

Chiquita Banana 1970

Farmworkers in the United States do not pick bananas, but they do work for the United Fruit Company operations in the Salinas Valley, and United Fruit owns Chiquita Banana. Now you understand the boycott relationship between California farmworkers and the United Fruit Company.

I was serving as the boycott director for the greater Los Angeles area, which covers approximately 56% of California consumers. Because of the Los Angeles boycott activities, Mayfair Markets had long since given up carrying non-union grapes or any other designated-grower produce that showed up on the farmworkers' moving-target "do not buy" list.

The produce buyer for Mayfair and I had developed the kind of friendship that sometimes arises from highly competitive contests in which the warring contestants develop a healthy respect and admiration for each other's skills. During those seven-day-a-week boycott days, I would visit the L.A. Produce Terminal several times a week, trying to keep abreast of where the "do not buy" produce was coming from and what markets were buying it. Arriving before 4 a.m., I would hook up with my buyer friend, and he would take me along as he made his buys from the 50 or so vendors doing business in the terminal. He would introduce me to the produce brokers he knew well, and with good humor caution them about getting on the wrong side of the farmworkers' cause.

One morning we were having breakfast, and I floated my idea of targeting Chiquita Banana. Before I could even flesh out my idea, he said, "Do you want to meet with the head of Chiquita? He's a friend of mine." Now I was stuck. What started out as the typical farmworker underdog bravado now turned into the real thing. I said, "Sure!"

He set up the meeting and came with me. The Chiquita man was about my age, tall, expensively dressed, and carried himself like an athlete. After the introductions, the Mayfair buyer simply said that he enjoyed a good working relationship with me and I had confided in him about a possible boycott of Chiquita Banana, which of course would put Mayfair in a real bind, and so he thought the best thing to do was bring us together to talk about it.

It was my turn. I spoke softly and without hype. I explained how the farmworkers were trying to build a union in the Salinas Valley, that the United Fruit Company was opposed to the union's efforts, and because of our long-term relationships with the longshoremen's union, not only here in Long Beach but in San Francisco, Oakland, and Seattle, I thought it likely that they would come to our assistance by not unloading the bananas from the ships, especially if we put up picket lines at the docks. I told him I could not be sure this would happen, but based on how much help they had given us with the grape boycott, I certainly thought it would.

That was all I said. I talked softly and tried to give the impression I was carrying a big stick. He said that if that happened it would be disastrous, because the bananas were gassed in the ships on the way to the U.S. ports so that they would be properly ripened when they arrived. If that process was interrupted, an entire boatload of bananas would be lost. All he could do, he said, was call United Fruit and convey to them my concerns.

Two days later, he called me. We were to meet with two representatives from the United Fruit Company who were flying in today from Boston. Could I make the meeting? I could. We met in their room at one of the major airport hotels. One was thin and wiry, I knew he was the person in charge, and the other was younger, well built, and looked like a linebacker with a baby face. The one in charge said that he and his partner were the labor negotiators for United Fruit Company, and they had been sent out to California to take charge of the farmworker problem, and from that time on, neither the Chiquita man nor I was to be involved. The meeting was over.

It was not too long, as these things go, before union contracts between the United Fruit Company and the United Farm Workers were negotiated.

I could only pull off a stunt like this because of the success of the farmworker boycott since 1966: Schenley, DiGiorgio, table grapes, wine grapes in Canada and abroad, non-union lettuce; the list goes on. It was the hard work of many hundreds of volunteers on the boycott across the country for many years that put the big stick in my hand. Thank God, I knew how to talk softly.