Farmworkers in the United States

Background for Teachers

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Introduction

Each spring farmworkers, some with their families, will pack up their belongings and begin the yearly trek northward to work in the fields and orchards. They will take only the necessary belongings—stuffing them into duffle bags, shopping bags, and old suitcases. Those with their own cars will fill the trunks to the brim, hoping they have what they need for emergencies, which they know will arise. Those without their own cars may try to find a ride from a relative or friend; some will climb into old school buses or vans owned by labor contractors. And some, those from Mexico and Central America without valid immigration documents, will begin their journey by risking death to cross the border into the United States.

Some may have work waiting for them and are returning to the same farm as last year. Others may be setting out to a new area based on the advice of a friend or relative—they heard there was work where the pay was good, and "if you work hard you can make a lot of money!"

The exact numbers of people who make this trek are unknown. Estimates range from 1 million to over 3 million men, women, and children, who provide the labor necessary to harvest the fruits and vegetables we eat. They lead a life isolated from the rest of American society. Living in labor camps and housing hidden on back roads or in shared rooms in villages and cities, they are often invisible even to residents of the towns where they come to work.

The migratory farm labor force has developed out of several contributing factors. The work of transplanting, weeding, and harvesting many crops can only be done by hand. The length of time to do this work is very short, usually a few weeks. By definition, the population is sparse in rural areas, and many local workers no longer choose to work on farms. The result is

that workers must be recruited from outside the area to come and work for a very short time.

The farms where they work can range from small family-owned businesses with few employees to a huge corporation. For example, the Dole Food Company, most likely the largest California farm employer, issued 28,000 W-2 statements annually in the early 1990s (Martin).

The work is hard. Those doing it must be able to withstand the physical demands of stoop labor or climbing ladders and carrying heavy sacks filled with produce. They may work in temperatures that can be near freezing on an October morning in New England, Michigan, or North Dakota or close to 100 degrees in an open field in the hot sun in August in Yakima, Washington, or San Joaquin, California. The fact that the labor force is young (average age of 31) is not surprising.

Many of the difficulties facing the migrant workers are inherent in these jobs and the structure of this labor market. The risks embedded in this system are borne almost entirely by the workers.

- When migrants are looking for work, most information available comes from word of mouth—from other workers. People may travel days to arrive at an area where they heard there was work, only to find none.
- Bad weather affects crops, farmers, and farmworkers. Delays in the ripening of crops mean days without work or income, as farmworkers get paid only for the hours worked or the amount of produce picked. Short seasons and a small crop mean that the earnings needed to get through the next winter don't materialize. Crops wiped out by rain, hail, or drought can mean huge debt. Workers have spent time and money traveling to the area, fed families waiting for the crop to ripen, and borrowed money from friends to get by.
- Migrant farmworkers are not provided with the benefits that many other workers enjoy. They almost never have paid sick days, vacation days, or health insurance. If working members get sick and can't work, they have no income.

Who are the farmworkers?

Over the years, growers have sought out and recruited people from various parts of the country and world to come harvest their crops. The routes they traveled were divided geographically and known as the "streams"—the East Coast stream, the Midwest stream, and the Western stream. These terms lost their usefulness during the 1990s as workers criss-crossed the country seeking work rather than following these traditional routes. Those doing agricultural work through the years include but are not limited to the following groups.

Migrant Travel Streams

Late 1800s and early 1900s

On the East Coast

- African Americans who were once sharecroppers and tenant farmers in the South
- Italian immigrant families living in the cities
- Finnish immigrants also working in the wire mills
- Cape Verdeans, Portuguese people of color, coming on packet boats
- Canadian Mi'kmaq, Maliseet, and Passamaquoddy Indians
- Local white laborers
- Unemployed men and women from nearby cities

In the Midwest

- Immigrants from Europe

On the West Coast

- Native-born whites, including transient workers or "hoboes"
- Native Americans impressed into labor by vagrancy laws
- Chinese immigrants
- Japanese immigrants
- Local women and children from cities during World War I
- Mexicans recruited as temporary workers during World War I
- Dust Bowl white farmers and their families during the 1930s

1930s to 1980

On the East Coast

- Italian immigrants
- Coal miners from Appalachia
- Transient workers or "hoboes" who traveled the freight trains
- African Americans who lived and worked in agriculture in southern states, primarily Florida
- German prisoners of war, during World War II
- Jamaicans and other Caribbean Islanders recruited for the H-2 guest worker program
- Puerto Ricans under "contracts" arranged by the U.S. Department of Labor
- Native Americans from Canada and French Canadians

