

McClogan, S
Oral History of the Southern
San Joaquin Valley Project

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ORAL HISTORY OF THE SOUTHERN SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY PROJECT

CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

FARM LABOR PROJECT

UNITED FARM WORKERS OF KERN COUNTY

Vincente Silva ✓

Interviewed

by

Susan McColgan

on

June 30, 1976

Transcriber: Sue Glenn

Editor: Dr. Gerald Stanley

Typist: Barbara Lewy

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M: To start out with, when did you start to work with the
UFW: How'd you get involved?

S: I started working with the UFW about six years ago when
I was in high school; and in 1971 I went to school in
Boston.

M: What do you do here out of this office?

S: This office is responsible for organizing the whole area,
Lamont, Arvin and Bakersfield.

M: So, you go out to the fields every day and talk to the farm
workers and that sort of thing? O.K. How much of the
labor force still migrates and goes from crop to crop?

S: The whole state?

M: Just generally.

S: I don't know. Some people say it's about one-third.

M: They still migrate and go from crop to crop?

S: A lot of the whole thing about migration and that whole business is historically a tool really to keep the workers down and powerless, and that started way back in the 1930's. You bring as many workers as you can to an area to keep the wages low and keep them fighting among each other. But really there's no need for as much migration. In places where we've had contracts, the work force has stabilized tremendously. One place where we've had a contract, in 1970, previously the grower had been hiring upwards of 1200 workers; and after the contract there were about 340 workers. They increased production so it was better in terms of production and yet there was no need for the migration. You can really see how it was used that way.

M: In regards to the Teamsters, when did they get involved in all this and why?

S: Well, the first time the Teamsters ever got involved was here, in this area with DiGiorgio back in 1967. What has always been the case in the history of farm labor is that the Teamsters really hadn't, didn't get into the scene and haven't been on the scene to organize farm workers. There has been an alternative for the growers; and it was a deal by which the growers got out of the fact of having to deal with the

United Farm Workers. In other words, the growers finally realized that they would have to reckon with unionization of the workers and to them it was an easier deal to deal with the Teamsters because then you didn't have any organization among the workers. They signed secret sweetheart agreements. A sweetheart agreement is one where it's just a deal between the heads of the union and the grower and there's no participation or care given to bring out the wishes of the workers. That's when it started. The first major contract signing for the Teamsters was in 1970 in the lettuce. The fact / is / that we won all the grape contracts; but when we began organizing lettuce fields, / the growers / signed sweetheart deals / with the Teamsters / in lettuce in 1970 and they did the same thing with the grape industry in 1973 when our contracts were up for renewal.

M: With these two unions competing for the membership, does that make the situation better for the farm worker? Does that give him a choice? Also, what's the difference between Teamster and UFW contracts?

S: Well, on paper they look comparable; but if you investigate it, there's no comparison. For instance, the pension plan and the medical plan for the Teamsters on paper look good; but very few farm workers can ever qualify. I mean they were designed for more permanent workers, like truck drivers and warehouse workers. You need just an incredible amount of hours to qualify for any

of the benefits, and farm workers can never get any of the benefits of the contract because they never work for one grower that long. So if you look at the benefits, there really isn't very much of a comparison. UFW contracts are far superior.

In terms of wages right now the UFW contract worker is getting \$3.10 an hour; and under the present Teamster contract he gets \$2.70. The UFW has a much better medical plan and a pension plan is being started now. But what's more important is the organization of the workers. The workers under the UFW contract have representatives right on the ranch to enforce the contract. Under Teamster contract, you don't have that. Under the UFW contract workers from the union control the hiring, and under the Teamster contract you continue under the labor contract, which has been a bitter enemy of the farm workers throughout history.

M: You mean they negotiate their own contracts?

S: That's right; under the UFW contract, the workers themselves on each ranch are involved in negotiating the contract. With the Teamsters contracts, the workers never even see a contract. It's even hard to understand a contract even after it's been signed. They have no in-put into what goes into the contract; and if you don't even know what the contract is, there's no way you can enforce it.

