

Gary Guthman 1976–1978

Getting Organized

Mine is a classic story of how the UFW recruited college-age kids into the movement with their excitement and meticulous organizing approach to making social change.

On a warm day in the middle of September of 1976 I was strolling through Sproul Plaza at UC Berkeley. I was considering enrolling at Cal, but at the time had just arrived in town to visit a friend. I was 21 and had already been off a year from school after completing two years of college in Maine. Three winters in Maine was enough for me, and I longed to return to California.

Sproul Plaza during the lunch hour was packed with students and others staffing tables of every cause of the day. Nearly all sat quietly behind their tables waiting for students to approach them. The UFW organizer was out in front, in the middle of the flow of foot traffic “barking” her Proposition 14 rap and sweeping people over to the UFW table. Another organizer took over from there as the first organizer returned out in front to get more recruits. I got swept over to the UFW table and eventually swept up in the farmworkers’ movement.

From the very first contact, the UFW organizers impressed me by demonstrating how the basic organizing techniques (stand in front of the table, bark out your rap, sweep people over) could make the difference in effective organizing. Some of these first techniques taught me lessons I would remember my entire life.

The organizers’ rap was that a “yes” vote on Prop 14 would save the UFW from destruction by the growers. All the gains made in past 10 years through boycotts, strikes, and recent election victories would “go down the drain” if Prop 14 didn’t win.

The organizers were so full of animus and confidence that it certainly got through to a young man like me who was looking for a cause to sink my teeth into. I knew by then that I wanted to work for real social change more than anything else in life. But I was just beginning to understand the power of unions. Having come from an activist Kennedy-liberal family, my orientation was toward electoral politics. I had worked on several campaigns, including the Democratic primaries earlier that year for Fred Harris for President. Despite having grown up in California during the boycott years, I knew little about the UFW.

When it came time to “crunch” me—that is ask me if I could sign up to help the farmworkers—I gave a reply that was, unbeknownst to me at the time, golden news to the organizer. I said, “I’m not too busy right now, kind of in between things, so give me a call.” She called me that night to come out to register voters on Telegraph Avenue the next day. Here was another great and simple organizing lesson learned within my first 24 hours from

the union: strike while the iron is hot. Get back to people who volunteer immediately—no more than 24 hours later. I had volunteered with organizations before and no one ever got back to me the same night! As Fred Ross, Sr. would say, “Ninety percent of organizing is follow-up.”

I wish I could remember who that woman was, my first organizer. She provided the spark for me that brought me into the UFW, into organizing. It changed my life forever.

Starting as a Volunteer on Telegraph Avenue

When I arrived on Telegraph Avenue, I was put to work registering voters. I quickly joined in barking on the busy sidewalk (probably pushed into it). “Register to vote right here. Vote ‘Yes’ on Prop 14. Save the Farmworkers’ Union.” I also learned the technique of juggling multiple clipboards to increase the number of registrations (no ironing board yet ...). Another group across the street, probably the Young Democrats, was sitting passively behind the table waiting to be approached. They came over to us and complained that we were harassing people. I knew then I was working for the winning side.

It wasn’t long before the organizer handed me a bullhorn and told me to start barking. I was petrified. I’d never used a bullhorn before, except maybe at a high-school football rally. I resisted, but she wasn’t afraid to push me out of my comfort zone. She probably said something like, “Come on, you can do it. It’s for the farmworkers. Just think of them working out in the fields in the hot sun with no toilets. You can do it,” as she put the bullhorn in my hand. Sure enough, more people came over to register.

I kept coming back to volunteer that week.

After a couple of weeks I received a call around 8 p.m. My organizer said, “Gary, Cesar’s in town and he’s staying at St. Joseph the Workman church in Berkeley. You’ve heard that there have been threats on Cesar’s life (no I hadn’t!) and we need you to do all-night security in front of the church—tonight.” I just couldn’t say no to that woman. And the idea of doing security for Cesar Chavez was pretty exciting. So there I was, strolling back and forth in front of the rectory at Father Bill O’Donnell’s church. Cesar came out and thanked me—my first time meeting him.