In the Midwest

- African Americans
- Puerto Ricans
- Native Americans
- Canadians
- Appalachian single males and families
- German prisoners of war, during World War II
- Italians who came to work in the copper mines
- Finns and Swedes who came to work in the private and public forest lands
- Mexican Americans (Chicanos) from south Texas
- Local white residents who were recent immigrants: Poles, Germans, Eastern Europeans, and the Irish

On the West Coast

- Mexican "Bracero" workers, from 1944 to 1964
- Mexican Americans
- Filipinos

1980 to 2000

On the East Coast

- Haitians who had arrived in Florida and were recruited by crew bosses to travel north
- Mexicans and Mexican Americans returning in winters to Mexico, Florida, or other southern states
- Guatemalans, El Salvadorans
- Bangladeshi immigrants from New York City
- Southeast Asian immigrants from Philadelphia
- Cambodian women from New Bedford
- Mexican and Jamaican workers recruited for the H-2A guest worker program

In the Midwest

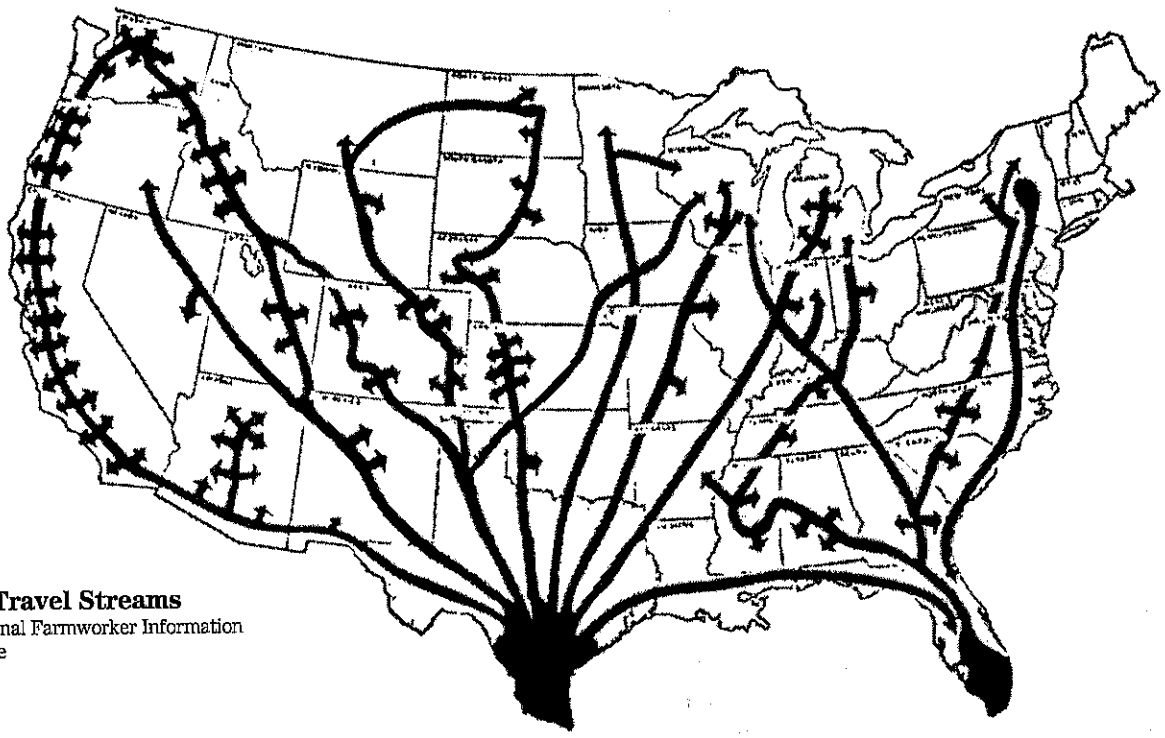
- Mexicans
- Mexican Americans
- Guatemalans
- Mexican Mennonites

On the West Coast

- Mexicans
- Mexican Americans

The hope of earning money to support one's family has always enticed people to leave their homes seeking better opportunities. Farmworkers are no different. Farmers, through organized efforts and sometimes with the help of the U.S. government, have at various times systematically recruited workers from other countries to come to the United States. Other workers have been pushed out of their home countries or states by restricted opportunity, political unrest, or repression. Some leave home never hoping to return, while others leave planning to return yearly or as often as possible.

