



A Harvest of Resistance: Farmworkers Victory Would Liberate Children from the Fields

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Some of their parents have papers; some don't. Although not in school, they are receiving education in the economics of agribusiness. A small, innovative union in Oregon has a solution to the problem of child labor in agriculture -- and a model for building community support for farmworkers' rights.

On December 18, the U.S. Department of Labor was stung by an Associated Press story about the department's failure to act against the use of child labor in agribusiness. These are not children working just to get extra spending money but impoverished children helping feed their families. A.P. investigators found the Labor Department blithely unaware: "I don't believe we have ever found it," said Jorge Rivero, Labor Department district director in Miami. "If it exists, we don't know about it." Less than an hour away, near Homestead, Florida., A.P. found eight underage children harvesting beans on several farms on a single day in November.

According to an A.P. analysis based on U.S. Labor Department statistics, at least 290,200 minors worked illegally in the United States in 1996. This was a dramatic increase from 1990 figures released by Operation Child Watch -- a campaign launched by then secretary of labor Elizabeth Dole -- that put the number of minors working in violation of federal labor laws at 28,000.

There are many arguments for removing children from the agricultural workforce: Children should not do the work of adults. Children should be in school, so they can break the poverty cycle. Children in the fields (and in the camps) are exposed to dangerous levels of pesticides. According to the Journal of Pesticide Reform, children in agricultural areas suffer increased rates of leukemia and other serious illnesses because of exposure to dust laden with pesticides. Oregon growers apply 110 tons of some 33 chemicals yearly -- just to the strawberry crop.

A Corporate Agenda?

In response to the outcry over child labor, secretary of labor Alexis Herman has announced

Operation Salad Bowl. To be launched next spring in cooperation with the Department of Agriculture, this initiative will involve farm inspections around the country. According to a follow-up A.P. story on Jan. 8, brand names such as H.J. Heinz, Newman's Own and the Campbell Soup Company are scrambling to join the crusade. A Campbell spokesperson said, "We're telling thousands upon thousands of suppliers, 'If you're not in adherence, you will be what we call a former supplier.'"

It sounds too good to be true: A major wire service publishes serious investigative journalism. The Labor Department promises to address the problem. Important corporate players rush to get on board. Why should we be uneasy? To answer that question, let's look at the basis for child labor in the fields.

Growers turn a blind eye to children in the fields. Taking on a whole family is an easy way to increase the workforce. Two violations of the law are involved: Besides the fact that these children are underage, they also are underpaid. In Oregon, wages for the crops children most frequently pick--strawberries, blackberries and raspberries -- are based on the number of pounds picked. Berries picked by these children are most often credited to the parents. Since the children are not even on the books, growers can illegally profit from their labor at a rate below the state's \$6 minimum wage, which covers agricultural workers.

The U.S. General Accounting Office reported a 17 percent decrease in farmworkers' wages between 1989 and 1995. Many farmworkers have to rely on their children's earnings to boost family income. Moreover, net daily wages as low as \$15 to \$20 make daycare out of the question. Welfare "reform" has tightened the squeeze. Without assistance from Adult and Family Services and no longer eligible for food stamps, many farmworkers have no option but to bring their children into the fields. Though many farmworkers would prefer to not have their children work, cracking down on child labor without raising adult pay would force farmworkers to choose between leaving their children at home unattended and not working.

Going after child labor in agriculture should provide a low-cost way for growers and brand-name food companies to appear "concerned" -- without in any way addressing the financial underpinnings of exploitation. It is a reform whose cost will be borne by farmworkers and their children.

Resistance

Nonunion agricultural work is sweatshop work. Farmworkers in Oregon do not enjoy the legally guaranteed right to paid breaks or overtime pay. Growers repeatedly have tried to exempt farmworkers from the state's minimum wage. Farmworkers who speak out are subject to firing, eviction from company housing and physical violence. Union representation would provide farmworkers with the vehicle to negotiate pay increases and address grievances on the farms without fear of retaliation. Union organizers contend that the only way to end child labor is to pay farmworkers a living wage and to give them job security and benefits.

