

Migrant farm workers: ignored by law, exploited by growers

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Almost three decades ago this month, CBS televised a documentary that would make broadcasting history. Reported by the legendary Edward R. Murrow, the most celebrated journalist of his time, *The Harvest of Shame* told the story of migrant farm workers in America.

Straightforward and unflinching, the presentation revealed the plight of those who reap the bounty that reaches the tables of the most plentiful nation on Earth.

The scenes of workers toiling long hours in hazardous conditions, without the benefit of adequate sanitary facilities, give the impression of a Third World country. For all but the most callous viewer, *The Harvest of Shame* is sickening to watch.

It was seen Thanksgiving Day, 1960, while most Americans gathered with loved ones to reflect upon their many blessings.

Even 28 years later, *The Harvest of Shame* is still a reality in America.

In 1988, as in 1960, migrant farm workers are the most exploited and neglected occupational group in the country. It is as if a time warp prevents them from escaping the conditions they have endured for decades.

Migrant farm workers' rights to sanitary facilities — toilets, pure drinking water and clean wash

basins — have been ignored. Even after the U.S. Court of Appeals ordered the Department of Labor in 1987 to end what it termed "a disgraceful chapter of legal neglect" by setting and enforcing federal field sanitation standards, workers' needs have been forgotten.

After 14 years of non-compliance, 90 percent of all workers in the field still toil in substandard conditions because of ludicrous loopholes in the guidelines. Growers simply don't care. With profits paramount, their excuses are that change is too costly — and unnecessary.

As a result, migrant workers as a whole suffer terrible health problems. Their infant mortality rate is 25 percent above the national average. The miscarriage

rate among migrant workers is seven times the national average, and the likelihood of communicable disease 25 times as high.

Dangerous pesticides pose another threat. Chemicals of high toxicity can be purchased and used by anyone. Pesticides with virtually no data supporting their safe use are allowed with an experimental-use permit. Regulations and enforcement procedures are so laughable that growers can spray with complete impunity.

The big picture is one of a victimized group, among this country's most downtrodden people, simply lacking the voice of power necessary to bring about change. Politicians don't care — just ask the ever compassionate Bill Clements, who vetoed a 1987 bill

that would have prevented workers from having to stoop in the field with short-handled tools.

The few public officials who do care, such as Texas Agricultural Commissioner Jim Hightower, can do only so much.

Like any oppressed group, what migrant farm workers in this country need most is access to power. They need a voice.

Rebecca Harrington, director of United Farm Workers of Texas, believes the key to helping farmworkers lies in widening the base of their support among the general public.

"Basically, they [those in power] can just do about what they want that affects us, without worrying. They're simply too strong," Harrington says. "We are now

trying to get to the consumer. We hope an educated consumer will start raising hell over what affects them directly."

What affects the consumer directly is the specific issue of pesticides. There are 496 pesticides that can leave residues on food, yet products are regularly tested for fewer than 100.

The UFW needs your support. They have asked all concerned consumers to join the boycott of California table grapes. Major growers in California are the most blatant abusers. Consumers can send a strong signal to local stores that disregard workers' safety by doing business with irresponsible growers.

Cosgrove is a journalism senior.