

WITH GOD ON OUR SIDE

A volume in the series

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WITH GOD ON OUR SIDE

The Struggle for Workers' Rights in a Catholic Hospital

ADAM D. REICH

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For Teresa

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PREFACE

I was out of bed by three in the morning and in Fred Ross Jr.'s station wagon a little after four. Fred Ross Jr. is in his sixties, tall and thin with a dimpled chin. His father, Fred Ross Sr., mentored Cesar Chavez in the early days of the United Farm Worker (UFW) movement. Fred Ross Jr. became a labor organizer with the UFW straight out of college and has spent his life working for a better world in a variety of capacities. In 1975 he led the largest UFW action in a decade, a twenty-thousand-person march from San Francisco to Modesto as part of a successful campaign to pass the Agricultural Labor Relations Act. The law, passed by the California Legislature later that year, was the first in the nation to give farm workers collective bargaining rights, such as the right to organize a union and obtain a contract.¹ In the 1980s, Ross directed a coffee boycott that helped to end U.S. support for the brutal military government in El Salvador. In the 1990s he was Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi's chief of staff in California, before joining with other UFW alumni to lead an immigrant rights campaign. And on this cold and foggy morning when I joined

the United Healthcare Workers West, Service Employees International Union (SEIU-UHW) for the first day of a big strike at California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco in the early fall of 2005, Ross had been working for SEIU's hospital division for six years.

Fred Ross Jr. and Eileen Purcell, his colleague at the international union, were charged with developing the union's Catholic hospital strategy. They were both Catholics themselves, and together they were a dynamic duo, a community organizer's dream team. In the 1980s, Purcell had co-founded the Sanctuary movement for Central American refugees and the National Sanctuary Defense Fund, working especially with the people of El Salvador as they sought to rebuild their lives in the midst of the country's civil war. Before Ross recruited her to SEIU, Purcell had been the executive director of the SHARE Foundation, which also supported organizing efforts by the people of El Salvador. In these roles Purcell forged close and lasting relationships with many religious leaders in the United States and abroad.

Ross's history with the UFW, his leadership of the coffee boycott through Neighbor-2-Neighbor, his extensive political experience, and his law degree mean that he has credibility in almost all aspects of the organizing world. He can rile up a crowd of cafeteria workers as easily as he can build a relationship with a priest or convince a senator to sign a letter. Several workers and organizers have also had the experience of meeting Fred Ross Jr., esquire, when they have been harassed or arrested by the police during an action. Ross often serves as in-street lawyer. Purcell, meanwhile, is able to straddle the worlds of organized labor, international politics, and religion with grace and aplomb—and she is the only organizer I've ever met who has expressed her commitment to worker justice in a published psalm.²

As we drove across an empty San Francisco Bay Bridge into the city, Ross regaled me with stories of his days with the UFW. Cesar Chavez had told him to organize farm workers in Oregon, but Ross was hesitant. He had heard that Latinos in Oregon were insular, hostile even to Latinos from California, not to mention a gringo. But over time Ross was able to organize them, proving to himself that anyone can organize anyone else with the right skills. Organizing is a craft, he seemed to be telling me, that transcends an organizer's identity.

We pulled up to the hospital in San Francisco still well before dawn, and on this morning the only skills I put to use were my legs. A bus filled

with replacement workers circled the hospital, and I tried to prove my chops by taking off after it. What I could do individually to stop a busload of people I wasn't sure. Fortunately, at each entrance where the bus stopped, a crowd of organizers and striking workers shouted, "Scabs, go home!" As a stocky redheaded man on staff of the union pounded on the door of the bus and forcibly prevented anyone from stepping off, the scene brought to mind the heyday of organized labor in the 1930s. And when the bus ultimately was forced to leave, I felt a surge of adrenaline, like *this* was union power at its essence.

