

Stop the Grapes on the Dock 1966

The call came to me in San Francisco: “The grapes are being trucked from Delano to the San Francisco docks; stop them from being loaded onto the ship.” That was it. The rest was up to me.

I was a volunteer organizer for Cesar Chavez, assigned to the San Francisco Bay Area, to support the farmworkers’ grape boycott.

Using my contacts with the longshoremen’s union, I was able to confirm that grapes were to be loaded the next morning at San Francisco pier number such-and-such, and also, the growers had obtained a restraining order prohibiting picketing at the dock. Without a picket line, the longshoremen’s union had no excuse not to load the grapes onto the ship.

But my informant also told me that the picketers had the right to read the injunction before the order to stop picketing and disperse would be given by the police. A group of us, a dozen or more, showed up early the next morning to set up the picket line, read the injunction, and disperse when ordered to do so.

We arrived at what seemed like a Hollywood stage set: eight refrigerated trucks were lined up on the dock waiting for the pier to open so they could drop their loads shipside; dock workers were milling around outside the pier gate waiting to see what was going to happen; a high-priced San Francisco attorney had arrived with dozens of injunctions stuffed into his bulging briefcase; the police were at the ready; and we stood across the street from the pier, next to the railroad tracks. As if someone shouted, “Camera, action,” the drama began.

One young woman from our group crossed the street, holding a picket sign aloft. She walked to the main pier doors and began to walk back and forth in front of the entrance. The attorney served her with the injunction, and as she read it word for word, she kept the picket sign high above her head. When she finished reading every word of the multi-page legal document, the police ordered her to disperse. As she crossed the street to join the other demonstrators, she handed the picket sign to the next person, and the cycle repeated itself many times. For their part, the members of the longshoremen’s

union were satisfied that as long as the picket sign was in front of the entrance, their lives might be endangered if they crossed it.

After two hours of this street theatre, the growers' attorney gave up and left. The longshoremen went to work loading the rest of the cargo onto the ship, the idling refrigerated grape trucks remained outside waiting for another day, and we went out for a glorious breakfast.