M: Why would somebody say join the Teamsters rather than the UFW?

S: Well, that's a big, big myth that the Teamsters put out, you know. When they did steal the contracts, they said how many members they had among the farm workers but they didn't have any members. I mean, they never had. The Teamsters took contracts in 1970 and 1973, but they never had a single meeting with the workers until 1975, this last year when elections started. How can you represent workers if you don't meet with them? It's just a false front.

M: You mean that if a person wants to work for this grower, he has to join a Teamster union, that sort of thing?

S: Well, he pays dues. It depends on how you define a member. If you define a member just by the fact that the union has a contract with him, then that's that. That's what the Teamsters are saying. But in terms of active members, there's no way the members can be active. There's no need--there's no organization. Right.

M: What kind of security does the union offer a worker when he's out of work?

S: I don't understand.

M: Well, I guess crops are seasonal, right? So the times you're out of work does the union offer any kind of security?

S: Well, in terms of union security, under UFW contract a worker can't be fired without just cause, and here again there's the machinery right on the ranch to enforce that. Many times under a Teamster contract you can be fired just at the whim

of the grower and you have no recourse. They tell you to go talk to a Teamster. You can find him in the office. You're lucky if you can get anything taken care of. But really, there isn't very much security under Teamster contract, and there's very much security under UFW contract here. A steward is there to protect you, to make sure that you aren't being fired. Before any disciplinary action can be taken under UFW contract, the union and the worker have to be notified in writing and have to have a chance to petition for grievance.

M: So you have what you call stewards on each ranch?

S: On a ranch committee, which is very important. Five members are elected at the ranch at-large, and they represent the workers and help enforce the contract.

M: What does a UFW member pay in dues?

S: 2 per cent.

M: 2 per cent? 2 per cent of gross annual wages? How about a Teamster member? What kind of dues do they have to pay?

S: They pay \$8.00 a month. Yeah, they just voted an increase of the dues.

M: What does that 2 per cent usually turn out to be? I have no idea.

S: Well, it depends on the worker and how often they work.

M: What does it, what's the average?

S: I don't know.

M: What do you think of the Agricultural Labor Relations Board
/and the elections?

S: The elections were stopped because the vast majority of the growers and the Teamsters didn't like that and they allied their forces to stop the funding. We're taking the initiative with a farm worker proposal which has qualified, and it's got the 14th position on the ballot in November. What that is, is that's basically /a strengthening of ARA/ for the workers with a few changes to make it stronger for the workers. We'd like to see the act going again and we've been pushing for funding. It looks like funding may be coming, but we're also trying to /get/ the law. It's the first time in the history of this country /that/ farm workers have had a chance to vote for their /law/.

M: Oh, I see. Is it true the growers oppose more access?

S: That's right. That's right. Many workers were forced at gunpoint. They just recently convicted two members of an armed vigilante group in Stockton of armed threatening of organizers.

M: Did the UFW lose a lot because of this, /because of/ their not allowing them to gain access to the farm workers?

S: Well, we fought it, you know. It's the only chance the workers ever get to really find out about the union. I mean, that's why the access rule is so important. I mean it was ruled by the board that the organizers should have access and it was

upheld by the state supreme court. That's one of the very important things. It guarantees a worker's right to hear about the union.

M: Do you think you'll get it back when it comes up on the ballot?

S: Well, under the farm labor initiative, it makes it part of the law that organizers do have the right of access.

M: How committed are the Teamsters to all this? Do you feel that the UFW can drive the Teamsters out. Just how committed are they?

S: I think that it's exactly what we thought; but they stopped the election process because we were winning. With the natural course, if the law is allowed to work when elections are being held, we're winning the majority and the Teamsters are eventually going to be defeated.

M: So you think that the workers will vote the Teamsters out?

S: We know it. Where there's been free and fair elections and where we've had the right to talk with the workers, we've won the vast majority of the elections. That's what was continuing and that's what'll happen with the election laws--one way or another.

M: So you don't think that the Teamsters and the growers together will have enough power to win in the long run?