The Oregon farmworker union goes by its Spanish acronym PCUN, Pinos y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United). Since its founding in 1985, PCUN has signed up more than 4,300 members and has been pressuring growers to sit with them at the bargaining table to negotiate over wages and working conditions. To date, no Oregon grower has signed a union contract with PCUN.

Anyone close to agricultural organizing knows the difficulty of trying to increase membership in the face of grower repression, biased law enforcement, a mobile workforce and federal legislation that barely recognizes farmworkers as part of labor. What PCUN lacks in numbers it has more than made up for in savvy. This is a union that knows how to build labor-community alliances. PCUN has strong support from many sectors of Oregon, including communities of faith, students, community-biased activists and organized labor.

In what was perhaps PCUN's most innovative outreach program, the organization borrowed an idea from the Central America solidarity movement. Last spring, more than 300 northwest Oregon residents took part in an accompaniment program, in which participants traveled with PCUN organizers going about their normal organizing duties, during the course of which organizers regularly face the threats of physical violence from growers and arrest by law-enforcement personnel. The presence of these accompaniers concretely demonstrated to farmworkers and growers alike the scope of public support for the struggle to unionize Oregon's field.

More important was the effect on the accompaniers, whose testimonies and photographs were gathered recently in booklet form. Upon returning to their own communities, many of them spread the word about what they had witnessed. It would be hard to match these unrehearsed expressions written at a field's edge, by the side of the road or in a labor camp at the end of a long day (or more) of accompaniment. This booklet is a must-read for anyone who cares about farmworker issues.

Boycott

In 1989, PCUN led a high-profile but unsuccessful legislative struggle to enact a collective-bargaining rights law and co-led a coalition that won an increase in Oregon's minimum wage, to \$4.75. The next year, PCUN's federal court lawsuit invalidated as unconstitutional a state law restricting workplace picketing during harvest. PCUN then led the first-ever organized strike in Oregon agriculture in 1991. Growers' retaliation against strikers prompted PCUN to launch a nationwide boycott in 1992 against the grower-owned NORPAC canneries and their FLAV-RPAC and Santiam products. In 1996, PCUN expanded the boycott to include Gardenburger products, which use the NORPAC distribution system.

As a vegetarian product, Gardenburger enjoys a socially conscious, environmentalist image. The Gardenburger production facility is nonunion. When PCUN leafleted the plant in 1996 to inform workers of the boycott, several workers were excited because they thought PCUN was there to start a union drive. Gardenburger is now moving its production from Oregon to Utah, a right-to-work (for less) state.

The overall strategy of the group is to apply consumer pressure on the growers so that they will bargain and sign a union contract. Also, through influencing public opinion, the union is gradually isolating the growers from sectors of moral support in the state. Finally, the union wants to prevent growers from being able to influence the state legislature to pass anti-farm-labor legislation.

In 1995 PCUN won the first-ever crop-wide wage increase (without a contract) for the strawberry harvest. By staging the biggest farmworker organizing drive ever attempted in the Pacific Northwest, PCUN was able to arm-wrestle its way into getting this increase. The growers still refuse to bargain with PCUN. However, because the boycott has heightened consumer awareness, growers now have to consider how their treatment of farmworkers affects their image. Some growers are backing off from speed-up tactics. Others have begun to provide drinking water and clean bathrooms. Others are not challenging farmworkers when they take a break.

PCUN, is now gearing up for a stronger national projection of its boycott. The focus of action will be on large-scale, institutional food service operations. Employees, students and concerned members of the community are asked to organize campaigns to stop serving FLAV-R-PAC and Gardenburger in the food services of hospitals, retreat centers, factories and campuses. PCUN is making a special appeal to student labor coalitions to take up this boycott and has set up a college listserv so that student activists can share information.

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