

FEBRUARY 27, 1999 NUMBER 9

National Journal

THE WEEKLY
ON POLITICS AND
GOVERNMENT

Importing Poverty

**We are creating a new
Appalachia in America's
farming heartland.**

A SPECIAL REPORT
BY DICK KIRSCHTEN

Resource ID#: 4382

Inviting Workers, Importing Poverty



HELP WANTED:

Growers are turning to higher-profit, more labor-intensive crops as the price of water and irrigation rises.

FRESNO, Calif.—Nestled between the snow-capped Sierra Nevada and the coastal Diablo Range, the table-flat San Joaquin Valley is the very picture of fertile agricultural abundance. The southern arm of California's great Central Valley, it's the heart of the state's \$25 billion-a-year farming industry and the most productive crop-growing area in the world. This great productivity rests above all on one thing: cheap imported labor. California's cornucopia was and is made possible by a steady stream of migrants—Dust Bowlers from the Midwest in the 1930s, Chinese before them, and

PAUL CONKLIN



ly reliant on them, notes Mason. California's preoccupation with imported labor is no longer unique.

Last year, growers from states across the country joined California in lobbying for a new federal guest-worker law that will allow the regulated importation of additional foreign workers, most of them from Mexico and Central America.

Perennially an issue ardently pursued by California farm interests, with some support from allies in Texas and Florida, the initiative this time around was spearheaded by Oregon's two Senators, with strong support from colleagues from Arkansas, Georgia, Idaho, Kentucky, Michigan, and North Carolina.

The growers were rebuffed after a similar attempt in Congress in 1996, but last year they surprised many observers by gaining Senate approval—by a lopsided vote of 68-31—of a measure that sponsors say could lead to a sixfold increase in agricultural guest workers, to perhaps 120,000 a year. The legislation died in conference, facing a White House veto threat and resistance from House opponents of increased immigration. The measure almost certainly will come up again this year.

STOP THE CYCLE

But not everyone in the Central Valley agrees with the growers that guest workers are the answer. Many local lead-

ers—mayors, union officials, academics—think the idea of importing more guest workers is pure folly. They fear that the valley is becoming a port of entry for poverty—a new, Western Appalachia, from which many families will never escape.

"We have one of the highest rates of unemployment in the state, and it is chronic, long-term unemployment that doesn't get much better, even during the peak of the harvest season," says Fresno County supervisor Juan Arambula. (*For more about the burden on local communities, see p. 530.*) Arambula and others scoff at the notion of a labor shortage in the valley. To them, the growers' real objection is to paying the decent wages that American workers demand. "The growers want to displace local workers with workers they can send back to Mexico," charges labor activist Dolores Huerta, who co-founded the United Farm Workers and helped end the bracero program in 1964.

Arambula, Huerta, and others in their camp note that the wealth generated in the valley accrues to relatively few of its residents. They cite figures that do seem to describe a culture of entrenched poverty. At least a third of the area's children live in poverty, and the prenatal care available for pregnant women is generally inadequate. Public assistance rates are high, and unemployment—even during harvest season—is often two to three times the state average. School dropout rates are worrisome, as is the incidence of crimes involving



Arambula and Whiteside hope that they and other local officials can attract new industries, agriculture-related and otherwise, to provide better jobs and upward mobility for the valley's low-income residents. But there are plenty of doubters.

Ernest Velasquez, of Valley Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Fresno, says the region's powerful growers will fight to preserve the economic status quo. "It is not in the interest of agribusiness in the Central Valley to have highly paid labor," he notes. "The biggest fear of the landowners is to have someone come in and open up factories."

The status quo may be fine for the growers, but it's not a good deal for the average taxpayer, argues Velasquez, who served for nine years as Fresno County's welfare director. The problem is that farm work does not provide year-round employment. "The public pays a price for it, because when there are no crops to be picked, folks apply for whatever benefits they can qualify for."

HELP WANTED

The fact that Manuel Cunha Jr. is now president of the Nisei Farmers League tells a lot about California's farming history. Second-generation Japanese-Americans, or Nisei, whose parents were barred from owning land, became prosperous growers after World War II and formed their own trade association. In 1972, the group magnified its influ-

ence by opening its doors to all comers. Its membership now includes Anglos, Hispanics, even Laotian and Hmong truck farmers. Now, little more than a third of its 1,000 members are of Japanese descent.

Cunha, a former college professor of Portuguese ancestry, who became head of the league in 1995, is a highly vocal proponent of an expanded guest-worker program. He's made the rounds in Washington in support of a campaign coordinated by the National Council of Agricultural Employers, with lobbying advice from such Washington consulting firms as McGuinness & Williams, podesta.com, and Rick Swartz & Associates Inc.

