

## Peter Baird 1974–1976

I begin my tale at the end. Thirty years since my short, but life-changing eight months as a full-time volunteer with the UFW—on the staff of *El Malcriado* newspaper, working out of La Paz—I still think of the UFW as the most important social movement of modern times and Cesar Chavez as its most influential leader. It is, at the very least, the most important and enduring movement I have been associated with. I'm now a professor of bilingual/multicultural education at California State University Sacramento and work with a whole new generation of young students and teachers. Many of them only know the union as a black eagle, only know Cesar Chavez as a holiday. Others see both as idealized pieces of history—part of a golden age of activism that bears little resemblance or relevance to our own age of 9/11 terrorism and Bush II global interventions.

### Santa Cruz

The story of why and how I came to be a volunteer with the UFW begins when I was a student at Merrill College at UC Santa Cruz in the late 1960s. I arrived in Santa Cruz on October 3, 1968, from Mexico City, where I had lived throughout my teenage years, the son of Presbyterian “fraternal workers” (missionaries) raised on the gospel of liberation theology. To my horror, I read the news and watched the television news about a student demonstration on October 2 in Tlatelolco, Mexico City, that was attacked by the Mexican Army. Several hundred students and workers were killed, with scores arrested and thrown in prison. So far from home, but linked by my desire to do something to help, I formed a Mexico Solidarity Committee and began to disseminate news and advocate for freeing the political prisoners. I also became involved in the anti-war and civil rights marches and demonstrations that involved thousands of youth like myself during those years.

But it was the UFW grape boycott and activities to support farmworkers in nearby Watsonville and throughout the San Joaquin Valley that soon got most of my attention and burning desire to be involved. During the summer of my freshman year I lived in labor camps and worked in various crops and packing sheds throughout central California—both to earn money for school and to learn what conditions were really like for unorganized migrant workers, most of them undocumented. The men tolerated the young *gringo* who spoke Spanish and they taught me how to pick apples in Watsonville, chop broccoli in Salinas, pick zucchini and work the short-handled hoe (*el cortito*) in Moss Landing. Three times I saw the *migra* border patrol raid the fields and labor camps; each time they took away friends who vowed to come back and repay their debts.

### Livingston

In my second year of college I left Santa Cruz and volunteered to work with the Livingston Community Action Council (LCAC), a small group of permanent resident farmworkers from Gallo vineyards and the Foster Farms chicken plant in this small town between Merced and Modesto. I lived with Chano Urrutia, the president of LCAC and a tractor

driver at Gallo, who later became a leader in the Gallo strike. Three other students and I worked as school tutors for elementary school children, helped paint and fix up the *Casa Campesina*—a donated house that was the LCAC office and later became the UFW headquarters during the Gallo strike several years later. I organized a summer reading program in the town park for the children of LCAC members. During this time the UFW was organizing in the valley, but not yet in Livingston.

An important part of the LCAC story was the courageous and loving support provided by one of its members, Jake Kirihara and his wife, Fran. Jake and Fran were Japanese-American *Nisei* almond farmers who broke ranks with the rest of the Livingston farmers to back the LCAC efforts to organize Mexican-Americans. They provided us outside volunteers with food, friendship, guidance, and a warm rug to sleep on. Jake has been involved with every progressive movement in the valley ever since, and deserves a book of his own. He is still farming at age 90, protesting the war in Iraq with wife Fran, and still mad as hell about the exploitation of farm laborers.

After Livingston, I decided to return to Mexico City in 1970 and finish a degree in political science at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, one of the centers of the 1968 student movement. I became a full-time student and was soon involved with *Los Mascarones*, a radical theater group who performed for labor and student causes in the Mexico City region. A mass march I participated in on June 10 of 1971 with these friends was attacked by right-wing paramilitary forces known as *Los Halcones*. Many were arrested and I feared the same, so I made a hitchhiking sojourn through Central America and eventually returned to Santa Cruz in September of 1971.

### Part-Time Volunteering

Back at Santa Cruz, I reconnected with other students and professors interested in Latin American studies and in supporting the UFW organizing. A grad student named John McFadden had volunteered with the union and gave me advice on how to apply. Meanwhile, a former professor, Ruth Needleman, was helping to produce issues of the union newspaper *El Malcriado* down at the La Paz headquarters. Ruth wanted to return to Chile—where the popular movement was on the verge of taking power under Salvador Allende—so she recruited me and a fellow Latin American studies major, Ed McCaughan, to take her place as part-timers with the newspaper.

