

WHO ARE TOMORROW'S FARMWORKERS?

a presentation^o prepared January, 2000 by

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“ 3 major farm labor issues at end of the 20th century:

- Latinization of farm and rural work forces, as rural poverty in Mexico and Central America is transferred to rural America via immigration.
- Farm labor law: Can enforcement agencies and unions maintain labor standards with an immigrant work force and a proliferation of middlemen such as labor contractors...?
- Integration: How will the settlement of immigrant farmworkers and their families affect the economies and politics of the rural communities in which they settle? and will the 1st and 2nd generation immigrants find upward socioeconomic mobility in rural areas? ” — *Rural Migration News 1997* [2]

**“ While history cannot predict
the future, it at least allows us to
make plausible guesses. ”**

—Kitty Calavita [5]

US FARMWORKER PROFILE, *continued*

- 54% of those with families are separated from families to pursue farm work (increasing)
- 56% live with non-relatives. 10% live completely alone. Foreign-born likelier (46%, vs. 19%) to live with >5 people.
- 9% live with a parent. Of youngest (<17 years old), 53% live with a parent = 47% live with no parent. Foreign born teen farmworkers: 80% live with no parent.
- Most common living pattern is to live exclusively with non-relatives (50% of men, 11% of women. For unauthorized, >75%): Of those living with a relative, 20% live also with or "host" non-relative (40% for foreign-born).

— *continued* —

[19]

US FARMWORKER PROFILE, *continued*

- Overwhelmingly poor (< FPL): 60% overall; 45% US-born; 69% foreign-born; 80% unauthorized. Proportions for fb increasing
- Poorest: in Midwest; unauthorized; women; young (<21); unaccompanied workers living without relatives; larger families; single mothers and solo mothers (90% & 78%, respectively; together = 25% of all farmworking mothers); Latino (US-born non-Hispanic <33% in poverty; US-born and foreign-born Hispanic 75% in poverty)
- Median income for individual farmworkers from farm labor = \$2,500 - \$5,000 per year. Hourly wage = \$5-7, about 1/2 others.
- 25% of farmworkers have nonfarm earnings; their personal median income from all sources = \$5,000 - \$7,500/yr. 75% earn under \$10,000 per year. Foreign-born less likely to do nonfarm work (19% vs. 41%)

— *continued* —

[19,28]

US FARMWORKER PROFILE, *continued*

- Median household income = \$7,500 - \$10,000 per year. Over 60% households in poverty (up from 50% in 6 years). For foreign born, \$5,000 - \$7,000. For unauthorized, \$2,500 - \$5,000.
- 33% with no assets here or in homeland. 50% with no US assets (25% of unauthorized).
- Most common asset = a vehicle. 49% own (24% of unauthorized)
- 17% own/are buying a house or trailer in US (declining over time). 4% of unauthorized.

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[19]

Who works in meats, poultry, seafood?

- in Eastern Washington, 90% of meatpackers are immigrants. Most are Spanish-speaking, but also SE Asians, Serbo-Croatians, others
- in poultry plants in Georgia & N. Carolina: 50% of workers are women
- in crab processing plants of North Carolina and Virginia, H2B Mexican immigrants (largely women) have been replacing African-American workers since 1988
- increasing "migrant stream" to Canadian & Alaskan waters to pack fish

[2b, 3, 2c]

Looking at these industries is relevant because:

— another immigrant-dominated, low-wage, food production sector involving frequently seasonal work

— work forces for FVH, other farms and these industries are very fluid & intermingled

“ Meat packing brings both more jobs and greater poverty, as the new workers brought into the area tend to be immigrants prone to injury and high turnover.

Companies hire ‘vulnerable workers who are in no position to demand better wages.’ ”

—Rural Migration News—

[2b]

Is Mechanization supportable on the basis of global competition?

If trends continue (lowering trade barriers), a more reasonable argument.

Mechanization increases productivity, displaces human harvesters, reduces costs, improves or stabilizes profit margins.

Though farmworker wages and earnings are very poor in the US, they still can't compete with other nations' lower labor costs (developing world).

Ultimately, depends on the crop involved.

Can mechanization help farm workers?

- **WAGES**
If harvest productivity increases, production costs decrease. Worker wages could increase ...
- **EARNINGS**
Besides wage increases, some remaining jobs would be more year-round or permanent (more processing jobs). So annual earnings could increase yet more....
- **INJURY PREVENTION**
Unpredictable. Depends on crop & technologies.
- **JOB OPPORTUNITIES**
Fewer overall jobs; more jobs requiring special skills. Computerized mechanization a special issue: will there be sufficient skilled workers?

“ The use of new technology may... increase the employer's need for employees capable of operating computerized farm machinery and thus produce a shortage of skilled labor. ”

— Oregon Employment Department's
proposed Agricultural Services Plan for 2000-2001 —

How government policies respond in the agricultural industry:

- anemic employer sanctions, enforcement
- foreign guest worker programs
- continued exemptions of MSFWs from protections
- adjustments of school schedules, allowing prisoners to do fw, other non-cash "subsidies"
- cash subsidies to farms to ensure fair crop prices
- direct and indirect support of increased immigration
- migrant health, migrant education, farmworker housing camps, migrant legal aid, etc. : \$\$\$ & programs

“ The federal government spends over \$600 million annually — equivalent to 10% of what migrant and seasonal workers earn — on programs designed to help to offset the problems experienced by farm workers and their dependents. ”

— Philip Martin —

[28]

...and thickening the soup (immigration policy overall):

- Many groups (some environmentalists; anti-immigrant groups; nativists; social welfare groups; some economists; etc) pressure government to reduce immigration
- States pressure feds to reduce immigrant eligibility for social welfare
- Generally, business interests and some others pressure government to maintain high immig.
- So: Congress votes **pro-immigration, and anti-immigrant**

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Department of Industrial and Commercial Development.*

The Resulting Picture in the US: Immigration

- US labor force = 130 million (1996) of whom 3-5 million Mexican-born arrivals since 1985
- 3 million Mexicans who came here 1980-95 = 20% of Mexico's net population growth and = 25% of US's total immigrant population (projections similar for 1995-2010)
- Legal + unauthorized immig to US now >1.2 million per year (400% > in 1965); male immigrants earned ~ 50% less than male natives in 1990, & (adjusted) less than earlier immigrants

[9]

The Resulting Picture in the US: Immigrant Farmworkers

- 7 of the 10 US cities with highest % of immigrants living in poverty are in CA's Central Valley
- Central Valley produces more farm income than any other state, but each farm job increases the # of people living in poverty there [9]
- As for legalizing unauthorized:
 - * Advocates want immediate legalization, on social justice terms (*empowerment*)
 - * Growers want legalization later, only for those who stay in ag (180 days/yr X 5 yrs) (*control*)

[4]

**“ If we were logical, the future
would be very bleak indeed.
But we are more than logical.
We are human beings,
and we have hope,
and we can work. ”**

— Jacques Cousteau —

**“ What we need
are more people
who specialize
in the impossible. ”**

— Theodore Roethke —

To Do...and to Advocate for

- Consider expanded MHP and definitional changes to involve all food production, seasonal planting and harvests
- Even more partnering with others (farmworkers and advocates with religious activists, women's groups, immigrants' rights groups, and Latino advocacy groups)
- Encourage naturalization
- Separate immigration policy from individual-case immigrant's rights
- Don't neglect personal reflection on immigration policy