

## **CESAR CHAVEZ AND THE UFW: REVIVAL OF THE CONSUMER BOYCOTT**

Of all the personal experiences that inspired Cesar Chavez to undertake the challenge of building a union of farmworkers, none was more important than his history in the fields. Chavez had done the backbreaking work of picking cantaloupes, and he saw that hardworking farmworker families were poorly compensated and subjected to inhumane living conditions. Chavez also understood that farmworkers were neither afraid nor reluctant to resist; but he had witnessed enough failed campaigns to know the importance of picking the right strategy and not simply settling for such traditional labor tactics as the strike. His experience in the fields convinced him that new strategies and tactics, such as using a consumer boycott to win a labor dispute, were necessary to overcome the history of grower dominance and farmworker defeat.

### **CHAVEZ IN THE FIELDS**

Farmworkers in the 1930s were called migrants, because they were always moving from town to town in search of work. The Chavez family was no different. In the spring, they threshed beans and picked walnuts in the small coastal town of Oxnard, north of Los Angeles, and then drove a few hundred miles north to earn about thirty cents a day—collectively—cutting and pitting apricots in San Jose. When Cesar was twelve or thirteen, he picked cantaloupes for eight cents an hour, while adult workers received twelve cents. Although Congress had enacted a federal minimum wage of twenty-five cents an hour in 1938, farmworkers were exempted from this and every other protection afforded by federal labor law.

California's politically powerful growers ensured that the state's primarily Mexican farmworkers would not share in the benefits of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal for American workers, a fact typically overlooked in accounts of labor's progress during this era. Nor could Congress claim ignorance of the farmworkers' plight. John Steinbeck's

classic novel *The Grapes of Wrath* had brought national attention to the issue, and his stirring tale of the Joad family's fight for survival in California's fields won converts to the migrants' cause. But Mexicans made up more than half of the state's farmworkers, and elected officials were not going to anger California's influential agricultural interests in order to bring justice to Mexican workers. After all, a Congress that remained silent as Mexican American citizens were denied the right to vote, to eat in restaurants, to patronize movie theaters, and to attend public schools was hardly going to get worked up about low wages and inhumane working conditions.

The Chavez family made so many trips up and down California that Cesar and his two siblings attended thirty-seven schools before they started high school. Cesar performed some of the most physically demanding work available, including topping sugar beets in the Sacramento Valley, thinning lettuce in Salinas, and picking broccoli in Brawley, where he and other workers had to stand in water and mud up to their necks. He planted onions and carrots in the winter months; the constant stooping required for this activity left workers' backs hurting all day. They were paid \$3 a day for planting seedlings for half a mile.<sup>1</sup>

When he was nineteen, Chavez was picking cotton in the town of Corcoran, in the San Joaquin Valley, when a car came by with loudspeakers blaring, urging workers to walk off the job to protest their low pay and to come to a rally downtown. The Chavez family had always stuck by workers who complained of unfair treatment on the job; Cesar once noted that they were probably "one of the strikingest families in California." On this occasion, Cesar and his brother Richard left and joined with several thousand cotton pickers in a downtown park. The recently formed National Farm Labor Union had called the strike, and a union leader started talking to the workers about "*la causa*" (the cause). Chavez later recalled, "I would have died right then if someone had told me how and why to die for our cause. But no one did. There was a crisis, and a mob, but there was no organization, and nothing came of it at all. A week later everyone was back picking cotton in the same field at the same low wages. It was dramatic. People came together. Then it was over. That won't organize farm workers."<sup>2</sup>

Chavez's experience in Corcoran mirrored a long history of failed efforts to organize agricultural laborers. As far back as 1903, Japanese and Mexican farmworkers had tried to organize for better wages and working conditions, but they were rebuffed even by the American Federation of Labor, which refused to help workers who were not white. In 1913,

the Industrial Workers of the World organized a rally of two thousand workers at a large ranch in rural northern California, who were then attacked by national guardsmen. The two lead organizers for the IWW were arrested, wrongly convicted of murder, and sentenced to life imprisonment. Despite such obstacles, the primarily Mexican and Filipino farm workforce, along with poor whites and blacks, consistently fought back. Farmworkers staged more than 140 strikes in the California fields from 1930 to 1939; in 1933 alone, more than fifteen thousand predominately Mexican cotton workers were on strike. Protesting workers were arrested, violently attacked, or, in many cases, both.

An official from the Roosevelt administration reported that farmworkers lived on as little as fifty-six cents a day in “filth, squalor and entire absence of sanitation” and that local authorities “forbid free speech and assembly, and indiscriminately arrest innocent men and women under fake charges.” In rural communities, “so-called peace officers do the bidding of their masters with the able assistance of pistols, machineguns, tear gas bombs, and hard wood sticks.” A U.S. Senate committee in 1939 and 1940 found “a shocking degree of human misery among farmworkers” and a pattern of “sheer vigilantism” on the part of growers. But the committee did not issue its report until October 1942, when America’s war effort was pushing the plight of farmworkers and other nonmilitary issues to the side.<sup>3</sup>

After the war, attempts to organize farmworkers confronted a new obstacle: the bracero program. This joint U.S. and Mexican government program had begun during World War II to address labor shortages, and it had effectively replaced resident farmworkers with temporary “guest workers” who were forced to return to Mexico once the harvest was over. For the next two decades, 4.5 million braceros came to California to pick crops, taking jobs from the primarily Mexican American residents, who had proved willing to fight for better living conditions and wages. The bracero program represented an insurmountable barrier to labor progress for these farmworkers, and in 1959 the AFL-CIO and the Catholic Rural Life Conference mounted a strong campaign in Congress to end it. Their efforts succeeded when Secretary of Labor James Mitchell, a devout Catholic, imposed reforms that reduced the number of California braceros from five hundred thousand in 1959 to around two hundred thousand in 1962. By 1963, one year after Cesar Chavez began trying to build an organization of farmworkers, Congress had ended the program.<sup>4</sup>

From Chavez’s perspective, the timing could not have been better. But other longstanding obstacles to farmworker organizing remained. Grow-

ers still controlled local politicians and law enforcement and had the political clout to prevent changes in federal or state law that would protect union organizing. The growers included some of California's wealthiest individuals and corporations, while Cesar Chavez had a name (the National Farm Workers Association), a red and black thunderbird eagle logo, and a plan to survive by collecting \$3.50 in monthly dues from workers. Chavez had so little money that he and his wife, Helen, picked cotton from 6:00 A.M. to 2:00 P.M. to support their eight children, and he spent the balance of the day and late into the night knocking on doors and meeting with farmworkers. Cesar Chavez's drive to organize farmworkers has been described as a David versus Goliath struggle, but even this analogy may greatly underestimate the odds he faced.<sup>5</sup>

But Chavez did not begin his organizing drive equipped only with a big heart and a passion to succeed. A decade earlier, in 1952, he had met Fred Ross, an organizer for the Community Services Organization, a group affiliated with Saul Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation. The IAF had empowered previously disenfranchised working-class residents of Chicago's Back of the Yards neighborhood, through a combination of grassroots organizing and securing the support of the religious community and labor unions; and the CSO intended to bring this successful model to California's Mexican American communities. Though he initially expressed reluctance to talk with Ross, Chavez was quickly hooked on becoming a CSO organizer. Ross trained him in the door-to-door, house meeting method of organizing that would become the UFW hallmark. Chavez later concluded that Ross was his "hero" and that, while he had "learned quite a bit from studying Gandhi, Fred Ross Sr. . . . changed my life."<sup>6</sup>

Chavez and Ross organized twenty-two new CSO chapters in San Jose's Mexican American neighborhoods during the 1950s, and Chavez became the CSO's executive director in 1959. The group was making a name for itself by registering tens of thousands of voters, offering citizenship classes, and promoting Mexican American interests in city affairs. But Chavez's dream was to organize a union for farmworkers. The IAF's Alinsky never shared Chavez's passion for this endeavor, arguing in 1967 that organizing farmworkers "was like fighting on a constantly disintegrating bed of sand." Alinsky even suggested that rural Mexican American workers should be "retrained for urban living." At the CSO's March 1962 convention, Chavez offered a proposal for a pilot farmworker organizing project, but the CSO membership voted it down, preferring to focus the group's energies on urban residents. Chavez re-

---

Figure 1  
near here



Fred Ross Sr. and Cesar Chavez. Photo by Jon Lewis.

sponded by resigning from the organization and launching his own organizing drive.<sup>7</sup>

Chavez did not have a “farmworker organizing master plan” for building power; rather, he compared his approach to picking grapes: you start by picking a bunch and then go on to the entire vineyard. By the fall of 1965, his person-to-person, house-by-house approach was slowly and steadily building a strong sense of community among farmworkers. His fledgling organization, the National Farm Workers Association, was providing assistance to farmworkers who had problems with government agencies and was also aggressively registering voters. The NFWA had twelve hundred members, although only two hundred were paying dues. But Chavez was patient. He knew the long history of organizing failures—and knew that the workers themselves were aware of this history. The association was only three years old, and Chavez felt that it was not yet strong enough to win a labor dispute against the powerful growers. Nevertheless, he lent the group’s support to a brief and unsuccessful strike by workers in the rose industry in the spring of 1965. That fall, when workers in the grape fields of Delano wanted to call a strike over the grow-

ers' refusal to raise wages from \$1.20 to \$1.40 an hour (a tactic that had recently won this increase in the Coachella Valley), Chavez again agreed, even though he doubted that they had the strength to prevail.

