this with Cesar always on the edge of my mind.

Cesar's insistence that we,
whoever we were, could do
whatever was needed,
wherever that need was
and do it fast because yesterday was
not soon enough
—fired us up and got us moving.

And keeps us moving.

What a delight to be able to share some of my story. Thank you.