What the above groups have in common is that during the time they were doing farm work, members of these ethnic groups lived outside the mainstream of American life with few alternatives for employment. Over time the groups doing farm work may change—currently they are mostly Mexican and Central American workers—but little has happened to change the structure of the agricultural labor markets in the United States. Governmental programs have been designed to assure that there is an adequate supply of labor to harvest our crops. The result, labor economists contend, is that the laws of supply and demand have not worked to improve wages and working conditions. The harvesting of some crops has been mechanized and a large number of jobs have been expanded, so that some workers are employed all year, or nearly all year, boosting the annual income of these workers. Yet it remains that a large number of workers are needed to do the seasonal, labor-intensive work, and most of these workers live in poverty.



Migrant Travel Streams
Source: National Farmworker Information Clearinghouse

Routes of travel

Aside from the 1930s Dust Bowl farmers made famous by John Steinbeck in *Grapes of Wrath,* the image most Americans have of migrant workers is of those who followed the famous routes of travel known as the streams. During the mid- to late 1900s many traveled these routes, starting in the South and working their way north. In the East this stream included workers based in Florida and some with their home bases in other southern states. They fanned out, up the Eastern Seaboard, into the Carolinas, along the eastern shore of Virginia and Maryland, to farms in New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and Maine. Midwestern workers were based in Texas and traveled up through the Midwest to the northern fruit orchards of Michigan, the sugar beet fields of Nebraska, North Dakota, and Minnesota and the vegetable fields of Ohio. In the West, many workers were based in Mexico or southern California and moved north in the state of California or up into Oregon and Washington. Some also went east into Arizona.

Today, "following the season," for some, means stopping along their journey as they travel north to pick crops as they ripen. Staying in some places only a few weeks or sometimes a few days, the journey north is long and arduous—going from strange town to strange town, employer to employer, and for children from school to school. Other workers travel the same path but may have managed to secure more consistent employment. They live and work in one place in the South and go directly to one town in the North. Two alternatives then face them. They can live in housing the farmer may provide and work on one farm, or they can try to find their own housing and work on several farms in the nearby area. Either way, they have reduced the need to move so often.

Patterns of movement and settlement

After years of traveling "on the season," many families will make the decision to "settle out." They will choose a town somewhere along their route, most likely where they have other family and friends, find a place to live, and try to find year-round work. These workers and their families are referred to as "resettled" farmworkers. Their employment often continues to be in agriculture as they piece together jobs or work for one employer. If they have resettled in the North, during the winter they may trim fruit trees or grapevines, repair wooden bins and other equipment, or work in a packing house.

The term "seasonal" farmworkers refers to people who live and work in the same area without traveling and would include resettled workers. Their employment is in agriculture and they piece together agricultural work in the same way the resettled workers do. Both usually face weeks of unemployment and no income through parts of the winter.

Workers often overlooked when considering migrants are dairy farmworkers and those who care for farm animals. Many workers and their families move frequently within a state or from state to state working as milkers on dairy farms. Some may actually move more frequently than the fruit and vegetable harvesters. They often work long hours under conditions similar to those of harvest workers. Other jobs include feeding and tending to cows, chickens, ducks, and other animals that are slaughtered for their meat.

Historically and still today, some workers leave their homes in the cities to live and work in rural areas nearby. They then return to their homes at the end of the planting or harvest season. They are often referred to as "shuttle" migrants—working in jobs over 75 miles from their homes.

Workers who leave their homes in the cities and return there each night are called "day-haul" workers. However, this term has a broader application and can also include "day-haul" construction and landscaping workers.

Some "guestworkers" enter the United States under programs that allow unskilled workers to enter the United States if they work temporarily in agriculture. One such program used by farmers in the West was the well-known Bracero program under which workers were recruited from Mexico during World Wars I and II (the second, however, lasted from 1942 to 1964). A similar program for farmers in the east was created in the immigration laws and is known by the subsection of the law—H-2. Historically, workers were recruited for harvest from Jamaica and the West Indies. In 1986 the program was expanded, renamed H-2A and is now used also to recruit workers from Mexico. H-2B workers are allowed to work temporarily performing nonharvest jobs and have been used by employers to fill jobs in packing houses. H-2A workers have few rights, and those who speak out about working conditions can have their contracts terminated.

Agreements between the U.S. Department of Labor and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico allow farmers and processors to recruit "contract workers" from the island. However, because Puerto Ricans are citizens, they are free to come and go as they please. Through the contracts they are provided transportation, health care while working, and a guaranteed job.