### THE BOYCOTT BEGINS

The Delano strike against grape growers was called by Filipino workers who were affiliated with the AFL-CIO–chartered Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC). Filipinos were a minority of the primarily Mexican farm workforce and lacked the capacity to win a strike. Nevertheless, their decision to strike on September 8 forced Chavez and the NFWA to either join the struggle or appear to be turning their backs on workers. Chavez believed that it should be the workers' decision, and on September 16, Mexican Independence Day, a crowd of more than twelve hundred NFWA supporters and members filled the parish hall of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church to decide whether to join the strike. The revolutionary spirit of the day led to chants of “*Huelga! Huelga! Huelga!*” and the great Delano grape strike—and the impetus for America's first successful national consumer boycott—began.

Despite the excited chants, Chavez knew that the NFWA and AWOC could not win the Delano grape strike through traditional means. Although picketing in the fields was robust, many of the people on strike went elsewhere to work. Marshall Ganz, who became the union's organizing director, estimated that those picketing involved a “hard core of about 150,” a relatively small number, which led the union to initiate the “roving picket line” to give the illusion of greater numbers. Chavez was recruiting student, labor, and religious volunteers to support the strikers, but the bottom line was that grape growers harvested a record crop that fall. As grape season drew to a close and all the workers left the fields, activists and strikers were left with nothing to picket. Chavez had to think of something for them to do. He instructed two workers and a student to follow a shipment of grapes from one of the picketed growers as it made its way to the Oakland docks. When Chavez's delegation arrived on the docks, they convinced the longshoremen not to load the fruit. More than a thousand ten-ton cases of grapes were left rotting on the dock. Chavez and the strikers had figured out not only a way to keep members and activists busy but also a strategy that gave the farmworkers movement a real chance of victory.<sup>8</sup>

While Cesar Chavez did not invent the boycott—the term originated in Ireland in 1880, after Captain Charles Boycott evicted tenants from his

land and the town stopped doing business with him as a way of pressuring him to allow their return—the farmworkers movement revived and reinvented this strategy. Chavez was so taken with the idea of consumer boycotts of corporations that he even named one of his dogs Boycott (the other was Huelga).<sup>9</sup> Although the initial use of economic pressure was not specifically planned, Chavez had long believed that the only way farmworkers could counter the growers' superior economic power was through public support for an economic boycott.

Chavez accurately described the boycott's beginnings as "helter skelter." The almost inadvertent start of the boycott on the Oakland waterfront was followed by regular picket lines on Bay Area docks, which were honored by the progressive International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union. As ILWU workers refused to load nonunion grapes, Chavez decided to launch a formal boycott of the two largest corporations involved in the Delano grape industry—Schenley Industries and the DiGiorgio Corporation.<sup>10</sup>

Because it was early December 1965, Schenley became the first target—the company's Cutty Sark whiskey and its other liquors were big sellers during the holiday season. This initial attempt at a national consumer boycott was not particularly sophisticated—it has been described as a "rag tag affair"—but it got the job done. Union volunteers and staff spread out to more than one hundred cities, handing out cards that people were asked to sign and send to Schenley's headquarters pledging that the signers would not buy Schenley's products until they were union-made. Supporters in Boston held a "Boston Grape Party" to spread the boycott; sympathetic unions in New York City picketed Schenley headquarters; and student, labor, and church activists picketed and leafleted liquor stores throughout the country, demanding that Schenley products be removed from the shelves. In March 1966, a U.S. Senate subcommittee hearing in Delano led to a high-profile confrontation between Senator Robert F. Kennedy and a local sheriff, which brought increased national publicity for the Schenley boycott. When these actions were followed by a fabricated memo spread by union sympathizer "Blackie" Leavitt, head of the San Francisco Bartenders Union, stating that the city's bartenders would no longer sell Schenley liquor, the company quickly caved. In April 1966, Schenley workers won a union contract that immediately raised wages and established a hiring hall.<sup>11</sup>

This quick victory confirmed Chavez's faith in the power of the boycott. But Schenley was not a typical Delano grower. Its five thousand acres of Delano grapes represented only a tiny part of its holdings, and most

of its \$250 million in annual sales came from liquor, not grapes. Many of Schenley's diverse operations were unionized, and it viewed itself as having good relations with its unions. Delano's grape growers correctly viewed Schenley as unrepresentative of the industry, and they would not so quickly capitulate to a boycott. This became clear when the union next confronted the giant DiGiorgio Corporation, historically one of California's leading agricultural powers. DiGiorgio's anti-union attitudes and practices had been fictionalized in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, and its staff had already used violence against union members. Even though the company's farming operations accounted for only 10 percent of its total business, DiGiorgio would not accept a farmworkers union easily. Chavez called for a boycott of all the company's products, including its well-known TreeSweet brand juices and S&W canned foods. The union quickly commenced picketing and reaching out to consumers at stores, warehouses, and DiGiorgio's San Francisco headquarters.<sup>12</sup>

In May 1967, after nearly a year of encouraging consumers across America to boycott DiGiorgio's products, the UFW increased pressure through a new tactic: blocking grape distribution centers. Boycott staff were convincing shoppers not to buy TreeSweet or S&W products, but reducing sales would be even easier if these products never reached supermarkets and were not available for purchase. The UFW unleashed the new tactic in Chicago, whose S&W distribution center supplied the entire Midwest. Although the union had only sixty people trying to stop distribution, primarily students and labor activists, many Teamster truck drivers refused to cross the UFW picket line at the distribution center. The element of surprise effectively shut the facility down. When the Catholic bishop of Chicago allowed UFW supporters to use his office to coordinate an ongoing blockade, DiGiorgio began to talk settlement.

After extensive negotiations, the first UFW representation election among DiGiorgio's workers was slated for August 30, 1967. The boycott had forced the powerful grower to hold an election, and Chavez felt it essential that the UFW win. In the 1967 DiGiorgio election, the only union competing with the UFW for the workers' loyalty was the Teamsters. The Teamsters had little base among farmworkers but had the advantage of being the grower's preferred choice.

Leaving nothing to chance, Chavez asked Fred Ross, his mentor from the CSO, to take charge of organizing for the election. Ross used the DiGiorgio campaign to introduce a model for winning elections that would bring the UFW victories in hundreds of representation elections in future years. UFW organizing director Marshall Ganz would later describe

Ross's training of fifty or sixty young organizers for this election as akin to a "school"—and its instructor made sure that his lessons were learned. Ross required organizers to keep a file card on every worker, to record every contact with that worker, to write down any questions the worker had, and to keep going back until the individual agreed to vote for the UFW. Ross expected his staff to update him daily on their progress and "not to leave anything to chance."<sup>13</sup> Ross's meticulous approach applied as readily to identifying voters and getting them to the polls in political elections, a connection not lost on the many UFW alumni who subsequently organized progressive electoral campaigns.

The DiGiorgio election also marked the emergence of Eliseo Medina, a twenty-year-old farmworker whose first exposure to Cesar Chavez had been at the Mexican Independence Day church meeting in 1965, when the Delano strike was approved. Initially, Medina had not been impressed by Chavez, considering him "a little pipsqueak." But Chavez's words inspired Medina, who, after hearing that the poor "shouldn't be taken advantage of" and that "we deserve more," became firmly committed to the strike.<sup>14</sup> As the DiGiorgio campaign was getting under way, Medina had wandered into the UFW hiring hall, inquiring about opportunities to pick wine grapes. He was greeted by Dolores Huerta, who, like Chavez, had been recruited by Fred Ross to be a CSO organizer and had joined the AFL-CIO's campaign to unionize farmworkers before joining the NFWA in 1962. Huerta told Medina that the season had not yet started, and she asked if he would like to help with the election. Medina agreed, having no idea of Ross's no-nonsense expectations.<sup>15</sup>

Medina's chance participation as part of Ross's election team enabled him to learn directly from a master of organizing and was his first step in becoming one of America's most successful labor and immigrant organizers. Though inexperienced, Medina was sufficiently effective to prompt the Teamsters to beat him up badly during the run-up to the election, requiring four stitches in his lip. (The Teamsters of the 1960s and 1970s often resorted to violence to intimidate opponents. Medina was only one of countless UFW members victimized in the next decade by the then corruption-plagued union.) The DiGiorgio election, generated by the boycott, created a long-term model for union and electoral organizing, brought Eliseo Medina into the organizing field, and won the UFW a critical victory, with a 530 to 331 vote.<sup>16</sup>

The boycott had barely started, and the strategy had already garnered two union contracts against major growers. Chavez next targeted the Giumarra Vineyards. This powerful grower had figured out a way to cir-

cumvent the boycott by shipping its grapes under more than one hundred different, non-boycotted labels. As a result, pro-UFW shoppers trying to avoid purchasing the Giumarra brand could unknowingly purchase boycotted grapes. Giumarra's tactic posed a dilemma for Chavez. He believed that it was much easier to get consumers to boycott a specific brand of grape than to convince them to forego grapes entirely. But Huerta, Ross, and others argued that to combat Giumarra's false-labeling strategy, the boycott would have to be expanded to the entire table grape industry. It was an audacious plan, but Giumarra had given Chavez and the union no choice. The industrywide grape boycott began in January 1968 and soon burst into public consciousness as never before.

