

## The Farmworkers and Their Allies In the Early to Mid-1960s

By Mike Miller

These are personal recollections 45+ years after the fact of my connection with the farmworkers' organizing efforts of the 1960s, and their relationship to the broader social movement that was growing on college campuses during that time.

Before 1960

I went to UC Berkeley in 1954, lived at Cloyne Court Cooperative, and became active in Stiles Hall -- the University YMCA. It was the tail end of the McCarthy era, and the coops and Stiles were among the few places on campus that were not part of "the silent generation." In 1956 I got elected to the executive committee of the Associated Students of the University of California -- student government. There were a couple of us who were the liberals in an otherwise fraternity/sorority/conservative body. In 1957, I resigned from my student government post to run with a slate of candidates who took positions on the major issues of the day: A & H bomb testing, civil liberties, civil rights, and others. While none of us won, we doubled the student electorate and stirred debate on issues that had only been discussed at the left margins of campus life. We formalized an organization at the end of 1957 and called it SLATE -- though it wasn't an acronym. (Later, after multiple efforts by campus administrators to ban the organization from the campus, we put words to the letters and humorously called ourselves "Student League Accused of Trying to Exist.")

One of the people who influenced this emerging student movement was Anne Draper. She and her husband, Hal, were independent socialists; each played important roles influencing the student movement. Anne was then associated with the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, responsible for its campaign to get consumers to look for the union label. A passionate advocate for economic and social justice, one of her commitments was farm labor. She was an important part of the National Sharecroppers Fund, an advocacy and education organization that spoke for farmworkers and supported the sporadic organizing efforts that took place among them.

1960-1962

At the southern end of California, in Imperial County, Clive Knowles was organizing cantaloupe workers under the banner of the United Packerhouse Workers of America (UPWA). Anne Draper organized students to collect and deliver clothing and food for the strikers. She also got us to appear before a state regulatory agency that had jurisdiction over some farmworker concerns. When the AFL-CIO formed the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), Anne introduced us to its research director, Hank Anderson, and its head organizer, Norman Smith. I think it was through Anne that we met "farmworker priests" in Tracy or Stockton. Some students went on weekend workcamps to

live and work with farmworkers. SLATE held a campus forum with Smith, and SLATE leaders helped form an independent Student Committee for Agricultural Labor (SCAL). In 1960, Edward R. Murrow's stirring documentary, "Harvest of Shame," dramatized the plight of farmworkers in the United States.

SLATE held an annual summer conference on issues affecting the nation and world. In 1961, Hank Anderson was a speaker at the SLATE conference. Students in and around SLATE, many of them from families with histories in the 1930s' CIO, were moved by the farmworker story. As Hank was leaving the Santa Cruz Mountains campground site, I asked him where he was going. "I've got to go meet Saul Alinsky; he knows some things about the Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in California." I immediately said, "You mind if I tag along?" (Alinsky often came to his summer home in Carmel because it was the permanent residence for his wife, Jean, whose chronic illness prevented her traveling back and forth across the country, and Carmel was a more hospitable place for her to live than their home in Chicago.) (Anderson, by the way, prepared a series of meticulously researched papers that analyzed crop-by-crop the cost of labor as a percent of the total price per unit paid in the supermarket. It was tiny; my recollection is that a significant increase in wages would have made about a penny a pound, or less, difference in the retail price of most fruits and vegetables.)

A slight digression is in order: I left Berkeley in 1958 for graduate school in New York at Columbia. After a year there, I became a graduate school dropout and went to work organizing public housing tenants on New York's Lower East Side. After six or so months on the job, I was fired for being a "little Alinsky." At that point I didn't know who Saul Alinsky was, but in New York City's social work world he was a highly controversial figure, having been in a major battle with the Hudson Guild Settlement House just a few years before I went to work for the Henry Street Settlement House. Now, 3000 miles across the country, I saw an opportunity to meet the guy who up to that point was only a mysterious name. Thus began a relationship with Alinsky that ended only with his death in 1972 and that included my working for him in Kansas City, Missouri's black community in 1967-68.

