

22. A busy month: SNCC, Joan London, grape strike

Henry: Well, there's something dangling. I'm not going to repeat anything, but this is something that happened in Feb and Mar of 1965. The get-together with the Academic Freedom Committee took place in April. But in late Feb and early Mar of 65 something really interesting and important happened in my life, having to do with the civil rights movements. Now when I formed the organization that we called Citizens for Farm Labor, I stole the slogan that the women's suffrage movement had used in the early part of the 20th century in their effort to get the right to vote. They simply used the slogan "Equal rights for women", so I always remembered that because they were a social movement that was successful. A lot of movements aren't successful, such as the world government movement that I was involved in deeply for quite a while. So I used the slogan "Equal rights for farm workers" to identify our organization, and I used that same concept in some of my KPFA commentaries, drawing an analogy between the civil rights movement in the South's efforts to get equal rights for Negroes, as they were called in those days, and I suggested that these 2 movements had something to say to each other, that is the farm worker's movement and the Negro movement.

Well, in the early part of Feb in 1965, I got a call from the Northern CA director of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC as it was almost universally known, which was what might be called the more militant wing of the civil rights movement. I think it's no secret that there was some tension between the young guys who made up the student movement and the Martin Luther King organization, Southern Leadership Conference.

Anyway, I had this call from the SNCC leader, who invited me to a training conference to be held in Mississippi, inviting me to go down there and broach my concept of a kind of exchange movement in which guys who had been through demonstrations down in the South, sitting in at lunch counters and so forth, having them come to CA to use some of their techniques in the efforts to organize agricultural workers, and at the same time that we might send some farm workers down to the South and they would show what they might have learned in the way of tactics in their efforts. So this fellow, whose office was in SF, his name was Mike Miller, thought that was a great idea and that I should go down there and explain it.

So I accepted with some slight trepidation, because at this time the voting rights act had still not been passed by the congress. In 1964 a more omnibus civil rights act had been passed, and that had to do with opening access to places of public accommodation – lunch counters, public transportation, things like that, although it took a really horrible event to push the Congress to pass it. In June of 1964, three young guys from the North had gone down there, one of whom was black and two were white, and all three of them were murdered by the Ku Klux Klan. In July Congress finally passed the omnibus bill, and Johnson promptly signed it, but it still didn't cover the area of voting rights, and that was really the big push of SNCC in the summer of 1965, and this conference, or training session, to be held in MS in late Feb and early March, had to do with training people trying to register to vote. There was an element in the South, particularly in MS, which is where the 3 guys had been killed the previous year, they were still not reconciled to the whole concept. So, some of my friends told me to be careful.

Well, I don't know whether you guys ever heard of Stokely Carmichael, he was a firebrand who was leading SNCC, and he was going to be the director of this training session. Among the other members of the faculty was another fellow who was quite well known in his way, and his name was Howard Zinn. He had achieved some renown for having written what he called a "People's History of the United States". It was from a left-wing point of view, in which he told about the warts of the Founding Fathers and all that sort of thing, and gave a great deal of emphasis to the efforts of reformers and rebels of various stripes who had brought about social change as the country had gone along, particularly in the labor movement. He had a lot of chapters about the IWW, for example, whereas most histories don't even mention the IWW.

As it turned out, I and Howard Zinn were roommates at this event. I don't remember what the setting was, it was a place that probably had been used by a church, because it had room for smaller meetings that would meet occasionally, and large plenary sessions, and so forth. As it turned out, I didn't get a chance to speak until the very last day, and by that time people were in a hurry to get home, and to make a long story short, nothing was ever done about this exchange program between the representatives of the two different types of civil rights movements. But it was very interesting to me to see Stokely Carmichael in action, and to have a chance to talk with Howard Zinn. I remember at night – the closest town was a tiny crossroads called Waveland, I don't think it even appears on a lot of maps. It's quite close to a town on the Gulf of Mexico called Biloxi.

In the evenings after the training sessions were over, a lot of the guys would go to a bar, or a night club, in the town of Biloxi, in the black section of Biloxi, where I and maybe Howard was along, I can't remember that detail, I and maybe one or two others of the faculty, outsiders who were going to speak at this session. We were the only white guys in the place, and it just struck me, the difference between the fact that we were accepted, nobody looked askance at us, as though we were out of place, and what a difference it would have been if three black guys had tried to be waited on at a white night club at that time.

