

Francisca Cavazos



Arizona Farmworkers

Francisca Cavazos is the grandchild of Mexicans who immigrated to the U.S. Her parents labored as migrant farm workers in eight Western states. She was once a farmworker herself on the citrus and green onion farms of Arizona. Today, Francisca works as a labor organizer for the Arizona Farmworkers Union. This union, organized by farmworkers who themselves migrated from Mexico or who are the children of migrants, addresses the conditions experienced by this migrant labor. The union's membership includes Mexican immigrants – many of whom are undocumented even though they may have lived in the U.S. for several years – plus other Americans who are Black, White, and Indian.

Francisca's presentation emphasized several key points:

- The extreme vulnerability of undocumented Mexican migrant farm labor in the U.S.
- The right of a union to organize undocumented migrants as workers.
- The benefits to workers of belonging to a union that organizes on both sides of the border.
- The possibility of migrant organizations - in this case, the union - spearheading economic activities in the home society.



THE BORDER CONTEXT

They may be working in one of the richest countries of the world, but the conditions endured by Mexican farmworkers in the American southwest are deplorable. Many of their hardships arise from the fact that many are undocumented. It is not surprising that Mexican nationals, living south of the U.S.-Mexican border in impoverished areas racked with high unemployment and inflation rates and confronted with the reality of their extreme and unceasing underdevelopment relative to their northern neighbors, migrate north. Here they become cheap labor for industries and corporations in need of unskilled, low-cost workers or they become part of the large, low-wage labor pool that moves from farm to farm on a seasonal basis across the American southwest picking citrus, green onions and other crops. They may migrate for short periods - with documents or without. They may remain illegally at the end of their contracts, or they may be smuggled into the U.S. illegally.

The advantage of these workers to employers and to the U.S. economy is that they can be let go when they are no longer needed, and in many instances they are then deported. Once they become undocumented workers, they have no rights and no recourse for their harsh treatment. They live in constant fear of deportation by border patrols, or worse, of working two to three weeks and then being deported the day they are to be paid, with their hard-earned money remaining in the pockets of the growers. They also become commodities in the "slave trade" between growers in Arizona and Florida, in which undocumented Mexican workers are literally sold to new employers at prices approximating \$450 a head.

IMMIGRANT WORKER VULNERABILITY

In her presentation, Francisca highlighted the extreme vulnerability experienced by these migrant workers and the government complicity in their exploitation. She described the humiliating conditions these workers endure, which begin at the point of migration when they are "smuggled" from one side of the 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexican border to the other. This is a frightening journey for which they must each pay approximately \$250. On the way they might be robbed, abandoned by their "smuggler/guides", discovered by the authorities and deported, and the women may be raped.

In the U.S. they continue to be confronted by appalling conditions. At first they might be forced to live under trees and bathe in and drink irrigation water that is laced with toxic pesticides. Many of the women have to take their children to work because there are no daycare facilities or because the school hours do not coincide with the work day. This means that some of the migrants' children do not attend school at all. And because the nature of the employment is seasonal, which means the laborers must migrate from state to state to work, their children's school attendance is again affected. According to Francisca, 60% of the children of these migrants eventually drop out of school.

Francisca's presentation also addressed the racism and class prejudice which underscore the migrants' experiences. This is shown in the absolute paucity of sanitation or health standards



Photo/Courtesy Arizona Farm Workers

on the job, for both the Mexican immigrants and their American White, Black, or Indian coworkers. The U.S. authorities refuse to impose any legal requirements on the growers regarding hygienic standards or to require such minimal amenities as adequate and clean toilets, or drinking and washing water. On most farms a grower has one or two toilets for 400 to 500 workers. Toilets may be cleaned only once a season. There is no running water - for flushing the toilets, for washing, or for drinking, for that matter (See, Henry Weinstein's description of this situation in *The Nation*, May 11, 1985).

One woman farmworker described the conditions:

The two bathrooms are always filthy and attract many flies. The flies are the worst thing. They are especially a problem because lots of parents bring their children to the fields, including tiny babies and toddlers. I've seen many babies with runny noses and eyes who had flies all over their faces. There is no place for the parents to clean or change the babies. The children play in the fields and get dirt and pesticides all over themselves, but there is no way for them to get clean because there is no water or soap or towels.

The situation is particularly uncomfortable for women - especially pregnant women - as the following comment of a woman migrant makes clear:

Women suffer more from these poor conditions than men because we won't use the bathrooms as bad as we have to use them as they are always so filthy and have such strong odors that can be smelled from a distance.

You can get sick from the odor alone. With both of my pregnancies I suffered many strong cramps and numerous bladder infections because I simply would not use the bathrooms in the field.

In the onion fields on any given day, some 50 of the 300 to 400 workers are likely to be pregnant women.