Through Alinsky I met Fred Ross and would sometimes go with Ross to see Alinsky at his Carmel home. Alinsky hired Ross shortly after World War II to work as an organizer in California's barrios, starting in Southern California. Ross developed the Community Service Organization (CSO). In a San Jose neighborhood called Sal Si Puedes, Ross drew a young Cesar Chavez into community organizing. Chavez quickly rose to an organizer position, then executive director of CSO. Ross considered Chavez his primary protégé. Chavez left CSO because he thought it wasn't giving sufficient attention to farmworker problems. With fellow CSOers Dolores Huerta, Gil Padilla, and maybe others, Chavez established a base in Delano, CA, and began organizing the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA). On our drives to see Alinsky, Ross would tell me about what Chavez was doing. At that point, Chavez was invisible to all but a handful of people who cared about farmworkers. Ross was drumming up a small amount of financial support for Chavez. I remember that a Quaker woman named Josephine Duvenek, who I think had a

fair amount of money, was one of those supporters. (Duvnek, by the way, connected with Stiles Hall at the University of California because Cecil Thomas, one of Stiles' principal program workers, was an active Quaker. I think she hosted one or more Stiles retreats at a place she owned.)

Chuck McDew, chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was the principal speaker at SLATE's 1962 summer conference. SNCC was the organization that emerged from the 1960 Deep South sit-ins, and a principal organization in the 1961 Freedom Rides. In 1962, SNCC began to develop a community organizing/voter registration strategy to parallel its more visible direct action activities. The focus of SNCC's work was rural "black belt" counties in the Deep South, particularly southwest Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and the Arkansas Delta; many of the people with whom SNCC worked were rural sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and day laborers.

While in the Bay Area, McDew asked me to become SNCC's volunteer representative in the Bay Area; by fall, I was full time on the SNCC staff. By this time, I had read Alinsky's *Reveille for Radicals* and had a hazy idea that my vocation was to be an organizer. Lengthy conversations with Ross and Alinsky deepened my understanding of what organizing was about. The student movement experience at Berkeley was, in effect, my first organizing work; the tenant organizing job in NYC was my second.

1963-1966

My work for SNCC in the Bay Area was initially limited to fundraising, education about "the Movement" in the Deep South, and political pressure on behalf of the activity in the South. Our regional office was doing well on all counts, and I was gaining the confidence of SNCC's national leadership. SNCC soon authorized the use of my SNCC staff time to become involved in local community organizing in San Francisco. At one of the organization's national staff meetings, I presented a paper on the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys, drawing a parallel between their role in California politics and that of the Deep South "Dixiecrats" in national politics. That paper was well received. Somewhere along the line, the idea of an exchange of personnel between SNCC and NFWA was adopted by both organizations. Perhaps in early 1965, Marshall Ganz, then a SNCC field secretary in southwest Mississippi who went south from Harvard as part of the Mississippi Summer Project but remained after most of the volunteers went back to school, returned to his Bakersfield home, met with farmworker union leaders, and became a SNCC-paid organizer working on the NFWA staff.

Perhaps in early to mid-1964, perhaps as late as summer 1965, I arranged for Bob Moses, Stokely Carmichael, and Ivanhoe Donaldson, all major figures in SNCC, to visit the NFWA in Delano. I hoped Cesar Chavez would meet with them, but he didn't. There was, however, a productive conversation with Dolores Huerta and other farmworker leaders at the NFWA headquarters.

In September 1965 came the “strike in the grapes.” By this time, *The Movement* -- a monthly newspaper published by the Bay Area SNCC office -- was regularly carrying articles on farmworker organizing, covering both the AFL-CIO’s AWOC and the NFWA. *The Movement* was mailed in bulk amounts to various Friends of SNCC, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), religious agencies, and labor and other organizations. SLATE leaders already had fraternal relations with SDS, which was emerging as the national organization of the northern, predominantly white, student movement. From our San Francisco Bay Area base we were giving as much visibility to the farmworker cause as we could.