From November of 1971 until April or May of 1972, Ed and I drove down from Santa Cruz to La Paz for a long weekend each month of pulling the *El Malcriado* together. I was excited to be at UFW headquarters, but the paper we helped paste together, as I recall, was a mishmash of rewritten UPI reports and letters from the boycott. We contributed youthful enthusiasm, fair Spanish, and an ability to work without sleep for several days on end.

I stopped my pilgrimages to La Paz when school ended, earned some money working on Ed's family peach ranch, and then headed back to Mexico City for a year of research on a

UCSC senior thesis. That was completed with the help of Ed. When the results were published, my attention returned to the union.

### Full Time *El Malcriado*

Nearly as soon as I was back in the states I called La Paz and asked if they still needed people for *El Malcriado*. Someone, I think it was José Gomez, told me to come down as soon as possible and I would begin as a full-time volunteer. I don't remember how I got there, but I was in La Paz by mid-January of 1974, setting my few belongings in the TB ward hospital where we bunked and getting to know the other volunteers. Venustiano Olguín was the editor at the time; María Rifo of Chile was in charge of translations for the paper; and Rick Sanchez was our layout guru.

My first official task, as I remember it, was to drive down the hill to the Bakersfield bus station and pick up another new volunteer for the paper, Bob Barber. Bob was from Cleveland, and a college grad and a political lefty like me, though he had more writing experience than the little I had. We became buddies by the time we arrived back at La Paz, eager to do whatever was asked of us by Cesar and the union. After a few days of meeting with Venustiano about possible stories, setting up our desks in the shed, and getting the feel of La Paz, an event occurred that began our first mission as new reporters for *El Malcriado*. On January 15, a labor contractor's bus filled with farmworkers from the Mexican border went off the road in the pre-dawn hours and landed in an irrigation ditch just south of Blythe, California, crushing and drowning 19 and injuring 28 more. The news made it to La Paz quickly, and Cesar called us in to his office and told us, "Go cover the story, the whole thing." He told us to interview all the families of the dead, to nail the labor contractors who used the death-trap buses, and to connect it to the growers who cared for profits over human lives. We were issued a car, a credit card for gas money, and that was about it. By the evening I was in Blythe, staying at the home of UFW activist Al Figueroa. Bob arrived later and Al helped us begin our reporting.

We spent the next week visiting the hospital, tracking down relatives, doing dozens of interviews, and researching the accident from every angle we could think of. We slept little and were pumped on adrenaline—a combination of pride in what we were doing, and the fear of failing at it. Quickly, Bob and I found a division of labor that made sense—I did the face-to-face interviews with the farmworkers and their families, since I spoke Spanish, and wrote those stories. He took charge of the investigation and research angles and was relentless at writing them up. He chased down photos, other reporters, the CHP, the labor contractor, and the grower involved. After a few phone calls to La Paz relating that we had the story, we drove back across the high desert to Keene and arrived in the middle of the night. The next morning Bob and I appeared in Cesar's office, bursting with pride at how much we'd accomplished and eager to get it written down and develop our photos. Our brief interview went something like this:

"Did you interview all the families of the injured and dead?" Cesar asked us.

“We got almost everyone,” we answered, our confidence dwindling.

“So you didn’t get the whole story” Cesar continued, his dark eyes flashing even though his voice was soft. “Go on back and get all the interviews, every one. Then write it up so that we can pass safety legislation in Sacramento.

That is exactly what we did. We had learned our first major lesson from Cesar and about putting it all on the line for *La Causa*. (The veteran volunteers had already learned their lessons in other equally trying circumstances, we learned later.) We spent another week between Blythe and the farms and villages south of Mexicali with the invaluable help of Tina Solinas and Ricardo Villalpando, tracking down and meeting with wives and parents and children of the dead. I remember feeling that my job was to become an ink blotter for their experiences, to capture them in words and photos and then get it into the paper with as little distortion as possible.

I often remember a chilling story about Cesar that occurred at the funeral service for the 19 killed in Blythe. I had heard many stories of the threats on Cesar’s life and had walked shifts of nighttime guard duty around La Paz, like all the volunteers there. At the funeral, family members and farmworkers carried the coffins of the 19 in a mass march that began in Calexico on the U.S. side and crossed the border into Mexicali, ending in the sprawling cemetery. Cesar walked the entire march and gave the eulogy. Afterwards he stood and shook hands with hundreds of humble people who came forward and wanted to touch him. A man waiting in line approached and presented Cesar with a paper bag containing a revolver, weeping that he had been hired to assassinate him but could not bring himself to do it. That story never made it to *El Malcriado*, but was told among members and volunteers at La Paz.