So that was a memorable experience, and I never felt in any danger. I came back and told it to my friends.

Shortly after that another memorable event took place, this one on Mar 17. I don't know whether you guys have ever heard of the Catholic Worker Movement. They put out a newspaper which cost 1 cent per copy, and I have been a subscriber for many, many years, and a subscriber to their basic ideas, which were really radical. They were started in the early 1930s as kind of a competitor of the Daily Worker, which probably was free or maybe it also charged 1 cent, and was the organ of the Communist Party USA.

A woman named Dorothy Day, along with a colleague, set out to form a movement which would be, I think the closest term would be Christian communist. They believed in the collected ownership of things, and almost every aspect of the Marxist ideal, except that it had a religious element, and a nonviolent element, and a democratic element. They didn't believe in war, and took it so seriously that they refused to serve in the draft, and a lot of them spent WW II, when it came along, in prison as COs. They did not believe in paying taxes, if any part of

those taxes were to go to the making of war, and so they had figured out the percentage of the national budget which went to the so-called Defense Department, and encouraged people to withhold that portion of their annual federal income tax, and defy the IRS to collect it, and the IRS of course had every right under the law to dip into a person's bank account, or if necessary force a sale of their home, or whatever. And I believed in it; I disbelieved in the Vietnam war to such an extent that I followed that precept of the Catholic Workers, and I withheld a quarter or a third or whatever it was from my income tax, and they did in fact take that out of my bank account, but they didn't threaten me with anything further than that, so I satisfied myself with mentioning it in my KPFA commentaries, and advising other people that they could do the same thing if they were so moved.

Anyway, as I said, Dorothy Day was one of the 2 founders of the movement, back in the early 30s. Well here we were in 1965, and she was getting along in years but she was still around, and she was in the Bay Area. There was a Catholic Worker house in Oakland, one of their activities was houses of hospitality for guys who were down and out, in the Skid Rows usually, and she checked in on these houses every so often, and somehow or other she heard about me, and my interest in justice for farm workers and other good causes, and so she wanted to meet me. It was worked out that she did in fact have some time to spend on the afternoon of March 17, and we met at 1624 Grove St, which is where Eugene and Dorothy and their mother and I were living at that time, and Dorothy Day and I had a great talk, for about 3 hours. Among other things she asked if I would be interested in writing a column about the developments in CA, to be published in their paper, which came out monthly. Well, I was sorely tempted, but I had to say I would think about it, but I had so many other commitments that I was afraid I couldn't give her a promise then and there, and as things turned out I was never able to follow up on it.

It was about that same time - it was a really very, very lively month - that Joan London came to me with another proposition. I don't know if I've mentioned the name of Joan London before; she was the long-time librarian of the State Federation of Labor in SF, which is a rather misleading title, because she was really a lot more than that, she was sort of their director of research, and whenever anybody had a question about the history of some union or other in this state, they would go to her and she would be able to answer their questions, and she would help with the writing of speeches by the big shots of the organization, because she was a good writer. In fact she had written a biography of her father, Jack London, back in the 1930s, which in the opinion of many people was the best one that had ever been written. As the years went by, others came along, and hers always stood well against all of these others, because she had the advantage that none of the others did, that she knew her father. She had a sister, I think I might have mentioned her also, but her sister was no writer.

And so Joan came to me on the 30th of Mar, 1965, I was living on Grove St at the time, and she came to me and said that she had had a feeler from a publisher in NYC called Thomas Crowell Co., an old line, small but well-thought-of publishing house that knew about the biography she had written of her father, and sent this letter to her asking if she were possibly able or interested in writing another book, and if so they would be interested in publishing it, I guess because her name still had some cachet. Well, she was not a well woman at this point. She

had been a lifetime smoker, and was already showing signs of some lung problem, and she didn't feel quite up to undertaking another book all by herself. But she was very interested in the farm labor movement. She was a member of the advisory board, or the executive committee, of Citizens for Farm Labor, so she asked me if I would be interested in co-authoring a book with her, under the understanding that she had with this editor at the Crowell Co. He of course would have to agree to this co-authorship.

