

Dick Wiesenbahn 1974–1979

I was probably the last person in Cincinnati who thought he would ever join the farmworker movement, or any cause for that matter. After serving four years in the Coast Guard as a radioman first class and selling golf equipment for the MacGregor Golf Company for 12 years to country-club golf professionals, I was about as conservative as you could get.

Everything changed for me in December of 1974 when I was handed a leaflet outside the Kroger store in Hyde Park by two college-age women. The leaflet stated that they were both fasting from all food for 10 days as an act of solidarity with migrant farmworkers in California. The United Farm Workers (UFW) union was on strike and was asking folks to honor its boycotts of table grapes, head lettuce, and Gallo wines in order to pressure growers to negotiate union contracts.

Reverend John Waite of the National Farm Worker Ministry (NFWM) was organizing the local UFW boycott effort from a storefront office on Race Street in downtown Cincinnati. He suggested that I read as much as possible so that I would be well informed about the living and working conditions of farmworkers in California and the need for a consumer boycott nationwide. Several weeks later, four of us traveled to Louisville, Kentucky, for a “non-meal meal” sponsored by the UFW. The meal consisted of beans and cornbread, which we were informed farmworkers eat every day. We were joined by UFW supporters from Kentucky and Indiana to hear a presentation from a panel of UFW officials giving us an update on the strikes and boycott and answering questions from the audience. All in all, the support for *La Causa* was very impressive.

In 1975 I moved to Akron, Ohio, in order to cover the northern Ohio territory for MacGregor. I was told to contact Nancy Hickey and Rick Nixon, who were directing the boycott in the Akron-Canton area. Their office was located in the basement of the American Friends Service building, which they shared with the American Vegetarians. They were surprised to learn that I sold golf clubs and wanted to do what I could to help the farmworker cause.

During the next five years, I learned a lot about strikes, boycotts, organizing, politics, and power. Nancy and Rick showed me and others how to work factory gate collections at 5 a.m., pass out boycott flyers at local grocery stores, walk picket lines, and get involved in demonstrations when necessary. These activities were exciting to me, as well as a welcome distraction from my sales work, but at the same time, the seriousness of the farmworker cause gave real meaning to my life. I’ve made many lifelong friends working for the movement and still stay in touch with them today.

MacGregor Golf Company transferred me back to Cincinnati in 1979, and I remember soon thereafter attending an event at St. Peter's in Chains Cathedral entitled, “An Evening with Cesar Chavez.” There were hundreds of people present and the opening speaker was

Baldemar Velasquez, president of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC). Baldemar was to introduce Cesar, but he took the time to inform the gathering about the strike and the struggles of tomato pickers in northwest Ohio and the horrible conditions that existed for farmworkers in the Midwest. He was a very enthusiastic speaker but cut his presentation short and introduced Chavez to the now very pumped-up crowd.

Cesar Chavez gave a most inspiring presentation that night about the UFW strikes in California and the need to support the boycotts, but I could not stop thinking that we had farmworkers in Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana who needed our help.

To make a long story short, I decided to get involved with the Farm Labor Organizing Committee. At the time, FLOC was on strike against the giant Campbell Soup Company and the farmers who contracted with Campbell to grow their tomatoes. These were very tough times for FLOC because it was not part of the AFL-CIO. After the fledgling union called for a boycott of Campbell Soup and asked schools to stop supporting Campbell's "Labels for Education" program, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union actually worked against FLOC.

In 1980, after an unsuccessful fundraising dance at Xavier University, I decided to use my knowledge of golf to raise money for the farmworkers by starting the FLOC Scramble Golf Tournament, which is now coming up on its 24th year. This unique event is fun because it brings together conservative golfers with progressive boycott activist volunteers, who all combine to raise funds to improve the conditions for farmworkers.

The Campbell Soup boycott finally ended after seven long years when a contract was signed with FLOC in 1986. This historic, first-ever three-way agreement between the canneries, farmers, and farmworkers was followed by contract signings with HJ Heinz, Vlasdic, and Dean Foods.

About five years ago, Steve Schumacher suggested that we put out citywide flyers that called for a meeting at the Su Casa Hispanic Center for anyone interested in starting a FLOC support committee in Cincinnati. Twenty people showed up for that first meeting, and today we have a solid core of local activists dedicated to supporting the farmworkers' boycott of Mt. Olive Pickles.

In March of 1999, FLOC announced a consumer boycott of the products of Mt. Olive Pickle Company, based in Mt. Olive, North Carolina, the nation's largest independent pickle producer and the nation's second largest processor of pickles and pickle products. The consumer boycott was called following unsuccessful attempts to bring the management of Mt. Olive to the table to negotiate improved wages and working conditions for farmworkers who produce the cucumbers processed by Mt. Olive. The FLOC support committee in Cincinnati, home of the national headquarters of Kroger Company, one of the nation's largest grocery retailers, is actively campaigning today to convince Kroger to remove all Mt. Olive products from its stores nationwide.

The Mt. Olive Pickle boycott got a boost recently when the National Council of Churches (NCC) endorsed the boycott action on November 6, 2003. The NCC represents 36 Protestant denominations, 140,000 congregations, and 50 million people. Also, after a brief campaign by FLOC staffers in Toledo, Farmer Jack Supermarkets has made the decision to honor the boycott of Mt. Olive Pickles. This action affects 100 stores in Ohio and Michigan.

My plans for the future are to stay active fighting for civil rights, worker rights, and social justice issues through the UFW, FLOC, and Cincinnati Progressive Action (CPA). In addition to all that, I hope to laugh, sing, dance, and play golf with lots of old and new friends for a long time.