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Interviewer: Ryan Nilsen, NFWM-NC Summer Intern through Duke Divinity School

Interviewee: Dave Austin, Farm Worker Support Action Team

Date and time: 3:30pm on July 25, 2011

Location: National Farm Worker Ministry office housed inside the Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Durham, North Carolina

Length of Interview: 46 minutes and 44 seconds

Length of Transcription: 11 pages

Transcriber: Ryan Nilsen

Abbreviations:

D = Dave Austin

R = Ryan Nilsen

ERUUF = Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

FLOC = Farm Labor Organizing Committee

NFWM = National Farm Worker Ministry

UU = Unitarian Universalist

RJR = R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company

ACTU = Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union

Interview Summary: In this interview, Ryan Nilsen asks Dave Austin, a leader in the Farm Worker Support Team at Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship and long time supporter of the National Farm Worker Ministry, about how he got involved with the farm worker movement, how his faith perspective has informed his involvement, and how he has been impacted by his involvement. Austin discusses his earlier work with worker organizing and health in North Carolina, the history of ERUUF's involvement with the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, how Unitarian Universalist principles inform such justice-oriented work, the experience of working with unions and immigrants in the Southeast, and why he believes others should become involved with the National Farm Worker Ministry.

D: My name is Ryan Nilsen, and I am currently a student at Duke Divinity School completing a summer internship with the National Farm Worker Ministry. This internship, this interview will primarily be for a National Farm Worker Ministry

organizational documentary project, and, with your consent, both the audio and the transcribed text of our conversation today may be used for National Farm Worker Ministry publications and projects. I also hope to use text of this interview as part of my research project on the National Farm Worker Ministry that I am completing as my thesis for a Master of Theological Studies degree at Duke. I also intend to preserve this and other interviews for future research in archives. Do you, Dave Austin, give your consent to using this interview for these purposes?

D: I do.

R: Great. So, one again, this is Ryan Nilsen, and I am interviewing Dave Austin here at the National Farm Worker Ministry office housed in the Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Durham, North Carolina. It is about 3:30pm in the afternoon on Monday, July 25, 2011. So let's get started.

D: Okay.

R: How did you first get involved with the National Farm Worker Ministry, Dave?

D: Well, I'm going to jump back a bit because I, when I came to North Carolina and went to the school of public health, my first job when I got out of the school of public health in 1976 was with something called the Carolina Brown Lung Association. So I had that beginning work with a, a labor organization I guess you would call them. They were mostly a group of retired or disabled and retired textile workers who had been disabled by Brown Lung which is caused by cotton dust in the mill. So anyway, I had that experience and subsequent experience for 5 years and then 5 years with the North Carolina Occupational Safety and Health project, which focused more broadly on occupational health issues in North Carolina, occupational safety and health, but mostly health, and was a coalition of health professionals, legal professionals, and workers, mostly labor unions. So, with that experience, and after that I wasn't formally involved with labor issues but it continued to be an interest of mine. In any case, I'd been at ERUUF for, it must have been about, geez about 8 or 9 years, I guess when I started going to here, ERUUF. It was about 1990 I think, maybe a little before. But in 1998, and at first unbeknownst to me, there was a group here that became aware of FLOC's effort, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee's effort, in the Midwest, which I'd read about, but it was in the Midwest. It wasn't completely relevant to me here. Anyway, they'd read about that and the fact that FLOC has decided that they needed to come to North Carolina. This was Sandy Smith-Nonini and John Olson were leaders at that time in starting to convince the congregation to take up this issue. And when I heard about it, it made a lot of sense, and so I joined the effort. So that was 1999 sometime. And I had been involved a little with what is called, or what was called, I don't know if they are still around, the Triangle Friends of Farm Workers here in the 1990s, which was led by Joan Preiss and was more connected with the United Farm Worker effort and lending support to it. So, that's how I got started.

R: So it seemed like the community here at ERUUF got involved with something that you already had experience with, with labor organizations. How has your faith perspective, being a part of this Unitarian Universalist Fellowship affected your involvement with the ministry, or has it?

