Fields of Dilemma: The Farm Workers' Story

(From Summer/Fall 1998)

by Nano Riley

Each year in March, when the luscious red strawberries are harvested, the city hosts its famous Strawberry Festival. Visitors from far and wide pock to the small Central Florida town to hear country music stars like Reba McEntire and Clint Black, and to eat strawberries in every imaginable form: dipped in chocolate, piled high in shortcakes with a mountain of cream, in pancakes, crepes and blintzes, or just plain, sweet and juicy.

But what most people don't realize is that these delicious berries are grown in pelds laced with methyl bromide, a highly toxic poison injected into the soil to prevent nematodes and other pests. And it's the farm workers, those invisible pickers that travel with the harvests, who must work long and hard around the methyl bromide so those beautiful berries can reach our tables.

In nearby Dade City, in a small community of wooden houses nestled away from the main part of town, most of the residents speak only Spanish. Here the roads are unpaved and they pool with muddy water when it rains. These are the homes of the farm workers, mostly Mexican, who pick the berries. These are the people who break their backs in the pelds for pennies so that there are plenty of strawberries for the festival and for the market.

Pesticides are only one part of the farm workers' dilemma. Low wages, child labor and lack of education are other concerns. Working without a green card is another. Combined, all of these problems are hard to escape, and the cycle of farm work continues in families for generations.

farm work continues in families for generations.

A Long Tradition

Agricultural labor has a long history in the United States, beginning with the slaves brought from Africa to work in the cotton, tobacco and sugar cane Þelds of the southern plantations. With the growth of large, eastern urban centers after the Civil War, "truck farms" emerged as suppliers of vegetables and berries for the cities. These East Coast farmers could truck their produce to market, but they needed laborers to help them when it was time to harvest, laborers that would leave when the work was done. In the early days, the workers were usually African Americans from the South, and immigrant Italians, Chinese and Filipinos.

During the Great Depression, many displaced Dust Bowl refugees entered the migrant stream. These workers had an advantage over the non-whites; many were able to break the cycle during World War II by moving into higher-paying jobs in defense factories. Since the 1950s, the majority of farm workers are African American or immigrants from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Jamaica and the Dominican Republic. With the political wars in Central America during the 1970s and 1980s, many Mayan Indians from Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador have made their way to join the other workers in the Þelds.

A Cycle of Shame

Margarita Romo makes her home in Dade City among the farm workers, where she oversees Farm Worker Self-Help, an organization to assist the predominantly Mexican workers that come to the area to pick oranges and strawberries. She has worked with Florida's migrant workers for nearly 30 years. According to her, of the many problems facing these workers today, the most basic is inadequate wages. Born into a farm worker family herself, Romo escaped the hard life when her father broke away from the grueling work and became a gardener in Texas. "That was hard work, too," she says, but a step up from their migrant life. "I worked with my father and so did my brothers."

When Romo married, she moved away from both the Mexican community and the farm worker community. But in 1971 she became involved again, and since then it's become her life's work. Now she serves on the governor's council for helping farm workers, and she's on the go all the time, traveling the state as an advocate.

One of the main ways to help break out of the cycle is through education, and Romo has set up a program to help keep farm worker children in school. "We're trying to get something done in the school system but it's hard," she said. "We have an agreement with the Department of Juvenile Justice. We wrote a proposal that we call the Dream Team. We (Farm Worker Self-Help) want to be a liaison between the kids and the system, and we are. Two of us work on that project. When there's a suspension in school, we go and try to get it lessened, or we teach the suspended child in our center.

"We jump in and say, 'What good is this gonna do the kid?'" she continued. "I just had a little girl, 16, who did Þve days with us just so she could go back to school. We did tutoring. We taught her to answer the phones around the ofÞce."

"We have a meeting of the Dream Team every Wednesday night with about 20 kids," Romo explained. "They walk here, and they come voluntarily. We're taking them to Tallahassee on spring break this year so they can see how the legislature works.

