

Dan Willett 1976–1977

I was employed as a boycott organizer from September of 1976 through June of 1977. I worked in St. Louis from September through December and in Los Angeles from January to June. I was a volunteer for the St. Louis Boycott from 1973 until employed as a boycott organizer in 1976. I hope that others will work on the UFW history. Think of all the action to be covered—each boycott city had its own drama in following the overall strategy, each organizing campaign in the fields had its own dynamics. But I am not going to concentrate on that. My corner of this story is trying to explain why I became involved and my mindset. How and why did a middle-class white kid from the suburbs of St. Louis become involved with the UFW boycott?

What little I contributed to the union, I got 10 times or more back. When I was 17 years old I saw a television show on New Jersey farmworkers by Geraldo Rivera. At one point in the show, Rivera and his cameraman were in their car and the growers' people in their cars pinned them in with their cars ahead and behind them. This, plus the narrative about not being able to vote on the union in an election, made me angry. It was unbelievable to me that people were being denied their rights in this way. My anger moved me to act. At the end of the show an appeal was made to viewers to contact the union in their cities and volunteer to help. This made a lot of sense to me so I called to help. At the time, the St. Louis boycott had two Delano strikers. I borrowed my parents' car and drove down to the boycott house. It was in the Central West End in a huge house donated by the Amalgamated Meat Cutters Union. I met them, we talked, and they warmed tortillas on the gas-stove burners. We added beans to the browned tortillas and drank 7-Ups. I was moved by their willingness to leave behind their families and come to St. Louis.

They referred me to the boycott organizer who handled the north suburbs of St. Louis. I would call and when I could not borrow my parents' car, he would give me a ride to whatever store we were picketing. This willingness to give rides was important to me because it said that the work of picketing a store was important and, if I wanted to do it, the union would get me there.

Trying to understand the UFW, the boycott, migrant workers, and agribusiness was something I had to understand if I was going to do a good job on the picket line. Later that year I applied for an academic scholarship to college, and an essay was needed. I wrote about the UFW and the boycott. Trying to write forced me to work through parts of what I did not understand. After I submitted the essay I wanted to keep picketing. For one thing, it did not seem right to write the essay and then walk away from it. It seemed like I owed the union my involvement if I was using their story to apply for a scholarship.

Sometimes when we picketed we talked to hundreds of people, shoppers we were trying to persuade not to buy grapes, lettuce, and Gallo wine. We got a range of responses. Some people told us they agreed or disagreed with what we wanted them to do, and many were quiet or indifferent. I wanted the UFW to be successful with the boycott. I wanted to see

that sales could be reduced. The union also helped me see that corporate decisions to stop carrying grapes, lettuce, and Gallo were more important than individual decisions not to buy them. It was the corporate decisions that the growers in California closely followed and reacted to. And those corporate decisions in some ways were built on the hundreds of encounters with individual shoppers in front of the stores. It was a revelation to me that this boycott was like a political campaign to elect a candidate to office. It did not have a deadline like an election, but it did have victories and defeats.

Acting and speaking on the picket lines connected with the church concepts of proselytizing and evangelizing. As a Southern Baptist, it reminded me of what my church encouraged members to do in reaching out to others to come to church and of the missionaries who would report on their missions and ask for donations at church. I felt guilty that I did not act on my faith for my church. I questioned myself about that. My hesitancy was partly out of shyness; that same shyness made it hard at first to talk to people on the picket line. But I wanted to help, the union wanted my help, so I kept trying. I learned from other UFW supporters not to dwell only on the people who told me that they disagreed with the boycott. I also learned from them the importance of trying to keep fresh and positive for the next person, who may never have heard of the UFW boycott.

The picket line gave me a chance to think. Sometimes, particularly with the little liquor stores, business was slow. If the store got a court injunction, sometimes we would have to keep walking to keep from violating the injunction. When it was cold it was good to keep moving to stay warm. If we had a crowd, we would talk and sing as we walked in a circle. Sometimes we were by ourselves to cover different store or parking lot entrances

