

Peter Jones 1975–1977

While at McGill University in Montreal, I heard Cesar speak. He said, “This is a struggle for human dignity.” In my own cynical way I thought, “You can spin it that way if you want, but it’s really about higher wages and better working conditions.”

As luck would have it, after I graduated from college in 1975, I went to work for the UFW, first in Washington, D.C. and then later in Southern California.

Soon after I joined the boycott I spent an evening talking with Lalo Rodriguez in the basement of the boycott house in Takoma Park, Maryland. I was amazed at his story. He was born in Brownsville, Texas, and had spent most of his life living on both sides of the border doing farm work and working in the shrimp industry. At some point he had joined the migrant stream and ended up working in Arvin, California, where he was active in the 1973 grape strike. He knew Juan de la Cruz, who had been killed on the picket line.

When the strike ended, Lalo, his wife, and their eight children piled into their old station wagon and drove to Washington, D.C., where they lived in a basement on room, board, and \$5 a week. At the age of 48, he learned English so he could persuade people not to buy grapes, lettuce, or Gallo wine.

At that point I realized that he wasn’t doing this for an extra 25 cents a box. It really did have something to do with pride and dignity.

And as I was marveling at the sacrifices he was making, he turned to me and said something like, “Don’t get me wrong. I’m glad you’re here. But I don’t understand. You went to college. You could be making good money. This isn’t really your fight. Why are you doing this?”

I’m not sure I had a good answer. It seemed logical to me. I didn’t care much about the money. It was a good cause and I worked with wonderful people.

I had answered an ad that promised to train me as a community organizer, which sounded like fun. I had a degree in East Asian studies, which wasn’t getting me far. A few weeks after I joined the boycott, I joined more than 100 boycotters (including Irv Hershenbaum) for a five-day training session by Fred Ross up outside New York City somewhere.

I hadn’t really thought through what a community organizer did, and I was painfully shy. The training was excruciating for me. Soon afterwards I was put in charge of organizing a committee in Bethesda–Chevy Chase, where I had grown up. I went to my old high school and persuaded a teacher I knew to let some of the farmworkers come, show the short film “Why We Boycott” and talk about the strike.

I went early to set up the movie projector and get things ready. As class was about to begin, the farmworkers hadn't shown up and the teacher told me I would just have to ad lib. I told her I was really nervous. "Just grab on to the podium and hold on."

I simply recited the spiel I had memorized in the training sessions. I spoke to every class that day. And little by little I grew less nervous. To my amazement, I became more comfortable speaking in front of people. That day I met Bini Reilly, whose mother was from Mexico and whose entire family became good friends and strong supporters of the UFW.

A few weeks after I joined, I brought out my guitar and started playing a few tunes. Gilbert Padilla, who was the secretary-treasurer of the UFW and the director of the Washington boycott, saw me and said, "You didn't tell me you can play the guitar."

"Well, I can't really. I just know a couple of chords."

"What do you mean you can't? I see the guitar in your arms. You're playing it. You have to bring it to the next picket line."

And I did. Little by little I learned the union songs, the civil rights songs, and the songs people were writing about the farmworker struggles.

At that time my brother Steve was a music major at the University of Maryland. He wrote a song about farmworkers that we sang all the time. And I remember someone from New York (Meta Rosenberg?) had written a song called "Boycott Now" to the tune of "*Bella Ciao*."

At that time I wrote one song to the tune of "Jambalaya" about a delegation that visited Joe Danzansky, the head of Giant Foods:

"Hello, bro, we gotta go and picket Giant
We went to see Joe Danzansky, he was defiant
He ain't no fool, but he lost his cool, now he won't forget us.
Until he takes off all the grapes and iceberg lettuce."

It was great fun.

Working for the UFW was my first real experience with burnout. I had never worked that hard in school or cared so much. And I had to screw up my energy to do a lot of the work—cold calls, personal visits, house meetings, public speaking—which are really more suited to people who are more extroverted than I am. With the help of Marjorie Margolis, we did build up a farmworker support committee in Bethesda–Chevy Chase. But I exhausted myself doing it.

I was also smoking, drinking a lot of coffee, and getting no exercise.

As the UFW starting getting ready for the Proposition 14 campaign in California, I realized I didn't have the energy for that kind of big push, so I left the union and followed my girlfriend to Vermont, where I spent the winter working construction.

In the meantime, my brother Steve joined the UFW and went out to Sacramento to work on the Proposition 14 Campaign. He wrote back passionate letters about the organizing. And, even though I was regaining my health, I missed the excitement of working with the union.

I continued to play the guitar and wrote five songs about the farmworkers that I sent to Steve. One of them was about the Gallo wine boycott and it is one that we still sing to this day.