D: I think the biggest, the biggest way it influenced me was trying to figure out how people in ERUUF saw their faith and how they might, or how we might persuade them that it should or could lead them to support for labor causes. I mean, there was a few, as I said, a few, sort of a nucleus here that had, for whatever reason, for whatever individual reasons had some sympathy with labor issues, but the vast majority didn't. I mean it wasn't a natural thing for them, so I think in terms of faith, it probably helped me start examining what UU's, what their principles are because I needed to see what people thought, how they were reacting to social justice issues or how they should react to social justice issues. I think personally, I probably didn't have a real strong faith impetus that drove me to it. It was more, at least a religious faith. I mean it, it feels like a faith. It's just something I believed ever since, I guess graduate school, since I started working with Brown Lung and got involved with that issue. It just seems that justice issues are a part of the world that we should be thinking more clearly about and doing something about. So, but not steeped in a theology for me particularly, no.

R: How has the effort to get the broader ERUUF community involved gone over the years?

D: It's interesting. Right at first there was, we had a bigger group that was involved. I think it was new I guess, and there were people who wondered what it was going to be about, and then fairly soon we started leafletting at grocery stores. That was the way that we could lend our support to National Farm Worker Ministry and FLOC efforts at that time because the Mt. Olive Pickle Boycott had started. And not many people, even some of our biggest supporters felt that this was sort of in a way a futile effort almost, you know? I mean, and to be honest, some days you'd go out there and it did seem sort of futile. I mean it was just a drop in the bucket of public opinion if you persuaded one or two people not to buy Mt. Olive Pickles. So what? But, anyway, but I think through the years there was always an effort to figure out, to try to think about the needs of the congregation. A lot of times it seemed like people were just, I think naturally, or, like most congregations, were more interested or sympathetic with actions that were service-oriented. And in fact people brought up the idea of somehow establishing schools for people to learn English better. For supplying people with stuff they would need out in the field, you know shirts, hats, protective equipment maybe, if that was needed. For, you know there was a couple of times during those years where there were hurricanes, and not only were just your average North Carolina residents devastated, but you can imagine how farm workers had been devastated. And so there was some talk, no action, about you know, what can we do for people who are at camps and had just been turned upside down? What other kinds of service stuff did people think about? You know, in any case, in any case, it seemed that was, that is the orientation and was the orientation of a lot of people. How can we help? How can we provide things these people don't have? And it, we couldn't, it was hard to get to the point of them actually hearing that workers were

saying, that's not particularly what we need. We can do something on our own, and we're doing it. If you can help some, that's great. But I think we got there, I think we did get there with a few people. We had some great staff here at the National Farm Worker Ministry, and when we went out to camps, when we did almost anything, people would start to understand what it was all about. But, you know, one or two at a time.

R: So can you tell me the story of a specific situation in this work with FLOC and ERUUF that has had a significant, kind of lasting impact on you today?

D: Well, I guess it's not one specific, but every time we had, every time I went to a FLOC meeting, I was just so impressed that here you would see guys, farm workers on Sunday afternoon, when they had, you know, that was their day of rest, and here they had driven two hours or something like that to come to this meeting, and they would be so animated in their discussions about what they were going to have as contract issues over the next couple of years or why the last year's contract issues hadn't been fulfilled and what they could do about it. You know half the time I couldn't, didn't know what was going on because my Spanish was pretty minimal, but that was just so interesting and so enlivening to see them there, deliberating and arguing and also the FLOC leaders themselves. All of the staff they've had have just been incredible people. And it was just inspirational to me. And then when we got to the, when I, I think there was a national or a statewide convention in Raleigh, and so we had people from the whole state, and that was even better, because you had, I mean it was just a larger group, and you had people identified by their Mexican state sitting out in this auditorium, and it was just so cool.

R: And how do you think that has impacted you? You said it was inspiring, inspirational.