The work

"Farm work is dirty, repetitive, hard on the body, and one of the most hazardous occupations in the country." (Norris, 2001)

Stooping over to plant or pick vegetables on the ground, sliding along on one's knees, or climbing ladders to pick fruit from the high branches of a tree—all involve hard physical labor. When picking, the workers must lift and carry the heavy container (be it a sack, crate, basket, or flat) to a central holding container or truck. The work must be done despite the extremes of heat and cold. The perishable nature of the crop means the hours can be long—from sun up to sunset. For some, there is no day off until the crop has been harvested.

The fruits and vegetables are next packed. This can occur as soon as they are harvested, or the produce can be placed in storage and sorted when it is pulled out of storage. The produce is washed, trimmed, and sorted to discard the spoiled or bruised produce. This part of the process can occur either in a packing house or in the field. The fruit and vegetables are next packed into boxes or bags for transport and sale. Migrant workers and seasonal farmworkers who find work in these packing houses are able to lengthen their time of employment into the late fall and winter.

Income

Throughout the twentieth century, migrant farmworkers have been among the poorest workers in America. A recent study showed that among those surveyed, the average hourly wage for farmworkers is $5.94 per hour—just a little over the federal minimum wage. However, incomes can vary widely, with some workers earning much more per hour and others earning far less (12 percent of all farmworkers earn less than the minimum wage). According to this study, one-half of all individual farmworkers earn less than $7,500 per year, and one-half of all farmworker families earn less than $10,000 per year, far below the 2001 U.S. poverty level of $17,650 for a family of four (USDOL, 2000). Farmworkers cannot earn money when they are sick, when it rains, while waiting for crops to ripen, when the crop is small and their work is limited, or when they are traveling to their next job.

Small agricultural employers state that they are unable to pay higher wages because of the constraints they face. They argue that their inability to set prices for their goods, foreign imports, weather conditions, and the vagaries of the markets leave them with very small, if any, profits.

Labor contractors

Labor contractors, or "crew leaders," act as the middlemen between the workers and the employers. They may recruit workers, transport the worker in vans or buses owned by the crew leader, arrange for and supervise their housing, and supervise their labor in the fields. In some areas of the United States the contractors act independently—securing jobs and arranging harvest schedules, hiring the workers, and paying the workers directly. About 20 percent of farmworkers are employed directly by labor contractors.

In other areas, contractors work at the direction of the farmers. They perform the same tasks of recruiting, transporting, and supervising, but the workers are employed and paid by the farmer. The contractor will negotiate his or her fee and the workers' wages, usually receiving a percentage of the workers' wages as payment for his or her contracting services.

In either case, most communication between employer and the workers goes through the crew leader, particularly if the workers cannot speak English. While many farmers find the crew leaders indispensable, studies show that workers prefer to secure work for themselves—not through a crew leader. Many of the worst cases of cheating or abusing migrant workers, ranging from withholding wages to enslavement, have been at the hands of labor contractors. However, workers who cannot speak English or who do not have their own transportation cannot find work on their own and often have no other choice but to work through a crew leader.

Women


NANCY BURSKI

Women who do farm work face discrimination on many fronts. Until recently, women made up a significant portion of the farm labor force—working and traveling sometimes alone but more often in family groups. While many women still travel as migrant workers, it has become increasingly difficult for them to secure work. Farmers who provide housing have restricted it to men only—excluding women and children. Those who recruit workers into the temporary guest worker programs (either H-2A or contracts with the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico) only recruit men.

On the job, women report incidents of sexual harassment and discrimination; jobs may be classified and segregated by gender. On many farms, those who pick (and have the potential to earn more money) are men, and those who trim and pack (paid hourly) are women. In other cases, couples and families may work together to fill the same container. The containers may be credited to just one worker, usually the man, and the paycheck comes in his name. The result is that women sometimes do not receive their own pay. Often overlooked is the fact that as a result, women are not credited with Social Security earnings and when they are older face difficulty collecting any retirement earnings.

Women report that with limited English, few opportunities to work, and no driver's license or car and by living far from their extended families, they face an isolated life (Biermayr-Jenzano).

Children

Children who travel with their parents find their lives both difficult and interesting. It is a hard life, yet teenagers report that by traveling and working together they have special bonds with their parents and brothers and sisters. In spite of the difficulties faced, they take pride in all the states they have been to and all the people they have met. Most telling is the pride they have in knowing that they are contributing members of their families—that the money they earn is important to their family's survival.

