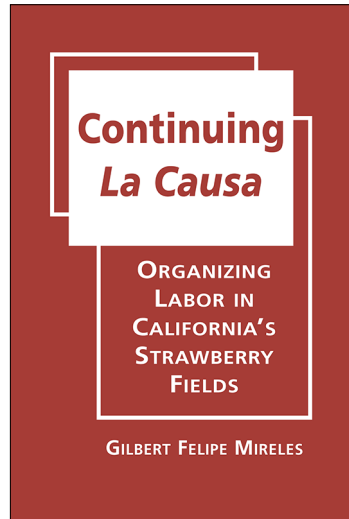


EXCERPTED FROM

Continuing *La Causa*:
Organizing Labor in
California's Strawberry Fields

Gilbert Felipe Mireles

Copyright © 2013
ISBN: 978-1-935049-64-7 hc



FIRSTFORUMPRESS

A DIVISION OF LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS, INC.

1800 30th Street, Ste. 314
Boulder, CO 80301
USA
telephone 303.444.6684
fax 303.444.0824

This excerpt was downloaded from the
FirstForumPress website
www.firstforumpress.com

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xi</i>
1 The United Farm Workers	1
2 The Drive to Organize	11
3 The Strawberry Industry Campaign	31
4 Immigrant Networks	51
5 Institutional Inclusion and the Organization of Dissent	71
6 The Triumph of Effective Bureaucracy	97
7 Contexts for Success and Failure	119
8 Incorporating Immigrants into an Organization Society	143
<i>Appendix A: A Note on Methodology</i>	<i>159</i>
<i>Appendix B: A Timeline of Events</i>	<i>163</i>
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>171</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>181</i>

1

The United Farm Workers

The United Farm Workers of America (UFW) features prominently in the modern American labor movement and in the struggles for racial justice among minority groups in the United States. The lives of American farmworkers have been greatly improved through the union's efforts. Both the UFW and Cesar Chavez are central to understanding the Mexican American experience in the United States.¹ Both are revered. The history of the union is not, however, one of unequivocal success. The late 1970s through the early 1990s were a period of dormancy for the UFW, with little active organizing taking place. The situation changed in 1993 with the death of Cesar Chavez. After assuming leadership of the organization, Chavez's son-in-law Arturo Rodriguez embarked on a series of organizing campaigns to revitalize the union and continue *la causa*; the struggle for farmworker justice. In 1996 the UFW initiated its largest campaign in decades as it attempted to organize workers in the California strawberry industry. This book chronicles that campaign and explains the initial failures and eventual success of the union.

The strawberry campaign took place during a period when issues of labor and immigration were dominating headlines in California. As many commentators discussed the decline of organized labor in the United States, unions were enjoying success and even resurgence in California. The Service Employees International Union's (SEIU) 1990 Justice for Janitors campaign had resulted in a significant gain for organized labor in California. Unionization campaigns by the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE) and other unions were also meeting with success.² What these campaigns had in common was that it was immigrants who were being organized. To many insiders, California in the 1990s seemed like the wave of the future for unions, with immigrants forming the basis of the resurgence of organized labor.

The possibility of resurgence had significant implications for local and state politics in California. Unions have always been active participants in California politics. Various labor councils and locals have courted allied politicians and supported legislation in the state. Examples abound. During the 2001 mayoral race in Los Angeles, the local County Federation of Labor endorsed labor-friendly Democratic candidate Antonio Villaraigosa. This umbrella for the city's numerous unions not only provided financial support for the race but also volunteered 2,500 workers for door-to-door campaigning.³ Another example is the Citizenship Project, the Teamsters-affiliated organization that worked to increase the civic participation of immigrant workers in their local communities. These political connections typify the close relations between institutional politics and organized labor in California and demonstrate how unions have facilitated the civic incorporation of immigrants into American society.

However, not everything was rosy for immigrants and their supporters. The increasing militarization of the US-Mexico border was a well-known fact courtesy of Spanish-language media outlets. This made an already difficult trip to and from Mexico even more difficult for immigrants without proper documentation. Compounding these difficulties, in 1994 California voters passed Proposition 187, intended to deny basic government services to undocumented California residents. Proposition 187 faced legal challenges and was eventually found unconstitutional in federal court. Still, anti-immigrant sentiment lingered. For many immigrants, the hostile environment was reason to retract from public life and keep a low profile. The tragic events of September 11, 2001, only made life more difficult for Californians perceived as foreigners. Labor resurgence and anti-immigrant sentiment stood as the socio-political backdrop to the UFW's unionization campaign in the strawberry industry.