During an interview in his Fresno office, Cunha presents carefully prepared charts illustrating the overlapping harvest seasons for his state's crops and insists that there was a shortage of 80,000 workers during the brief, but critical, raisin harvest in the Central Valley last September.

The growers' association executive speaks vehemently about the disinclination of many unemployed local laborers to do the hard work that immigrants willingly perform. Noting that "welfare-to-work" programs in the Central Valley have produced virtually no new agricultural workers, Cunha scornfully asserts that "Americans have lost their work ethic." He also complains about restrictions against the use of child labor in farming jobs that the Labor Department deems hazardous.

Such complaints go beyond California, however. The argument for a new guest-worker program got a well-publicized push last May, when the Immigration and Naturalization Service launched "Operation Southern Denial" during the peak harvest season for Georgia's hot new Vidalia onion industry. After just one day of raids, which netted fewer than two dozen undocumented workers, an outcry from growers and lawmakers forced the INS to back off.

As Sen. Larry E. Craig, R-Idaho, a leading guest-worker proponent, explained in a Senate floor speech last summer, such raids can devastate a harvest. "A single INS raid, netting a handful of illegal workers, can scare and clean out thousands of workers in surrounding counties," he declared. Noting that farmers have limited means to detect fraudulent identification papers, Craig said: "Employers in such cases typically have complied with the law. But, of course, the crops were left rotting in the fields."

Despite their worries, growers—especially those in California—have shown little interest in seeking temporary workers under an existing guest worker program called H-2A, under which only about 24,000 visas are currently issued each year. The principal complaint about the program is that bureaucratic red tape makes it unworkable. Farm interests say they are required to apply for visas too long in advance and that it is all but impossible to certify, as the program requires, that local workers are not available.

Current H-2A rules also require that employers participating in the program provide housing for workers and pay them at a premium rate known as the "adverse-effect wage." The pay differential is significant. Most California farmworkers, paid by how much they pick, get little more—and sometimes less—than the state-set minimum wage of \$5.75 an hour. But the "adverse-effect wage" for California this year has been set at \$7.23 an hour.

The Senate last year approved legislation to create a more user-friendly H-2A program. The bill's key features included a federal registry of authorized local farmworkers, which growers would have to exhaust before applying for visas to bring in temporary hands. Growers would also have to pay transportation expenses and provide either housing or a housing allowance. The measure lowered wages for temporary workers, however, to an amount equal to the local prevailing wage rate plus 5 percent.

Some experts believe it would be a good idea to have an expanded guest-worker program, provided that ways can be found to ensure decent wages and working conditions and to somehow guarantee that workers actually return to their country of origin. Because the workers' wives and children

presumably would stay behind, U.S. health care facilities and schools would bear less of a burden.

"We've created too many incentives for people to stay," says Demetrios G. Papademetriou, co-director of the International Migration Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "A pattern that was circular for generations has been interrupted because the cost of crossing the border has become prohibitive. We need to try to re-create incentives for people to go back and forth."

Agricultural economist Mason sees the issue as a matter of lesser evils. "These entry-level jobs have to be filled from somewhere, so let's give the guest-worker program a shot," he says. "It can't be any worse than the situation we've got now."

He argues that the current system, which operates "with a wink and a nod" toward the use of illegal labor, is inhumane. "You've got the poorest and most-recent immigrants—who are the most easily exploited—working in the worst situations. They are working for the worst employers, the worst *raileros* [transportation providers], and the worst farm-labor contractors."

TOO MUCH HELP ALREADY

But opponents of a new guest worker system argue that the social costs of bringing more poor Central Americans into the country are too high. And they say that any labor shortage in the Central Valley is caused not by a lack of local workers, but by the horrible conditions to which growers subject workers—conditions that only workers from other countries, with even-worse wages and conditions, will tolerate.

That unemployment among legal workers is high is indisputable. A recent analysis by the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation Inc., *Joblessness in the California Heartland*, indicates that 18 of the state's top agricultural counties—including 14 in the Central Valley—already have more potential workers than there are jobs. At the height of the 1997 growing season, for example, unemployment rates in all but one of the valley's counties exceeded the statewide average of 6.3 per cent. In most, it was twice that figure.

The U.S. Labor Department also says there is no shortage of agricultural workers. John R. Fraser, administrator of the department's Wage and Hour Division, acknowledges that sometimes getting agricultural workers to the right place at the right time is an obstacle, but he insists that "fundamentally, this is not a labor-shortage problem." Even allowing for the fact that an estimated 600,000 farmworkers are undocumented immigrants, Fraser insists there is an adequate supply of legal farm labor, "even during peak harvest months."

Fraser says that arguments for bringing in additional immigrant workers also ignore the consequences for the one



PHOTO © KEN LIGHT

WHAT FUTURE?:

California's Central Valley needs diversification if young people are to have a hope of climbing out of poverty.