School attendance is difficult for children who experience frequent moves, and this is especially true for migrant children. They miss many days of school when they are on the road traveling to a new job. It then takes time for parents to find the school and get them enrolled and assigned to a classroom. Courses and curriculums are different from school to school, making it difficult to transfer credits once a student reaches high school.

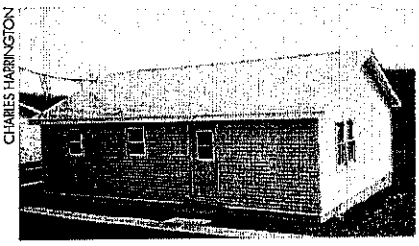
The hardship of moving to a new school and making new friends is compounded by the fact that migrant children are often from a different culture and speak a different language than other students in their class. All too often a migrant child may sit in the back of a classroom and not understand what is being said. The teacher knows the child will probably be leaving in a few weeks and may already be overwhelmed by the needs of other children in the classroom.

Schools and classrooms can be a very uncomfortable place for children who are judged harshly by their peers. Migrant children report embarrassment when other children comment on their clothes, the places they live, or the way they talk. Few participate in after-school activities or organized sports. Added to this is the poverty their families face. Economic pressures push many, particularly teenage, children to work in the fields and contribute to their family's income. Even though parents value education for their children and hope for a better life for them, it is often hard for children to obtain a high school diploma. Fifty-four percent of migrant teenagers drop out of school before graduation.


NANCY BURSKI

According to the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), 116,000 15- to 17-year-olds worked as hired agricultural workers in 1997. This study acknowledges that this figure does not reflect the true number of child laborers, because children under 15 were not counted. The GAO also reports that "the Fair Labor Standards Act and state laws provide less protection for children working in agriculture than for children working in other industries. Consequently, children may work in agriculture under circumstances that would be illegal in other industries." This study noted that child agricultural workers are allowed to work at younger ages, for longer hours, and in more hazardous work than children working in other industries. In addition, enforcement of existing laws had declined in the five years before the study.

The U.S. Department of Education provides funding to states to assist migrant children with their studies. With this funding, many states offer summer schools, night classes, or supplemental services in school districts. The Migrant Head Start Program provides funding for child care services in areas with high numbers of migrant children. However, in many areas the needs outweigh the funding for both programs. Parents with young children may sometimes have no alternative but to take children to the fields with them. There, the children can be exposed to pesticides and are at risk of injury.


CHARLES HARRINGTON


CHARLES HARRINGTON

Housing

Housing for farmworkers varies widely in type and condition. Housing may be provided by the farmers or labor contractors. If it's not provided, workers must search out housing on their own—a difficult task in rural areas where there is not adequate housing for the large influx of migrant workers. Some workers unable to find housing may live in their cars. In the West, workers have been found living in orchards, in tents, or in caves they have dug.

Employer-owned housing ranges from houses for individual families to large barrack-style buildings for many workers. Conditions vary considerably—from overcrowded, dilapidated wooden structures without running water, to mobile homes, to new housing, often funded through government loan programs. Employers understand the role that good housing can play in attracting workers to their farms. A migrant family that finds safe, clean housing will be reluctant to move in search of other work. As a result, many farmer and farmworker groups have encouraged increases in state and federal funding for farmworker housing.

Health

Many of the health problems suffered by farmworkers are work related. Farm work is a physically demanding occupation. Dangerous machinery, strenuous labor, and exposure to pesticides and other chemicals combine to make farm work one of the most hazardous occupations in the United States. According to U.S. Department of Agriculture data, agriculture is one of the most accident-prone industries in the United States. Many of these accidents result in fatalities.

Workers may suffer from muscle strains, back pain, dermatitis from exposure to chemicals and plants that exude toxic chemicals, and injuries from performing the same repetitive motions for hours on end. Lack of safe drinking water contributes to dehydration and heat stroke. Workers caring for cattle and milk cows can be kicked and injured by the large animals. For children working in agriculture, health problems can be heightened by their small body mass and other factors. Between 1992 and 1996, 59 children lost their lives while working in agriculture (GAO).

Health problems may be exacerbated by the workers' poverty, lack of access to health care, and mobility. Conditions that must be monitored pose a special problem for farmworkers who move frequently: tuberculosis, diabetes, cancer, HIV, and hypertension (NCFH).