### **RECRUITING FOR THE GRAPE BOYCOTT: STUDENTS, WOMEN, CLERGY, LABOR**

Convincing millions of Americans and Canadians to stop buying grapes was quite an ambitious goal. Expanding the boycott in this way required a far greater number of staff and volunteers, more training and coordination, and the creation of extensive alliances with outside groups. With unlimited funds, the UFW could have run slick radio and television commercials urging people not to buy grapes, hired public relations staff to generate sympathetic media coverage, and taken out full-page newspaper ads to spread the word. But the UFW could not afford such advertising. Instead, it was attempting to run a nationwide consumer boycott by recruiting volunteers to work more than a hundred hours a week for weekly stipends of \$5 plus room and board.

The sheer number of personnel needed to pull off such a boycott appeared insurmountable. In the forty to fifty cities targeted by the boycott in the United States and Canada, thousands of supermarkets were selling grapes. At least one volunteer had to be present at each supermarket to convince shoppers to stop buying grapes, while others were needed to staff tables at major street corners. Additional help was required to build and maintain community support for the boycott and to work closely with institutional allies in the labor, religious, and student communities. Although the personnel and organizational requirements for operating an effective nationwide boycott were onerous, the UFW was convinced that it was the only way to force growers to the negotiating table.

The immediate challenge was recruitment. When the boycott was first expanded in January 1968, UFW vice president Dolores Huerta headed to New York City with more than fifty farmworker families to direct the

operation in one of the nation's key distribution points for grapes. Many of the California boycott directors had formerly been farmworkers; for them, staffing the national boycott often meant leaving California for the first time, traveling to places where they had no friends or family, and then conducting a campaign with little training or experience. But it was also true that shoppers were more easily persuaded by those who had actually labored in the fields and could explain the unfair conditions firsthand.

Eliseo Medina recalled that when Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez asked him to go to Chicago to work on the boycott, he was twenty-one years old and had never been outside Delano. "When I was asked to go to Chicago and stop the grapes, I didn't know where Chicago was. I thought it was an hour away driving, so I said, 'What time do I leave?'" He then learned he would have to take a plane. Equipped with "one name and a bag of buttons," Medina was dispatched to Chicago to "go stop the sale of grapes." Volunteers from established allies in labor unions, churches, and civil rights organizations, including the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), quickly supplemented this boycott staff. Skilled activists from these groups joined farmworkers-turned-organizers like Medina in anchoring boycott efforts in New York City, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Detroit. But boycotters were needed in dozens of other cities as well, and the UFW sought them from the new generation of idealistic young people committed to social and economic justice.<sup>17</sup>

### **America's First Student-Labor Coalition**

The UFW attracted students and recent college graduates to join the boycott staff in two ways. First, it gave them the opportunity to work full time in a movement for social change—never mind that the pay was low and the hours were long. Second, boycott volunteers gained entrée into a whole new world of labor and civil rights activism, with many receiving training in organizing and campaign strategy directly from experts such as Fred Ross, Marshall Ganz, and Cesar Chavez. The UFW, through the vehicle of the boycott, became the preeminent home for young activists seeking full-time engagement in a movement for social justice. Volunteers had the opportunity to work with others equally committed to activist work and progressive ideals, creating a deep sense of community that was not easy to find in the often contentious political movements of the era.<sup>18</sup>

Gary Guthman, who introduced me to the world of UFW organizers in 1977, described how he became part of the movement. In September 1976, Guthman was on campus at the University of California at Berkeley, thinking about enrolling there after spending two years attending college in Maine. He observed a UFW organizer “barking” her “rap” and “sweeping” people over to the UFW table. Guthman approached the table and was asked if he would sign up to help the farmworkers. Convinced by the organizer’s rap that help for the farmworkers was desperately needed, he signed up and told them to “give me a call.” The organizer called Guthman the next night and asked him to come to Telegraph Avenue the next day to register voters. Guthman soon found himself doing his own “barking” and quickly became an expert at juggling clipboards and attracting people to his table.

Still in his first day of work, and only two days after learning about the UFW, Guthman was given a bullhorn and encouraged to really get people’s attention. He continued volunteering and received an evening call two weeks later, asking him to help provide all-night security for Cesar Chavez, who was staying in a Berkeley church. Guthman could hardly resist the chance to protect the legendary UFW leader; while on duty, he was personally greeted by Chavez. Imagine working for a well-known group for less than a month and being personally thanked for your service by the head of the national organization, who also happened to be one of America’s preeminent labor and civil rights leaders. Chavez had a personal magnetism borne from his deep commitment to social justice that often drew talented young activists to join the UFW; after meeting him that night, Guthman was hooked. He decided to become a full-time UFW volunteer, launching his eventual career as a labor organizer less than a month after first being exposed to the movement.<sup>19</sup>

Guthman’s experience was far from unique. Hundreds of college students were so attracted to the idea of making a difference in the world that they dropped out of school soon after encountering the farmworkers movement. Lilli Sprintz was a student taking archaeology classes at Temple University in Philadelphia in 1969 when she began questioning why she was not rallying against the Vietnam war, fighting for civil rights, or taking some other action to improve the world. While she was wondering, “What could I do?” she walked off campus to a shopping center, where female farmworkers were promoting the boycott in front of the A&P grocery store. One of the women, Carolina Franco, told Sprintz “that people would be picking crops in the fields all day and not be able to use the bathroom” and that “women would have to make a circle

around the woman who had to go, so she could have some privacy.” Angry at this lack of respect for workers, Sprintz visited the women later at the Philadelphia boycott house. The young woman who had felt herself “floating” through college found her home, and Sprintz worked for the UFW for the next five years.<sup>20</sup>

Harriet Teller was one of many who left college after a summer internship with the movement. A University of Michigan student from a family of union organizers, Teller spent the summer of 1970 working on the Philadelphia boycott and was there when the UFW prevailed in the grape campaign. Noting that “the spirit of victory was contagious,” she did not return to classes in Ann Arbor that fall. After leaving Philadelphia in 1971, she spent eighteen months organizing the boycott in St. Louis. In 1987, Teller finally graduated from Michigan, twenty years after she began.<sup>21</sup>

Whereas the UFW offered activists like Guthman and Sprintz immediate entry into an exciting multiracial movement for social and economic justice, other labor unions of the 1960s and 1970s were not interested in recruiting them. To the contrary, as Marshall Ganz observed, “no unions were hiring in the sixties when they were strongest.” Ganz first learned about unions in 1965, when SNCC and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) organized a meeting at the Highlander Center in Tennessee, the famous training center for civil rights activists. But no mainstream unions attended. Ganz concluded, “While the Peace Corps and the poverty programs were recruiting us, unions were too afraid of communists to talk to us. The unions were so scared of young people, and an organization fearful of the young is a dying organization.”<sup>22</sup>

Born in Bakersfield, California, only a short drive from agricultural fields, Ganz was among a group of white students from elite schools who had participated in the Mississippi Freedom Summer campaign in 1964. That same year, he had dropped out of Harvard to work for civil rights in the South. When he returned home from Mississippi, he observed that the plight of California’s rural farmworkers involved many of the same injustices he had witnessed being perpetrated against black people in the South. As Ganz came to see the farmworkers with “Mississippi eyes,” he decided to join the UFW. From 1965 to 1981, he was among the farmworkers’ chief strategists and campaign organizers, playing a major role in building the movement. Like Harriet Teller, Ganz eventually returned to his original college to get his bachelor’s degree, in his case twenty-eight years later.<sup>23</sup>

Since SNCC no longer provided white students with year-round ac-

---

Figure 2 near  
here

---



Marshall Ganz directs a question to a union member. Photo by Nick Jones.

tivist jobs, a well-trained cadre of politically committed young organizers found themselves looking for new challenges when the UFW grape strike commenced in September 1965. They were thus available a few months later, when the Schenley boycott was launched. They had already become experts in picketing and other forms of nonviolent protest, and their experience with local police and law enforcement in Mississippi proved invaluable for interactions with sheriffs in Delano. The involvement of these former students from the civil rights movement heightened interest in the UFW among other urban activists, bolstering recruitment. Student recruitment also benefited from Chavez's frequent campus speaking engagements, which introduced many to the farmworkers' cause and invariably ended with people rushing to sign up to volunteer.<sup>24</sup>

Although the role of student activism in the antiwar and civil rights movements is widely recognized, the UFW's success at forging the first labor-student alliance is often overlooked. The UFW did not inherit the allegiance of students; rather, the union actively recruited students and created a culture hospitable to their broader social concerns. Cesar Chavez, like Martin Luther King Jr., spoke out against the Vietnam war, when some believed that he should confine his opinions to issues more narrowly focused on workers in the fields. But Chavez's antiwar stance, as well as his zealous support for the civil rights struggle of African Amer-

icans, helped the UFW attract young activists whose concerns extended beyond the labor movement. The UFW's constitutional convention in 1973, for example, adopted a resolution urging the United States to withhold recognition of the military junta the U.S. government had helped to install in Chile, and the delegates stood in memory of that nation's democratically elected and recently assassinated former leader, Salvador Allende. From resolutions on Chile to protests against government crackdowns on progressive groups, the UFW demonstrated that, unlike others in the labor movement, it shared young activists' broader social vision.<sup>25</sup>

