

Los Angeles Boycott Strategy—Thank You, Betsy Goldman 1970

I was not raised in the labor movement and none of my relatives were union members, or if they were, I never knew it. In fact, on my mother's side of the family, they were rice growers. My first introduction to a picket line was as an observer, not a participant. It came in the late 1950s, when as a Catholic religious teaching brother, I was stationed in San Francisco and lived at Franklin and Ellis streets. A group of activists was picketing a supermarket in the Western Addition and it had something to do with civil rights, if I am not mistaken. I remember it being raucous and chaotic but short-lived.

My first activity on a picket line came in late September of 1965 when I had brought food and money from Los Angeles to the Delano grape strikers and Cesar Chavez asked me to visit the picket lines in the fields. Because I was decked out in my religious garb, Cesar might have thought it would be “inspirational” and “affirming” for the striking farmworkers, while at the same time giving the finger to the growers and the assembled police officers.

I spent all afternoon on the picket line and got into the spirit of this confrontational activity very quickly. Pleading with—and shouting at—the strikebreakers, ignoring the personally abusive remarks of the growers and their superintendents, and always careful not to let the police intimidate or push me around. Yet, at the end of the day, I knew with certainty that the Delano grape strike would never be won with picket lines. And I never forgot it.

When I was assigned to direct the Los Angeles grape boycott in 1970, I brought my bias about the strategy of the picket line with me. As a farmworker staff member, I had participated from time to time in boycott picket lines both in San Francisco and Los Angeles, but I was never very impressed with their long-term effectiveness. It took a great deal of time and energy to organize a picket line for one location and it seemed to be a one-shot deal that didn't last very long. People came late, left early, or didn't show up at all, and although it was raucous, confrontational, and chaotic, I couldn't understand its purpose in a place like Los Angeles, which seemed to be non-union at best, and more likely, anti-union.

I was determined to try something else. My thought was to assign one boycott person to the same store each day of the week. With a volunteer staff of 30 or more people, we could cover that many stores of a supermarket chain. I also reasoned that each boycott person was likely to attract a few others from the surrounding area to help, if not every day, at least several days a week. The strategy was to arm the volunteer with a grape boycott leaflet and approach the potential customer before he or she could exit their automobile. Explain in a few words how they could help the cause of the farmworkers and ask them to please shop at another store. We tried it and the daily reports began to show that many customers would cooperate and drive to another store to shop. Some reports were as high as 80 to 90 customers honoring the “picket line.” I wasn't convinced; I wanted to see for myself.

Betsy Goldman, a 17-year-old Beverly Hills high school graduate was a summer boycott volunteer and was living with Bonnie and me and our family at our “loaner” house on South Harvard Street. Ralph's Supermarkets was our boycott target and I had assigned her to one of their flagship stores at 3rd and Vermont. Without telling her, I selected her as my test-marketing expert.

I showed up at the Ralph's store on a weekday morning, shortly before noon. I watched from the sidewalk on the street so that Betsy would not know I was there. There she was, hustling from car to car as they drove into the lot to park. She approached the car, leaflet in hand, and talked to the driver, frequently a woman. After a few seconds, the car would move on and exit the lot or no, the driver would get out of the car and walk to the store. But when that happened, Betsy was already hustling to another newly parked car to talk to its driver. And so it went. It was obvious to me that Betsy was turning away dozens of would-be Ralph's customers, but did Ralph's know it and even care?

Not even an hour had passed when I noticed two well-dressed executives standing in front of the huge superstore; one had his arms folded over his chest and the other was pointing—both were looking at Betsy turning away their customers. They couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it either. A soft-spoken, non-threatening, and attractive 17-year-old young woman was throwing a wrench into the gears of one of the largest supermarket chain stores in the Los Angeles basin. They could not have been more displeased than I was pleased. This was my kind of boycott: at least one person, every day of the week, nine hours a day, pleading one-on-one but not confrontational, and taking its cumulative financial toll week after week.

We settled with Ralph's and they could not have been nicer or more helpful. Not only did they not sell grapes, we had complete access to their stores and distribution centers for inspection, and they gave us valuable feedback and gossip about the effectiveness of our grape boycott.

Hard work? You got that right! Thank you, Betsy Goldman.