

Introduction

by LeRoy Chatfield

By the end of 1965, it was clear that the Delano Grape Strike could never be won through the use of picket lines and work stoppage. The strike area was too large (300 square miles) and the growers had unlimited access to strikebreakers, especially from the Mexican border areas.

However, because Schenley Liquors was one of the struck growers, Jim Drake - a California Migrant Minister and one of Cesar Chavez's closest advisors - thought that public pressure in the form of a consumer boycott could be brought to bear on Schenley because of their national liquor brands, and he was right. The threat - and the public noise generated by supporters of the farmworkers - about a consumer boycott caused Schenley to recognize the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) and to sign a union contract. The Delano grape workers were such an insignificant part of their international corporate business, it made no economic sense for them to risk the sales of branded liquors because of a small labor dispute in the Central Valley backwaters of California.

DiGiorgio Fruit Corporation was also in the consumer product business, and they too could be vulnerable to a boycott of their products. Again, a smattering of boycott activity, negative publicity, and political pressure exerted by then governor of California, Edmund G. Pat Brown, brought about a secret ballot union representation election supervised by the American Arbitration Association, an election won by the United Farm Workers.

Then it was only a matter of time, and the noisy and public threats of a consumer boycott before the major wineries in California that owned vineyards and hired farm workers recognized the UFW and negotiated contracts - Christian Brothers, Almaden, Paul Masson, Gallo, Perelli-Minetti, etc.

The table grape growers were in a much different marketing position than the consumer branded wineries and were not intimidated by the threat of a grape boycott, negative publicity, or the pressure applied by UFW supporters in some major cities on wholesale produce houses and major chain stores. Despite the valiant and sustained boycott efforts of the farmworker union, they were still able to cultivate, pick, pack, ship and market their grapes. Their public relations mantra never changed: there is no strike, our workers do not want a union, and the grape boycott is not hurting us.

This brings us to January 1969 and a series of boycott planning meetings organized in Delano by Cesar Chavez to assess the grape boycott strategy, stoke it up and re-energize it.

The first meeting (Tape 1: Parts 1, 2, 3 and Tape 2: Parts 1, 2) was led by Jim Drake, the director of the grape boycott, and his staff of volunteers: Jerry Brown, Jane Brown, and Venustiano Olguin. The only other participants were Cesar Chavez, Richard Chavez, Manual Chavez, Chris Hartmire, and Gene Boutilier. (I have been unable to identify the voices of at least two others who participated in this planning session.) Most of this meeting is taken up with Jim Drake and his staff reporting on the success/lack of success of the boycott and offering a series of recommendations to improve the boycott. Listeners will have the rare (very rare, I should say) opportunity to listen to free-wheeling and opinionated comments of Manual Chavez, the cousin Cesar Chavez. (Cesar always referred to him as his brother.) This meeting will illustrate to the careful listener how Cesar

Chavez processed the ideas of others, his patient listening technique, and his penchant for asking seemingly innocent questions that many times punctured the expertise and/or exposed the lack of adequate research done by the person who was making the report.

The second meeting (Tape 1: Part 1, 2) in the January 1969 boycott planning series had a much larger audience – the several dozen farmworker families newly recruited by Manual Chavez to work on the boycott, the Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Oakland strikers and their boycott volunteers, Cesar Chavez, UFW board members, Tony Orendain and Philip Vera Cruz, Jim Drake and his boycott staff, and Fred Ross, Sr. The new farmworker boycott recruits were introduced at the meeting and given a heroes reception. The meeting is part boycott briefing, part motivational rally, part community building, and part staging for a CBS documentary film.

In Spanish, Jerry Brown provided the background about the successes of the international grape boycott, while those with boycott experience chipped in their own evaluations and suggestions, and Fred Ross, Sr., based on his own extensive New York and Los Angeles boycott experiences, lectured the group about the nuts and bolts of creating a successful boycott operation – “what works and what doesn’t.” In the second tape, Jim Drake led the group in some of the traditional farmworker movement songs that were an integral part of any farmworker meeting, and when Cesar Chavez is introduced, the listener will hear the distinctive, rhythmic farmworker movement “clap” that came to define any meeting dominated by farmworkers and their supporters.

The third meeting (Tape 1: Part 1, 2; Tape 2: Part 1, 2) was a boycott retreat at the Franciscan Retreat Center in Three Rivers, CA. All the full time boycotters from California (Los Angeles, San Francisco, & Oakland) plus some of their key boycott supporters, the new farmworker families recruits ready to leave for East Coast boycott cities, Cesar Chavez, Jim Drake, Fred Ross, Jerry Cohen, Larry Itliong, and other UFW staff members came together for a two-day boycott workshop. The large group had been divided up into smaller groups to brainstorm about how to make the boycott more effective, and then came back together to report their findings. Cesar Chavez served as a kind of master teacher who extracted and wove together bits and pieces of ideas from others, reconstituted them as his own, and then proceeded to teach a lesson about how to create a more successful boycott. Jerry Cohen, general counsel of the UFW, spoke – and told stories – to the boycott assembly about legal matters that related to the strike, the growers, and the boycott.