During the 1990s, however, organized labor did not consider immigration status as an obstacle to unionization. Large and successful unionization drives among immigrant workers in the state during the first half of the decade had upended conventional wisdom that immigrants could not be organized. A common refrain heard in labor circles at the time was that immigrants should be organized "as workers, not as immigrants" (Johnston 2001). Neither the UFW nor the AFL-CIO considered that legal status might impede the organization of farmworkers. Both organizations viewed the strawberry campaign as the start of an ambitious plan to organize immigrant workers in different industries across the entire state.⁴

When I arrived in California in the summer of 2000 to study immigrant farmworker mobilization, the UFW campaign was winding down.⁵ To the surprise of many observers, an upstart group of anti-UFW workers calling themselves *El Comité de Trabajadores de Coastal Berry* (Coastal Berry Farmworkers Committee, usually referred to simply as the *Comité*) had beat the UFW three times in state-sponsored elections. After extended legal maneuvering, a judge ruled that the UFW would represent workers in southern work areas and the *Comité* would be the bargaining agent for workers in Coastal Berry's Northern California operations. It was an uneasy peace that did not last long. In 2002, when the *Comité*'s contract was up for renewal, the UFW challenged them and easily won the election to represent workers in Coastal Berry's Northern California operations. When I initially began to study this case, I was intrigued by what seemed like a great sociological puzzle. Prevailing social movement perspectives would have predicted a clear and outright victory by the UFW in its initial efforts to unionize the strawberry workers. Instead, the UFW was thwarted by a loosely organized group of anti-union workers.

The case of the UFW at Coastal Berry defied common understandings of how social movements succeed. Here was a seasoned organization that was extremely well-organized and in command of an impressive range of material, political, and symbolic resources. California had a Democratic governor and legislature. The UFW has historically had close ties to both. The union also enjoyed close ties to national Democrats and national labor leaders. Impressively enough, the UFW had been able to get the largest strawberry producer in the nation sold to union-friendly investors—ample testament to its expansive ties and political leverage. No unionization campaign is ever easy, and the agriculture industry in California has always proven itself a formidable challenger. But if ever a union was well-positioned to win a campaign, this was it. Yet somehow a rag-tag group of workers at Coastal Berry, with no resources or political clout, managed to surprise everyone and beat the UFW not once but three times. This unfolding of events simply didn't make sense to a sociologist studying social movements. Something peculiar was happening, and I was determined to figure out what it was.

The UFW and its supporters claimed that the *Comité* was an industry front-group. Certainly, there was reason to suspect that it was. Early in the campaign, the UFW had uncovered incontrovertible evidence of grower-financed anti-union groups operating in the Central Coast. But subsequently Coastal Berry was sold to union-friendly investors, and it was unlikely that the new owners would support anti-

union efforts at the company. In fact, they had purchased Coastal Berry specifically to provide an ownership that would be neutral in the unionization campaign. Perhaps other growers in the local strawberry industry were responsible, but by now the early anti-union financiers were embroiled in serious litigation with the UFW, and it seemed that a chastened grower community was unlikely to engage in further shenanigans. For these reasons, I was skeptical of the claim that the Comité was an industry-driven effort. I sought evidence to the contrary, but none was ever found—by me, other researchers, or the UFW.

It would be easy to dismiss the Comité as a company union. The group certainly counted among its leaders several supervisors, foremen, and other employees of the company. But one cannot dismiss the fact that the group had won three consecutive state-sponsored elections. In each election the majority of workers at Coastal Berry had chosen to throw their lot in with the Comité rather than the more sophisticated and professional UFW, and it was not immediately apparent why. The Comité demanded serious scholarly inquiry if I were to make sense of what happened in the California strawberry industry between 1996 and 2003.

The UFW chose to focus on the Coastal Berry Company after close consultation with the AFL-CIO. As a subsidiary of the Monsanto Corporation, Coastal Berry made an attractive target for a variety of reasons (to be explained in Chapter 6). This strategy was the result of a “corporate campaign” approach popular among labor unions in the 1980s and 1990s. In a corporate campaign, labor unions use detailed industry research to decide how best to organize a particular employer or industry sector. This approach had proven effective in the past, but as the strawberry campaign demonstrates, it is imperfect.

Developed and implemented by sophisticated organizations, corporate campaigns emphasize organization-level analyses in their approach to unionization campaigns. By focusing on employers as organizations, however, this approach runs the risk of de-emphasizing worker views and interests. Among immigrant workforces like those found in the California strawberry industry, patron-client relations are often structured in a way that exerts tremendous power over workers. When it focused on Coastal Berry’s upper management as the major impediment to unionization, the UFW failed to fully recognize and act on foremen and supervisors, who were the major power brokers among the company workforce and who stood to lose the most from a successful unionization campaign. When organizing from above, as the UFW did in this case, unions risk not fully accounting for micro-level dynamics that influence individual decision-making processes.