In contrast, these young people saw AFL-CIO president George Meany as "epitomizing all that was wrong with the labor movement." Meany and the AFL-CIO staunchly backed the Vietnam war, and in 1970 the longtime labor chief made these comments about youthful antiwar protesters: "There is more venereal disease among them. . . . There are more of them smoking pot and . . . they have long beards and look dirty and smell dirty." Meany's lack of personal commitment to civil rights was seen in his refusal to sanction official AFL-CIO participation in the 1963 March on Washington, where Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous "I have a dream" speech. While AFL-CIO lobbyists did back all of the era's major civil rights legislation, Meany defended the discriminatory hiring policies of the building trades unions and referred to a new generation of "wild men of the NAACP" and fire-eating "black militants." According to Jim Drake, who began working with Chavez as a migrant minister in 1962 and became a key UFW organizer, the UFW's political and strategic autonomy within the AFL-CIO drove Meany "up the wall."<sup>26</sup>

Meany could not understand the UFW posting signs on college campuses to recruit \$5 a week organizers for the boycott, as labor was accustomed to hiring only well-paid professional organizers. Nor was Meany happy about the UFW's political independence, particularly when the union's grassroots outreach to Latino voters had been instrumental in Robert Kennedy defeating Hubert Humphrey, the candidate backed by the AFL-CIO, in the 1968 California presidential primary. The UFW joined the nation's student movement in strongly backing George McGovern in the 1972 presidential race, whereas Meany's AFL-CIO stayed neutral. And one can only imagine Meany's reaction to Chavez's endorsement of Black Panther Party member Bobby Seale in the 1973 Oakland mayor's race. All in all, Drake concluded that the UFW's dual role as both a union and a social movement of the poor, whose leadership and membership were primarily Latinos, gave the AFL-CIO "nothing but headaches."<sup>27</sup>

In contrast to the indifference and even hostility young activists encountered from the nation's leading labor unions, the UFW laid out a welcome mat. Longtime labor activist Kim Fellner, who began working in 1974 with the same SEIU local of Pennsylvania social workers that launched the career of future SEIU president Andy Stern, recalled that "most AFL-CIO unions had been closed communities for more than 15 years. I knew no one active in the labor movement and few who thought well of it." Susan Sachen, who joined the boycott in Boston in 1971, expressed the view of many volunteers in noting that she "would never have gotten involved with another union because working for the UFW was working for the movement." As a result of her UFW experience, Sachen went on to become a lifelong labor organizer. She followed her UFW stint by working on the J. P. Stevens boycott and then was a key organizer in Denver in the first Justice for Janitors campaign. Sachen spent more than twenty years with SEIU and the California Labor Federation and is one of countless skilled and committed young activists for whom the UFW boycott provided the only available entry to the labor movement. If Cesar Chavez and the UFW had never launched a boycott, Sachen and other valuable organizers would have been forever lost to the labor movement.<sup>28</sup>

Students and young people are vital to national campaigns for many reasons, including practical ones such as their capacity to work long hours, their ability to pick up and move on short notice, and the presence of campuses in communities large and small across America. But despite the obvious advantages of labor unions building relationships with students, the UFW was the only one to aggressively recruit these young people from 1965 until 1995, when new leadership in the AFL-CIO finally began encouraging student recruitment. Today, as other chapters describe, labor-student alliances are often formed for economic justice campaigns. But Cesar Chavez and the UFW deserve credit for pioneering this strategy.

### **Organizing Opportunities for Women**

In addition to actively recruiting students for the boycott, the UFW also distinguished itself from other unions that had primarily male membership by empowering women organizers. UFW vice president Dolores Huerta was a top leader in the union, and she served as the union's first contract negotiator. This was an unusually prominent role for a woman of that era in a male-dominated union. Huerta not only negotiated the UFW's first union contract (with Schenley) but also was in charge of



Dolores Huerta in front of Safeway headquarters, 1968. Photo by Jon Lewis.

building the union's negotiating department. She headed the New York City boycott when the grape campaign went industrywide in 1968 and created a model for building broad community support, assisting efforts along the East Coast and throughout the Midwest. One gets a good sense of Huerta's organizing style from a letter she mailed to boycott offices across the country in 1969:

In those areas that are absolutely clean like Long Island, we are beginning to do saturation type organizing. The students have volunteered to form a speakers bureau and we now have students who will be going to churches to speak on the boycott. After we cover churches and political groups, we hope to pick up enough speakers to approach each, individual union shop. We are doing this by areas though, and as we pick up people to help we refer them to the coordinator in their own town, or neighborhood. We hope to build a community neighborhood machine by this method for the boycott.<sup>29</sup>

---

Figure 3  
near here

---

Huerta returned to California in February 1969 and assumed leadership of the San Francisco boycott. She had won an agreement from A&P, the nation's and New York City's largest supermarket chain, not to sell grapes; and she soon launched a major campaign against the country's second largest grocery giant, California-based Safeway, for its sale of boy-

cotted grapes. As the UFW became involved in major political struggles in Arizona, Washington, and California in 1971 and 1972, Huerta redirected her focus to these campaigns. She went on to play a major role in the UFW for the next three decades. After Cesar Chavez's death in 1993, Dolores Huerta became the living person most identified with the farmworkers movement.

Jessica Govea is another woman whose extraordinary organizing and leadership skills found expression in the farmworkers movement and particularly in the boycott. Govea began working in the fields with her parents at the age of four and spent every summer until age fifteen picking cotton, grapes, or prunes. Her father was a lifelong activist, and by age twelve Govea was already organizing farmworker children around petition drives and rallies. She left college to join the UFW in 1966 and stayed for the next fifteen years. After two years of performing administrative tasks in the union office, Govea accepted an opportunity in July 1968 to join Marshall Ganz (with whom she was romantically involved) and Catholic priest Mark Day in Toronto, to lead the Canadian boycott there. Canada was among the top five markets for California table grapes.

Govea was not deterred by her status as a single woman traveling alone in a foreign country, and she often single-handedly assembled coalitions of labor, clergy, and political activists to win support for the boycott in the small cities outside Toronto. This was Govea's first experience living outside her hometown of Bakersfield, and she became a huge hit with the Toronto media. The *Toronto Star* called her "the girl from the south," intrigued by her stories of how Mexicans were discriminated against in California. Govea won a standing ovation after speaking to the Ontario Federation of Labor, and she convinced the United Churches of Canada to support the boycott. Along with Day and Ganz, Govea succeeded in getting three major Toronto chain stores to stop selling grapes. Rising public interest in the campaign led the mayor of Toronto to proclaim November 23, 1968, as "Grape Day" in recognition of the city's official support of the boycott.<sup>30</sup>

Govea believed that although the boycott experience was challenging, "we learned we were capable of a lot more than we thought." She captured the message an effective boycott volunteer needed to convey:

"What we're asking you to do is to become involved in our struggle and to help us by not buying grapes. That's what we're asking you." Actually that was the smallest thing we were asking people to do, because, when we went out, we had to lose all shame and be willing to ask for everything. And we were asking people to quit their jobs and drop out of school and



Jessica Govea inspired Canadians as she led the UFW grape boycott in Toronto and Montreal, 1968–1969. Photo by Hub Segur.

come work with us full-time. We were asking people to give us money; we were asking people to let us live in their home, and sleep on their floor. We were asking people to feed us. We were asking paper for leaflets . . . anything you could think of, we were asking for, because we didn't have it, and we needed it in order to do the boycott<sup>31</sup>

In January 1969, the twenty-two-year-old Govea was put in charge of the boycott for Montreal and the entire province of Quebec. Montreal was North America's fourth largest grape-consuming city. Govea had so impressed the UFW leadership back in California that she was given complete authority over the entire boycott organizing strategy for this important region. Govea worked day and night, meeting with labor officials, religious leaders, and key community supporters to assemble a citywide campaign. She was also responsible for staff recruitment, training, and supervision and for the overall operation of the Montreal boycott office.

If Govea's "one-woman" organizing machine were not impressive enough, consider that she had been raised speaking Spanish, although she had become proficient in English by high school. In Canada, how-

---

Figure 4  
near here

---

ever, 75 percent of Montreal residents spoke French. In other words, Govea was taking on one of the largest challenges in the boycott operation while communicating with people who often did not speak English or Spanish. She quickly recruited a staff of bilingual organizers and implemented a door-to-door campaign in neighborhoods surrounding Dominion grocery stores. Govea supplemented the door-to-door work with a broad range of public activities, as captured in this account of an event in the summer of 1970, published in the UFW newspaper *El Malcriado*: “Jessica Govea organized a massive moving picket line that totaled over 200 at times and visited five Dominion stores, concluding the day’s activity outside of the Quebec division headquarters. A street theater group traveled with the picket line on a flat-bed truck, performing a skit depicting economic links binding the growers and the supermarket.”<sup>32</sup>

Govea had no budget in Montreal. Not only was she responsible for raising sufficient funds to keep her staff housed and fed and to cover all office costs, but she was also expected to send at least \$1,000 a month back to Delano. Raising money often required her to attend labor-oriented social events, which sometimes proved awkward for a young woman dealing with an overwhelmingly male-dominated Canadian labor movement. Govea’s problems with sexual harassment were greater in the provincial areas outside Montreal, where some mistook the Chicana boycott leader as a Canadian Indian. Separated from Ganz and her close-knit family, Govea never allowed her loneliness to interfere with her mission. The Montreal boycott was central to the success of the UFW’s international campaign. Based on her work in both Montreal and Toronto, Govea was the person most responsible for Canadian pressure on the Delano grape growers to settle with the UFW in 1970. After the settlement, she returned to California, working in Salinas on the lettuce boycott and becoming one of the international boycott coordinators. She returned to Toronto to run the Gallo wine boycott from 1973 to 1975 and later joined Huerta as one of the two women on the UFW executive board. Both became models for women working on the boycott and in the union.<sup>33</sup>

