

A Boycott Story

I have no recollection of telling anyone this boycott story, but please stop me if you heard it before.

During my tenure (1972-1973) as the boycott director in Los Angeles, my office was located in a five-story office building on West Olympic Blvd. In fact, I sublet office space from Chris Hartmire and his National Farm Worker Ministry. The California State Employees had a field office on the same floor in the same building, as did a California assemblyman, whose last name might have been Warren, but I am not sure. And there were many other tenants on different floors whose names I do not remember.

Compared to my offices in Delano – first, next to the Pink House, then later in Filipino Hall – and then in the former morgue at La Paz, I found this Los Angeles office building to be the lap of luxury.

One day, late in the morning, we received notice to immediately evacuate the building because a gas leak in the building had been detected and the Los Angeles Fire Department had been called. As we gathered ourselves up to leave, the hook-and-ladder fire truck and several other emergency vehicles pulled up outside the building with red lights flashing and their sirens winding down. As we exited out the hallway and down the stairwell, I could smell the gas odor.

For more than an hour, all of the people who worked in the various offices of the building milled around on the street waiting for the emergency fire personnel to complete their investigation. They examined the heating and air conditioning systems and all the hot water heaters, but despite the obvious smell of gas, they could not find the source of the leak. They brought in several commercial-size portable fans to draw the air out of the stairwells and the hallways. Finally, they pronounced the building “safe.” Everyone returned to work.

When I had settled back into my office, Ken Doyle, one of our boycott staff members, came in and said he needed to talk to me but wanted me to go outside with him. I walked with him down the hall, and he took me into the five-story stairwell. When I closed the door, he mumbled something

apologetic, saying it was only an experiment, and assured me he had only used three drops.

You may not know this; I certainly did not. Natural gas is odorless, and an “odor agent” (my word for it) is added to natural gas to give it its distinctive odor. Ken had found a commercial source for this additive, purchased some, and conducted an experiment. He had released three drops at the bottom of this five-story stairwell, and it was those drops that caused the emergency evacuation order.

I leave the rest of this boycott story to your imagination.