Proposition 14

The next step was to join on full-time staff for the Prop 14 campaign for \$5 per week, room, and board. We worked night and day until the end. My clearest memory is of being dropped off at a Safeway in blazing hot Contra Costa County to put “Yes on 14” bumper stickers on cars, with permission, for eight to 10 hours per day. This was my first introduction to the importance of the numbers. The union had a tight reporting system that worked to get my competitive juices flowing. I strived to be one of the top bumper-

stickerers to be recognized in the evening debriefs. In the mornings we received reports of how many bumper stickers we put on cars throughout the Bay Area and California.

We did human billboarding and attended rallies in San Francisco and Oakland. It seemed like the UFW would be victorious again.

As we all know, the union got trounced as the growers outspent us by huge margins with a massive, deceptive TV ad campaign. The post-election party was the most depressing event I had ever attended. People were crying and bemoaning the disaster awaiting the UFW. Yet speakers from the podium boosted our spirits and remind us that the struggle would continue and we would overcome this setback.

Becoming an Organizer

After Prop 14, I learned that the union was hiring organizers for the boycott in the Bay Area, starting in January of 1977. In addition to my overall excitement about organizing and the farmworkers' union, the big draw was that Fred Ross, Sr. would be conducting a two-week intensive organizing training. I had squeezed in some reading of UFW history, including how Fred recruited Cesar and Dolores into the Community Service Organization in the 1950s. I knew I wanted to learn how to organize. I decided that being trained by Fred Sr. and the UFW would be more valuable to me than completing my education—not an easy decision to make for a middle-class Jewish kid who'd already been out of school for nearly two years. While my parents questioned my decision, they were amazingly supportive—as they have been throughout my life. I thank them for that more than anything else.

I reported to work at the 14th Street office in Oakland with a team of about seven organizers. First we took care of our living quarters. We went out to the boycott house on 78th Street in the heart of East Oakland. Another first order of business was to apply for food stamps and Medi-Cal. I received those benefits the entire time I was with the union.

There were rumors and articles in the left-wing press about staff purges in the union. I remember hearing about Nick Jones, former boycott director, being fired for being a communist. The UFW leadership said, "He had his own agenda." I didn't pay much attention to it. I wanted to learn how to organize.

The training with Fred Sr. began in mid-January. I believe it was the first of a series of trainings he did in the remaining boycott cities—the Bay Area, L.A., Chicago, and New York. This was at a time when there was no AFL-CIO Organizing Institute, and few if any unions were recruiting young organizers.

Each morning began with a lecture by Fred on each aspect of organizing: how to make a phone call, reminder calls, personal visits (PVs), house meetings, and area-wide organization. We did role-plays over and over, with Fred providing helpful hints and

detailed critiques at every step. He emphasized eye contact, posture, body language (sitting at the edge of your chair), and your handshake—and his voice has been in my head ever since. “Gary, don’t slouch. Who’s gonna want to join your organization if you can’t sit up straight. Don’t cross your legs. Lean forward. You gotta show people you’re excited about what you’re doing ...” Every stage of the process had a verbatim script or rap that we had to memorize. Fred went with us on PVs, listened to our phone calls, and observed our house meetings. He gave us his undivided attention for two weeks.

Fred was such a dynamic, forceful, and inspiring man. His sleeves were rolled up on his lumberjack shirts; his trim and muscular build; and his powerful eyes peering out at you over his glasses. Fred was 67 at the time. I remember how impressed I was when he asked to pull into the local health food store one afternoon while we were driving between visits. He was big on a high-fiber, natural diet.

His organizing style and method were delivered with such confidence. This was the way to move people. If the worker or supporter was not being moved, then the organizer needed to figure out what he or she could do better. There was always a way to get through to people—we had to find that way and not make excuses or “alibis.”

It was those two weeks with Fred and the following months of implementing the organizing skills that persuaded me to be an organizer. I felt that the UFW had shown me the way to effect real social change—how to win through meticulous, inspired, and aggressive organizing. I believed that if the farmworkers could overcome the powerful growers, anything was possible.

But I had to struggle within myself to be a UFW organizer. I was uncomfortable with pushing people to the degree Fred would. I didn’t like crunching people for money or getting supporters to role-play their rap to recruit for a house meeting. Why remind people at 7 a.m. the morning before an action when I just talked to them the night before? I distinctly remember pacing back and forth in front of a house hesitating to do a reminder house visit before a committee meeting (wouldn’t a phone call do?) and then saying to myself, “I’m just going to do this stuff. If Fred and the UFW pushed people like this, who am I to question? They’ve organized one of the great movements in American history.” And lo and behold, it worked.