As Govea demonstrated, there were few limits to the amount of responsibility women were given if they could do the job. The UFW treated organizing training like a school, and the good students, regardless of gender, were given broader responsibilities. The boycott’s staffing demands were such that the union sometimes had to break down cultural barriers to get potential women leaders involved. For example, Maria Salgado Magana was from a family of farmworkers who had been dues-

paying members of the UFW since holding a house meeting for Cesar Chavez in 1964. After Magana had proven herself by walking picket lines during the day, attending house meetings at night, and putting up with abuse from grower employees for two full years, Chavez asked her in July 1967 to go to Chicago with Eliseo Medina and a few others to run the boycott there. Magana did not think that her family would let her go, because “Hispanics did not let their daughters out of the house until they married.” But her parents agreed to the move, and she not only succeeded in Chicago but then went on to head the Indianapolis boycott campaign. While in Indianapolis, Magana went on a spiritual fast for ten days to highlight the refusal of the Kroeger’s grocery chain to stop selling grapes; the tactic succeeded in bringing Kroeger’s to the table. Magana stayed with the UFW until 1980.<sup>34</sup>

Another cultural barrier the union had to overcome in recruiting women organizers was the media’s reliance on racial and gender stereotypes. Organizer Wendy Goepel Brooks was on a picket line with Dolores Huerta in Delano in November 1965, and a photo of them together was included in a *San Francisco Chronicle* story on November 6, 1995. Huerta was second in command to Cesar Chavez, while Brooks had joined the movement in 1963 but was not part of the union’s leadership. Despite their respective roles, the article did not discuss Huerta. Instead, it described Brooks as a twenty-six-year-old who looked like a “pretty Stanford coed, her silky hair, brown plaid skirt, and white blouse in sharp incongruity among the other picketers.” The newspaper apparently could not believe that a Chicana could be the real leader and a white Stanford graduate a helpful assistant. By the time the right-wing John Birch Society got hold of the story, it concluded that Brooks was “the real star of the Chavez show,” claiming that she “ghostwrites Cesar Chavez’s speeches.”<sup>35</sup>

During the industrywide grape boycott of 1968–70, women directed campaigns in such top UFW boycott cities as New York City, Montreal, Vancouver, Cleveland, and Philadelphia. In Philadelphia, women farmworkers Tonia Salgado and Carolina Franco joined leader Hope Lopez on an all-female boycott leadership team in 1968. Salgado, who was Magana’s sister, and Franco had both walked off jobs picking grapes to join UFW strikes against Giumarra and Schenley, respectively. The three women ran an aggressive boycott campaign in both Philadelphia and the surrounding suburbs. Lopez noted that suburban women who supported the boycott “were heavy duty in the confrontation division” and “hated the sight of table grapes on their local retail store shelves.” In May 1969,

Lopez fasted for eight days, until A&P agreed to stop selling grapes in the city. Saludado and Octavia Fielder, another female staffer, fasted for two weeks, and a male volunteer for three, in an effort to convince the city's largest chain, Acme, to follow suit; though the fasts did not immediately change Acme's stance, the chain announced in a full-page newspaper ad in June 1970 that it was now selling only grapes picked by the UFW. Lopez was a widow who fulfilled her duties as boycott leader while being a single parent for five children. She was among other women organizers who eventually gave up leadership positions with the UFW for jobs that allowed them more time with their children.<sup>36</sup>

Although the UFW provided an otherwise unavailable entry point for women organizers, this did not mean that the organization was immune to sexism and gender discrimination. For example, Dolores Huerta's formal leadership role and track record of success did not insulate her from encountering antagonism and disrespect even from longtime colleagues. Other women confirmed Huerta's experience, with one staff member noting, "Dolores is often overlooked because she's a woman. Sometimes our staff says, 'Oh, it's only Dolores. We don't take orders from her.'" Despite the persistence of male jealousy and sexism, Huerta nonetheless sent a message to other female UFW activists that they could fulfill important roles with the union.<sup>37</sup>

Susan Samuels Drake, who was Cesar Chavez's personal secretary from 1970 to 1973, offered this look at the leader's mixed attitudes toward women:

When Cesar called department head meetings, sometimes he'd forget to tell the women. Or he'd leave their names off the minutes when I knew they'd attended the gathering. "How dare he overlook Dolores Huerta, Jessica Govea, and other key staff," I'd think. These were strong women whose native skills blossomed under his tutelage. He had stepped up to the union's presidency with a history of *machismo*. Whenever the habit got to him, I became determined to let him know how important our gender is.<sup>38</sup>

But after noting that she spent three years as Chavez's assistant while her male predecessors "changed with the seasons," Drake concluded:

I'm only one of droves of American women, not only those who work in the fields and orchards, who believe *Sí, se puede* ("Yes, it's possible"), because Cesar believed in us, gave us meaningful work to do and appreciation when we did it. Cesar Chavez taught me when to speak, when to listen, when to negotiate—sometimes in cooperation with him, sometimes in opposition to him.<sup>39</sup>

The experience of Elaine Elinson confirms Drake's assessment of Chavez's ability to instill self-confidence in UFW staff and volunteers. Elinson was a senior at Cornell University in 1968 when UFW staffers Jerry and Juanita Brown came to the school to recruit for the boycott. Elinson was moved by their slide show of the deplorable working conditions faced by farmworkers, but she had already been accepted to graduate school in London for the fall. Soon after beginning school, Elinson found herself less focused on Asian studies than on world events. She called Brown (not the future governor of California) and asked if she could return to the United States and work for the UFW. Brown stunned Elinson by saying that Cesar Chavez wanted her to stay in England and organize an international grape boycott.

California grapes were not typically sold in Europe, but growers were now dumping grapes abroad to make up for the lack of an American market. Brown told Elinson that the UFW would send her flyers, posters, and \$200, which amounted to forty weeks' salary in advance. In light of Chavez's stringent attitude toward money—he personally reviewed telephone bills and in 1971 opposed raising the weekly stipend from \$5 to \$10—this show of confidence in a young woman with absolutely no prior organizing experience was remarkable. Yet Chavez's confidence in Elinson seemed to boost her own faith that she could handle the job, even though she knew no one in England and the UFW had no contacts to give her. She got a letter of introduction from Chavez designating her as the UFW representative and then began going through the phone book, calling and writing labor unions and student groups, asking them to support the grape boycott. Chavez's faith in Elinson paid off, as the British and Swedish labor movements effectively shut down European markets for California grapes.<sup>40</sup>

The UFW also drew in women activists through its emphasis on workers' families; in fact, the union built a tradition of transforming workers' struggles into family campaigns. Mothers often ran the boycott's day-to-day operations, including phone answering, record-keeping, supervising volunteers, and managing the many boycott houses. Entire families of farmworkers frequently participated in protests, rallies, and boycott activities in front of supermarkets; and the July 1, 1970, issue of the UFW newspaper, *El Malcriado* (literally, the "unruly child"), featured an article titled "A Woman's Place Is . . . on the Picket Line!" It was unusual for families to participate in protests at the time, but the precedent set by the UFW proved handy in organizing for the massive immigration protests in 2006. Although the "family model" of activism

during the boycott often left wives in roles secondary to those of their husbands, the grape boycott never could have succeeded without the active participation of women. Cesar Chavez was credited at the time with turning the grape conflict into a “strike of families,” and Dolores Huerta argued that women were “most important” to the union because “if a wife was for the union . . . then the husband would be. If she was not . . . the family usually stayed out of the union, or it broke up.”<sup>41</sup>

The UFW’s need for skilled boycott organizers created opportunities for women that were otherwise unavailable in the labor movement. No other male-dominated union of this era actively recruited female staff or trained as many women to become highly skilled professional organizers and leaders. These female staff members had the same duties as their male counterparts, despite often having the additional responsibility of raising children (Huerta had seven kids, and Lopez had five), and they received the same level of training as male staffers. In contrast, unions other than the UFW hired organizers almost exclusively from within their own ranks, which effectively excluded women from becoming organizers in male-dominated industries. Even SEIU—a union that once included many female-dominated fields and that broke with standard practice by hiring “outsider” college graduates for its research departments—had nowhere near as high a percentage of female organizers as the UFW did. When Susan Eaton, once an SEIU staffer and now a labor studies professor, was hired into a staff internship program with SEIU as late as 1980, only four of the thirty-five people who had been chosen for the program since 1972 were women.<sup>42</sup>

### **The Role of Clergy and Labor**

Recruits from religious institutions and labor unions were also critical to the boycott’s success. In fact, Cesar Chavez’s personal skill at building support for the farmworkers’ cause in the religious community during the 1960s and 1970s is among his greatest achievements. The clergy’s overwhelming backing of this American labor struggle remains unprecedented, and it is such an important part of the UFW’s ongoing legacy that chapter 3 is devoted entirely to this issue. Here, however, it is worth noting that the involvement of the clergy in the boycott was particularly significant for four reasons.