In April 1977, I moved to Los Angeles and worked with Steve on the L.A. boycott. I had great fun following trucks from the Hemet Wholesale Nursery to see where they delivered. During the summer I worked with the summer program in the town of Hemet, in San Ysidro, and in La Paz. At one point I went to stay with my aunt and uncle and realized it was the first time in three months I had slept in a bed with sheets.

Steve and I started writing songs, mostly parodies of folk and pop tunes, and we had a blast singing on picket lines, at rallies, and even in staff meetings.

One time I was the picket captain at a retail nursery in Hemet, CA. We set up the picket line and I went inside to talk to the manager. He was from Scotland and had a heavy accent. He totally lost it, grabbed a heavy staff, and chased me out of the nursery. I was shaking as I rejoined the picket line. I just picked up my guitar, and without even thinking, I started singing the old Woody Guthrie refrain, "Oh, you can't scare me I'm sticking to the union."

After the convention in Fresno in 1977, the boycotters all went up to La Paz. Cesar spoke to us in an uncomfortable session. He seemed to be baiting us. The gist of his comments, as I remember it, was that he was totally committed to the cause of the farmworkers and we were not. If it would help farmworkers for him to visit Marcos in the Philippines, then he would do that. If it would help farmworkers for the UFW to back the corporate growers against the small farmers (particularly in terms of the 160-acre rule), then he would help the farmworkers.

One of the boycotters stood up and, in the spirit of the Synanon Game that was popular in La Paz at the time, said she thought Cesar was "chicken shit" for taking one of these stands.

One of the field organizers stood up outraged and said we didn't understand. He had come up from Mexico, at the age of 14 he was washing dishes in Los Angeles, and the worst part was that he had been ashamed of being Mexican. It was because of this man—and he pointed to Cesar—that he was now proud of who he was.

I certainly didn't think that Cesar (or anybody else) was above criticism. But I also thought that if Cesar had helped even one person, let alone tens of thousands of people, be proud of who they are, then that truly was a miracle.

Around this time, Steve broke his ankle playing basketball and went back to Washington, D.C. to finish up college. I was assigned to the boycott and given a territory out near the L.A. airport. It wasn't where I wanted to be and there didn't seem to be any other place in the union for me.

I decided I could be a better supporter than staff member. So, I left the UFW and drove a cab for a few months out of Venice before returning to Washington.

Four days after my return, our old UFW supporter, Trini Reilly, persuaded Steve and me to sing union songs every Monday evening for her Mexican dinner night at the local Bethesda Co-op and Community Café. We sang there every week for two years. We continued to perform for labor and other causes. In 1984 we produced an album, with the Gallo song on it.

Today, Steve has become a professional musician. I am the director of the Labor Heritage Foundation (www.laborheritage.org), a small nonprofit organization that works to strengthen the labor movement through the use of art, music, and culture. Several times a year Steve and I give a concert down at the Machinists Union Educational Center in Southern Maryland. We always sing the Gallo song.

I have also come to believe that Cesar was right. If you think that this is primarily a fight for better wages, it is hard to understand how a song, a poem, or a poster will help you get another \$1 an hour. But once you believe that it is really a struggle for human dignity, then you understand the importance of a roomful of people linking arms and singing "*De Colores*," "We Shall Overcome," or "Solidarity Forever."

"And, in the end, we will win."

The Gallo Song

I was having dinner the other night with the Bishop of Idaho
He served roast beef and mashed potatoes and a bottle of Paisano
And I said ... Paisano is a Gallo wine—You got to take that bottle back
And you cannot drink it until Gallo signs—You got to take that bottle back.

I was walking through the alley the other night and these were the words I heard
“Give me all your money, ‘cause I got to go buy a bottle of Thunderbird.”
And I said ... Thunderbird is a Gallo wine—You got to take that bottle back
And you cannot drink it until Gallo signs—You got to take that bottle back.

I was at a concert the other night when I felt the tap on my arm.
I took the joint, but I refused the bottle of Boone’s Farm
And I said... Boone’s Farm is a Gallo Wine—You got to take that bottle back
And you cannot drink it until Gallo signs—You got to take that bottle back.

I was lying in bed the other night talking with my friend named Jane
I brought out a bottle of baby oil and she brought out Andre Champagne.
And I said ... Andre Champagne is a Gallo wine—You got to take that bottle back
And you cannot drink it until Gallo signs—You got to take that bottle back.

So, when friends and family and relatives, too, take Gallo off the rack
Don’t be afraid to step right up and tell them to take it back.
If it’s from Modesto it’s a Gallo wine—You got to take that bottle back
And you cannot drink it until Gallo signs—You got to take that bottle back.