Romo also visits the schools and the parents. When there's family violence, Farm Worker Self-Help offers counseling for the entire family. "Kids act out in school because they're frustrated at home," Romo said. "Farm worker kids get tired of coming to the school session late and leaving early because their families have to move to different Þelds around the country. The oranges are done now and they have to move up to South Carolina."

That means a new school, and new teachers. There is little continuity to encourage them, little help if they are having a problem. The kids often don't speak good English, so they eventually just give up. Romo has volunteer tutors at the help center, and little by little, they bring the children in for assistance. "We give one or two $500 grants every June. We Þnd one kid who wants to go to college and they go."

Slave Wages

"How can you change the basic poverty if [migrant farm workers] make less than they did 20 years ago?" asked Romo, echoing the sentiments of other advocates around the country.

The average farm worker in America earns between $8,000 and $9,000 per year for his or her labor. Some earn far less. The average pay is by the piece: they are paid for each bushel, box or sack they Þll. In Immokalee, a tiny farm town in Florida's Everglades region, six tomato pickers drew international attention last December when they went on a month-long hunger strike to protest their low wages. Mike Stuart, president of the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association, maintained that the farm workers earn $8 per hour, or about $16, 000 annually. Though there were no changes, the hunger strike sent a strong message, said Lucas Benitez, the spokesman for the Coalition of Immokalee Workers.

Since the crackdown on immigration a few years ago, many farmers claim they cannot Þnd enough workers to pick their produce. That has renewed an old practice of hiring "off shore" workers. It works like this: The farmer makes a deal with a "crew boss" who produces workers brought in from other countries, rents them out to the farmer, and takes all responsibility for them. These workers are often subjected to the now-outlawed "debt peonage" system, where the crew boss is responsible for recruiting the workers and bringing them into the country to work, then charges them outrageous fees for transportation, housing and food. Though the farmer

fees for transportation, housing and food. Though the farmer pays the crew boss for the labor, the workers may leave the country with next to nothing after the boss extracts what he Þgures is his share. It's a raw deal all around.

But there are victories. Last summer Gargiulo Inc., one of California's largest strawberry growers, and a subsidiary of Monsanto, agreed to turn over $575,000 in back pay to hundreds of workers that were forced to work without pay before their shifts began. The AFL-CIO bankrolled a class action suit by the United Farm Workers, the union founded by Cesar Chavez in 1960, and it was a success.

Where's Home

Most of the women who come to the Monday night quilting sessions Margarita Romo holds at the Self-Help Center call Dade City their home, but they usually go elsewhere to pick. They are not all American citizens, but they all have green cards.

"We have seen people come through and just stay for the night at the mission," Romo said. "There are still camps in Dade City, but they are owned by crew chiefs, not farmers. Farmers have passed the problem on to the crew chiefs, but exploitation continues. When the farm workers leave, they give up their homes, and they are homeless."

Romo expressed her frustration with the state in all of this. "If the workers live in public housing, they are not allowed to keep their possessions or even pay for their apartment while they are gone to another place to pick," she explained. "They can't have any possessions. They have to get rid of everything."

The Pesticide Problem

Strawberries have become a major political issue mostly because of methyl bromide, especially for farm workers and advocates in Florida and California, where the berries are really big business. Methyl bromide is completely odorless and must be mixed with tear gas to warn farm workers who encounter its toxic fumes. In 1995, the EPA halted testing of the poison on beagles when they found the dogs were suffering severe neurological damage, causing them to bang their heads into their cages. In California, methyl bromide poisoning is considered the fourth leading cause of injury among the farm workers who must apply it. According to the California Environmental Protection Agency, 15 workers are known to have died from the poison, and another 216 have suffered serious health problems from exposure to it. But the big berry growers are so dependent on methyl bromide, they are unwilling to give it up in spite of the danger of neurological damage it poses.