Later that week, as the strike got into full swing, I came back to the hospital and—on the recommendation of a union staff person—pretended to be an expectant father concerned for the safety of my pregnant wife. In our fabricated story, my wife was scheduled to deliver at the hospital the following month. I was instructed to complain about the strike and to try to gather intelligence about what effect it was having on the floor. I complained my way to the nurse director of the obstetrics department before she asked me the name of my wife's obstetrician. I balked, then stammered that we didn't yet have one. The nurse called my bluff. She ordered me not to move and turned quickly away, while I sprinted down the hospital stairs and past a line of beefy security guards. I kept running away from the picket line until I was safely in my car and headed back to my apartment in Berkeley.

Three years later, almost to the day, I actually became a father. On a brisk October evening my wife Teresa gave birth to our daughter Ella at the Berkeley affiliate of the same hospital chain I had helped strike those years before. After a relatively smooth labor and delivery, and two dream-like days in a beautiful private room overlooking San Francisco Bay, we were about to go home when Ella spiked a fever of 101. The doctors were worried about a possible infection, and we were told that Ella would have to spend the next three days in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), where she would be hooked up to an IV, given large amounts of antibiotics, and monitored closely around the clock.

The NICU is a glistening shrine to modern medical technology. Premature babies of less than two pounds, who could never have made it fifty years ago, are incubated, respirated, and ushered into healthy and normal lives. But since most of the infants in the NICU are there long term, and many are seriously ill, the place feels sad and somewhat intimidating.

Nurses do their rounds accompanied by the blips and beeps of monitors, and as a whole don't seem to have much time for parents—who themselves are often compelled to return to something like regular life before their babies are healthy enough to return home, and so appear on the unit only sporadically.

But our case was different. If the tests came back okay, Ella had to be in the unit for only seventy-two hours. So Teresa and I spent those hours clinging to Ella as if she were a life preserver in a fierce sea, as we fought off the urge for sleep and the practical (if somewhat cursory) advice of nurses who thought we were being just a little too *Berkeley*.

Needless to say, Teresa and I nearly lost our minds. It was only thanks to a veteran nurse named Mildred that we stayed on this side of the brink. Mildred had been working at the hospital for almost three decades, and although she had already retired she still took the odd shift. With gentle humor she told us about her own kids, now grown, and warned us that our worries were just beginning—that we should thank our lucky stars Ella was far from being a teenager! She reassured us that Ella would be out of the hospital in no time, and made us feel taken care of amid the flurry and worry of the unit. When Ella's tests came back clear, we wept with gratitude for Mildred's small kindnesses, and she told us that these sorts of experiences were what kept her coming back to the hospital year after year.

These two stories illustrate for me the paradox of work in the hospital. In some ways the hospital is the modern factory, and labor organizing in the hospital is similar to organizing at any other large industrial workplace. In other ways, as Ella's birth brought home to me, the work that goes on in the hospital is loaded with emotion and meaning, giving struggle in the hospital a special character. This book explores in detail the tension between worker power and workers' emotional relationship to their work. For unions to be successful in the healthcare industry and beyond, they must combine an attention to power and control with an appreciation of the cultural context of work—and must link workers' political-economic interests with broader considerations of the public good.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book tells the story of a group of worker leaders, union organizers, and religious allies who overcame countless obstacles to help workers win a union election at Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital, a Catholic hospital in the small city of Santa Rosa, California, about an hour north of San Francisco. These leaders' humor, wisdom, and deep commitment to social justice represent for me what is best about the modern U.S. labor movement. Without their courage and their persistence, there would be no story to tell. I am especially grateful that many of these leaders have been willing to participate in this book. Among them, most of whom I have promised confidentiality, I would like especially to recognize Fred Ross Jr. and Eileen Purcell, who served as my mentors and coaches over the course of my involvement in the campaign. I also owe tremendous debts to Glenn Goldstein and Peter Tappeiner, two organizers on the campaign and ongoing sources of inspiration. Jim Araby, a political organizer on the campaign and a close friend, has read several versions of this project and offered valuable feedback throughout. His breadth and depth of knowledge about

the labor movement and about modern American politics has helped me immensely as I have tried to connect the lessons of Santa Rosa with the challenges facing the labor movement more generally. He has also been a steady source of moral support in the more difficult days of the writing process.

