

## Bill Berkowitz 1974

### Remembering Jim Drake and the National Farm Worker Ministry

In early September, Jim Drake, the longtime aide to the United Farm Workers Union's Cesar Chavez and a veteran activist with the National Farm Worker Ministry, died. Most activists probably never heard of Jim Drake. During my days working for the UFW, I met him only a few times.

Drake, who was 63 years old, died of lung cancer on Labor Day at Brookshire Medical Center in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Drake was a newly ordained minister when he joined the UFW in the early 1960s. Dolores Huerta, cofounder and vice-president of the UFW, told the *Los Angeles Times* that "Whatever the need was, Jim Drake was there. He became our ambassador at large for the union, and Cesar [Chavez] relied on him very much."

Ms. Huerta hit it right on the mark. "Whatever the need was," was the understated and understood mission of Jim Drake and hundreds of others like him who worked their butts to the bone, rarely questioned what was asked of them, and certainly never complained.

It was the fall of 1974 and the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act (CALRA) had passed the state legislature and was signed by Governor Jerry Brown. CALRA allowed for elections in the fields for the first time in the state's history. After working at the UFW's Livingston, California, headquarters, the home of the then-notorious and anti-union Gallo winery, UFW organizers moved south to Delano for the fall campaign. Jim Drake was one of a number of UFW organizers who had boundless energy and devoted his all to *La Causa*, despite seeming like he never slept.

If you're not familiar with the National Farm Worker Ministry, you should be. In the 1960s and 1970s, members of this religious-based organization stood on the front lines for justice for farmworkers. They marched on the picket lines in the sweltering heat of California's Central Valley, passed out flyers and newsletters and talked to the workers in and out of the fields, raised money for food for the strikers and gas for the union's fleet of funky cars, and ministered to workers and organizers alike. They were, and still are, dedicated fighters for justice and dignity for farmworkers.

### The Farm Worker Migrant Ministry

The Farm Worker Migrant Ministry had modest beginnings. In 1920, according to a short article posted on the website of Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), an "interdenominational group of church women in New Jersey, Maryland, and Delaware established four migrant day care centers." During the next two decades similar programs were established in several other states, and "by the 1950s migrant ministry programs existed in 38 states with formal support and sponsorship from state Councils of Churches

and the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA.”

Many of those working with the Migrant Ministry came to recognize that if farmworkers were ever to experience a substantial change in their lives, the conditions under which they worked and lived would have to be radically changed. During the 1960s farmworker organizing began in earnest with the founding of the United Farm Workers Union in California.

By 1971, the California Migrant Ministry of the National Council of Churches became the National Farm Worker Ministry (NFWM), and “the emphasis shifted from social services to servanthood in which the church worked with farmworkers in their self-determination through organizing, boycotts, strikes, protest actions and political advocacy.”

With all the negative hullabaloo coming from conservative Christian denominations about this, that, and the other thing, it was wonderful to read that in July, at its annual convention, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) passed a series of resolutions supporting the continued efforts of the NFWM. On its website, the NFWM states its mission clearly: It is a “movement within the churches to be present with and support farmworkers as they organize to overcome their powerlessness and achieve equality, freedom and justice.” (If you think this is an antiquated mission, check out “Yo no quiero Taco Hell: Fast food and sweatshops in the Florida fields,” a story about the ongoing struggles of the tomato pickers in the fields of Florida at [www.workingforchange.com](http://www.workingforchange.com)).

The NFWM’s website also provides excellent information on the working and living conditions of today’s farmworkers—the women and children working in the fields—and the devastating poverty they face. There are currently 32 NFWM member organizations, including the Alliance of Baptists, Catholic Migrant Farmworker Network, Central Conference of American Rabbis, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Division for Church in Society, United Methodist Church Board of Global Ministries, Unitarian Universalist Migrant Ministries, and the Presbyterian Church (USA).

The NFWM is active in a number of ongoing struggles, including those involving strawberry pickers in California, tomato harvesters in Florida and the Midwest, cucumber pickers in North Carolina, and berry pickers in Oregon.

Jim Drake left California and the UFW in the late 1970s, but he never left the struggle for social justice. He founded the Mississippi Pulpwood Cutters Association to help workers negotiate contracts with the large paper manufacturing companies. In 1983, according to Myrna Oliver’s *Los Angeles Times* obituary, “he signed on with the Industrial Areas Foundation, an international federation of broad-based community organizations.” He also worked in South Bronx churches in New York City “in a campaign to build 800 units of affordable housing and open a model public high school.” Drake was with IAF until his death. Toward the end of his life he moved to Boston and worked for affordable housing and better schools and on behalf of immigrant rights.

I'm not sure what to make of this, but when I did a Google search for Jim Drake and the United Farm Workers Union, 39 references came up. Of these, 38 were references to his obituary.

Father Bill O'Donnell, 1930–2003

*Wherever little children are hungry and cry,*

*Wherever people ain't free.*

*Wherever men are fightin' for their rights,*

*That's where I'm a-gonna be, Ma.*

*That's where I'm a-gonna be.*

—The Ballad of Tom Joad, Woody Guthrie

On Monday, December 8, Father Bill O'Donnell, the longtime pastor at St. Joseph the Worker Church in Berkeley, California, died at his desk while preparing his homily for the upcoming Sunday service.