Well, it wasn't as though I would be under a monthly deadline, as I would have been if I had taken up Dorothy Day on her offer. I was already under a deadline with the station to do a monthly commentary, and I was under a deadline to put out the magazine for the Citizens for Farm Labor, even though sometimes we were delayed, but we were attempting to put out an issue every month. But there would be no such deadline on this arrangement for the book. So I said OK, if her editor would agree to it, I will be happy to work with out. And so in a couple of weeks or so she got a reply from, Hugh Rossen was his name, and he understood that it would be a book about the farm labor movement.

So Joan and I began meeting occasionally, at the very least we would meet monthly, because we had meetings of CFL every month, and she was always there early, and she and I could talk before the meeting, and after the meeting if necessary, so we began talking about an approach, and it seems that we could divide the book into two parts, one of them being a history of previous efforts to organize farm workers in the state of CA, and the 2nd half, roughly, would consist of profiles of individuals who had emerged in the recent past, who would illustrate different strands within the movement, including those who were working for the organization of workers, and one or two examples of persons who were working against it, because in the course of my work in the study of the bracero program, I had gotten to know a lot of representatives of different points of view, including growers, the operators of bracero camps, and the government agencies who administered the bracero system. I got to know all of them, because I would simply identify myself as doing research on the health of braceros, and they assumed it was perfectly innocuous, and so they would open up with me. I didn't ever lie to them. I guess that's the reason why they were so outraged when the AFSC sent them copies of my manifesto. I guess I can't really blame them entirely; I should not have written that.

Anyway, I began by drawing up a list of about 20 people, all of whom were interesting in their own way, even though I might disagree violently with their points of view. I thought that to make a rounded picture, 1 or 2 of them should be included, and then of course there would be a lot of interviews with rank and file farm workers, who would go into detail about things like the very nature of the work they did, much of which was highly skilled. (One of the things that always impressed me about the whole subject of farm labor is that in the popular mind it has the connotation of unskilled work – simple-minded work that anybody can do, very monotonous, often physically demanding, but any idiot can do it. Well, the truth of the matter is that most farm work is in fact skilled, sometimes highly skilled, as I myself found when I would try to pick apricots or cherries or things like that. It requires great judgment, as well as manual dexterity.)

So anyway I would have a number of representatives of those types of farm work, they're not all interchangeable. And then there'd be representatives of the organizing efforts, all of which had failed up to that point, including a guy named Ernesto Galarza, who was the most recent, who had broken his heart trying to form a union in the teeth of the bracero program, which made it virtually impossible. And Norman Smith would have been in there, and so forth.

I got engrossed in this to the extent that I actually began doing some writing. One of the very first chapters that I began working on was a profile of a man named Fred van Dyke, who was himself a grower in the Stockton area, who had used braceros right along, as everybody else in that area did, but he had a change. He became a convert, a believer that in fact it would be to the advantage of both employers and employees if both sides got organized so that the whole farm labor market could be stabilized, rather than having migrants drift across the landscape, never knowing where their next job would come from, and growers themselves nervous as their crops ripened in the fields, and they weren't certain whether they'd have enough workers. Well that of course was the reason for the bracero program in the first place; it gave them a guaranteed labor force.

By this time, those of us who opposed the whole idea of a captive labor force had it about to expire, and on Dec 31 of 1964 it did expire. However, there was another law under which they were able to bring in a few "green-carders", as they were called. It was different from the bracero program. It involved far fewer workers, and the Secretary of Labor, by this time, did what some of us had felt the administrators of the bracero system should have been doing all along, which was to make an informed estimate of what the wages and working conditions should be, or would be, if this supply of workers from abroad were not available. What would growers have done under those conditions? Would they have gone out of business? No, they would have adjusted their wages upward, and they would have been able to attract local workers. Well, we finally had a Secretary of Labor who made this estimate on his own, and the growers didn't like it, but they went along with it because they had to.