First, one of the key aims of the boycott was to send a message to the entire liberal establishment that this was a mainstream, nonradical cause it should embrace. In a period when Chavez and others were still branded

by opponents as “communists,” a boycott endorsement from a local or national church organization made it “safe” for community members to stop buying grapes and express solidarity.

Second, religious approval also lent moral authority and social legitimacy to those sitting at tables in front of supermarkets asking people not to buy grapes. Such a scene was unusual in America and might have generated suspicion or confusion. But once boycott volunteers, some of them active church members themselves, publicized the endorsement of local churches, people were much more willing to talk to them and to support the UFW campaign by not purchasing grapes.

Third, because churches have a nationwide presence, grassroots religious activists were positioned to help boycott staff virtually everywhere. Boycott organizers were typically sent to unfamiliar places where they knew no one, armed only with a few names they could contact to get the local campaign going. These lists invariably included religious allies, who would then provide other names of potential supporters. Support from a major urban Catholic archdiocese, for example, granted access to the full range of church committees, greatly expanding the number of boycott volunteers. Moreover, since churches had their own internal organization, it was much easier to mobilize large numbers of people to attend a boycott rally on short notice than if the UFW had to do it alone.

Finally, a large number of boycott volunteers came to the campaign through internship programs like those run by the National Farm Worker Ministry (described in chapter 3). It was not simply Chavez and farmworkers who were strongly motivated by religious concerns; many of their boycott recruits also saw working for *La Causa* as a spiritual and moral imperative.

Labor also had a nationwide presence and internal organized structures that facilitated boycott support. In fact, labor’s involvement in the grape boycott was international, with British, Canadian, and Swedish unions all helping to reduce grape sales in their countries. Union support was especially important because it was unionized truckers and grocery clerks who first got information about grape shipments and the unloading of grapes at stores and, in some cases, could stop such deliveries. After the New York Labor Council endorsed the boycott in 1968, the Seafarers Union stopped all shipments of grapes through the Port of New York through mid-July. The Teamsters, who did not stop grape shipments to Safeway supermarkets because of their competition with the UFW in California, nonetheless lent their support to the boycott in New York, pressuring buyers in produce markets in New York City to stop pur-

chasing grapes. By January 1969, grape sales in New York were down 30 percent, which enabled the UFW to divert experienced boycott staff to other cities. Even when unions could not themselves shut down grape shipments, individual members could sometimes tip off boycott staff so that future deliveries would be greeted by picket lines or rallies.<sup>43</sup>

Support for the boycott from rank-and-file union members was also significant because the UFW was relying on tactics that America's labor unions had long abandoned. The UFW always viewed itself as a civil rights movement and a spiritual mission as well as a union, and it embraced movement-style tactics to achieve its broader goals. But since the early 1950s the AFL-CIO had pursued a "business unionism" model that focused labor's agenda on securing good contracts for members rather than pressing for the general welfare. As labor historian Sidney Lens describes it, American labor unions by the end of the 1950s were no longer a "maverick" force and had become "sluggish toward new ideas, practical rather than idealistic, legalistic rather than militant, more conformist than anti-conformist."<sup>44</sup>

This narrower agenda was reflected in the use of more traditional tactics. This distinction had been clear when the AFL-CIO tried to organize farmworkers in competition with Chavez and the UFW in the early 1960s. Its local leadership insisted that the battle with growers involved "a trade union dispute, not a civil rights movement or a religious crusade." The AFL-CIO approached farmworker organizing as if it were dealing with autoworkers in Detroit's General Motors plants in the 1930s, when sit-ins and stationary picket lines brought success. Chavez and the UFW understood that new tactics and strategies were needed, the most important of which was expanding the arena of labor conflict from the fields of Delano to a Philadelphia shopping center or a Chicago supermarket. Grassroots labor activists embraced the boycott's movement-style tactics even while mainstream union leaders—other than Walter Reuther and Paul Schrade of the United Auto Workers, who long backed the UFW—remained skeptical.<sup>45</sup>

### DAILY LIFE FOR BOYCOTT ACTIVISTS

After recruiting such a wide range of staff and volunteers, the UFW needed to train them and find places for them to live. The farmworkers movement included many who had dropped out of college to become involved (Sharon Delugach, in fact, began a lifelong organizing career at fifteen after leaving high school to work for the UFW), but the union

provided a far more rigorous education than that found on most campuses. The UFW treated organizing as a serious discipline that required study, homework, and lesson plans. Nancy Carleton, a longtime political activist, describes how the UFW taught her the “methodology” of organizing in 1975:

I use the word *methodology* quite intentionally, because there was nothing haphazard about the UFW’s organizing techniques. We were trained to be incredibly disciplined about our use of time, and daily staff meetings and daily reports helped make certain that we used our time productively. Each day started with a morning meeting from 8 to 8:30 A.M., where we reviewed our progress and set our goals for the coming day and week, as well as receiving inspiring updates on breaking news. Then we made personal visits during the rest of the day and attended house meetings we had arranged through successful PVs [personal visits]. In this way, word about the union spread to increasingly larger circles of people. On evenings when we didn’t have house meetings or other supporter meetings lined up, we focused on making dozens of calls to line up more PVs and to get commitments from volunteers for the upcoming weekend’s actions. The UFW managed to ensure an impressively high rate of turnout from volunteers by sticking to the discipline of follow-up calls.<sup>46</sup>

---

Figure 5  
near here

---

The UFW was willing to invest time in training those who were highly motivated but needed extra attention. Larry Tramutola got off to such a slow start as a UFW organizer that he told Fred Ross Sr. that he couldn’t do the job and should quit. Rather than accepting Tramutola’s departure and focusing on other workers who needed help, Ross asked him to explain everything he had done to date. After Tramutola recounted his failed efforts to get people to attend a meeting, Ross told the young organizer that he had done everything wrong. Ross then told him that if he wrote down every single thing he did on the job for the next six months, Ross would make himself available by phone every night at 10:00 P.M. to review Tramutola’s actions. It was akin to Harvard’s most famous professor giving private tutoring each day to a first-year student who had yet to show promise. Tramutola lived up to his pledge, and Ross fulfilled his. Tramutola’s meetings were soon better attended, and under Ross’s tutelage he became a top organizer, spending eleven years with the UFW and the rest of his career as a political organizer. The UFW’s investment in training created a boycott staff that understood how to accomplish the union’s goals. Chavez, Ross, Govea, Ganz, and others also created a culture of mentoring in the union. As Ganz put it, “Organizing was taught as a discipline. There was a method, and you



Boycott reports published  
in *El Malcriado*.

could learn it, and be good at it, and then you could teach others.” Veteran organizers were expected to become mentors, greatly enhancing the UFW’s organizing prowess.<sup>47</sup>

While undergoing training and working on the boycott, UFW organizers had to have a place to call home. During 1968–69, the union maintained “boycott houses” in forty to fifty cities, although organizers were still encouraged to find their own lodging. The Boston boycott house was typical of many, as it was large, run-down, and located in a low-income minority neighborhood. This particular house had been abandoned by an adjacent Catholic church and donated to the union. The seven-bedroom, three-bath structure housed ten or fifteen people; some rooms had been converted to a print shop and workspace. Staff took turns cooking and cleaning, but the atmosphere was a far cry from MTV’s *The Real World*.<sup>48</sup>

The often substandard living conditions and dangerous neighborhoods made less of an impact because boycott staff were rarely home. Mornings were spent picketing produce terminals, in the hope that a grape shipment might be refused. Organizers then went to supermarkets to picket or gave talks to interfaith committees, local unions, or any other organization that might be persuaded to lend money or time to the campaign. Some days there would be sit-ins at stores or fun tactics like creating a public scene in a store that was selling nonunion grapes. Boycotters also had to visit stores regularly to monitor those that claimed to have stopped selling grapes, with protests and picketing needed in response to viola-

tions. On Saturdays there were mass pickets, and there was also an occasional rally that had to be organized. For example, Chavez declared May 10, 1969, as International Grape Boycott Day, and rallies were held in more than a hundred cities to promote the boycott.

Planning or strategy meetings might be held in restaurants or cafés. Churches became popular stopping places because they sometimes had available office space, typewriters, or copiers. The boycott house was indispensable for one reason: making phone calls. In that pre-cell phone era, the fastest, cheapest, and easiest way to make local calls was to call from home. Phoning was an important part of the job, as potential donors had to be solicited to raise funds for the local boycott, and part-time volunteers had to be contacted to keep them involved. Given the all-consuming nature of the work, it is no surprise that many staffers formed romantic relationships with one another; there was little time available for someone not involved in the campaign and also little stability, as boycotters were moved from city to city without much advance notice.

The UFW realized that there were many committed activists who were unable to devote their entire lives to the farmworkers' cause but whose volunteer hours were nevertheless needed. The union thus became expert at recruiting and utilizing part-time volunteers. These volunteers were typically found at the omnipresent UFW boycott tables at supermarkets, on college campuses, or at community events. Staff members were trained to ask those expressing sympathy for the cause to sign up to volunteer for "a few hours" per week. Using Ross's model, the staffers would then make sure to call the potential volunteers quickly to give them an assignment. Because boycott staffers were trained never to ask volunteers to do too little, those committing to a "few hours a week" soon found themselves being regularly called to come out and help. UFW staffers were so diligent in calling part-time volunteers that it seemed as though they were following a schedule. They were. Given the disorganized aspect of most '60s-era campaigns, few could have suspected that Ross had set up a system requiring boycott staff to make a certain number of calls each night and then report the number of commitments back to their supervisors.