On March 28 of this year, Gloria Steinem joined a 1,000-strong march in New York City to protest the terrible working conditions in the California strawberry Þelds. Chanting "Se puede," the Spanish slogan for "It's possible" that was popularized by Cesar Chavez, the group marched down Broadway, passing stores that sell strawberries picked by

Broadway, passing stores that sell strawberries picked by women who do not earn enough to feed their families. Workers that have tried to unionize in the strawberry Þelds have been Þred, according to United Farm Workers. Dolores Huerta, co-founder of UFW with Chavez, said California's strawberry workers earn about $8,000 annually and have no health insurance or other beneÞts.

But it's not just strawberries. In the small panhandle town of Quincy, Florida, mushrooms are the beef. At Quincy Farms, the Florida branch of the mushroom giant Sylvan, Inc., based in Pennsylvania, workers have Þled suit over their working conditions. Quincy Farms workers reported they had to ask permission to go to the bathroom. In March of 1996, 86 workers were Þred during a protest walk-out; only 24 were rehired. Six mushroom workers Þled a class action suit against Quincy Farms in March on behalf of the Þred workers. Perhaps this is just the beginning.

Dr. Marion Moses, Director of the Pesticide Education Center in California, has worked closely with the United Farm Workers and has assessed many of the pesticide exposure risks agricultural workers and their families face. Since many farm workers often camp close to the Þelds, they are exposed to dangerous petrochemicals even when they are not working. The land their children play on is toxic, the water they drink may be toxic, and they must handle toxic chemicals at work. It's a no win situation for these people.

Though Moses concedes that chemical poisoning is less acute than 20 years ago, there are new and still dangerous chemicals being used. Parathion, a toxic nerve gas developed by the Germans during World War II, was discontinued because of farm worker protests. It came on the market in 1943 and was responsible for more poisonings and deaths than any other pesticide. But some of the newer, approved chemicals may be just as toxic. The EPA rates chemicals from 1 to 4, with 1 being the most toxic. Moses wants to see all toxicity 1 chemicals removed permanently from use.

Small Victories

Until recently, farmers allowed crop dusters to spray the Þelds while the workers were picking, but after much protest, the practice stopped. In 1994 the Florida legislature passed the "Right to Know Law," which allowed farm workers to know what pesticides they were handling. Until this law, Florida farmers did not tell their workers about the pesticides they used.

In 1990, environmental groups won another victory using the Delaney Clause, a 1958 amendment to the Food, Drug and Cosmetics Act. The Delaney Clause states that processed foods must not contain residues of any pesticides that induce cancer in laboratory animals. It covers 36 pesticides, including mancozeb, a fungicide used on cereal grains and grapes, dicofol, an insecticide sprayed on fruits, and captan, a fungicide used on plums, grapes and tomatoes. Several California environmental groups and farm workers, along with the state of California, sued the EPA using the Delaney Clause, and a California court approved the settlement in 1995. Though this will lead to stricter regulations on pesticides, a

Though this will lead to stricter regulations on pesticides, a group called the American Crop Protection Association says the þve-year review process will only prove costly and time-consuming, with resources wasted "in pursuit of trivial and non-existent risks."

Child Labor

Though there are rigid laws against child labor in the United States, farm labor is an exception. A section of the Fair Labor Standards Act, the law regulating child labor, lets agricultural industries obtain waivers allowing them to use ten- and 11-year-olds for hand-harvested products if the companies can show that not using the children would cause severe economic disruption to the industry. A child 14 years old or younger can use knives and machetes, operate machinery and be exposed to pesticides. Children in other occupations cannot.

Margarita Romo often sees children working in Dade City. "They're not supposed to work in the þelds, but they do," she said. "Little kids too young for school hang with their mothers. Because the workers can't afford day care, they take the little ones with them. Even if they are not working in the þelds, they play along the side and are exposed to chemicals and hazardous conditions.