My field research revealed that the success of the Comité was due to the strength of patron-client relations found within family and family-like networks. It was through one-on-one exchanges among family and close friends that the Comité was able to gain the support of a majority of workers at Coastal Berry. In the end, however, the strength of interpersonal bonds alone was not enough to win the unionization campaign. The UFW ultimately prevailed because of what I call *organizational capacity*—a characteristic of fully developed formal organizations that allows one organization to meet its interests over and against the interests of others with which it interacts. Organizational capacity facilitates the acquisition and implementation of institutional knowledge. Institutions are the rules that dictate interorganizational dynamics. All organizations must contend with institutions as they attempt to meet their objectives in an environment comprising other competing and allied organizations. For example, California's Agricultural Labor Relations Act (ALRA), which governs the rights and responsibilities of employers and employees in the state's agriculture industry, is an institution. It regulates the behavior of labor and capital interests, and is itself the outcome of interactions between labor and capital interests.

If social movements are to make lasting social change that is structural in nature, they must have an understanding of institutions and be able to interact with and shape them in their favor. One of the reasons that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) has been so successful in its long history is that it developed and sustained an organizational capacity that allowed it raise effective legal challenges to racial injustice in the United States. These challenges would not have succeeded without knowledge of American jurisprudence and the ability to operate within the legal system.

However, social change through institutional mechanisms poses challenges for social movement organizations. Groups that focus on change at the institutional level risk alienating themselves from the population base that originally gives rise to collective action. Recall that the unionization campaign began in the fields but ended in the courts. The ability to operate within the legal system required a cadre of specially trained practitioners—lawyers. The problem for the NAACP, as well as the UFW, is that however effective these skilled practitioners may be at bringing about structural social change because of their knowledge of arcane institutional procedures, those skills don't necessarily translate into grassroots support for the movement. Moreover, in their reliance on lawyers and other such highly specialized professionals, social movement organizations run the risk of becoming

technocratic organizations operated with little interaction with the very people on whose behalf they are ostensibly working. This is what happened to the UFW in the 1980s, after the union had moved its operations away from the agricultural centers of the San Joaquin and Salinas Valleys to the distant town of La Paz, in the Tehachapi Mountains. During that period the UFW concentrated on direct mailings to union supporters and boycott management and neglected farmworker organizing. The UFW's absence from the fields in the 1980s had significant consequences in the 1990s during the strawberry campaign.

The fact that the UFW has long become decoupled from its base has particularly troubling implications among a farmworker population made up predominantly of recent immigrants. Social movement organizations have historically functioned to ease the socio-political integration of marginalized groups into the mainstream of American society. Groups such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and the aforementioned NAACP have served the African American and Latino populations effectively in this manner. The UFW could greatly benefit immigrants and American society at large if it were to function in this way. The fact that it did not created significant obstacles in the strawberry campaign and does not bode well for the integration of society's newest members. The UFW's lack of engagement with farmworkers is especially troubling considering both the outsized role of organizations and the growing presence of immigrants in contemporary American society.

Thus, organizational capacity and patron-client relationships played major and alternating roles in the historical development of the strawberry campaign. Having organizational capacity but lacking social networks in California's strawberry fields, the UFW faced tremendous difficulty organizing workers at Coastal Berry. In contrast, patron-client relationships at the company operating within kinship networks allowed the Comité to undermine the union's overtures to workers. Organizational capacity ultimately gave the UFW the upper hand, however. The fact that it was able to finally win a union contract at the company is testament not to its abilities to organize immigrant farmworkers but rather to its position as a sophisticated organization with institutional prowess. The remainder of the book will elaborate on this thesis given the events surrounding the Coastal Berry campaign.

In the next chapter I walk the reader through the agricultural community of Watsonville, California, and survey the unique characteristic of the Pajaro Valley and the larger Central Coast region where the campaign took place. I also introduce some of the people whose lives were directly impacted by the UFW's unionization efforts. I

provide background information on the campaign and explain the theoretical framework that I use to examine the case.

In Chapter 2 I provide a more detailed narrative account of the events in the California strawberry industry between 1996 and 2003. This chapter lays out the factual contours of the campaign, which are then analyzed in the remainder of the book. (Appendix B provides a timeline to help the reader keep track of the important events of the campaign.) In Chapter 4 I further explore why some workers were eager to side with the UFW but a majority were not. Using a framework that integrates a network theory view of the US labor market and that applies insights from extensive research on transnational immigrant networks in the western United States, I analyze the strawberry industry and examine how interactions among workers and farmers contributed to the emergence of a broad range of responses to the UFW campaign. The average immigrant working in the California strawberry fields is one part of an extensive web of interpersonal relationships spanning the job site, the local community, and his or her country of origin. I further explain industry-wide labor market dynamics and the specific dynamics within the Coastal Berry Company.