Ross's systematic approach to ensuring quality UFW outreach led him to devise what became one of the essential tools of the organizing trade: the ironing board "table." Marshall Ganz recalls that while UFW volunteers were staffing a table in front of a K-Mart in 1973, Ross observed that the orange folding metal tables they were using were rickety and kept falling apart. Ross went into the K-Mart to get something, "and his eyes fell upon a stack of folding ironing boards. Flash. Moment of in-

sight. Maybe those would work better. He bought one, took it outside, set it up in place of the flaky orange table, and history was made. They were the right height, kept the petitioner from sitting down (losing energy), people could easily sign them, they were long enough that several people could sign at once, and you could carry them around in your car.”<sup>49</sup> And thus began the ironing board brigades, launched by the UFW, which remain a staple of signature gathering drives for twenty-first-century social movements.

For Gary Guthman and other new volunteers, spending a few hours at a boycott table—or an ironing board—was the least they could do in light of the terrible conditions faced by farmworkers. And while some activists later joked about how boycott staff “guilt-tripped” them into volunteering, that was simply good organizing. Effective boycott staff developed cordial relationships with volunteers, which increased productivity and also gave them a place to visit when they got hungry at night. Guthman used to typically appear at my wife’s apartment between 5:30 and 6:00 P.M. As he filled us in on the latest news from the campaign, time would pass until dinner was ready. It would have been inhospitable to ask Gary to leave at that point, and he was grateful for our offer that he stay for dinner. That’s the kind of resourcefulness that living on \$5 a week instills. With boycotters working for a vital cause on subsistence wages, UFW supporters were more than happy to feed them.

In many cases, people began as part-time volunteers but soon found boycott work so fulfilling that they gave up regular jobs. For example, Mark Sharwood was earning a good living working for the U.S. Geological Survey when he met Oakland boycott coordinator Bob Purcell at a local Safeway in 1972. Sharwood began volunteering for the boycott part time and ended up quitting his job in 1976 and working full time on the boycott in the Midwest. After leaving the UFW in 1982, Sharwood found his way to SEIU, where he has been an organizer for California’s statewide janitors union, SEIU Local 1877, since 1987. His recruiter, Purcell, went on to work for multiple labor groups before spending more than two decades as director of the Public Employee Department of the Laborers International Union.<sup>50</sup>

### PUBLIC SUPPORT GROWS

By the spring of 1968, public support for the grape boycott had grown dramatically. Even agricultural industry trade publications acknowledged the impact. *California Farmer* headlined its July 6 story, “Boycott Jeop-

ardizes Entire Grape Crop,” while the August 1968 *Sunkist Newsletter* stated that there was “no question that the boycott of California grapes, unethical and illegal as it may be, is currently effective.” After declaring “the boycott has been unsuccessful,” Allan Grant, president of the California Farm Bureau, conceded that it represented “the most serious crisis that California agriculture has ever faced.” Grant also accused the UFW of trying to “blackmail California.” In October 1968, to increase pressure on grape growers, the UFW shifted the focus of its boycott from convincing consumers not to buy grapes to persuading them not to shop in stores that sold the boycotted product.<sup>51</sup>

Targeting a business that is not the primary source of a labor conflict is known as a “secondary boycott,” and unions are prohibited from using this tactic under the federal National Labor Relations Act (NLRA). But when the NLRA was enacted in the 1930s, pressure from agribusiness had exempted farm labor from the act’s protections. This meant, among other things, that the farmworkers’ right to organize was not protected or guaranteed by law, which is why the UFW faced such steep hurdles in securing union representation. Now the union was turning its exemption from the NLRA into an asset—since farmworkers weren’t covered by the NLRA, they were free to launch a secondary boycott, targeting supermarkets that sold boycotted grapes. Chain stores such as A&P and Safeway became the new “villains” of boycotters, as activists attacked the groceries’ willingness to profit from exploiting farmworkers. A boycott that once financially harmed only the grape growers now threatened the bottom line of supermarkets selling nonunion grapes.

By 1969, the boycott’s combined focus on individual consumers and supermarket chains was having its intended impact. Retail grape sales were estimated to be down 12 percent nationally and down more than 50 percent in major cities. Growers still refused to negotiate with Chavez and used their influence with the incoming Nixon administration to boost sales. (When Richard Nixon began his presidential campaign in San Francisco in the fall of 1967, he expressed support for the growers who had been targeted by the UFW and ate grapes to show his solidarity.) In fiscal year 1969, the Defense Department bought 2.4 million pounds of table grapes for soldiers fighting in Vietnam, a fourfold increase over the previous year. Overall, the department purchased 9.69 million pounds of grapes, nearly three million more than in 1968. (Similarly, after the UFW lettuce boycott began in 1970, the Defense Department more than tripled its purchases of nonunion lettuce in 1971 while sharply reducing purchases of lettuce picked under UFW contracts.) These purchases, how-

ever, did not make up for the lost sales, and the UFW had its own successes leveraging its political allies to help the boycott. For example, in July 1968 the administration of Mayor John Lindsay announced that it would stop New York City's annual purchase of fifteen tons of grapes for its prisons and hospitals.<sup>52</sup>

In July 1969, growers filed a lawsuit against the UFW, claiming that the boycott had caused losses of \$25 million. In December, California's Board of Agriculture launched a grower-funded media campaign to convince consumers to buy grapes. A high-profile advertising firm came up with the idea of attacking the boycott as a violation of "consumer rights" and set up nationwide Consumer Rights Committee offices to protest supermarkets that refused to sell grapes. The campaign also featured bumper stickers boosting California grapes as "the Forbidden Fruit." The board's actions were consistent with the anti-UFW attitudes of California governor Ronald Reagan, who labeled farmworker supporters "outside agitators" and joyfully ate table grapes in front of the cameras.<sup>53</sup>

By 1970, both Chavez and the growers knew that the boycott was killing the table grape industry. In addition to its moral appeals, the UFW had used congressional hearings during the fall of 1969 to expose growers' use of DDT and other dangerous pesticides (see chapter 5). Boycotters tabling at supermarkets now handed out flyers charging the stores with selling "poisoned grapes" and arguing that only a UFW contract that banned hazardous pesticides could ensure healthy grapes. As those avoiding grapes out of health concerns joined consumers seeking to express solidarity with farmworkers, stories began circulating of unsold storage sheds of rotting grapes and of table grapes being sent off to wineries. The April 6, 1970, edition of *U.S. News and World Report* stated that grape sales were down an estimated 50 percent in New York City and about 46 percent in Atlanta and that "demonstrations in Boston forced most chain stores to take grapes off the fruit counters." Grape shipments were down by more than 33 percent, and wholesale prices fell below the growers' production costs. Lionel Steinberg, a grape grower who was a registered Democrat with close ties to pro-UFW politicians, tried unsuccessfully to get California growers to negotiate with Chavez. Steinberg felt that the boycott had "closed Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, Montreal and Toronto completely from handling table grapes."<sup>54</sup>

Tired of waiting for his fellow growers to come to the table, Steinberg broke ranks and signed a union contract with the UFW on April 1, 1970.

---

Figure 6  
near here

---



UFW march on Tremont Street in Boston, 1970. Photo by Nick Jones.

His move led some other growers to follow suit, raising concern within the UFW that the union would once again be forced to boycott specific grape companies rather than the entire industry. But this risk never materialized, as stores feared that buying any nonunion grapes would provoke a picket line. Newly unionized grape growers also tipped off the UFW on where nonunion grapes were being distributed, enabling the union to quickly close down such channels. The market for union grapes grew, and soon they were bringing higher prices than nonunion grapes. As nonunion grapes continued to rot for lack of consumer demand, growers actually began calling the union and asking, “What do I have to do to get the bird on my grapes?” (referring to the black thunderbird that was the UFW insignia).<sup>55</sup>

On July 29, 1970, Cesar Chavez appeared before a boisterous crowd of two hundred farmworkers in the hiring hall in Delano. All around the room hung pictures of religious saints, of the late Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Mohandas Gandhi. Officials of the AFL-CIO were also present, as were key Catholic and Protestant religious leaders. Chavez looked out over the crowd and used a word that those in the room had waited to hear since the strike against grape growers began in

September 1965. This word was “victory.” The previous day, the Giumarra Corporation, the most powerful grape grower in the San Joaquin Valley, had agreed to sign with the UFW. This paved the way for the remaining large growers to sign as well.

After a nearly five-year strike and more than two years of an industrywide table grape boycott, the farmworkers movement had won a complete victory. John Giumarra Jr. left no doubt what had brought the large grape growers to the table. “Boycott pressures,” he said, were threatening “to destroy a number of farmers.” The Department of Agriculture subsequently found that 17 million Americans, or 10 percent of the population, refused to eat or buy grapes from 1966 to 1972. The union, which before the grape boycott had contracts covering only three thousand workers, soon won more than two hundred grape contracts covering seventy thousand workers.<sup>56</sup>

### THE UFW BOYCOTT EXPANDS

If life were a movie, the story of Cesar Chavez and the UFW would end with this dramatic victory. The Delano grape strike and resulting boycott had already become the stuff of legend, achieving a cultural cachet by being chronicled not only in newspapers but also by prominent writers such as Peter Matthiessen in the *New Yorker* and John Gregory Dunne in the era’s leading literary magazine, the *Saturday Evening Post*. Joan London, the daughter of famed California writer Jack London, lent further gravitas to the struggle in her 1970 book *So Shall Ye Reap: The Story of Cesar Chavez and the Farm Workers’ Movement*.<sup>57</sup>

The UFW’s grape boycott of 1968–70 deserved all this attention. It was the first of many consumer boycotts launched by the farmworkers and laid the groundwork for these future struggles. The grape boycott shifted the arena of farm labor disputes from the Central California fields to hundreds of cities across the United States and Canada, transforming a California campaign into a national movement. It ushered a generation of young activists into the labor movement and into lifelong advocacy on behalf of social and economic justice. It also created the foundation for the powerful confluence of Latino and labor power in the twenty-first century.