The unsanitary conditions on these farms, situated in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, make the workers' infection and disease rates comparable to those of many developing countries that have nowhere near the resources of the United States. For example, the rate of parasitic diseases among these Arizona farmworkers is higher than that found among Guatemalan children. And compared with the general population in that area of the U.S., as one journalist has pointed out (again, See Weinstein in *The Nation*), farmworkers are 7 to 26 times more likely to contract parasitic diseases; 9 to 85 times more likely to suffer from diarrhea; and 3 times more likely to suffer chemical exposure. The refusal of the U.S. government to pass legislation enforcing a code of sanitary conditions for farm labor - most of whom are dark-skinned Mexicans - and its toleration of a market in which humans are the primary commodity, call attention to the disregard the authorities have for these workers as human beings.

ARIZONA FARMWORKERS UNION

Against the context of these conditions, Francisca described how, through the migrants' own organizing efforts into a labor union, and through the assistance the union has received from



Photo/Courtesy AFW

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sympathetic solidarity groups, the migrants have been able to address, and in some instances reverse, the humiliations of their situation. Most of all, however, the union has given the workers confidence to protest their situation and to feel that they are entitled to rights.

The union has sought to organize one of the most difficult constituencies of all - the frightened, vulnerable, undocumented workers. These are the workers who face the risk of deportation because of their organizing activities. Organizing efforts among these farm laborers began in 1977 because, as Francisca said:

We felt undocumented workers had a right to organize into unions, a right to a minimum wage, a right to set up picket lines, and a right to benefits such as any other citizen in the United States, because they are here as workers.

The union has a variety of programs to assist migrant farmworkers with such necessities as shelter, food, and clothing when needed, with translation and with referral services, and recently it has assisted in establishing a primary health care facility and a legal project for undocumented workers. It also protests the variety of intolerable conditions these workers face - such as wages, hours, poor sanitation, lack of social security, and so on. The resources to support union activities come from membership dues, along with what the organizers have been able to solicit in the form of church gifts, private foundation grants, and cash and in-kind donations from the local community.

There are two particularly innovative elements to this union's activities:

- a) the creation of a "sister organization" south of the border; and
- b) the generation of specific economic development projects in Mexico.

The rationale for the Mexican branch of the union is that rural workers in Mexico need to understand more about what is actually involved in the migration experience, as well as to think in advance about how they will migrate and what they will do upon arrival in the U.S. As Francisca said:

We go into the rural communities in Mexico and organize men and women before they actually migrate. We form committees. We strategize with them exactly how they are going to migrate to the U.S., where they are going to work, and how they are going to organize.

These efforts create a more conscious union membership in the U.S.

The economic development projects that the union has implemented in Mexico build on these "sister" union branches in Mexico. These development projects have been particularly creative in terms of their financing, which is provided through the collective bargaining agreements that the union has been able to negotiate with farm owners. Under these contracts, each grower in the U.S. employing unionized, Mexican migrant laborers who are union members must pay 20 cents per worker per hour into a fund that is channeled directly into the Mexican development projects.

These projects have focused on developing and improving

irrigation systems, agricultural productivity, housing, education, and health care. They create employment for workers in Mexico and, it is hoped, at some point will provide enough economic activity to offer an option to would-be migrants, or at least, serve as a source of economic activity if the time comes that the U.S. no longer needs Mexican migrant labor. The economic development projects also assist women who are "left behind" by migrating men and who must care for children and till their meagre plots of land with little or no male assistance. Among the projects specifically for women are a pig breeding cooperative, a chicken cooperative and a mid-wife training program. These development projects, which are among the most innovative activities initiated by a migrant organization, present a model to be closely explored and which perhaps could be implemented in other migration circumstances. They present one means of linking the labor donor and recipient societies in a way that can be beneficial to the donor country, in particular.

Both women and men belong to the Arizona Farmworkers Union. Women, however, have played an especially active role in its history. They were at the forefront in organizing a strike among onion workers in 1977, when the union was in its infancy, because wages had not gone up in 14 years. Just as women have played an important role in the union's development, the union has been a particularly important force in the growth of consciousness and personal esteem among these Mexican rural women. As Francisca pointed out "We the women in rural Arizona, have learned that women can no longer remain silent, and that we, as women, have a lot to offer. We have been growing and expanding our horizons. And we firmly believe that consciousness-raising and participation are key elements in organizing".

But the Decade for Women and the institution of International Women's Day have also been important forces for Francisca and other rural Arizona women in both increasing their awareness and directing their action. As Francisca said in her closing remarks in Nairobi:

In the spirit of justice and liberty, we have to create a place of our own. Thanks to the International Conference in Mexico City in 1975, the concept of International Women's Day was brought to Arizona seven years ago. Now, I am proud to announce that on March 8, 1985, we celebrated our seventh annual Women's International Day in Arizona. We believe that this will continue for many, many, many years. We also believe that we, the women of the world, united in justice, must move forward together, because we have a lot of work to do.

BILL OF RIGHTS FOR THE UNDOCUMENTED WORKER

The Arizona Farmworkers Union has also been notably creative in its approach to undocumented workers. In keeping with its view that undocumented workers have the right to organize as workers because they provide needed labor, the union formulated a *Bill of Rights for the Undocumented Worker*, which Francisca distributed in Nairobi.

