

## Dan Thomas 1984–1986

My wife, Mila, and I joined the union as volunteers via the National Farm Worker Ministry, after several meetings with Fred Eyster, the convention in Fresno, and a couple of trips to La Paz. Both of us worked in direct marketing under David Martinez, then conducted social research in Delano with Filipino farmworkers, and finally Mila worked for Frank and Artie in the revived boycott department and I served under Chris Hartmire in accounting.

### Some Snapshots

We took a weekend off to visit our friends in San Francisco. Our daughter Michelle, then almost four years old, spotted a beautiful fruit stand at Pier 39, adorned with all kinds of fruit. Without missing a step she began marching in front of the stand, punching her fist into the air, and shouting, "Boycott grapes!" An addendum to this story: shortly after we left the union, we were invited to a reception for Jim Hightower, then the Texas commissioner for agriculture, at (then) Berkeley mayor Loni Hancock's house in Berkeley. Table grapes were served, and it dawned on me that this boycott revival was working.

One of the union volunteers (Joaquin?) was asked to go to Canada to drum up boycott support. He piled brochures and other materials into his car and set off on his journey. Just before he crossed to Canada at some obscure upper Midwest border crossing, American officials pulled him over and made him empty his trunk. He was allowed to cross, minus the materials.

We interviewed Filipino farmworkers in Delano in order for Cesar to find out if they were organizable or not. Ken Barger at Indiana University helped us with survey design and implementation, and five Tagalog speakers (two Filipino-American couples and a single) spent three months talking with scores of farmworkers and their families. So as not to bias the survey, we did not let on that we were UFW. The very short summary of our findings: Filipinos in general were pro-union, but anti-UFW. The newly arrived immigrants had negative feelings about unions based on their experience of company unions back home. The long-term immigrants felt the UFW hiring hall practices at best were chaotic and at worst discriminatory against the Filipinos. Cesar's visit to the Philippines was not mentioned as a factor either way. We presented our findings to Cesar and the board, who were keenly interested in the results.

Some of the peripheral aspects of the survey: 1) Many of the Filipinos were single, or their families were back in the Philippines. Therefore, they could live together dormitory-style in fancier suburban houses, sharing their incomes. One household had four bedrooms and 11 adults. Their annual incomes averaged \$6000 each, but the household income was \$66,000. 2) Many Filipinos came from rural farms, where they worked seven days a week year-round, and had often experienced hunger and extreme poverty during the months leading up to the harvest. To work 40 to 60 hours a week and receive Medi-Cal and food stamps

during the off-season was perceived as a blessing. 3) The new immigrants were quite diverse, coming from all parts of the Philippines, of both genders and all ages, and quite a contrast to the retiring “manongs” who were from Ilocos. 4) The Filipino community as a whole was not very well organized, and when the particular issue was not vis-a-vis the larger society, they were factionalized into many small groupings. 5) Personal and anecdotal experience transmitted as gossip shaped opinions greatly. Some of the big issues included immigration, city politics (a Filipino mayor had been elected, seemingly to balance the 40/40 percent Anglo and Hispanic vote), government programs, and Filipino cultural identity. 6) The most eloquent of my interviewees was a very old manong who lived in a shack on one of the farms. He said, “I came to America, land of milk and honey!” He paused, and with tears in his eyes, gestured to the far fields, “Where’s the milk? Where’s the honey?” (Thank you, UFW farmworkers of Delano, who donated furniture that followed us to the Bay Area. And thank you, Sal, for introducing me to Los Lobos and for giving us so much support in Delano.)

One of my assignments was to arrange two events in L.A. for Cesar: a luncheon with African-American ministers and a breakfast with (mostly Latino) priests. I spent two weeks organizing, letting everyone know about the meetings. The reception I got on the phone was incredibly positive, and the events were a success. The black ministers were quite supportive and did some of the calling themselves. Their speeches at the luncheon were not just testimonials to Cesar, but also an affirmation of the ties between people of color, and specifically the farmworkers’ movement and the civil rights movement. One curiosity of the luncheon: the only gringos there (aside from me) were about eight Scientology cultists. Evidently they caught wind of the event and thought they could recruit some young unionistas by showing up.

La Paz in 1984 carried an air of tiredness and sadness. A few weeks after arriving, when I had spoken to no more than three people about the frustrations of working in La Paz (but in no way attacking Cesar or the union), a fourth individual approached me to warn that I had better keep my complaints to myself or I would be branded a traitor. It was many months until Dolores and Pete opened up about the destructiveness of “the Game,” which was so evident on their faces. Many events of the past were simply not talked about. Several key union figures of the past were demonized, as though they had caused the union’s decline. If I can be forgiven an analogy, it’s as though a small town had experienced a massive fire, and unknown townspeople had looted afterwards. Who among us were true friends? I believe that legitimate paranoia bred illegitimate paranoia, and kept the union from prospering as it could have.

Now I’ll be a contrarian and talk about the community that was present in La Paz. People took their jobs very seriously and worked long hard hours with pride. Everyone was expected to attend church, and if we could bring Protestants and Catholics together to celebrate as well as Chris Hartmire and Ken Irrgang did, the world would be a much better place. You could always find kids running around playing and making mischief, and families were supported in many ways. The Montessori School was a great learning

environment, and several times Paula led a camping trip for preschoolers to the Mojave Desert.

#### Postscript

In 1993 I attended Cesar's funeral march in Delano. Many farmworkers, UFW supporters, and ex-UFW volunteers were there, and it was an awesome experience. I have heard many people talk about the healing that occurred that day. I believe the reconciliation that began then has allowed this listserv to thrive and allow us to communicate with one another. *Por paz y justicia.*