During my work on the campaign I came to know many religious and community leaders who supported workers in their unionization struggle and deserve special recognition. Monsignor John Brenkle, Father Angelito Peries, Father Ramon Pons, Reverend Blythe Sawyer, Reverend Chris Bell, JoAnn Consiglieri, and Stephen Harper are only some of the many leaders in Sonoma County whose ongoing work gives me hope that meaningful social change is possible.

The publication of a book, it turns out, is a kind of organizing project in itself. Throughout the process, Michael Burawoy has consistently offered a critical eye and supportive ear. He has read and edited countless drafts of the manuscript, but as importantly has encouraged me to pursue a life that balances scholarship with practice, a commitment out of which this book has emerged. Along the way, several other scholars have helped shepherd this project to publication, among them Kim Voss, Ruth Milkman, and Steve Early. Years of conversation with Marshall Ganz about the art and craft of organizing have also helped to inform this project.

At Cornell University Press, Fran Benson, Suzanne Gordon, and Sioban Nelson have been an especially remarkable group of editors with whom to work. Suzanne even came to Berkeley and helped me reshape my introduction in person, with both of us huddled over my laptop in a busy coffee shop. Thanks to Susan Specter and John Raymond for their attention to matters both large and small. The book is much stronger as a result of their editing. Thanks also to an anonymous reviewer solicited by the press who gave quite thorough and thoughtful feedback.

The roots of this project go back even further. My father, Robert Reich, has advocated on behalf of working people since before I was born. He is a role model as an engaged intellectual, not to mention a role model as a father. He was also an enthusiastic participant in the St. Joseph Health System campaign. My mother, Clare Dalton, is even more of a radical—first as a legal scholar and advocate for victims of intimate partner violence, and more recently as an acupuncturist. Her journey continues to inspire me to follow my own conscience, wherever it may lead. Thanks to both

of them for changing my diapers, for feeding me, and for giving me the right values.

Finally, I would like to thank Teresa Sharpe, my partner, to whom I have dedicated this book. Teresa's own work on the labor movement demonstrated to me how one might balance one's social justice commitments with careful analysis and critique. The first time we met for lunch, over burritos on Berkeley's campus, she shared with me her experiences working for a union while attending graduate school, and encouraged me to do the same. And as our friendship blossomed into marriage and into parenthood, she and I have continued to wrestle with broader questions about worker power and the cultural significance of work—that is, when we're not wrestling with our toddler, Ella.

A NOTE ON NAMES

Social scientists face complicated ethical questions about the degree of anonymity they provide the subjects of their research. For many historians, time has given the events they describe a distance that allows for specificity. Sociologists writing about events closer at hand often occlude the people and places about which they write, creating a different kind of distance between readers and the experiences about which they are reading.

Neither of these solutions felt available to me. The events described in this book are still “raw” to many of the people who experienced them, as one respondent put it. Were I to wait for time to scab over the wounds, I might be waiting a very long time indeed. Yet the specifics of the campaign felt important to the lessons I was able to draw from it. Moreover, I wanted to recognize the successes of workers at Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital and those who worked alongside them.

In order to balance my commitment to specificity with my ethical obligations as a researcher, I have compromised. The people in the text identified by their full names are either interviewees who agreed to be

identified, or people who were publicly identified in media accounts of the Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital campaign. Those identified by first names only are participants who appear regularly in the story but whose names I have changed in order to protect their anonymity. Those participants in the study who appear only sporadically I have identified by position alone.

ABBREVIATIONS

AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations
AFSCME	American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees
CHA	Catholic Health Association of the United States
CHW	Catholic Healthcare West
CNA	California Nurses Association
HERE	Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union
NLRA	National Labor Relations Act
NLRB	National Labor Relations Board
NUHW	National Union of Healthcare Employees
SEIU	Service Employees International Union
SEIU-UHW	Service Employees International Union, United Healthcare Workers West
SJHS	St. Joseph Health System

SRMH	Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital
UAW	United Auto Workers
UFW	United Farm Workers
UNITE	Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees
USCCB	United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

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