Bob and I came back to La Paz and found the wonderful help of Maria Rifo in transcribing and translating the dozens of taped interviews and stories from *los campesinos* that she so loved and respected. Maria also took to feeding us often when we were in La Paz from her pot roast and vegetable dinners, cooked in a large pot on her electric plate and served from the same. *Gracias, María*. (I rejoice that you are still alive and vital in Santa Rosa, and that you too are sharing your stories with this project.)

Bob and I desperately needed guidance on what to publish. Venustiano appeared to be “burned out” by his many months in La Paz, so we prepared, and Bob typed up, an 11-page memo (“Memo on the Blythe bus accident 1/31/74”) to Cesar with cc’s to the legal department, boycott, information center, and service center. It ended with an “outline of upcoming issue of *El Malcriado*” and expressed the kind of themes we had absorbed from Cesar and the dozens of people we were talking to in the union.

The two themes of the special section of the paper about the accident are: 1) it was not an “accident” but the logical outgrowth of the contractor system; and 2) The only solution

that will work is to eliminate the contractor system and replace it with the UFW hiring hall. The goal is to place the accident in the context of the life and work of farmworkers in the Imperial Valley, and wherever possible to write the stories in their own words.

Cesar read over the document in detail, met with us, and gave us the green light to go ahead. I recall beginning to learn how to write a news article from Bob as we sat pecking at our typewriters hour after hour. “What’s the lead?” Then I translated with Maria and we wrote and wrote for another week. Then came the days of typesetting and laying 20 pages of each *El Malcriado*: one in English and another in Spanish. After that, we drove down to Los Angeles to the printer and put it to bed. The front page displayed a grisly photo of the dead workers pinned inside the bus, and the English headline screamed in bold red ink: **“Drowned in ‘prison of seats’: 19 lettuce workers die in contractor bus massacre.”**

Bob and I slept for a day after it was all through. Then we regrouped and began charting where to go from there. I remember talking a lot about the book we were reading, *All the President’s Men*. Like its authors, Woodward and Bernstein, who had helped topple the Nixon presidency with their investigative journalism, we felt we were being entrusted with grave responsibilities as reporters and now writers of *El Malcriado*, yet we barely had a notion of what the union wanted in its official newspaper.

Our questions were answered in the next few days. The heads of the union field offices met in the La Paz conference room and talked about how poor the newspaper had become over the past year—the same period that Ed McCaughan and I had been part-timers—and their vision of how it could be returned to its former hard-hitting glory days. This was welcome news to Bob and me. Immediately following the meeting, we typed up another long memo (“From Bob and Pedro to Cesar and Venustiano: 2/13/74”), which is in my possession because Bob saved it and made me a copy at a recent UFW reunion.

The criticisms from the head of the field offices included distribution (“Papers get there late or not at all”) and reporting, (“Only half our members and sympathizers get the paper and only half of them think it’s good enough to regularly read. ... the shameful situation that *The Militant* and the *Guardian* have better union reporting than our own paper ... all articles seem to sound alike and are too propagandistic; they don’t have enough fire (*que les metan chile picante*); news items sent in from the field often don’t get printed; we should get sued more often, like the old *Malcriado* did; that the ranchers stood in line to hear the shit we had to throw at them ...”)

Our memo responded with some specific suggestions for “making the *Malcriado* much more of a weapon for the movement ... and voice of the farmworkers,” but it admitted that the meeting “asks more questions than it answered for us. We hope for more discussion, especially after the past issue comes out and we have something concrete to criticize and work from.”

The “Bus Massacre” issue, as we called it, was a success throughout the union. Cesar was happy with it, especially when the UFW’s organizing efforts in Sacramento yielded some new and significant safety legislation for buses transporting farmworkers. The next three issues—March, April, and May—were not as dramatic, perhaps, but they showed a steady progression in our learning about the union’s message and getting it out through *El Malcriado*. Bob and I divided up the territory and spent three weeks on the road and one back at La Paz each month to get the paper out. My reporting route took me from the La Paz headquarters south to El Mirage-Phoenix, Arizona, then back into Calexico and up the coast through Santa Maria, Watsonville, and Salinas. Armed only with my tape recorder, notepad, camera, car, and \$5 a week, I was the embodiment of *El Malcriado* for these precious months. I remember the thrill of arriving at a UFW hiring hall in Calexico or Salinas and hearing the farmworkers shout, “*Oye, Malcriado, ven papa acá.*”

#### March Through August of 1974

There is neither time nor room here to tell one-tenth of the stories of those next few months, nor to thank the countless people who made my days joyful. But a quick review of the March through June *El Malcriado* issues tells what we were up to. The March 1974 issue headlined “**NO MORE TEAMSTER DUES!**” It told the story of the successful *paro* work stoppage led by the UFW in the Imperial Valley, after which Cesar called for a new strike, like the Salinas strike of 1970, to push out the union-busting Teamsters.