D: I think just to, I hope I've been able to argue for, for people participating in this cause better since seeing that. Because I think that's really the crux of what we're doing here. If we're going to be an ally, I mean, we should be an ally if this is an issue we want to look at, but being an ally means that if there's an organization of workers, we don't need to go off and identify how we can help them. They can tell us what we can do. And they are perfectly capable, as was evident in these meetings, of figuring out stuff on their own. It's not that they don't need help and money or whatever, but you know, they're just as strong and intelligent and hardworking and everything else as any group that wants to achieve something. So if we want to be allies, we can find out where we can fit in. And so being at those meetings I think just reinforced that feeling with me. And I am hoping, I hope that I was able to argue that, maybe a little bit.

R: So you're saying that you were able to argue that to the people, to get involved. How would you do that, to people? What would you say to people who were interested or maybe not interested? What would say to people in order to get them involved at this point?

D: Well I guess I would try and, actually what we mostly did was try to get people involved mostly through service kinds of stuff because that was just so much a natural feeling. But service whose ultimate objective was to fit in with National Farm Worker

Ministry, FLOC activities. So like driving a car or fixing a lunch for workers who were meeting here for a FLOC meeting was a pretty good compromise. And, I mean, it was an easier way for people to understand. Well, ERUUF is hosting a meeting, so how can we do that? People had a feeling that, oh if we're hosting, well of course I can help do something. I mean people at a church have, feel that, yeah we should be good hosts. We have guests. So that was one way, probably the main way that we tried to set things up and probably not make the philosophical argument too much but just set it up for people to participate and then come and hear a little bit or see a little bit. And sometimes Alex or whoever was in the National Farm Worker Ministry role would call volunteers together say after or even during a FLOC meeting and say, okay let's talking about what's happening. So some of that understanding and motivation we left to this organization, which was probably a good idea.

R: Yeah. I don't know. [Laughs]

D: Well Alex and Lori before her were really good. They're both so good at thinking through that on their feet, you know, when they're talking to people.

R: So in that time, starting people out with these more concrete, service-based activities but ultimately wanting to get them involved with supporting this justice work and FLOC...

D: Well yeah, the work itself might not change, but you would like people to understand that supporting the worker organization was, in that way and perhaps other ways, I mean. We did have a few people who, for example, after participating in those more service-focused activities then went to say RJR's annual meeting and stood outside and picketed. So it was trying to open them up to that broader range of kinds of advocacy, I guess. Advocacy based on what FLOC, the organization said they needed, but advocacy nonetheless. And I think it worked with a few people. I mean, it's hard to know what people think. I mean, how many people, if two people went to the RJR thing but maybe more were persuaded, I don't know. You know, they just couldn't go that day. Well, that happens a lot.

R: And, you think, you said it's hard to know what people think. Do you think that there're some general trends or do you have ideas about what type of people or what it is that would help someone make than transition in thinking? Or it's just kind of you put it out there and hope people...?

D: I think we just put it out there. And we, I, our committee probably didn't do enough of trying to engage in that conversation of what is the motivation for any of our work in social justice. I mean we did put a whole, when was it, October of 2009. We put together and worked on it a lot of the year, a workshop that was focused on how we decide what is important enough to do. And what's the difference between this sort of service-focused work and advocacy work? What does it mean to you? And it was a good workshop, you know. It was hard to tell if people felt changed by that or not.

R: When you talk about UU principles, what are the sorts of things that end up getting brought into the conversation?

D: Well, like the inherent worth and dignity of every person. That's sort of a bedrock, and I think it does come up in these conversations and has in our conversations that we're having on immigration, obviously. But jumping from there, I think jumping from there to a worker organization and how or if we should work with them, is a big jump for people. Something that, I mean, I think there's something especially in the South, I guess, where it's suspect. Worker organizations, unions, I mean the word "union" is suspect. I think it, sometimes people can't get passed that.

R: Bringing in the South, and the culture here as it affects this work is something I've thought a lot about. Where are you from originally?

D: Missouri.

R: That's right.

D: North Missouri. [Laughs] Almost in Iowa.