S: You know, the Teamsters had the contracts, but we had the workers, and in the end we're going to win because of that,

because we have the workers /who/ want their own union.

The workers are going to keep fighting for that if it takes 5, 10, 20 years. Eventually the Teamsters are going to learn that.

M: In the case that the UFW would lose, just say, do you think that the status of the farm worker would go back to where it was before all this started, or do you really feel that you've established kind of a permanent basis for collective bargaining for the farm laborer?

S: Once the contracts were gone, the conditions went back.

M: So, if you do lose then, their status would probably go back to where it was?

S: The important thing is that the workers have an organization that will fight for their rights. I mean, wages have gone up and to a certain degree, wages aren't going to drop too much farther down. I mean that's what the growers wanted--to get back what they can. But the important thing, I think, /is/ wages'll probably stay; but what's more important is, is the workers being able to have some power on the ranch so that they can protect themselves, protect their rights.

M: Do you think you've established collective bargaining for the farm worker then on a permanent type basis?

S: Well, I think that it's coming to be realized.

M: It's coming to that?

S: Yes, where we've won contracts and we've negotiated. The fact

Is that we've right now got 46 contracts since the law went into effect. I think it just shows the fact that some of the growers are realizing that unionization is a reality they have to accept and realize.

M: Which law are you referring to?

S: The ARA. Without that, without protection of the law I mean, that just stops the process. So that's why support, if it's allowed to continue to work and work the way it was designed, unionization is going to take place.

M: You know traditionally there's been a sort of a social value structure with the grower being in control of everything; but you feel now that they are finally accepting this reality of unionization?

S: Well, some places they are. I mean, the fact that they're still fighting the funding shows that not all of them have. With some, it's going to take a long time.

M: How about the government? Do you think that they're finally recognizing the rights of the agricultural workers to collective bargaining?

S: In this state, yes. I think in this state they realize that the farm workers have a strong political force, a force to be reckoned with; and I think in this state the fact that we did get a law and the fact that they're working to revise the law now shows that to some degree government is being, starting to be a little bit responsive to the workers. But here again it's

because of the struggle.

M: Do you feel it's mostly on a state level now? It hasn't really gotten to the federal level?

S: No, it'll be a long time before we have a national ✓?

M: So, the average farm worker has his situation improved quite a bit materially over the last few years with the unionization?

S: Where there~~o~~are contracts, yes. You can go out and see the fields where there aren't contracts, and conditions are just as bad as they were before. There are children in the fields, workers aren't given drinking water, and there is something very important. You can work at a ranch for 10, 15 years and still be fired just at the whim of the grower.

M: The UFW has been really the first successful organization that's been able to organize the farm workers. This is kind of a wide open question, but what do you think that the UFW has done right, why is it succeeding?

S: It continued to organize the workers and that's what's important. Like I said, you~~k~~now, the most important thing about a contract is the worker's security on a ranch, and the only way you have that is if you have a contract and you have an organization right on the ranch to enforce the contract. But the reason we've been able to win and continue to fight against all the odds that the growers and the Teamsters have been able to throw out is that we still have the support of the workers and the workers want unionization. They've

sacrificed and they've struck and they've boycotted to win that right.

M: There've been attempts to organize the farm workers since the 1800's and they've all failed. Why do you think yours has succeeded? I mean, what sort of things have you done differently to make this work?

S: Well, go to history before the first strike in 1965. What had been done before is you try and organize the workers after a strike. What we've done, what we've always done, is organize the workers first and use the strike as a weapon rather than as an organizer. I mean, a strike is easy to do. Anybody could effectively start a strike, but what happens after that? Whether or not the workers are organized is whether or not you can carry it through to something, to reach an agreement, to reach a contract; and, like I said, we've continued to organize the workers and we have the workers organized. That's the difference.

M: How much success do you think you owe to the media? How has the media helped you or has it helped you?

S: I think, in general, the media has been good, you know, nationally overall. I think the media helped in 1965, 1966, 1967 to bring just what was going on to the American public and that's why I think the American public responded and helped with the boycott because they realized that farm workers did have rights and they needed help to win those rights and

secure the new contract and so they helped and they boycotted.