A UFW memo from Cesar dated February 27, 1974, reads, “Just a note to thank you again for the good report on the work stoppage. I feel very good about the work you’re doing for us. Thanks.”

I remember the way Tina Solinas of the Calexico Field Office took care of us, the organizing spirit of Ricardo Villapando, and the toughness of Manuel Chavez. And Cesar’s incredible capacity to inspire a small group of union stalwarts or a mass of workers in their first work stoppage, such as his speech about self-determination and courage to the one-day strikers in Calexico on February 18, 1974:

Rights are won with good plans. They are also won with the consciousness and education of all farmworkers, and in this case, today’s *paro* is a beginning, the prelude to what’s to come ... Right now it is necessary, sisters and brothers, that you remain strong and not fall back. It is crucial that there be organization. We don’t have time to do it, but you can do it in every field crew, at every ranch, like we did in 1970, build and organize. Do it quietly, but do it. From each field crew, a representative, from each ranch a ranch committee. Do it clandestinely, but do it. Do it silently, but do it. And so that you can know what is happening, to keep informed, read *EL MALCRIADO* ... Here among the farmworkers at the border, there is always great courage and spirit to improve our lives, a courage that can never be lost. *VIVA LA CAUSA Y ADELANTE!* (*El Malcriado*, March 29, 1974, p. 16.)

The April issue took me to Coachella, where I reported on the grape strike and had a run-in with grower K.K. Larson. In Delano I got to meet some of the Filipino old-timers in the union struggle and visit Agbayani Village. One of them was Pete Velasco, who sent the *El Malcriado* a kind letter about improvements in the paper [April 24, 1974] from the boycott office he headed in Baltimore:

Dear *El Malcriado* Staff,

I received your copy of *El Malcriado*. It is to me like a difference between night and day from the issue before it. It is like a work of seasoned journalist and columnists. Captions are directly related to pictures it speaks about. It is a job well thought of and planned. Subjects were up-to-date, lively and newsy. Good luck!!

Peace and love from all of us, Pete Velasco and staff.

May took me to Watsonville to cover a short and victorious strawberry strike. In June I was in Oxnard for another strawberry strike, as well as my normal Salinas to Phoenix driving circuit. I loved being *El Malcriado* and expected that it would continue forever. When I got back to La Paz, however, there was some trouble brewing, an apparent change in Cesar's mood about *El Malcriado*. Cesar had told Bob that he was bringing in a new editor to run the paper, Carlos Calderon from Los Angeles, a former editor of the far-left *Call* newspaper. Bob expressed his doubts about this new leadership to Cesar. Carlos came to La Paz and talked to us briefly, then later fired him by phone from Los Angeles. Bob told me he was going to leave the paper and go to Salinas and work with Jerry Cohen, the UFW head legal counsel. Shortly afterward, I was told by Calderon to move my base of reporting up to Salinas as well and send articles to La Paz for their consideration. I had fun in Salinas with Tom Dalzell and many other UFW volunteers in Salinas, and my investigation into the apple industry near Watsonville eventually came out in the paper. But the sense of being in the middle of the movement and carrying the banner of its newspaper under the guidance of Cesar was gone. Then in August I was asked to leave *El Malcriado* by Calderon. I finished my final article on Watsonville, returned to La Paz on August 21, and told Carlos and Jose Gomez that I was leaving the union.

Post *El Malcriado*: Cesar Chavez Values

After several more issues under Calderon and his team, *El Malcriado* stopped being published by the union, and this voice of the farmworkers' union has remained quiet ever since. I do not know the reasons for it, since I made the decision to leave and do other journalistic work. I have always wondered and mourned the loss of *El Malcriado*—loss on a personal level to be sure, but more important, the loss of its ability of tell the ongoing stories of the UFW's role in organizing a democratic movement among working people in this country. It is my hope that this documentation project and others like it will be a growing source of story telling and sifting of lessons for the tough times ahead for working people.

For the past four years I've had the privilege of supporting the Cesar Chavez Day of Service and Learning by helping our new teachers prepare lessons for their students, by speaking and singing at events on campus and in nearby Galt, and by giving presentations to grantees of GOSERVE. It is a sign of the times that funding is being cut off from this excellent source of education by the new governor of California. I am hopeful, however, that activists and educators throughout the country will continue to honor Cesar Chavez and fight for the values that motivated us all to join the farmworker movement in the first place.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my small piece of this grand puzzle.