R: And you're identifying how there's a distinct kind of way in which there's a stigma around unions or you said the word "union." Are there specific instances in which that has come into play, this kind of cultural resistance to workers' organizations?

D: Well, here at church, I think when the issue was first voted on, and I wasn't even there when the congregation voted to take this on as an issue and at the same time to support the Mt. Olive boycott, I heard that there was some fairly explicit objections that we should get involved with union and labor management issues. It was a pretty small minority apparently from the vote, but I don't know how many people that sort of resonated with, you know? My impression is that it probably does resonate with some proportion of people, but it's not something they would talk about very easily, you know? And I've never lived in New York or someplace where unions are widely accepted, but I've talked with enough people that I think that there's just a different ethos about it, that there's just a suspicion down here, and it's been here a long time. And even people that are progressive, that's not one issue that they are particularly progressive on, you know?

R: Being raised in Northern Missouri, that's not something you had to overcome yourself? You weren't raised with that sort of suspicion?

D: Small town Missouri. I probably didn't know what a union was through growing up in high school. Honestly, I probably read about it in the social studies book once or twice, but that was the extent. If there was a union in Chillicothe of anything, I didn't know it. And the same in small town Iowa, where I went to college, too. It didn't become an issue for me until graduate school.

R: Yeah, that's interesting, because it wasn't until you came to the South that, the kind of no union zone, that that became an issue of interest and involvement.

D: Yeah. And it was probably graduate school that got me, and not graduate school in Iowa where I studied neurophysiology of invertebrates [laughs], but the school of public health where we had some good classes on sort of political economy, and that was the first time I got aware of these issues. So.

R: So I've sort of tried to ask this question in several different ways, but a big part of why we're doing this and having these conversations is to try to understand and be able to make a case for people about why they should get involved, so I am curious to just directly ask you. Why should people get involved with the National Farm Worker Ministry?

D: Well, for me because the National Farm Worker Ministry is involved with worker organizing, I think there can be concrete results. And that is unlike many issues that you can become involved in. Workers are empowered, you know? Although our faith that that would happen was shaky sometimes, boy, on that day in 2004 when the Mt. Olive Pickle boycott was won, that helped. So I think that's my argument. That you should become, we should become involved because it can make a difference. That, and that difference can go, will go beyond just this union of farm workers, that the Hispanic community in general as these, as some of these guys stay around to do other jobs, and as the Hispanic community in North Carolina also lends some support, it will become a political force. And I've always thought that that in itself may help break down the black-white dichotomy that we run up against so much. So that's one reason that I think that it's important. I mean, plus, it's just right there in our backyards. Invisible, but nonetheless. One hundred and fifty thousand people out there who, who you know, we think about work in third world countries and how oppressed people are but it's right out there.

R: Have there been any times in your work with FLOC and the ministry where you have personally experienced some strong opposition, I don't know if in personal relationships or family or any sort of situation where that really became a controversial issue in your life?

D: I'm trying to think. You know my first reaction is, I don't think so.

R: You're fortunate. [Laughs]

D: I had, any family reactions around this issue were clear back when I worked with the Carolina Brown Lung Association, and that was even, at least in my estimation, was even more clear cut. I mean, here were people who were disabled and barely able to walk sometimes. It was becoming medically pretty clear that the fault was at the work place, but that fault had been obscured on purpose for years, so you know. At least in terms of family, I mean my dad is I would have to say an arch-conservative. He's got FOX news on all the time. So for the most part we just don't talk politics. But we did talk, I mean I talked about my work back then, but there was never much push back because it was, at

least my presentation of it was, you know, why isn't this a good thing to do? I mean, I think there has been a little push back in ERUUF because, and even now still is. I mean, there's a thought. Well, the way the church organizes and selects its activities that it'll focus on and put some priorities on, it's always been an issue of concern for people and...

[Automated noise interruption.]

R: I think our power's back on.

D: Oops. Oh yeah, I guess that's it.

R: I'll turn the lights back on then. Just for the record, the power had gone off at ERUUF because we had a storm here, but it's back on. Alright, sorry.