AWOC started the “strike in the grapes.” Soon NFWA joined the strike. Later, the two organizations merged into the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC). I remember student movement people having heated debates about whether or not Chavez and NFWA should become part of the AFL-CIO. Some of the debate focused on the “sellout” character attributed to the AFL-CIO; when Cesar negotiated a direct organizing committee relationship with the AFL-CIO executive council and a promise for an independent international, one of the reasons for opposing the merger was answered. Another one was not. Those of us who got involved with NFWA learned about the difference between the “migrant stream” strategy of AWOC and the “shoestring communities” approach of NFWA. We further learned about Chavez’s ideas of a “community union,” and the importance he gave to mutual aid activities. With the autonomy assured by the status of international union, objections to affiliation with the AFL-CIO continued only from some on the sectarian left.

Sometime that winter, Cesar Chavez visited me at my Webster Street apartment in San Francisco, where I was living with my then-wife, Carolyn. He asked me to coordinate the first farmworker boycott, targeted at Schenley Liquor. I was honored to be asked and willing to do it. I told Chavez I had to get approval from SNCC to put time into this activity. (Perhaps Cesar wanted me to leave SNCC and come to Delano; I’m not sure about that.) SNCC readily gave that approval. By then I knew Paul Booth, who was a national officer in SDS. Paul became an enthusiastic supporter of the boycott. Quickly, SDS chapters and Friends of SNCC northern offices became the hubs of boycott activity in cities across the country. (I think in some places CORE chapters became involved as well, but I wasn’t close to what CORE was doing.) Soon Jim Drake was appointed co-coordinator of the boycott. Booth and I wrote a memo to Chavez proposing that SNCC and SDS be the boycott’s vehicles in the north. Chavez and the NFWA preferred to establish a separate boycott apparatus. Jim Drake took over the boycott; its base of operation became Delano. SNCC and SDS continued to provide support for the emerging United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC).

In March, 1966, the farmworkers began their peregrination -- pilgrimage -- from Delano to Sacramento. It was the action that put the strike in headline news. Terry Cannon, editor of *The Movement*, actually accompanied the pilgrimage on its entire route as its press secretary, first working successfully to get media to cover the event, then fielding reporters’ questions

when they did. His daily press releases became the source of many a news story around the country.

It may have been on the pilgrimage that the idea of a major national boycott structure, built around student volunteers, surfaced. As I recall, there was a breakfast or lunch meeting someplace along the route that perhaps included the following people: Jimmy Herman, then president of the International Longshoremen's & Warehousemen's Union (ILWU), Chris Hartmire, director of the California Migrant Ministry (which was actively supporting farmworker union efforts), *The Movement* editor, Terry Cannon, Cesar Chavez, perhaps Marshall Ganz, perhaps one or two other NFWA people, and me. A concern expressed in the over-the-meal conversation was the growing number of college students who were showing up in Delano to "help." Many students were participating in the march as well. There really wasn't much for the students to do. The question at the table: is there a constructive application of the idealism these students are expressing that can help the farmworkers? Out of that conversation came the idea of the national boycott structure that would send teams of students and farmworkers to urban centers across the country.

In his important book, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, which I read long ago, Aldon Morris spoke of "movement centers" -- places that sustained hope for positive social change in times when there weren't major social movements to be the vehicles for that change. Highlander Center was such a place for the southern civil rights movement. At the University of California, Stiles Hall and the residential coops were in some ways such centers, though that was not their central purpose (as it was with Highlander). In addition to the more formal movement centers, webs of values-based relationships connected people who believed in social and economic justice and democratic participation. For people like Chris Hartmire, the Protestant social gospel was the source for the values; for his Catholic counterparts it was the almost 100 years of social encyclicals; for others drawn to the farmworkers it was socialism; for people like me it was the radical democratic tradition. These ideas, relationships, and centers nurtured the farmworkers' union in its fragile beginnings and helped make it the magnet that it became for socially concerned students across the country.