

Chewing Up and Spitting out Farmworker Volunteers

I have offended the sensibilities of some of my former farmworker movement colleagues by writing that the movement sucked in, chewed up, and spit out volunteers. Too harsh, some wrote. The fact that the top 50 NCAA colleges and universities treat their scholarship athletes the same way, or worse, doesn't seem to be as controversial. Even less so, it seems, when the U.S. military treats its young recruits in a similar fashion. I suppose many former farmworker volunteers view their service as exemplary, morally uplifting, and altruistic, and they fear that my somewhat crude characterization tarnishes the image of their years of service. Let me explain again what I mean.

First off, let me state again my view that not only were United Farm Worker volunteers valuable, they were invaluable. In my judgment, there would have been no farmworker movement, no successful Delano Grape Strike, no Agricultural Labor Relations Act, and no UFW today without the work, the dedication, and the commitment of hundreds of UFW volunteers. It is for this reason that I entitled the CD publication of the Farmworker Movement Documentation Project "Cesar Chavez: The Farmworker Movement, 1962-1993. Primary source accounts by the volunteers who built the farmworker movement."

So, if volunteers were so valuable to the movement, why do I write as if they were expendable? I do so because that was the reality of their situation. Consider this: when a volunteer left the UFW, another volunteer immediately took their place, and the farmworker movement did not miss a beat. The same happened to me and to every other volunteer who joined and subsequently left the movement. There were always volunteers coming into the movement who were able and willing to take the places of those of us who left.

I realize it must sound crude or harsh when I write that the farmworker movement sucked up volunteers, chewed them up, and spit them out, but I am simply hammering on the point that each volunteer came to the movement with a burning desire to help. They did whatever was asked; they went wherever they were sent, sometimes on a minute's notice; they worked long days for months on end, without time off or vacation; they worked for the love of a cause, not for money; they were separated for long periods of

time from their spouses and children; and so forth. These are only a few examples of the unrelenting and insatiable demands made by the farmworker movement upon its volunteers, and they responded with a heartfelt “yes.” I characterize this work period as the chewing up process.

The spitting out process occurred when each volunteer came to the realization that for a variety of reasons – personal, ethical, marriage, children, financial, educational, career, physical, and parental demands – they could no longer participate, or did not want to. Some came to this realization because they felt unwanted or unappreciated or unneeded or physically and emotionally spent. I view this voluntary leaving as the normal and natural result of idealistic volunteers throwing themselves headlong into a cause, without thinking about – or even caring about – the personal consequences of such a decision. Sometimes the realization that it was time to move on took years to materialize, sometimes only a year or two or even just a summer. But at some point during the volunteer’s service to the farmworker movement, the realization came, because it had to. For the vast majority of people, living a Cesar Chavez-inspired movement was an abnormal life. It could be done, but only for a time.

I pause here to make the point that not all volunteers who came to Delano were acceptable to the movement, nor should they have been. Some were lazy and did not have enough personal discipline to cope with the hard work, some came to make policy and run the union, some were romantic revolution drifters, and others came to peddle their own brand of ideology. Generally speaking, these kinds of volunteers were soon weeded out by requiring them to participate in the grinding hard work of manning the picket lines in the fields or in front of supermarkets.

Was leaving the movement inevitable? Theoretically, perhaps not, but since the cause of the farmworkers was seen as an all-important life-and-death struggle, the movement was wired to place the needs of the organization above any of the personal needs of its volunteers. The movement demands upon the individual volunteer were incessant and voracious, and they could never be met, because there was always a new set of demands waiting in the wings. I compare the farmworker movement to a moving river: a volunteer never stepped into the same river twice. It was a life of constant change, much of it crisis-driven, and semi-organized chaos.

Yes, there were some occasions – not too many by my estimate – when volunteers were pushed overboard. Sometimes it was done nicely and sometimes accusingly – no explanation was requested, no questions were asked, no reasons were given, and no justification was deemed necessary. Cruel? Yes. Unnecessary? Probably so. I have no adequate explanation why terminations were handled in the manner they were, except to observe that the cause itself was deemed so important that such individual personnel matters paled by comparison and seemed insignificant and inconsequential.

Admittedly, the leaving part of the volunteer equation was more stressful than either the coming part or the working part, because leaving frequently generated emotions and feelings of loss, guilt, failure, sadness, anger, or resentment. In my case, for example, there was certainly a feeling of loss, sadness, and some guilt. True, leaving sometimes generated feelings of relief because one was returning to a more normal life, but, in my view, this was generally not the case.

The work of the volunteers not only built the farmworker movement, but it prepared the volunteers for their own future careers. They learned valuable organizing skills, they met people from all walks of life, they were exposed to new career opportunities, and they worked in rural and urban areas throughout California, the U.S., and beyond. Many learned a second language and how to speak in public, and all developed a sense of self-confidence with an infectious can-do attitude. Correct me if I am wrong, but because of Cesar Chavez and his farmworker movement, the volunteers ultimately created for themselves a more financially secure and rewarding life. I doubt if there is even one former volunteer who has not highlighted his/her resume to show the involvement with Cesar Chavez. Not only is it considered to be a badge of honor, it has the potential to be used as a self-promotional marketing tool.

So as impersonal, indifferent, and insensitive as the farmworker movement was in accommodating the personal needs of its volunteers, all parties ultimately benefited from the enterprise – the movement was built; the volunteers prospered.

