

Gilbert Rodriguez 1972–1993

Preface by Tina Solinas: “Gilbert is currently (January 2004) organizing for the UFW in Delano. He’s thinking of retiring this year at the age of 66. That gives him 32 years organizing in the fields for the UFW.”

Before working for the union, I had been on strike once, in 1953, when I was 15 years old. The company wasn’t paying well, so we just made a walkout. We were local guys from Brawley. The oldest of us was 19. The supervisor told us to go back to work. We said, “Shit no,” so we went back to Brawley. It wasn’t organized or anything.

In 1968 I had injured my back while working in the sugar beets in Brawley, carrying 100-pound sacks of sugar. I was on disability in May of 1972, when Gilbert Lopez and Cesar Enriquez of the Casa de Amistad told Manuel Chavez about me. He wanted to meet me, so we met in Brawley.

Manuel asked if I could help him for two weeks. There was a cantaloupe strike in Yuma involving 1500 workers. Manuel just told me, *alli esta*—it’s yours. You know what it was like in those days. I didn’t know anything. I took over the strike, although Manuel was the number one guy of that strike, the boss. We were talking to the workers to get out of the field, to support the strike. We didn’t get a contract, just better wages and better conditions, but all this we got by keeping the workers out of the field.

I liked working for the union. I knew people always had a lot of problems, and I knew somebody had to help them, and I thought I could be of help. And I’ve been striking since I began with the union.

After that first time in Yuma, I was sent to the service center in San Luis, Arizona, to help workers with problems in the field: disability, unemployment, filling out papers, that sort of thing.

There was a strike vote in Sun Harvest in Calexico, so they sent me to Calexico. We talked to the workers to help get them another contract. It was a big strike in Salinas and the Imperial Valley. It lasted two weeks. At that time there were only irrigators and tractor drivers working in the Imperial Valley. The harvest was up in Salinas. It was settled; it was a good contract.

From there, in 1972 Cesar had the fast in Phoenix. We took Angel Quintero’s truck to Phoenix. We saw Coretta King there. Lupe Quintero, who is with CRLA now in El Centro, was with us. About eight of us were in the back of the little camper.

I was in Coachella when the Teamsters were in the fields organizing, when they had their sweetheart contracts. It wasn’t easy. The Teamsters had access to the workers when they were working in the fields, just like we did. They were big guys, “gorillas.” It was confusing

to the workers, because there was a lot of yelling. That's when the video came out: *Luchando Por Nuestras Vidas*.

I'm not sure why the Teamsters left. Something happened upstairs and then they were supposed to leave.

Then there was a lemon strike, in maybe 1974 in Yuma. It lasted about nine months. Manuel put me in charge of the strike. It had been going for about one or two months when I went there. Part of my job was to talk to all the captains, make sure that there was no violence, make sure that everyone went out to do their duties. The growers lost a lot of money. The trees were full of fruit and they couldn't get the workers to harvest the lemons. There were sheriffs and everything. The sheriffs cracked a lot of our people's heads in the picket line.

Finally, after the strike was over, the growers wanted to send me to prison, along with the 17 strike captains. They took us to court. They argued that the union had caused them to lose \$1.5 million. We had a good attorney. The settlement was that we would go into the county jail for two and a half weeks. So we did: the 17 strike captains and me.

The workers had a big strike in Oxnard. They were living in a big camp. The owners were trying to close it, which would leave the workers with no housing. It was a wild strike. Nobody knew about it. The UFW wasn't involved. Cesar called me and told me to go there and take anybody I wanted. I said I needed just one guy. He was my second guy in the strike in Yuma, a guy from Modesto. We went to Oxnard. It was a big strike. I was told not to use the flags, to get everything fixed as soon as possible. We met with the workers and the owners. The workers wanted to know where the flags were. I had more than 100 flags in the car, but I was only supposed to help the workers and they would do it on their own. The workers were well organized but they didn't have anybody to lead them. When the owners found out I, a UFW staff member, was in the meeting, they told me to leave. They said that I didn't represent the workers. The workers said, "No, no, no. He is going to stay here. He is our representative." I stayed and gave them some advice.

There was a settlement, and the workers got what they wanted: better benefits and better pay. The settlement was with the workers, not with the union. Years later I found out that the workers got new housing and new homes. So we had helped. Later on we got a contract with the company. I can't remember the name of the company.

In 1973 or 1974 in Mendota, we got a couple of raises in the cantaloupe, in a general strike there and in Firebaugh. During those years, if we drove through Mendota and the growers saw us, they would give the workers a raise because the growers were so afraid of a strike. One time I went to talk to the workers on a bus for about five minutes, and the next day they got a 25 cent raise.

In 1975 I met Arturo Rodriguez, Irv Hershenbaum, and David Martinez. All were on the board later on. I also knew Eliseo Medino, Saul Martinez, Oscar Mondragon, Calacus. A lot of people, good people.

I was sent to Phoenix from 1977 until 1979 with Calacus and Lupe Bautista. We were in Phoenix administering contracts for about two and a half years.

I got a call to come back to California when they killed Rufino on February 10, 1979, during the general vegetable strike in Salinas and the Imperial Valley,

In the 1979 strike I was traveling up and down, helping on the strike. *No violencia*, I would say to the workers, telling them to *que se calmaran*, or calm down.