Chapter 5 discusses the organizational theories of Max Weber and others to explain why formal organizations such as the UFW are better at achieving structural social change than loosely organized groups such as the Comité. I review the significant features of formal organizations and develop organizational profiles of the dominant organizations in the campaign, including the Comité, the UFW, and Coastal Berry. These profiles help explain the Comité's forced shift from a network-based set of individual preferences to a loosely structured organizational vehicle ultimately incapable of engaging the UFW in an organizational field well known to the latter. My analysis reveals why it was only after workers had elected the Comité as their bargaining agent that the UFW was able to defeat the Comité. Once the unionization battle moved out of the fields and into the courts, the UFW was able to make use of its institutional capacity—a capacity that the Comité did not possess. Organizations, not networks, best accomplish the complex task of labor representation because they enable the navigation of institutional frameworks established to govern labor relations.

Chapter 6 presents a holistic analysis of the campaign by applying three concepts—networks, organizations, and institutions—to explain the Comité's initial successes and ultimate failure at Coastal Berry. Chapter 7 extends the discussion by examining institutional processes operating at the interorganizational level. A theory of institutions as “rules of the game” for interactions among organizations is presented

and applied historically to explain the emergence of successful advocacy efforts among disenfranchised groups in society. I argue that an organization's knowledge of and ability to execute these rules represents a cultural competency not unlike the "cultural capital" invoked by scholars to explain individual capacities and predilections. We can attribute the Comité's failure to its lack of this institutional knowledge. Without knowing the intricacies of the ALRA or how to effectively engage the Labor Relations Board, there was no way the Comité could hope to outmaneuver the UFW.

The book concludes by considering the campaign's broader implications for American civil society and participatory democracy. The US democratic system may be thought of as a system that distributes power among a wide range of competing groups and individuals. A central tenet of this vision of government is the ability of individuals to participate in governance in the classic liberal-democratic sense. Yet as DeTocqueville tells us, in the United States this participation has usually taken an organizational form. The grip of organizations on society has strengthened in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as economic interactions have come to dominate social life. This development raises interesting questions concerning the nature of individual participation in American society. It is especially troubling for the newest members of society when one considers how hard it can be for immigrants to learn to navigate in their new environment. It becomes an almost herculean task to acquire the formal rules of participation and the cultural competencies necessary to bring about meaningful social change. The strawberry campaign reveals that organizations that have developed the ability to navigate institutional processes can help immigrants become more socially engaged. Unfortunately, not all organizations that are supposed to serve immigrants operate in this way.

¹ In Spanish, the name *César Chávez* uses accent marks. However, most English-language writers omit these. Neither the Cesar E. Chavez Foundation nor the UFW use accent marks when referencing Chavez's name. I have followed their lead and omitted the accents found in the original Spanish. Throughout the text, I have employed accent marks on personal names when specifically asked to do so.

² In 2004 the HERE merged with the Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees (UNITE) to form UNITE HERE. A year later, in 2005, UNITE HERE left the AFL-CIO and joined the Change to Win Federation.

³ Villaraigosa, a former labor organizer, narrowly lost the mayoral race to James Hahn in a run-off election. In an interesting turn of events, the County Federation of Labor had endorsed Hahn, not Villaraigosa, for mayor in the 2005 race. Justifying the shift, Federation official Miguel Contreras stated, "An old labor saying reminds us that labor rewards our friends" (*LA Weekly*, Dec. 31, 2004).

⁴ In retrospect, it appears that by emphasizing the organizability of immigrants, labor leaders may have underestimated the significance of legal status. Johnston (2001) suggests that the era of amnesty and lax immigration enforcement in the late 1980s may have contributed to the false notion that immigration status was unimportant in labor mobilization. Johnston (2001) goes on to argue that citizenship concerns cannot be divorced from immigrant labor mobilization. This is especially important to keep in mind when we consider the fact that the strawberry campaign took place during a time of intense anti-immigrant sentiment. Had the UFW and the AFL-CIO taken legal status into account, they may have been able to better address the concerns of workers in the industry. It should be noted that since the 1990s, labor leaders have changed their stance with respect to immigration. In 2000 the AFL-CIO Executive Council officially reversed its previous support for sanctions against employers of unauthorized workers and called for a new amnesty program for undocumented workers. In 2006 organized labor was a central component of a nationwide coalition of groups that mobilized in support of immigrant rights.

⁵ For an extended discussion on the methods used in this study, please refer to Appendix A at the end of the book.