The boycott also gave me a chance to meet Roman Catholics. I was around Catholics all the time in school and in the neighborhood, but we did not talk about religion. In church we talked a lot about how our faith was different from other faiths. When we said “faith,” we really meant other Christian denominations. For example, we focused on the differences in structure between Baptists and Catholics. One bromide was about how “the tearing of the curtain in the Temple symbolized that no intermediary was needed between God and man.” This meant that the Catholic Church was on the wrong track by having priests hear confessions from members; those members should be talking directly to God. A lot of the church teaching was very critical of Catholics. Many UFW activists were Catholic and, as we walked around in circles to obey court injunctions, we would talk. Over time I came to appreciate the beauty of their faith. Their commitment to social justice was so ingrained and part of them. I had been brought up in a faith that held up as a model a kind of “hot” faith, in which it was good to be on fire for your beliefs. It was good to have all the answers—and thought to be very powerful to start answering questions before they were even asked. But these Catholics were surer of themselves. They had a faith that was strengthened, in part, by acknowledging that some questions did not have answers. And they were comfortable with that. They seemed so cool to me.

What the boycott organizers were paid made a big impression on me. The UFW salaries were a uniform rate from top to bottom—room, board, and \$5 per week. People were sacrificing to make things happen. Strikers were leaving their families to work on the boycott, union members were paying dues on piecework wages, and supporters were donating to the union. The UFW was not ashamed to present itself as poor and vulnerable. That was touching to me. There was purity to room, board, and \$5 per week, and in some ways I needed that purity at that time. So many politicians and leaders were critical of unions—they argued that unions were a negative force or no longer served a purpose. It made it easier to deal with issues of union corruption to work with a union that was so transparently clean. It also helped that the UFW was in a pitched battle with the Teamsters. It was clear to me that St. Louis stories of union corruption and ties to organized crime were a world apart from the UFW and what it was trying to do.

Later the St. Louis boycott was directed by Richard Cook, a Southern Baptist minister who moved to St. Louis from Arizona UFW campaigns. The fact that he was a Southern Baptist was affirming to me that at least one other Southern Baptist, and a pastor on top of that, saw it the way I did. Looking back, what were the chances that the St. Louis boycott would have a Southern Baptist director? It was like he was brought to St. Louis especially for me.

The UFW had strategies on the boycott. Sometimes it made sense to go after independent liquor stores, and other times it made sense to go after chain liquor and grocery stores. It tried to model a participatory democracy where the volunteers who walked the picket lines could be part of the strategy discussions. One night I got a call from Richard, and he was laying out some choices we all needed to consider in strategy. During the phone call, my father saw a neighbor's dog in our front yard. He feuded with this neighbor. Seeing the dog in our yard, he told me to get off the phone so he could call the dogcatcher. I thought my father to be so petty compared to the noble strategizing I was doing on the phone. I did not give up the phone to him. He looked at me strangely but did not press his point. Showing that he had not cornered the market on pettiness, I also got enjoyment in not giving up the phone, and it was not from helping farmworkers.

Living in the suburbs, I was isolated from Hispanic and black people. The UFW introduced me to Hispanics through some Mexicans working on the boycott but mainly through the ways the union highlighted the culture. For example, we sang songs and yelled chants in Spanish. There was some connection to blacks through the campaigns of Florida farmworkers, but more significant to me were the indirect connections through the boycott of Gallo. Sometimes strategically targeting 905, the largest St. Louis liquor chain, we picketed stores in black neighborhoods. Interacting with black customers at these stores showed me their receptiveness to a message of social justice and being in black commercial districts during peak shopping times showed me parts of their economy at work.

Working with the UFW was an education on issues of court injunctions, federal labor laws, and labor contractors. Wanting to do a good job on the picket line meant that I had to struggle with realities of my own country that were foreign to me. Grocery and liquor

stores would get temporary injunctions that limited our presence. Sometimes the injunctions limited the number of people who could be at a particular entrance. Other times they restricted us to the street entrance of a store in a strip mall, far away from the customer entrance. I had a really hard time understanding how restraints on free speech could be legal. The stores would claim that we were threatening and intimidating customers. I knew that we did not do that and that we were nonviolent. It was galling to me to see the courts give the stores the benefit of the doubt at the expense of our free speech and effectiveness on the picket line. I struggled to understand why federal labor law did not apply to farmworkers. I learned from the UFW rhetoric that turned around that exclusion to our advantage: “If we are not covered by the National Labor Relations Act, then we are also not restricted by the Taft-Hartley ban on secondary boycotts.” I struggled with the notion of a labor contractor between the growers and workers. The growers used this to evade responsibility for working conditions, saying they just paid the labor contractors—that the farmworkers were not their employees. The existence of a layer of a labor contractor was outside of my experience. Everyone I knew directly worked for an employer who paid their wages.