Anyway, Fred van Dyke was a very fascinating fellow. He had this all figured out, that under the normal circumstances, and by the law of supply and demand, the growers would have had to create a sufficient pool of workers by paying a wage that made it competitive with other industries. In order to meet those wage requirements, the growers themselves would have to organize to bargain with the buyers of their stuff, in most cases it would be wholesalers and canners. And that the effect on the consumer would be so slight that most would not even notice it, because if you buy a can of tomatoes, for example, we had this all figured out, if a can of tomatoes were 30 cents, that maybe 1 cent of that would represent wages to the workers who had picked those tomatoes. So you could double the wages of the worker, and if it weren't taken advantage of by other intermediaries up the ladder, by rights it should have made a difference of only a 1 cent increase in the cost of the can of tomatoes. That sort of thing. But as long as the growers were all independent operators, they made no effort to bring the amount of tomatoes they planted and harvested into line with what was needed in the market. If they overproduced tomatoes, they didn't get as much return from the market as they could if they were to restrain themselves, and to produce just what the market required.

Anyway, Fred van Dyke was going to be one of the chapters, and I would have interviewed a labor contractor, and the various others in the general social structure, which is what I called my chapter in the bracero monograph that my principle investigator at the school of public health found so objectionable.

Now, another activity that I volunteered for, I found it difficult to say no, one of the spin-offs of the Free Speech Movement, which had broken out at the University in Sept of 1964, was something called the Free University of CA, in which people who had something to say about some topic of interest and on which they had some expertise could volunteer to conduct classes which met in churches in the vicinity of the University, and so I volunteer to teach a class in the farm labor movement, and it was accepted and I was assigned a place to meet in the Lutheran church on College Ave at the corner of Haste. I was allotted a 12-week period of time to conduct this class, and it began at just about the same time that all this other stuff was happening. It began in Mar of 1965.

Now all of this, I just don't know how I did it all. I was still the head of a research project that was taking place in the town of Capitola in Santa Cruz county, I'm sure I've mentioned that before, and my brainstorm on the occasion was, rather trying for a representative sample, we would interview everybody over 65 in the town, and I was given enough funds to hire more interviewers than I had ever had. I had so much trouble finding somebody to do my interviewing in the bracero study that I ended up with only 1 guy I could really count on. But in Capitola, I spread the word among the over-65 group that we were looking for interviewers, even if they didn't have any prior experience, and so I trained them and we ended up with a team of 2 or 3 gray-haired ladies. I didn't have to spend a heckuva lot of time supervising them, but I would have run down there every once in a while. To cover the entire town took the greater part of the summer, and that went on until probably August, after which time it was necessary to bring the results up to Berkeley and begin working on coding protocols, getting the results of the interviews into a form amenable to tabulation and analysis.

Among my other activities I organized what we called a "student committee for agricultural labor" at the Berkeley campus. The acronym was SACL, which made use of the letters CAL, which we thought was rather clever. And this spread and we had invitations to help them organize student committees at UC Davis and at Stanford, which we were happy to do, but of course they were then on their own. At the mother organization, which I believe one might call the Citizen's Committee here in Berkeley, we had enough to keep our own organization going, rather than keeping tabs on them. I don't know what became of them eventually. The student committee at Berkeley went on for some years.

At the Mother organization CCFL, we began having a brain drain, because things were brewing down in the lower San Joaquin valley. I had a co-editor of the magazine for a couple of months, who was really very valuable, but he went down there, because that's where the action was, and he became editor of their publication. My other co-editor, a woman named Wendy Goepel, also decamped, went down to Delano and became Cesar Chavez's personal secretary.

So in a real sense it might be said that my greatest contribution to the farm labor movement was not what I myself did, but that I recruited so many other people, who did valuable work. Another fellow I don't know if I've mentioned was named Gene Nelson. I had met him back in the days when I was doing the bracero study. He was at loose ends and wanted me to suggest a book that he could write. I said why don't you write a book about the bracero program consisting of a novelistic approach. In my attempt to study the program I was supposed to keep it at an academic level, but he would be free to fictionalize it, and to base it entirely on what he learned by interviews with braceros, but then to write it up with whatever adjectives and adverbs he might want, to make it more colorful. And so he began doing that until things really got hot in Delano, at which time he dropped everything else and volunteered to work for Chavez.