D: So, when people have seen the Farm Worker Support Action Team be fairly small, I think there's been a question, well should we really be doing this because it's not involving many people, and one of the objectives of our social justice work should be to get lots of people involved. So, and that's been right from the, just continuing right from the start and it's clear up until now. There's still a, justifiably I guess, yea we want to get lots of people involved. I would love to get lots of people involved. And we give the opportunity to people, but it's true that there have not ever been a lot of people, compared to the size of this church, that have been involved with farm worker support activities. So I guess my response has been to make it seem as much as possible through documenting what we do, like a good activity and sort of not talking about how few people were involved. [Laughs] Good PR can go a long way. [Laughs] But I think, I mean, you know, it can only go so far. And there's always going to be that push. It seemed at times that we had, it was the social justice types of activities and leaders were pretty fluid. We could say, I want to work on that and I've got a couple people and we'll do it. And they'll say, oh yea go ahead. And then they'll be another cycle where they'll come back and say, well you know shouldn't we try to establish three or two activities that lots of people want to work on and we'll all just focus on those. So that's been, at least from time to time has been an issue. They've never actually gotten down to the point of sort of enforcing that. We have gone through prioritization activities, and, you know, there would be three activities that would come up on top and it wouldn't be farm workers, but it was never said, well then you should stop working on farm workers and work on these other things. Although I have, and maybe other people in the farm worker support group have, too, said, okay I can put some energy into this number one priority, but I am still going to continue doing farm workers. Almost as sort of a safety vow, kind of thing, you know?

R: Mhm. If, at times in telling your story you've presented a relatively seamless transition from the Brown Lung kind of graduate school involvement and into this FLOC work with ERUUF. Have there been substantial differences in your experiences between those, like working with those labor organizations?

D: Well, Brown Lung was with a organization that was, had more, more, not a lot, but more resources and more staff. So we had chapters, Brown Lung Organizations chapters

that were organizing in probably from twelve to fifteen North and South Carolina and Georgia communities, for a while. And so when we'd get together, or even just around here, I had other people to related to as staff. So it was different in that way. And then NCOSH, the COSH group that I was sort of more formally affiliated with after that was a smaller organization, but we always had two or three staff, paid staff. So, and we were interacting with, fairly often, with union organizations that were our members. So we would be setting up a conference with union presidents from around the state. So what was the questions? [Laughs] I lost it.

R: I was asking what has been distinct or different about working with FLOC?

D: Well, you know there was a lot of similarities when I was with Brown Lung. Because we were the organization that was connecting with, at some level with the union of textile workers, ACTU, which it was named at that time. And they, at some points, were just as mysterious or seemed just as disorganized as FLOC does at some times here, probably for the same reasons, that they are stretched so thin, that is hard to communicate with their own members sometimes, much less communicate with different groups and individuals outside of the organization. But, from our vantage point both now and back then, they were hard to work with, because you didn't quite know, you couldn't quite see the plan and sometimes it changed and you didn't know it. Back then, though, there was some, I think the union didn't quite trust us, but here I've never felt that, that Baldemar, that FLOC didn't trust the National Farm Worker Ministry or any of it's participating churches. They may have wondered why we did some things [Laughs], I suppose, but I've never heard that. I've never heard FLOC say anything but great things about the support they get, despite the fact that it hasn't been as good as it could have been sometimes.

R: Well, I think, I mean I've covered a lot of the questions that I was interested in asking you directly. Are there other things that you think would be important to share with me, with the National Farm Worker Ministry or anyone else who might [Laughs] end up with these interviews? Specifically...

D: Well, I should go on the record as saying, another motivation for working with this organization was the opportunity to work with organizational leaders like Lori and like Alex. I mean it was just so invigorating to work with people who were just young but were just such great organizers and were so dedicated to the work. It was just so much fun, and that I could learn stuff from. I think they both had outlooks that I could learn from. So it made, that was another reason for working with this organization, it made it so easy to be right in contact with people that you really respected. And the other side of that, I guess, was the opportunity to work sporadically or interact sporadically with Baldemar and his staff but particularly him. I just think he's incredible. So those are other reasons, I guess.

