

## Crosby Milne 1976–1978

### “Which Side Are You On?”

I had heard he was an immensely remarkable person. Perhaps, even one who could walk comfortably with Abraham, Jesus, Jefferson, Lincoln, or Gandhi.

Some almost worship him. They see him as totally committed and unswerving in his crusade on behalf of the oppressed and impoverished.

Some hate him as a threat. They see him as rigid, unyielding, and self-serving.

My wife and I pondered these clashing feelings. Then we decided to visit our youngest son and directly expose ourselves to this leader he seemed so to worship.

We traveled to where thousands of people had gathered in support of their cause and their leader. We joined them in their march through the city streets and out along the dusty county roads.

During the march many social justice songs were sung. One, which the workers and supporters from Florida sang with such deep feelings, had the words “Which side are you on?”

After about a 10-mile walk, this long line of banner-carrying and singing zealots stopped in a park for lunch. Before resuming their march they called for their leader to speak to them. He responded by climbing up on a park table among the trees.

His voice was not loud and there was no public address system. It was obvious that so all could hear him, many would need to move. All would need to be in front of him rather than surrounding him.

His location among the trees roughly divided the crowd into two groups. These supporters saw this, and they began to good-naturedly chant, “Which side are you on?” Which group would he ask to move to the other side?

He looked all around at this mix of humanity that surrounded him. Then he got down off the table, picked up one end and with help carried it the edge of this large gathering.

He then got back up on the table, turned to face them all, and spoke to them.

Everyone was included. Yet no one had moved—except Cesar Chavez.

Some hate him as a threat, as rigid, unyielding, and self-serving.

Some love and support him as unswerving in his crusade on behalf of the oppressed and impoverished.

And I knew then which side I was on.

### Working Full Time for the UFW

What got me to start working full time for the union was what was going on at the time in the California legislature. The ALRA had passed, but the Republicans were refusing to appropriate any money to run it. I always believed the right to vote was fundamental to democracy. The only democratic check and balance in the workplace is the collective bargaining process exercised through unions and democratic elections to have union representation. So if farmworkers were denied the right to vote, we were effectively destroying our democracy.

My wife and I began going up to La Paz in 1976 to work. I met with Cesar and started drawing an organizational chart, but stopped when we got to the 50th or 60th person reporting directly to him. He was persuaded the union needed to start managing itself better, so he introduced me to the board. At that time the board included Dolores Huerta, Richard Chavez, Philip Vera Cruz, Eliseo Medina, Marshall Ganz, Mack Lyons, and others. We talked for maybe six hours, which was a lot of time to devote to a discussion about management because the ALRB elections were in full swing, and management was something most of the board at that time regarded with some suspicion.

They wanted to know how they knew they could trust me. I told them they didn't and would have to decide whether it was worth the risk. I left the room for them to discuss it among themselves, and they decided to go through the strategic planning and organizational development process, so we went ahead.

When we started, the basic goal of the union was to do something terrible to the Teamsters, who were at that time our mortal enemy. After five or six 14-hour days, they came up with the basic goal of the United Farm Workers Union, AFL-CIO: to improve the lives and conditions of farmworkers in the field, in their families, and in their communities.

I was born in Canada and moved to California during the Depression. Like the American Great Plains, Canada's Prairie Provinces had become a dust bowl. I've always been grateful for the opportunities and generosity America gave me, so my bicentennial gift to the United States became a year and more of free work with the UFW. We started with the board but ended up going through every department and ended up with a lot of field and boycott offices and staffers. It was a great experience.