Bay Area Boycott: 1977–1978

Over the next 14 months we conducted house meeting drives throughout the Bay Area, building area-wide organizations (AWOs). The heyday of the boycott was over as there were no massive grape or lettuce boycotts. No Gallo wine-type boycotts. The union’s focus was now on winning ALRA elections, negotiations and winning contracts at individual companies after election victories. That didn’t stop us from creating the urgency—and working the six to seven days a week to build effective organization. We supported recognition or contract fights, often coordinated on a national scale. We

organized supporters to lobby elected officials on legislative issues or ALRA enforcement. We collected food and clothing to support a rose strike, taking a delegation of supporters out to the valley to deliver the goods. We raised funds through donations, monthly pledges (still going strong in 1977–1978) and fundraising events like walk-a-thons and block parties. We worked in local political campaigns and other important coalition-building activities.

I was first assigned to Berkeley. I organized in Berkeley without a car, walking and taking the bus to meetings and taking the bus home to East Oakland every night after 9 p.m. Our organizing rekindled our old supporters and recruited a fair amount of new blood.

In the spring of 1977 Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance was the target of the national UFW boycott. Conn Mutual owned some citrus ranches in Coachella and was refusing to recognize the union after the union won elections. It wasn't really a boycott, as we weren't trying to get people to cancel their life insurance. Rather, it was a pioneer of the corporate campaign. We picketed its office in downtown Oakland and other cities two or three times a week for several weeks. We organized delegations to their office with religious and community leaders and generated free media against the company. The union may have used corporate tactics like shareholders actions. We won that campaign.

We worked on the campaign of Lionel Wilson for mayor of Oakland. This was a big campaign in Oakland that year as Wilson was to become Oakland's first black mayor. In this campaign we worked with Elaine Brown and what remained of the Black Panther Party on GOTV in East Oakland. We also worked on local elections in Berkeley. All of this local political work and coalition-building was valuable in our ongoing battles in Sacramento.

Our organizer in the Fremont/Hayward area, Dan Blocher, reported meeting many workers—many Portuguese-speaking—from local nurseries and mushroom farms who asked if we could negotiate their contracts. The union won several elections in this area in 1975. But they were not able to get staff out to win contracts. Whatever happened with them?

One day I was assigned to drive Dolores around to meet Bay Area union leaders as she lobbied them about the ALRA enforcement and grower-proposed amendments. Dolores was so sharp, moving so fast, using our time in the car between meetings to teach organizing. And she was so approachable and down-to-earth as she made this new organizer feel accepted as part of the union family. The highlight of our day was meeting with Jimmy Herman and the executive board of the ILWU. I was impressed by the degree of respect she commanded from the leaders of that great union. I've had the opportunity to work with Dolores this year as she is leading SEIU's effort to build community and political support for a health-care organizing drive in Kern County. Her fire for organizing is strong and she is still that down-to earth woman I met in 1977.

In the fall of 1977, I was assigned as the organizer for San Francisco. This is when I was given a beautiful red 1964 Dodge Valiant—my first car. The supporter list was still on index cards—no databases yet. Most of them hadn't been contacted since Prop 14. I found the supporters still ready to work with us—just waiting for a call. There was a wonderful older lady (Betty?) who had been a top supporter since the 1960s. She took me right in, had a house meeting, and let me work out of her spacious Victorian home in the hills above the Castro district. It was the hundreds like her that were the great unsung heroes of the boycott.

Miguel Contreras was also on my list to contact. He had just started working for HERE Local 2 in San Francisco. I visited him at his home in Bernal Heights and he agreed to hold a house meeting. To my surprise, Fred Sr. showed up at the meeting. Was I nervous? You bet. But I guess I did all right as Fred had only a few observations in our debriefing after the meeting, along with a good laugh with Miguel. This was the first of many practical jokes Miguel would play on me in the ensuing years as we worked together at HERE. (Miguel is now the head of the L.A. Central Labor Council.)

We organized a delegation to meet with San Francisco assemblyman Art Agnos regarding ALRA issues and Speaker Leo McCarthy's attack on the law. Agnos was close to McCarthy, also from San Francisco. We delivered a petition, but Agnos didn't meet with us, putting us off to one of his aides.

Why Were the Boycotts Closed Down in 1978?