M: Mn hmm. What are you boycotting right now?

S: Grapes, non-UFW grapes, non-UFW lettuce, and Gallo wine.

M: Some people have said that the UFW really isn't a labor union. They call it more a civil rights movement or a representation of a social class rather than a labor group. What do you think about that?

S: Well, it is a labor union. It is a labor movement, but it's more than that. It has to be.. I mean, you have to be concerned. If you're going to be able to protect the workers on the job, you also have to be interested in the needs of the workers beyond the job. And it's not just that the workers are being exploited on the job. They're being exploited in their whole life and social structure; and you've got to be interested in the social needs of the workers too. And that's why we have printing, our own printing system, so they're interested in not only the needs of the workers on the job but their families. We have a service center. We've always had a service center to offer help to the workers in whatever their needs. Before there was nobody to help the workers, and now with service centers there is somebody the workers can go to to get help, help them explain what they have to do to get what they need and to go with them to make sure they get what they deserve.

M: Um (pause). . . Do you see any danger of the UFW becoming part of the establishment, like the other national labor unions

have become?

S: Well, we're of the establishment in the sense that we are a labor union. But, I mean our case is with the workers and we're always going to be fighting for the workers.

M: OK. Is California sort of a test case to obtain support nationwide? You know it's a big thing. Do you expect the UFW to become sort of a nucleus for the whole national farm labor type movement?

S: Sure. We've always been organizing nationwide. We are a national union. California is the biggest agricultural state and that's why it started here. That's why we are organizing a UFW contract in Florida. We're going to be organizing in Texas, Arizona, all states in the West. We're starting to ~~organ~~ organize in the East coast. I mean there are three million farm workers in the country, and there're only about one hundred thousand here in California. So, farm workers in this country aren't going to be free until they are organized across the nation, but it's important here.

M: I guess consumer prices have been kept down by the low wages that they've been paying agricultural workers, partly. Do you think that as you drive the wages up, and the consumer prices go up, do you think that that will lose support for you?

S: No. I think that's a myth, you know, that the growers have been trying to put across as a weapon against the boycott, that wages are going to go up. Well, I think we just gotta

look at the whole country. Should we get rid of the Auto Workers Union just because it'll make cars cheaper and forget about the benefits of the workers? Don't the workers have the right to get a decent wage, and to be able to feed their families, and have decent working conditions? But if we really look at it, I mean let's take the lettuce workers.

Of the price the consumer pays for a head of lettuce in the supermarket, half of a penny goes to the wages of the workers. So even if the wages completely doubled, that effect on the price could only be a penny. You know, compared to the whole marketing system and agribusiness, the wages of the workers are small, a very, very tiny part of the cost.

M: So the workers' wages are just a minute percentage of what the consumer pays. Right?

S: Right, and even if it wasn't, what's more important? I mean if he should pay two cents, is not that worth the life of a farm worker?

M: I know this is kind of a wide open question, but what do you see in regards to the future in the UFW? The big problem this year is going to be automation. Mechanization is going to take over and there will be no farm workers or very few farm workers as we know it now. They will become obsolete. What are you going to do for the farm workers when that happens, or do you think that will happen?

S: Well, mechanization is a reality that has to be dealt with. I mean, you can't stop progress. We're not against progress in that sense, but I don't think there will come a time where agricultural work will be done primarily by machine. There is just no way. No machine can tell when a grape is ripe and needs to be harvested. It's the same with a lot of crops. Mechanization is going to happen, and it has happened. It's going to make the work easier, but it's never going to completely wipe out farm workers. But what is the objection of the workers against mechanization? It's not stopping mechanization. The UFW wants a system set-up for retraining and rehiring of workers in other jobs, to run the machines and take care of the machines, and on other jobs. And that is something that is very important.

M: So that the UFW will do that for the workers?

S: The contracts?

M: Change their program to meet the needs of the workers. What do you see for the growers in the long term in case the mechanization is in their favor?