I struggled with understanding changing positions of the UFW. The union usually had a political position of supporting undocumented workers in the U.S. But there was a brief period of time when the union called for the strict enforcement of immigration laws and regulations to keep out Mexican farmworkers. Three months later, the UFW reverted to its previous position of organizing all farmworkers no matter what their nationality. It was a sobering realization that I had argued for a position I did not really believe. This taught me to more carefully consider what I was saying. This was at least partly a product of saying it in the highly charged atmosphere of the picket line. Words had more depth and more was at stake when they were said on the picket line.

Later, the St. Louis boycott was directed by John Gardner, who came from organizing campaigns in the Coachella Valley. He emphasized the idea that organizing was a learnable skill. Comparing it to the church, which emphasized the charisma of the call to becoming a pastor, it was comforting to think that anyone, even me, could be a student of organizing. He offered the chance to receive training in community organizing by joining the staff full time. It seemed like such a good opportunity, I decided to take a leave from college and work full-time for the union. My father thought I was a fool to leave school without graduating. With John, I followed weekly and daily exercises in time planning that were hard at first but became easier over time.

That fall we planned a fundraiser by showing the movie *The Grapes of Wrath*. My father had calmed down about me leaving school and I invited my whole family for dinner at the boycott house and then the fundraiser. We passed the hat after showing the movie. We raised \$60, and \$20 of it came from my father. He said that it was the second time he had seen the movie, the first time being in Oklahoma, where he grew up, after it came out in 1940. This was the year after his father had died, his family had lost the farm, and they had moved to town. He was visibly moved, remembering this story of people having hard

times in Oklahoma and moving to California. His reaction made me think about people who left Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl and what they had faced, and how the farmworkers in California had changed from Okies back then to Mexicans and Filipinos.

Several months later the UFW reorganized its boycott. The St. Louis boycott was closed. The union asked me to transfer to the Los Angeles boycott and I wanted to work for it. I drove west, going through Oklahoma, following the route taken by Okies leaving the Dust Bowl.

I started working for the Los Angeles Boycott. Among the many people I met were three from Oklahoma who supported the UFW. I met Flora Chavez, who worked for the California Service Organization (CSO), the group that Cesar Chavez worked for before the UFW. When I met Flora at the CSO office, I was startled when she first spoke. It took me a while to realize that her accent was familiar to me. I met Ola Pacifico, a UFW volunteer who was also active in open housing fights against racial discrimination in housing. I met an autoworker, whose name I have forgotten, who was active in the United AutoWorkers. Their idea was that they had an allegiance to people who were getting pushed around. What they took from their experience as Okies was that they could not stand to see other people getting pushed around. They made sense of their experience as Okies by fighting for these farmworkers and their union. I was inspired by their loyalty that transcended region and race.

In Los Angeles I was paired with Dave Pappen to work on the boycott in Santa Monica and Venice. One day, killing time between visits, we stopped at a left-wing bookstore. I saw a stapled booklet for sale with an article on the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) by Mark Naison. The STFU was a racially integrated union of sharecroppers and tenant farmers in Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Missouri in the 1930s and 1940s. Thinking it looked interesting, I bought it and showed it to Dave when we got back in the car. I asked Dave if he had ever heard of the STFU. He said he had and talked about working with H.L. Mitchell, an STFU cofounder, in Louisiana for the Amalgamated Meat Cutters in the 1960s. I remembered that the St. Louis Boycott House was owned by the Amalgamated Meat Cutters Union. What are the chances that the first time I would become aware of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, a union that existed 40 years before in another part of the country, I would be riding around with someone who had worked with the cofounder?

That summer I left the union and went back to St. Louis and college. That fall one of my professors mentioned in class that the library had just purchased the microfilmed records of the STFU. After working with the microfilm to write a history of the STFU in Missouri, I got to talk with H.L. Mitchell when he came to our school.

The UFW was a great organization for me. It always sent a clear message that my help was needed to do important things. It asked me to do simple, learnable tasks repeatedly. It gave me an opportunity to take on increasing levels of responsibility. It gave me insights into my culture and introduced me to a bigger world.