During the 1980s, there was supposedly another union organizing in Arizona. That other union involved Ricardo Garcia, a company man. I got a call, because they won an election there. It was certified *luego luego* right away, and we went to Yuma. That's when I won three elections in Yuma. Arizona was under the ERLB (I think that's what it was called), the Arizona labor relations law. I won a big election in Phoenix with Verde Growers, another with a lemon company, and then one with a lettuce company; but all our elections were thrown out, not Garcia's. Our elections were thrown out by the Arizona labor law. The labor law scared the workers. The workers were told that they were better off without the union, and so the workers were left with nothing. That's why I was pulled out. We could not organize in Arizona with that law. Garcia organized only one contract. Later on I found out that he left the workers and he became a labor contractor. That may be just hearsay. He just disappeared.

I met Sr. Jose Luna in Yuma, Arizona.

In Yuma, they threw Cesar into jail during one strike in the 1980s.

In 1982 or 1983 we helped in the presidential election campaign for Edward Kennedy—Eduardo. We helped him in California, and we won in Arizona. We were there for about three weeks, then we went to San Juan, Texas. I met the people at the union office there in San Juan, Texas, then we were sent back to California.

Then I was sent to San Ysidro to open the office there, in the 1980s. From there, I was sent to Salinas to organize. I worked from Calexico to Salinas and Watsonville and all of the pueblos in between.

I was sent to Santa Rosa; we won a couple of elections there, up in Napa.

I went to Florida, in an airplane, which I hate. I'm afraid of heights. I went for two weeks. We got a contract with Quincy Farms, a mushroom farm. We still have it.

I was on the boycott, but only in California. From Coachella, from Indio, and from Delano, we would take vans of workers to L.A. and boycott at Von's and all those places.

Sometime in the 1980s I won the first election in Santa Maria in the strawberries. We left it up to the negotiators, but later on I found out it got thrown out by the ALRB, maybe because it was a co-op. I don't know why, really.

In the 1980s I got our first contract from a local farm, Abati Farms in the Imperial Valley, by myself. On a Sunday, I went out and pulled out all the people on strike. There were about 20 crews, about 400 people. Just with a *bandera* (a flag), Francisco "Pancho" Reyes, and me. Ben Abati, the owner, came out to talk with me. He told me he would negotiate with us. It was a Sunday. I couldn't find Manuel to let him know. I tried calling Dolores. Finally I found somebody. I said, "Look, I've got a strike here." In two or three hours the lawyers for the union and the company got together. They made an agreement to meet in a couple of weeks. Dolores was the one to negotiate the contract. Dolores told me to sign it. It was the first contract that I ever signed in my life.

I am proud of it because all the other companies we had in the Imperial Valley were huge companies, with operations from Yuma, Arizona, to Calexico and Salinas.

I was asked if I wanted to be on the board of directors for the union sometime before Cesar passed away, but I didn't want to be on the board. He got mad at me. He wanted me on the board. It was hard for me because I didn't have any high school. I like organizing better.

I was also Cesar's personal driver in maybe 1983 and another time, maybe 1993. The last time he called me, I took him to Sacramento in February of 1993. That was the last time we talked.

We won a big election with the company called Gerwaan, I think that's how it's spelled. They had more than 3000 workers. We got it in 1990. It had fruit, peaches, plums, grapes—all kinds of stuff. We won the elections; we were certified.

I just win the elections and somebody else takes over. Whether they get a contract is not part of my job. Things happen.

In 1994-1996 I was sent to Stockton. Dolores Huerta was in charge of our campaign. It was very good to work with Dolores. She is a good leader. We took access at many companies, but although we were certified, we never got a contract.

Last year in Oxnard, in 2003, we were organizing in the *fresa*—strawberries. The companies had hired four "consultants." One of them was Jose Sanchez, a consultant from Watsonville for years and years. These consultants were there to scare the workers, to tell the workers that if they sign with the union, the fields would be plowed under. There were

lots of flyers saying the workers would have to pay union dues, 2-1/2 percent, if there was a contract. There is a new *maquina* (machine) in the strawberry fields that came out last year. It goes very fast in the field, although you can't tell when you see it on the highway. It's got a long belt, the workers have to keep working until it stops. They have to keep up with the machine, moving fast, until they're done. They don't get a break. It's not like before when they carried their own boxes. Now, because we were on the campaign, they are slowing down a little bit, I think they even got some breaks. Most of the workers did get a 25 cent raise.

Now I'm in Delano, organizing in the grapes. They are *podando* (pruning) at this time. We are talking with the workers. They want changes. Last year, there was a problem with the *bandejas* (containers). The workers had to take them home to wash them. These containers are full of pesticides. The workers were washing them at their home with their children. Now the company is paying the workers to wash the containers during company time.

It was a good campaign last year. Some of the workers got a raise.

We have medical coverage now. When I had cancer, the union paid for it. I was organizing and administrating the contracts we had in Oceanside with Robert Hall and San Clemente farms. I worked on the 23rd and the next day I had my surgery for colon cancer. I'm just fine now.

I'm 66. I will retire at the convention in August. I've been thinking about it. I don't have a plan yet. *Ya me voy a retirar.*

Submitted by Tina Solinas,

Written from a phone interview with Gilbert, Saturday, January 24, 2004.

We are lucky that Gilbert is the godfather of my son, Angelo.