

Thank You, Betsy Goldman 1970

I was not raised in the labor movement, and none of my relatives were union members, or if they were, I never knew it. In fact, my mother's side of the family were rice growers. My first introduction to a picket line was as an observer, not a participant, and it came in the late 1950's when, as a religious teaching brother, I was stationed in San Francisco and lived at Franklin and Ellis Streets. A group of activists was picketing a supermarket in the Western Addition, and it had something to do with civil rights, if I am not mistaken. I remember it being raucous and chaotic but short-lived.

My first activity on a picket line came in late September, 1965, on the day I brought food and money from Los Angeles to the Delano grape strikers, and Cesar asked me to visit the picket lines in the fields. Because I was decked out in my religious garb, Cesar might have thought it would be "inspirational" and "affirming" for the striking farmworkers while at the same time giving the finger to the growers and the assembled police officers.

I spent all afternoon on the picket line and got into the spirit of this confrontational activity very quickly. Pleading with – and shouting at – the strikebreakers, ignoring the personally abusive remarks of the growers and their superintendents, and always careful not to let the police intimidate or push me around. Yet, at the end of the day, I knew with certainty that the Delano grape strike would never be won with picket lines. I never forgot it.

When I was assigned to direct the Los Angeles grape boycott in 1970, I brought my bias about the strategy of the picket line with me. As a farmworker staff member, I had participated from time to time in boycott picket lines in both San Francisco and Los Angeles, but I was never very impressed with their long-term effectiveness. It took a great deal of time and energy to organize a picket line for one location, and it seemed to be a one-shot deal and didn't last very long. People came late, left early, or didn't show up at all, and aside from being raucous, confrontational, and chaotic, I couldn't understand its purpose in a city like Los Angeles, which seemed to be non-union at best and more likely anti-union.

I was determined to try something else. My thought was to assign one boycott person to the same store each day of the week. With a volunteer staff of 30 or

more people, we could cover that many stores of a supermarket chain. I also reasoned that each boycotter was likely to attract a few others from the surrounding area to help, if not every day, at least several days a week. The strategy was that a volunteer armed with a grape boycott leaflet would approach the potential customer before he/she could exit their automobile, explain in a few words how they could help the cause of the farmworkers, and then ask them to please shop at another store. We tried it, and the daily reports began to show that many customers would cooperate and drive to another store to shop. Some store reports were as high as 80 to 90 customers a day honoring the “picket line.” I wasn’t convinced; I wanted to see for myself.

Betsy Goldman, a 17-year-old Beverly Hills High School graduate, was a summer boycott volunteer who was living at our “loaner” house on South Harvard Street. Ralph’s Supermarkets was our boycott target, and I had assigned her to one of their flagship stores at 3rd and Vermont. Without telling her, I selected her as my test marketing expert.

I showed up at the Ralph’s store on a weekday morning, shortly before noon. I watched from the sidewalk so that Betsy would not know I was there. There she was, hustling from car to car as they drove into the lot to park. She approached the car, leaflet in hand, and talked to the driver, frequently a woman. After a few seconds, the car would move on and exit the lot, or no, the driver would get out of the car and walk to the store. But when that happened, Betsy was already hustling to another newly parked car to talk to its driver. And so it went. It was obvious to me that Betsy was turning away dozens of would-be Ralph’s customers, but did Ralph’s know it or even care?

Not even an hour had passed when I noticed two well-dressed executives standing in front of the huge superstore. One had his arms folded over his chest, and the other was pointing – both were looking at Betsy turning away their customers. They couldn’t believe it, and I couldn’t believe it either. A soft-spoken, nonthreatening, and attractive 17-year-old young woman was throwing a wrench into the gears of one of the largest supermarket chain stores in the Los Angeles basin. They could not have been more displeased than I was pleased. This was my kind of boycott: at least one person, every day of the week, nine hours a day, pleading one-on-one with each shopper to

help the cause of the farmworkers. The only personal confrontation was one of morality.

As the financial toll mounted week after week, Ralph's contacted me for a meeting, and we settled the matter. They could not have been nicer or more helpful. Not only did Ralph's not sell grapes, we were given complete access to their stores and distribution centers for compliance inspections. Because we were now, in a manner of speaking, partners with them, they gave us valuable feedback and gossip about the effectiveness of our grape boycott, not only in the Los Angeles area but in the grape industry as a whole.

Hard work? You got that right! Thank you, Betsy Goldman.