

Bob Barber 1973-1976

As I thought about Cesar Chavez's death, I realized that the UFW was many things to many people, but for everyone involved, it was certainly a school. Not that it was always a completely positive experience, but you couldn't help learning from it—about politics and people and the complexities of collective action. Maybe you had to confront the dichotomy between the perfectly just cause and the imperfect organization and people waging the struggle.

Being in and around the farmworker movement was one of the defining experiences of my life. I think it was like that for a lot of people who were members of the union or who worked on the union's large and varied staff or as boycott supporters, an experience which qualitatively deepened your commitment.

For much of the last 1960s and 1970s, the UFW's strike and boycott organizing efforts were the largest and most consistent of any U.S. labor struggle. Everyone who joined that struggle put themselves into school: the farmworker families who changed their lives forever by leaving their jobs and going on strike; the men and women who joined ranch committees under their new union contract; the activist types like myself who flocked to the volunteer staff positions in boycott offices around the country or in the union's central administrative apparatus, legal staff, or network of clinics.

Now, all over California valley communities, Chavistas are found among elected officials and in local civic, school board, and community leadership roles; they are all around the U.S. in union and church organizations, community groups, government agencies, teaching, and a variety of advocacy professions. They are activists of all races, probably more women than men. Whole new organizations have been developed by former UFW organizers. Aside from the antiwar movement and the earlier civil rights movement, no other single movement of the last 30 years had that kind of impact.

For myself, I think living and working in the valley made me a confirmed socialist. In agriculture you see very clearly the enormity of the wealth generated by the production of food on a mass scale and the enormity of the crime of poverty inflicted on those who do the work. I remember standing out on Highway 99 in the middle of the night during the Gallo strike and watching the trucks go thundering up the highway, one after the other, all night long, carrying enormous loads of fruit and vegetables out of the valley. Having just been in Cuba, I was thinking, it could be different here too. What a thought that was! Especially when you were 24 years old.

Whether in a strike or boycott campaign, the UFW was always toe-to-toe with its opponents. People from many different backgrounds learned to work together in close quarters and under stressful conditions. You had the opportunity to be part of a struggle where you could work hard and sometimes actually win "small" victories, like refusing to be evicted from the labor camp after going on strike, or exposing some crime of the growers, or getting a store not to carry Gallo, or even getting legislation passed to guarantee farmworkers the right to vote for a union. Seeing what effort it took to win small victories gave you a much more realistic view of winning big ones. But you could connect your work to the victory. To be part of something like that is unfortunately not a common experience in modern America.

As a reporter on the union's newspaper I was able to see the union at work in many different situations, and I learned what an organized group of people can do when they get the opportunity to do it. There was a bus accident in 1974 where 19 farmworkers died at 5 a.m. one freezing winter morning on their daily 100-mile trip from the border to the fields, when the bus they were riding missed a turn and fell over on its side in an irrigation ditch. The seats of the bus broke loose because they were so poorly secured to the floor. Those who died were drowned in less than two feet of water by all the seats and people falling on top of them.

Peter Baird and I, cub reporters for the union paper, were sent to the border by Cesar to cover this story. Peter recently reminded me that when we returned, Cesar rejected our report, telling us we were not done until we had found every family that lost someone in the "bus massacre." We were sent back to Calexico, where with the help of Tina Solinas and Ricardo Villalpando and other union staff and members we indeed tracked down every one of the families. Some of the search took us to tiny *ejidos* well into Mexico. We were welcomed into home after home as people told us how the deaths impacted their lives. We were able to present a very powerful set of voices and images in a special edition of the paper. We were able to nail the highway patrol for its lackadaisical attitude on farm labor bus inspection; legislation came out of that. But Cesar was completely right: we hadn't gotten the story until we found every family. That was one of the most educational experiences of my life. Everyone who worked on that issue felt honored to be able to be part of telling that story to the world. For that opportunity alone, I owe Cesar a special thank you.

Cesar Chavez forged a virtually unprecedented alliance, leading some Mexican workers out of the fields to join the Filipinos already on strike and then bringing to bear on their struggles one of the most active national coalitions the country has seen in modern times. The whole experience stands as a model of effective labor-community organizing and a monument to the complexities of actually creating conditions where people of many cultures and backgrounds can work together. During the 1975 march on Gallo I was able to stand at the point in Modesto where the marchers from the city met the marchers from the farms. Thousands of people with their flags were coming from the south, and thousands from the west, representing the breadth of the movement Chavez had built. It was a breathtaking moment.

People often gravitate toward strong leaders, for some good reasons and some bad reasons. It wasn't until later that I truly learned how devastating it can be to allow one person to control everything in an organization. Cesar Chavez was a complicated man. On the one hand, he could motivate people to push themselves into new levels of experience and effort. In this respect he unleashed a tremendous amount of collective energy. But on the other hand, he couldn't let that energy get out of his control. In this respect, he held back the potential development of the organization, even facing the tough times that it did. That doesn't take away from his accomplishments at all. The experience of the union offers much to ongoing discussion of the real question, which is far from being answered: How do you create a democratic organization that really empowers its members?

A fitting tribute people could give to Cesar Chavez would be simply for everyone to say what they learned from the experience. Those who attended his funeral in Delano on April 20 say that kind of sharing profoundly united 35,000 or more people that day. May it long continue.

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