"During the orange season we have a children's church, and many weren't there," Romo acknowledged. "Twelve-year-olds have to get out of school to help their parents. One 16-year-old I know works in the þelds instead of going to school. If you see these kids are absent more than they're in school, you know they're going to fail."

Health Care How does all this pesticide exposure affect the health of the farm worker? Tom Himelick is the Associate Director of the Emory Physician Assistant Program, and he's been going to the þelds of Georgia and South Carolina for the last few summers to train graduates as physician assistants.

"Our mission is to bring primary care to rural and underserved areas," said Himelick. "This is our third year collaborating with the Southwest Georgia Area Health Education Center."

Himelick and his crew of graduates go into the þelds, but they offer only primary care. "We see many musculoskeletal problems, such as back pain, knee and muscle pain from stooping and lifting," he said. "Also eye complaints, mostly from pesticides and dust. And the crops themselves may be irritating, such as strawberries and tobacco. We work with limited equipment, doing most surveys at the side of the þeld and outside the packing sheds.

"Workers also suffer from headaches, possibly from heat exposure and dehydration, and skin problems, such as contact dermatitis from chemical or plant sources, often due to clothing and shoes in bad shape. Shoes that don't keep their feet dry encourage fungal infections. There were some gastrointestinal complaints. We're not set up to look for parasites," he continued, "but other reports have indicated a high incidence among migrants due to sanitation. But we have no lab equipment."

no lab equipment."

Other studies have cited a high incidence of cervical cancer among young farm worker women in their 20s, and there is also a high rate of leukemia among migrant children. Most health workers attribute this to pesticide exposure, and Romo has seen a higher-than-average incidence of birth defects among children of workers in Dade City.

It seems to be a frustrating and insoluble problem. When one group manages to break the never ending cycle of the farm worker poverty, another group slips in to take its place. Just be aware the next time you walk through the produce section of your local supermarket that the enticing array of colorful fruits and vegetables comes at a very high price, not only in the pesticides hiding inside, but in the human toll of the farm workers that pick the produce we put on our tables.

Some Solutions

- Buy organic produce. It's not poisoning any farm workers and it takes a bite out of the chemical industry.
- Support boycotts of products that exploit farm workers. There are many groups that offer lists of these products. (See list at end.)
- Grow your own produce. It's rewarding, and you'll know what's gone into it. Even apartment dwellers can grow a few things on windowsills and balconies.
- If you live in an urban area, join a co-op or community garden. If there isn't one, consider starting one. You'll Þnd many interested people.
- Get active. Talk about the problem and let others know what's going on.

Resources

Web Sites:

- Pesticide Action Network (www.panna.org/panna/). This site gives updates on pesticides and offers many links for sustainable agriculture worldwide.
- United Farm Workers (www.ufw.org/). This site gives actions and updates on farm worker concerns across the United States.
- Oregon Farm Worker Union (www.pcun.org/). PCUN stands for Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste, or Treeplanters and Farmworkers United of the Northwest. It offers information on actions and alternatives in the northwest. Currently they are boycotting Gardenburgers because of unfair wages and beneÞts.

Books:

The Fruits of Their Labor: Atlantic Coast Farmworkers and the Making of Migrant Poverty, 1870-1945. By Cindy Hahamovitch (University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

Nano Riley is a Tampa-based writer and frequent Organica contributor.

Photo by: Davida Johns

Davida Johns is a feminist photographer whose award-winning photographs have been exhibited in galleries from Florida to Chicago, and published in numerous magazines and journals. The series featured here came about after the organization Common Ground contacted her to document the way of life of migrant farm workers and their families. She spent three months working on the project. Respecting their rights, she always sought permission to use the photos and gave her subjects copies of any pictures she took. Johns is a part-time computer programmer, and is presently working on a series, "Women at Work," which she considers her most important personal project.

Photo Caption: Plant City, Florida bills itself as the "Strawberry Capital of the World."

Return to top