S: Oh yes, they're going to mechanize when they can and where they can. But it's a long way off, and like I said it's never going to completely take over. I think there are a lot of studies going on now in agribusiness, and all involved in the corporations, which is very important, people should be aware of it. Not just farm workers, but everybody in this country should be

aware of what's going on in agribusiness. Oil companies are taking over agribusiness and they're just trying to totally control the food supply in this country, all the way from the seedling to where you buy it in the market. Tenneco is an example. Years ago Tenneco didn't own anything really worth mentioning in terms of agriculture, and now Tenneco owns twice the acreage of twice the size of the state of L?T. That is, they own the land. They own the companies that produce the chemicals which they spray on the products. They own distribution firms. They own packaging corporations. They're just trying to control the whole industry.

M: What do you think L has T changed since 1965? Are farm labor goals the same, are they changing, or what's the outlook?

S: Well, the goals haven't changed. We want to organize farm workers and get protection for farm workers. Give them a better life, a decent wage, decent living conditions.

M: So the goals are essentially the same?

S: Sure.

M: Do you foresee any changes in your tactics?

S: Well, tactics have been changing. I mean, before we held the law, the workers had absolutely nothing, no power. All we had was a strike and a boycott. Now we have a law to gain recognition and to begin the bargaining process, so that changes how things are done. The strike is still important, but it is no longer the only thing we have for recognition; and now the

strike can be used the way strikes are being used in other industries. That brings you the contract. So in that sense, it will change.

M: What do you think of the UFW in the larger perspective? Do you think that its impact is being felt as much or even more in the cities? I know Chavez has stirred up a whole social consciousness in the city, an ethnic pride, a sense of racial identity. Do you think that the UFW is having this large impact on just everything?

S: Well, you know it's been a big education for the American public to realize what conditions the farm workers of the country are forced to live and work under. You know people, people go get their food at the supermarket; and they think that it grows out in the field, wrapped in a package. It doesn't, and people have become aware of the fact. There's a lot of blood and sweat that goes into the picking of food that feeds the country. I think for that reason we got a lot of support, and the support is very evident. I mean, we qualified an initiative in this state in the least amount of time that it's ever been done. We got more than twice as many signatures than we needed to qualify the initiative in just a matter of 28 days. It shows that we do have strong support in the cities, and it's because of massive education that has gone along with the boycott effort and the strikes.

M: But the UFW is having a larger impact in regards to the farm worker. It is also raising the social consciousness in the cities to make life better for Mexican-Americans, don't you think?

S: Well, there are a lot of other things that contribute to that too. The UFW isn't just a Mexican union, Chicano union. Right, it is all kinds. It's every nationality, Arabs, Philippinos, white workers, black workers. I think that has helped some.

M: So, you don't see the UFW being primarily for Mexican-Americans but being basically for the farm workers.

S: What farm workers?

M: Any farm workers. Is there anything else that we missed that you'd like to talk about? Perhaps the violence that happened during the strike?

S: Well, one thing that is coming up that I mentioned to you is the trial for the death of the strikers in 1973. I could tell you of some of the violence that happened out here.

M: Plenty of violence?

U.V.*: Yes. From the cops and from the growers and the Teamsters. The growers, just last year during the organizing, had people beaten up while they were organizing. The people were pushed around and arrested and everything. But during the strike, mainly the Teamsters; and they'd beat up all these people at Kovacevich.

M: Where was that?

U.V.: In the strike where they beat up the people at Kovacevich.

They beat up a 68-year-old man, anybody who got in their way. All of them were big guys. /We/ were fighting for our lives.

S: There's violence. It was very brutal.

M: But it didn't work, right?

S: Well, it stopped the picketing activity; but I think that /what has/ happened since then shows that we won and that we've always been a non-violent union. We know that you can't win through violence, and you have to overcome violence. When the violence just kept increasing and increasing until two workers were killed, we kept the struggle going and we started the boycott. The boycott and everything else took precedent to win.

M: Now, is there anything else that you would like to add, anything that I missed or something? Well, thank you very much.