Now I had been following Chavez since Mar of 1962. Well, I'd known him before that, when he was organizing chapters of the Community Service Organization around the state, but he left the CSO because it wanted to concentrate on urban Latinos, and Chavez wanted to concentrate on the rural Chicanos, and so he resigned a very good job he had, and without any financial support at all, he went down to Delano and started holding house meetings. In fact, he followed very, very closely the program that Father McCullough had used in Stockton, and Chavez called his organization the Farm Workers Association.

I applauded this whole approach, that he didn't make public speeches, he didn't make promises of any economic advantage to people who joined his organization. He himself worked in the fields to support himself from time to time, and went around holding house meetings. House meetings every night, laying a foundation which eventually would be so interconnected and so involved, everybody in the organization would have a function, and it wasn't anything like the form that so many unions take, where you pay your dues and nothing more is ever asked of you. He of course deliberately avoided the word "union", and as he had it calculated it would take 5 years of building this foundation before the association would be sufficiently powerful that it could venture into the economic arena.

But his hand was forced in Sept 1965. It had to do with the fact that the farmers were still hoping to get a few green-carders, but that they would have to offer domestic workers a considerable increase over what they had been paying in previous years. It began in the grapes of Coachella valley in the spring of 1965. There was an enclave of Filipino workers who were headed by a man named Larry Itliang, who was a former staff member and organizer for AWOC. He represented his fellow Filipinos in negotiating with the grape growers of the Coachella valley, and he got exactly what the Secretary of Labor had decided would be the prevailing wage if the growers were not able to call upon the Department of Labor to provide them with not so much as a single green carder from Mexico. As I recall they got \$1.40 per box of grapes, whereas the most they had been able to get in previous years had been probably \$1.10. And if they completed the season they would get a bonus of 10 cents a box.

Well, the grapes in the Coachella valley ended and there was a little time in between in which the same group moved back to their more permanent base of operations, which was in Tulare county, and the same drama was played out again. The growers began by offering \$1.25 a box,

and the Filipinos, through their spokesperson Larry Itliang, said “We just came from getting \$1.40 a box, why should we settle for \$1.25?” The situation was a little different because the growers in the area had never asked for any green-carders, and so the Secretary of Labor had nothing to say about the situation, and the growers thought they would draw a line in the sand. The \$1.25 they were offering, I suppose, was something of an improvement over the previous year, and there were a lot more workers in the area than had been available in the Coachella valley, and they thought that the Filipinos might hold out for a little while, but they would have capitulated. Another important variable is that the Filipinos of the Delano area lived in camps that were operated by the growers, and if they struck they could be evicted, and the growers had every intention of utilizing that leverage.

So, the Filipinos did strike, and the growers did start to evict them, and the growers began turning to the other major ethnic group in the area to get replacement workers, and the other ethnic group of course consisted of Mexican-Americans, many of whom were members of the AWA, all of whom had been told by Chavez in so many words, if the subject ever came up in these small house meetings, if the subject of a work stoppage had ever come up, Chavez would have said “we’re not in a position to do that for another couple of years”. So it put the AWA on the horns of a dilemma. If they went to work in the grapes, they’d be scabs; they’d be strike-breakers. On the other hand, if they went on strike on their own, they were unprepared for it, they might well lose, they didn’t have any strike fund to fall back on. I suppose they thought that the growers had sufficient reserves in the form of savings in the bank that they could write off the year’s harvest if necessary, to keep the union out.

The AWA believed in organizational democracy, and so they called a meeting, to be held in Delano although members from anyplace in the valley where they might live were welcome to come and take part in this meeting, at which the decision would be made, whether to join with the Filipinos, who represented a totally different organization, AWOC, or not.

Well, as I read the record, Chavez didn’t make any attempt to stampede the meeting. He was not a fiery speaker by any means, and I’m sure that he laid out his initial assumption, that he needed 5 years to build a sufficiently firm foundation, and it didn’t yet exist. But the vote was unanimous, apparently, they all wanted to join the strike. So that changed everything: it changed the history of the AWA radically, changed the history of AWOC radically, and changed the history of the CFL radically.