But because the struggle was not happening on a movie set, but in real life, the harsh reality of grower dominance of America’s agriculture industry prevented the UFW from savoring its success. Within days of its historic grape victory, lettuce and vegetable growers took preemptive ac-

tion against the union by signing contracts with the rival Teamsters Union (the absence of any agricultural labor law allowed growers to bind their workers to a union without the workers' approval). Employers favored the Teamsters since, unlike the UFW, the Teamsters did not push for increased wages and improved working conditions for farmworkers. The Teamsters had a different motive: they represented truckers who drove produce from the fields, so cutting a "sweetheart" deal with growers for farmworkers created leverage for improving Teamster trucking contracts. In response to the growers' action, Chavez and the UFW redirected the grape boycott staff to a campaign against nonunion lettuce and vegetables. This boycott was still ongoing in 1973, when grape growers who had signed three-year contracts with the UFW in 1970 unilaterally switched their union contracts to the Teamsters when the contracts came up for renewal.

The impact of the grape growers' action was dramatic and could have broken the will of a less committed movement. The grape growers' switch to the Teamsters left the UFW with only a dozen contracts covering about sixty-five hundred full-time workers and reduced the union's total membership to no more than twelve thousand.<sup>58</sup> In response to this nearly 90 percent reduction in its contracts, the UFW began a bitter grape strike in 1973, in which two union members were killed on picket lines that summer. The violence directed against UFW members by both local law enforcement and the Teamsters became so blatant and pervasive that Chavez decided to end the grape strike and to instead fight the growers from a position of strength. This involved continuing the lettuce and vegetable boycott, but also raising the stakes for California agribusiness by intensifying the UFW's year-old boycott of Gallo wine.

Of all the corporations targeted by the UFW, the wine company owned by Ernest and Julio Gallo may be the one most associated with the farmworkers boycott. To this day, one virtually never sees Gallo wine at a progressive event. While projecting a warm image of its two immigrant founders making affordable quality wine, the Gallo Corporation would neither negotiate with the UFW nor allow its workers to vote on whether they wanted UFW representation. Gallo was America's largest wine-maker, and its products were sold everywhere. But its very size significantly raised the economic impact of the UFW's boycott, a fact not lost on Fred Ross Jr., son of the man who had trained Cesar Chavez in organizing. Ross Jr. conceived a strategy that used the Gallo boycott to set the stage for the UFW to win enactment of America's first labor relations law protecting farmworker rights.

### THE UFW TRIUMPHS

Children often go into their parents' business, but Fred Ross Jr. followed a father who was one of the great community organizers of the twentieth century. Ross Jr. joined the UFW for the same reason many others did: the charismatic leadership of Cesar Chavez. Ross said that, after meeting Chavez, "I knew I wanted to work with him." After graduating from college in 1971, Ross Jr. began working on the lettuce boycott in Seattle. From 1972 to 1975, he was in Berkeley, organizing the lettuce boycott there and doing campus recruitment. These were challenging years for the UFW, as it was engaged in a nationwide boycott of nonunion lettuce, the continuing grape strike and conflict with the Teamsters, and a separate boycott of Gallo wine.<sup>59</sup>

In January 1975, the *New York Times* declared that the UFW boycotts had failed and concluded that the Teamsters union would soon control the lettuce and wine industries. Ross Jr. interpreted the article as a pronouncement that "the UFW is dead." He was outraged, believing that, for all of the union's setbacks, "the workers were on fire" and were as committed as ever to fighting for justice in the fields. Ross and other UFW organizers also knew that their close ally, California governor Jerry Brown, who had just taken office, was committed to passing a state law granting labor protections to farmworkers. The *Times* somehow missed the political significance of a pro-UFW Jerry Brown replacing the pro-grower, anti-UFW Ronald Reagan as governor. Believing that the UFW needed to do something to show its strength, Ross suggested a march from San Francisco to Gallo's Central Valley headquarters in Modesto. Although some staff argued that the turnout would be too low to fulfill Ross's goals, Chavez agreed with the young organizer's plan.<sup>60</sup>

In order to ensure a good turnout, Ross arranged for the march to begin on February 22 in San Francisco, which was a hotbed of pro-UFW sentiment. Organizers in that city had succeeded in having Gallo wines, including the Thunderbird and Night Train brands, which were popular among street alcoholics, removed from many stores in the heavily Latino Mission District. Before the Union Square rally to kick off the march began, a giant banner was unfurled from the top floor of the adjacent St. Francis Hotel. In three-foot-tall letters, the banner read: GALLO'S 500 UNION FARM WORKERS BEST PAID IN U.S. . . . MARCHING WRONG WAY, CESAR? The sign referred to the Gallo workers who had been put under a Teamsters contract without having had the right to vote on representation. Although Gallo's banner was designed to intimidate the

UFW, it had the opposite impact, inspiring the marchers as they left on the 110-mile journey to the Gallo corporate headquarters in Modesto.<sup>61</sup>

The impact of the march exceeded Ross's expectations. By the time the marchers got to Modesto, they numbered twenty thousand, even more than had participated in the 1966 pilgrimage. As the crowd sang and chanted, "Chavez, sí! Teamsters, no!" a company-sponsored banner unexpectedly appeared in front of Gallo's headquarters bearing these words: 73 MILES TO GO. GALLO ASKS UFW TO SUPPORT NLRA-TYPE LAWS IN SACRAMENTO TO GUARANTEE FARMWORKER RIGHTS. The "73 miles" referred to the distance from Modesto to Sacramento, the state capital.

This unorthodox announcement by Gallo that it wanted to join the UFW in pressuring the new governor, Jerry Brown, to enact the farm labor bill that the UFW had long sought—but that former governor Reagan had steadfastly opposed—shocked the union. It meant that growers, supermarkets, and the California agricultural industry were tired of dealing with the UFW boycott and would accept a farm labor law in its place. In response to Gallo's overture, Chavez agreed to drop the Gallo boycott in exchange for passage of a farm labor act in 1975. With key growers such as Gallo now aligned with the UFW, the historic California Agricultural Labor Relations Act (ALRA) passed in June 1975. For the first time, farmworkers in the United States were granted the rights that industrial and service workers had received under federal law in the 1930s. No longer could employers legally fire employees for union activity; and now workers themselves, rather than growers, would decide on union representation. Ross's idea of directly confronting Gallo with the full force of the boycott was yet another example of the power of the UFW's multipronged boycott strategy.<sup>62</sup>

In taking stock of the farmworkers movement in the October 30, 1975, issue of the *Los Angeles Times*, longtime labor reporter Harry Bernstein concluded that the UFW grape boycott "was the most effective union boycott of any product in the history of the nation." To support this view, Bernstein cited a recent Louis Harris poll reporting that 17 million consumers had stopped buying grapes, 14 million had given up lettuce, and—explaining Gallo's push for the ALRA—11 million had stopped purchasing Gallo wine. Although the ALRA's passage in 1975 paved the way for hundreds of union elections in the fields, the UFW still saw the boycott as an important weapon against stubborn growers. In 1976, the union's boycott operation included about three hundred full-time staff members in more than thirty cities in the United States and Canada. Nearly a third

of the staff had at least four years of boycott experience and could ramp up quickly as needed.<sup>63</sup>

In February 1979, Chavez announced that the UFW was launching an international boycott against the United Brands Corporation, owner of Sun Harvest lettuce, with whom the union was engaged in a bitter strike. The UFW's United Brands boycott extended to the company's better-known products, including Chiquita bananas, John Morrell meats, and A&W root beer. In a sign of how seriously corporate America took the threat of the boycott, it took only a day after the UFW began mobilizing this boycott on July 31 to bring United Brands to the negotiating table. On August 31, the UFW won a three-year contract with Sun Harvest covering twelve hundred workers.

But the need to prioritize resources soon led Chavez to dismantle the UFW's boycott infrastructure. The passage of the ALRA had brought the union's focus back to the fields, and the boycott fell by the wayside as the union focused on winning elections and servicing its members. Chavez subsequently tried to promote consumer boycotts through direct mail, a tactic that brought in money but had little if any economic impact on targeted companies. Chavez and the UFW continued to call for boycotts of various products and companies until his death in 1993, but, unlike the original grape and vegetable boycotts, these appeals were not accompanied by a larger grassroots movement of workers and community supporters. Chavez and the UFW had shifted in a different direction, and nearly all of the leading boycott and organizing staff had departed from the union by 1982. It would be left to UFW alumni and others to apply the lessons of the table grape, wine, lettuce, and vegetable boycotts to new struggles.<sup>64</sup>