I go into some of the detail of the boycott activities not only to provide an account of my own story, but also to show that we were engaged in productive activity for the union. While these weren't the heyday times, the boycotts (or perhaps more accurately described as "urban support organizations") had the potential to strengthen field organizing with boycotts of targeted companies or industries, community organizing to support legislative battles, electoral work, and, of course, fundraising. With donations we collected, monthly pledge drives, and fundraising events, I'd say we were supporting our own operations at a minimum. It can't take too much, with most of us more than willing to continue working for \$10 per week (we received a raise from \$5 some time in this period). So why were the boycotts closed down in 1978? Was it a question of resources, as more staff were needed in field organizing, negotiations, and contract representation? Or was a belief that the boycott operations were no longer effective? In the beginning of 1977 the leadership must have decided to continue developing the urban operations as they assigned Fred Sr. to spend several months training new organizers. What changed from January of 1977 to April of 1978?

In April of 1978 the boycott operations were closed throughout the country. About 30 to 40 organizers were called back to La Paz. Most of us were divided into two schools: negotiations and contract representation. I was in negotiations.

At first La Paz was an idyllic experience. It was like summer camp with a group of organizers rooming together in barrack-style rooms, sharing meals in the cafeteria, working during the day, hanging out at night (except when we had to do all-night security detail roaming the grounds on the lookout for intruders coming in over the mountains!), hikes in the hills, an occasional trip back to civilization in Bakersfield and L.A. We got to meet all the leadership, organizers, lawyers, staff, and families of the union—all who lived in La Paz or came through at some point. Cesar, Dolores, Richard, and other leaders would eat with us on occasion—sharing stories and lessons on organizing. I made some very close friends that summer. But three months out there was enough for me. I left La Paz and the UFW in August of 1978. Cesar met with me before I left. It meant so much to me when he encouraged me to stay in the labor movement.

The Game

We played the Synanon Game regularly at La Paz. I was open to the concepts about open communication and breaking down hierarchical relationships, getting control of the nasty chisme that can tear down an organization. But some people (not the leadership) took it too far and jumped on and broke down people who didn't deserve such treatment. I can recall this happening to a woman who had recently joined our staff in the Bay Area. She had been a super-supporter for years, coming from the American Friends Service Committee. When the boycott closed down she moved with us to La Paz. A gracious, loving woman who was brought to tears and shaken up to the point that I think she may have left the movement as a result. I overdid it in a few games myself.

That fall, ex-UFW organizer Bob Purcell recruited me to work on the Jerry Brown campaign for governor. I was assigned to my old turf in Berkeley. It was a great statewide field operation, run by Marshall Ganz and led by mostly (if not all) current or former UFW organizers. Marshall held a great retreat for all statewide organizers in Santa Barbara—my only opportunity to work directly with this extraordinary organizer. Brown won by a large margin, and no doubt our field operation contributed significantly to the victory.

I rejoined the labor movement in 1980 through UFW connections. Miguel Contreras helped me get a job in a union restaurant with HERE Local 2, and I became an active rank-and-file member. In 1980, ex-UFW organizer Bill Granfield was heading up the San Francisco hotel strike, joined by ex-UFWer Kevin O'Connor. I was hired in the middle of the strike and then joined the local's new organizing department with Bill and Kevin. I worked for HERE until 1994. For most of the past 10 years, I've been an SEIU health-care organizer in L.A. But that's all a story for another documentation project!

In my view, perhaps the greatest legacy of the farmworkers movement is the hundreds of us who were inspired to become organizers and activists by the UFW—and have continued to be effective “social arsonists,” in Fred Sr.'s words. Where would the labor movement be today without leaders like Eliseo Medina, Miguel Contreras, Maria Elena Durazo, Fred Ross, Jr., Scott Washburn, Bill Granfield, Kevin O'Connor, Guy Costello

(now a teacher and activist in the NEA in Milwaukee), Roberto and Arnulfo de la Cruz (SEIU), Bob Purcell (Laborers), Marianne Massengale (UAW District 65), Ellen Greenstone (attorney for HERE and other unions), and Sandy Nathan? These are just some of the farmworker people I've had the great fortune to work with since I left the union. So many hundreds more labor, political, and community activists—as well as the organizers and leaders—have continued to do great work fighting for justice for farmworkers in the UFW and around the country.