R: Well, if you have any other specific kind of stories or memories to share, this would be a great time, or we could also wrap up kind of earlier than I'd thought.

D: What else? The other thing that I've felt [Laughs], we had some good people on the committee, too. That was another reason for participating. You never knew John Olson. He moved away, but he was an IBM executive, and how he got his politics, I still don't understand. I mean, he came from up in the Northeast, so maybe that helped, but here he is a corporate person for thirty years, and they basically retired down here. And every once in a while he would be cantankerous about some issue, but it was always trying to put his principles into play. So working with him was great. And other people, too. Like Sandy Smith-Nonini who is still around. She never was much of an ERUUFian, but she did champion this issue and helped us get started. But just a wide array of people, you know, it was interesting to see the people who would come out and participate in one way or another.

R: How do people hear about, like if someone's not involved with ERUUF, how do you manage your publicity or community contacts as far as the farm worker...?

D: Probably people wouldn't know much about what we're doing here. We rarely, I mean, National Farm Worker Ministry would be doing things with other faith communities, and so that's where we would interact with people, and so, we might go back to Raleigh UU and say, to the people that we had met, you know, we're doing this other thing on social and economic justice event, so why don't you come over? But in general we rarely did something that was publicized to the wider community, you know, to Durham or the region. People wouldn't know about it.

R: And you said you'd done some sort of stuff with like the Raleigh UU. Have there been any sort of relationships built through this work with non-UU congregations or just meeting individuals?

D: Just meeting individuals, I would say, yeah. And not very strong, at least I can say this for me, not every strong even then. There would be someone I would see who drove workers to a meeting, and I drove workers too, so I would see them during the meeting and begin to recognize them. And National Farm Worker Ministry would sometimes or fairly often would have a get together with volunteers and give a briefing on you know what this meeting was about or what the union's plan was for the next month or next summer, so we sort of got to know each other a bit that way, but it was very sporadic. We as a taskforce here at ERUUF, we did some outreach to some other UUs, as far as other UU congregations in the state, to say this is a great issue. If you can't get involved, if you can't, you know they really need money. So we did some fundraising that way. And we did, three of us on the committee, actually did some presentations at church services, where we went out and talked very generally about ethical eating and moved from there out into the work we were doing with farm workers. But, no. People generally wouldn't know we were here and doing this work in Durham, unless the ministers talk about it at the inter-denominational meetings or something like that.

R: Like DCIA.

D: Yeah.

R: Cool. Well, thank you for sitting together. Do you have anything else you want to add before we sort of close it?

D: Stories, you asked about stories. I'm trying to think if there was anything. Oh, the reason I thought about John Olson was that, for a while during the Mt. Olive pickle boycott, some of the Duke students were involved and persuaded Nan Kohane, the president at that time to essentially support the boycott for a while. And then she had saw the need to bring Bill Bryan, the president of Mt. Olive in to talk with her. And at that meeting she decided, I guess, that she'd been rash [Laughs], so then they backtracked on supporting the boycott, but anyway, John and I can't remember, maybe Lori, and I can't remember who, went in to talk with her after that. I wasn't one, I wasn't there, but I remember being proud that they had taken the initiative to set up that meeting and go say, we don't think you did, you made a mistake. And it didn't change her mind, I don't think, or at least they didn't change back the policy, but it wasn't all that long after that that the boycott was won. After the United Methodist Church nationally came down on the side of the boycott, and things started to change really quick.

R: I don't know if I was reading about or talking with someone about the Duke situation, but I'm pretty sure that the reversal came early summer, after the students had gone off. [Laughs]

D: [Laughs] That's true. I think that's true. [Laughs]

R: I don't know how that works, but it's important to keep in mind maybe with student organizing.

D: Yeah, that's right.

R: Cool. Well thanks a lot Dave. This has been really good.

D: Sure.

R: And I appreciate your time.