Father Bill O'Donnell's life was devoted to “speaking truth to power,” and he did it with a sparkle in his eye and a smile on his face. Father Bill, as he was known to the many thousands of people whose lives he touched and influenced, was an activist priest. He not only spoke out about human rights, peace, and justice, solidarity with working men and women, and service to the poor, but he continuously put his body on the line in support of these issues.

In 1974, I joined the United Farm Workers Union boycott team in Oakland, California. My assignment was to organize Berkeley and North Oakland residents in support of the UFW's boycott of grapes and Gallo wines. My first nighttime picket line was at a liquor store located in a generally supportive North Oakland neighborhood. It was also the first time I met Father Bill O'Donnell. During the picket, a fellow stumbled out of the bar next door, wobbled over to Father O'Donnell and ripped off his collar. As picket captain, I didn't know what to expect or exactly what to do. Father O'Donnell set the tone: he smiled, calmed “the brother” down, and we went on picketing the store as if nothing untoward had happened.

A few weeks later, at 4 o'clock on a cold and wet summer morning, a handful of East Bay boycotters gathered at Oakland's fruit terminal. Our mission was to “talk” with the truckers delivering non-union produce, and picket those fruit dealers selling non-union grapes to markets from across the East Bay. It was a decidedly unfriendly crowd, but

Father O'Donnell was there leading the demonstration. One of the truckers saw Father O'Donnell and went berserk, screaming at him: "What's a priest doing here?" and then proceeded to shove him against a stack of boxes of grapes. Bob Purcell, then the head of the East Bay boycott, recently remembered that "as always, Father O'Donnell straightened up and stood his ground."

Father O'Donnell was born in Livermore, where he attended St. Michael's church and school. He "came from a large Irish family who were farmers. He told friends that his Irish mother, Maude Regan O'Donnell, was the one who inspired me," *The Argus* (Fremont, California) pointed out in its obituary.

According to the obituary, Father O'Donnell "once told a reporter he was 'kicked out' of three parishes before finding his rightful home. That was his assignment in 1973 to St. Joseph's, which at the time was known as St. Joseph's the Workman. As assistant pastor, O'Donnell was instrumental in 'de-gendering' the name to St. Joseph the Worker, to honor the work of women as well as men."

In his well-worn leather jacket, priest's collar, and black jeans. Father O'Donnell, 73, marched with Cesar Chavez and the farmworkers, was on Justice for Janitors picket lines. and got arrested with hotel workers at the San Francisco Marriott Hotel. He could be found at the head of marches and speaking at rallies for workers seeking justice in workplaces throughout the greater Bay Area.

"Labor could always count on him to be there in the day-to-day fights," said Bob Purcell, now director of the public employee department of the Laborers' International Union of North America. "Even when the cameras weren't rolling, he was there," Purcell recently told me. "It wasn't just that you were calling on a priest from the local parish; he was a working-class guy. He brought the moral authority of the Catholic Church and his personal integrity, and he was there whenever the cause was just. He represented the best tradition of Catholic social teachings."

Father O'Donnell was arrested more than 220 times for performing nonviolent civil disobedience at demonstrations against Ronald Reagan's Central American contra wars, the proliferation of nuclear weapons at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, and on numerous labor picket lines.

He recently returned to Berkeley from serving a six-month sentence at Atwater Penitentiary, a high-security federal facility near Merced, California, for trespassing at the Western Hemisphere Institute of Security—formerly known as the School of the Americas or School of the Assassins—at Fort Benning, Georgia. In November of 2002, Father O'Donnell matter-of-factly told a federal judge, "Your honor, you are pimping for the Pentagon," before his sentencing.

After he was sentenced, he commented to a *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter about the history of U.S. military actions overseas: "Philosophically, it's the bully beating up the little

kid. We've been beating them up for centuries. The crusades are alive and well in Washington, D.C."

"Bill is one of the scariest people I know," actor Martin Sheen once said about his close friend, "because he makes us tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, all the time. He takes the cup as it is offered, not altered."

Several thousand people paid their respects to Father O'Donnell at a memorial service at the Berkeley Community Theater on Sunday evening, December 14, 2004. "Father Bill O'Donnell rested in a pine coffin draped by a United Farm Workers flag, serenaded with protest and union songs, eulogized by former cellmates—a measure of a man one mourner dubbed Berkeley's saint and another likened to Jesus," the *Contra Costa Times* reported.

At the memorial, speaker after speaker—including San Francisco Congresswomen Nancy Pelosi, Oakland's Representative Barbara Lee, UFW cofounder Dolores Huerta, UFW president Arturo Rodriguez, Chuck Mack of the Teamsters, representatives from the janitors and hotel workers' unions, Father Roy Bourgeois, a leader of the anti-School of the Americas movement, and a young girl from the St. Joseph's youth group—talked about Father O'Donnell's commitment to peace and justice and his connection to them personally.

Perhaps the most poignant and revealing testimony came from a recovering alcoholic that Father Bill had taken under his wing. Being unemployed and homeless in Berkeley can be as daunting as being down and out in any town. Father Bill not only befriended the man, but he supported him at every turn. This included giving him a car so he could go to work. The man said that he was reluctant to accept the gift, but Father Bill, with his customary straightforwardness and humor, tossed him the keys and said, "Here, it's a gift from the Pope."

Father Bill O'Donnell was just as at home at St. Joseph's as he was marching with farmworkers, getting arrested with anti-nuclear activists, organizing prison inmates, supporting immigrant workers, and ministering to the poor and homeless. That's where he was "a-gonna be" from the very beginning. And that's where he always was.