

UFW 1975-1980: The New Law, New Challenges, the Game, the Purge By Larry Tramutola

When the Agricultural Labor Relations Act was signed into law in 1975, most of the UFW staff and supporters thought that the ALRA, which we all had worked hard to get signed into law, would be the beginning of a new era for farmworkers.

The law was now firmly on the side of workers. This new law was, without debate, the best labor law in the country. For the first time in history, farmworkers would have the law of California on their side as they organized, participated in fair elections, and negotiated contracts.

Little did we know, as we celebrated the success of the passage of the ALRA and the remarkable election victories that followed, that within a short five-year period the union would lose almost all of its key organizers and much of its top leadership, and the union would never reach the potential we had envisioned. Within a decade the union would be reduced to a few thousand members with few contracts and little hope for future success. Most tragically, farmworkers would eventually lose most of the protections and gains they had made.

The passage of the ALRA changed the union in ways no one could have predicted at the time of its passage. Workers could now petition for elections with or without the approval of Cesar Chavez or the union. Workers throughout California had the right to organize, negotiate contracts, and demand representation. Almost overnight the union had to respond to workers in far-flung locales across the state who looked forward to the hope of better wages and a better future. The era of the union -- or Chavez -- determining where and when to organize was over.

Administratively, the union at that time was a mess. The medical plan, the pension plan, and most important, the field offices, where most workers engaged with the union, were staffed with people who, although well-meaning and in most cases hard-working, lacked basic administrative skills.

Almost without exception, our field offices were disorganized, unstructured, and chaotic. Each office had different systems, different procedures, different or nonexistent office hours, and different rules. More often than not, the field office director had a short tenure and any new director was often overwhelmed and developed his/her systems just to cope with the work. There were no policies, no job descriptions, and no system to evaluate personnel. The offices were often dirty and disorganized. This was in the pre-computer, pre-cellular phone era, so accessing information and communication were difficult if not impossible. The field offices may be nostalgically remembered by some, but working in one was hell. No one wanted to really deal with this.

At La Paz, where most of the administrative responsibilities of the union were managed, there were many people who frankly were not equipped to be good administrators. Often they were assigned there because they lacked the skills to be effective in field offices. Few had any background or training for jobs they were assigned to do. Some La Paz staff resented being so far away from "the workers." People came and went, some for short periods of time, others for longer. Unfortunately, there were no personnel policies (I never saw any if there were) nor any procedures to evaluate performance or effectiveness.

For years, staff (including the boycott) was kept to a manageable size by budget constraints and by working people to exhaustion. Burning out staff was an accepted and appreciated practice. There seemed to be an endless supply of (untrained) people willing to work for \$5 per week. Untrained volunteers worked long hours. Dedication and sacrifice were the key attributes. In time, dedication and sacrifice would be replaced by loyalty as the quality most important to the union.

The election campaigns of 1975-78 masked in some ways how disorganized we were internally. Our success in organizing election victories (due to a combination of good organizing, good legal work, a supportive law, worker leadership, and pent-up demand) created even more demands on the local offices, which were understaffed, undertrained, and overwhelmed. Few people in the union, including Chavez, had the necessary administrative skills to manage this new world where organizing had to take place in numerous geographic areas simultaneously and where successful organizing campaigns led to drawn-out negotiations and contracts that needed to be administered.

It has been said that the union often operated best during a crisis and less effectively when there wasn't a crisis. The post-1975 world created a crisis the union was not prepared to handle.

The success the union was having, even with some election losses and some difficult campaigns (Gallo, among others), created an administrative and organizational nightmare. Chavez wisely knew that the field offices needed to improve AND he had to get his own house (La Paz) in order. I believe his reading of management books and talking to management gurus (Peter Drucker, etc.), his ill-fated experimentation with Crosby Milne's Pentagon-inspired systems, and even his association with Synanon should be considered in this context.

Chavez needed internal organization and management skills and was open to new places to find them. What he saw in Synanon was an organization that was managed well and efficiently. Synanon also had resources that the ever-frugal leader wanted: office chairs, rugs, desks, telephone systems. I believe Chavez was intrigued by what he saw and believed that some of what Synanon did right could be implemented in La Paz and perhaps in other union offices.

I was involved in one of the first two groups that went to the Synanon headquarters in Badger, CA, to not only "play the game" but to observe how the Synanon people managed their operations (food delivery, radio station, work responsibilities, etc.). In fact, I remember more of that than I do of the game. I am not sure who was chosen to go or why, but the game, at the beginning, was quite honestly not that big of a deal. Those who went to Badger were generally matched up with someone from Synanon who had similar job responsibilities.

After dinner and discussions, the game was "played." Some people were good at it; some were not; some refused to play. I honestly think that those outside of La Paz overemphasized its importance. What was important, however, is that Chavez was forcing La Paz staff to change -- to improve how they looked at their work, how they managed their work, how they treated others in the union and guests in La Paz. It was Chavez's hope that by improving the work climate at La Paz he could create systems and improve the quality of the management of our offices and the union as a whole. (It may have been naïve, but I believe that was his motivation.) Initially, these efforts did result in some improvement in La Paz. For the first time, there was importance placed on improving administrative functions.

At the same time, our fellow staff in the field offices were facing an avalanche of work from workers in all parts of the state demanding representation, contracts needing to be negotiated, more elections, managing "hiring halls" and contracts that were rigid and unworkable, and at the same time trying to take advantage of more organizing opportunities. *La Causa* was morphing from romantic views of workers, flags, songs, buttons, and posters to a need to become a real union -- a union that could deliver on its promises and its hopes. More personnel and more resources to do the work were demanded by all.

Working in the aforementioned field offices, with few resources, the staff outside of La Paz viewed the goings-on in La Paz with justifiable suspicion and skepticism. "What the hell is going on in La Paz? You are playing games and we are dealing with real problems and the survival of the union."

Field and organizing staff were beginning to say that the only way to manage all the work that needed to be done was to decentralize, develop more worker leadership, and pour more resources into organizing, negotiating, and managing of contracts.

In short, the perfect storm was in the making.

At La Paz, Chavez openly posed the question: "Are we a movement or a union?" He often asked, perhaps rhetorically, if it would be better not to have contracts but rather to speak on behalf of those in need. While he pioneered efforts to train new negotiators and talked of training organizers, I think he was genuinely concerned about the cost and the ability to

invest in the personnel and administration that would be required to build the infrastructure of the union.

Increasingly, there was pressure from the field offices and the legal department to provide more resources for what was an unmanageable workload. At La Paz more people were resisting playing the game, and Chavez more and more continued to see the game as a way to improve behavior and performance. (Remember, there were no job descriptions, no evaluation procedures for staff.) As I saw it, Chavez became more and more paranoid about people who challenged his vision (or who even differed slightly on the means to achieve it), and he became more reliant on family members (some of whom had little experience or success in many aspects of union work). But Chavez was larger than life, and challenging him meant the end of work in the union.

For many in La Paz, and perhaps throughout the union, there were conflicts not easily resolved. On one hand, the improvements that were being made in La Paz were significant and real. On the other hand, there was merit in what some were saying: that the emphasis had to be on organizing workers, not organizing La Paz. Our field offices needed more organizers and additional resources and staff to continue organizing, yet Chavez was saying we had to do more with fewer resources. Working in La Paz meant no mixed loyalties; either you agreed with Chavez's perspective or you were gone.

For better or for worse, La Paz became the first major battleground for tests of loyalty to Chavez. Anyone who was suspected of being "more loyal" to those advocating for worker involvement or greater organizing resources became a target. Those who didn't embrace the game also were targets.

People were "accused" of disloyalty and counter-organizing. Chavez began talking about the need to purge people who were not loyal. Unfortunately, the manner in which people were asked to leave was through a public humiliation and attack.

It was planned. Meetings were held in advance among loyalists to identify those suspected of disloyalty and to script the accusations.

It was public. Rather than deal with people individually, a community meeting was held where people were publicly castigated. These were not polite disagreements; yelling, accusations, and name-calling were encouraged.

It was unjust. No proof of any wrongdoings was required, and anyone who spoke out on behalf of the accused was in turn accused of disloyalty. Those who were silent were assumed to be in agreement with the accusations.

Removal of staff, for whatever reason, could have been accomplished fairly and easily in private and without the public humiliation. But once public accusation became the accepted way of dealing with personnel, it was impossible to stop.

I have wondered for years why Chavez chose this method, and I can only guess that it was in his mind a way of letting others know that dissent was not to be tolerated. (Being asked to leave privately is one thing; being publicly humiliated is quite another.) As has been documented in this forum, this was not the first or last case of accusations against people, or "purges." What was unique, I believe, was the public nature of the attacks, the number of people who were accused, and the total lack of fact in most of the accusations.

Disagreement with "policy" now became disloyalty, and disloyalty meant removal from the union. It became clear that to disagree meant that you needed to leave, either willingly or unwillingly. Disloyalty, not incompetence or ineffectiveness, became the norm for letting staff go. Loyalty was determined pretty much by Chavez and those "loyal" to him. Disagreement meant disloyalty and potential public humiliation. Just at the time the union needed able staff, loyalty became more important than competence. It was a huge mistake.

Post script 1.

By 1980, much of the union's talent had left. Eliseo Medina and Gilbert Padilla were gone. Marshall Ganz and Jessica Govea were on their way out. The exceptional legal staff had mostly left. Nevertheless, workers continued to organize, with the hopes of a better future. During the garlic strike in Hollister (1980-81) and the eventual election organizing campaign in the area I managed (where we won 27 of 29 elections), we were helped immeasurably by the able and effective leadership of the paid reps from Salinas. These paid reps (trained under Marshall Ganz), including the Bustamonte brothers, Mario and Chava, along with Sabino Lopez and others, were invaluable. They came to Hollister daily, often in the early morning, to speak to the workers about the union, the importance of organizing, and the benefits they would receive if they became part of the union. They were loyal AND effective.

Not long after our organizing drive was over, I was asked to come to LaPaz to meet with Chavez. There, anticipating congratulations, I was accused (in this case privately) of being disloyal. My attempts to explain that the success we had in Hollister was due to the workers themselves wanting to organize and to the help we received from the paid reps fell on deaf ears. If I wanted to continue to work for the union, there would be no organizing unless Chavez authorized it. It was time for me to move on.

Postscript 2.

Ironically, the paid reps, who had been elected by their fellow workers and who had volunteered to come to Hollister, as well as other areas, to help organize, were eventually accused of being disloyal and were forced out of the union. But that is another story.