Migrant workers usually have no health insurance through their employers and do not earn enough to purchase it. Most don't have enough money to pay for even basic health care. Access to health care is difficult because of the lack of transportation and language barriers, and workers fear they'll lose wages or their jobs if they take time off to go to the doctor. The U.S.

Public Health Service provides funding for migrant health centers in areas where there are large concentrations of farmworkers. However, not all farmworkers live close enough to use these services, and only 20 percent of eligible workers are served.


CHRIS HILDRETH

Agricultural labor laws

At the federal level, several labor laws are designed to protect workers. Unfortunately, they provide coverage only for those working on larger farms. Workers on smaller farms must look to the states for protection. Often states do not include agricultural workers under their labor laws, or they offer them lesser coverage than other workers.

Workers on large farms are covered by the federal Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), which sets a federal minimum wage. However, the FLSA fails to address issues such as overtime pay, day of rest, and work breaks for agricultural workers. As noted above, the FLSA also sets federal child labor standards but places more lenient requirements on agricultural employers who hire children than on other industries.

The Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Workers Protection Act regulates the manner in which workers are recruited, transported, and housed. It regulates the payroll records employers must keep and requires that they provide workers with wage statements. It also requires that labor contractors obtain licenses to operate.

The Environmental Protection Agency requires that farmworkers be trained yearly in ways to protect themselves from exposure to pesticides and emergency procedures if exposure occurs. However, there is usually no monitoring of workers' levels of exposure as there is for workers exposed to toxic chemicals in other industries.

With all these laws, good intentions may fall short when it comes to enforcement. Limited staff and travel budgets for enforcement agencies and small fines do not act as a deterrent to unscrupulous employers and contractors.

OSHA regulations require that employers provide access to toilets and hand-washing facilities in the fields when groups of 11 or more are working. Small farms are exempt. Unless state laws are in effect or employers voluntarily provide facilities, workers on smaller farms do not have access to basic facilities when working. Workers also report that even when provided, the facilities often are not maintained well; water coolers are often empty. Compliance nationally is poor. A recent North Carolina survey found that only 4 percent of farmworkers surveyed had access to drinking water, hand-washing facilities, and toilets (NCFH).

The National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), which protects workers who are trying to organize and form unions from being fired or from other forms of retaliation, specifically excludes agricultural workers from coverage.

While many critics believe the NLRA provides workers only weak protections, the AFL-CIO has called for the inclusion of agricultural workers under the NLRA. Some states have passed their own versions of an agricultural labor relations act. However, protections vary widely from state to state.

Immigration

DREW HARTY

Three girls in the Mexican-American store, Harrington, Maine (2000)

As we have seen, migrant farmworkers through the years have included numerous immigrant groups. Currently, 81 percent of farmworkers are foreign-born, with 77 percent being born in Mexico. It is estimated that as many as half of these workers may be here without valid immigration documents. The following factors contribute to the high number of workers from Mexico:

- High unemployment and low wages in Mexico provide an incentive for workers to leave.
- The wages paid farmworkers in the United States are high compared with what workers can earn in Mexico.
- The United States and Mexico share both a border and a historical relationship; the Southwest once belonged to Mexico.
- The Bracero program, which operated during both world wars and then into the 1960s recruited workers from Mexico.
- Many Mexicans have relatives or friends residing in the United States, who provide a place to stay until work is found.

In 1986, Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act, granting legal status to those who had entered the United States illegally and worked in agriculture. Hopes were high that workers would then feel free to speak up about their working conditions. However, the 1.2 million workers legalized led to an oversupply of farm laborers and actually increased illegal migration as relatives from Mexico came to the United States to join them. The result has been that many farmworkers live in "mixed" households made up of family members with immigration documents and those without. Fear that a family member might be caught once again keeps farmworkers from pressing for better working conditions.

The trip is not without risks for those without immigration documents and has become much more difficult in recent years. The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) has built concrete walls and wire fences along stretches of the United States–Mexico border. The number of border patrol agents has been increased and they provide constant surveillance in even the most deserted stretches. "Coyotes" charge high fees (as much as $3,000) to smuggle people across the border, sometimes abandoning their charges when they fear they may be caught. Workers report that "coyotes" will sometimes hold people in peonage until all their fees are paid off.

For some, whether with a "coyote" or not, the only route is to cross the desert on foot. The extreme heat during the day, the lack of water, and the extreme cold at night have resulted in many deaths from exposure. People also risk being robbed by those who use the same routes to smuggle drugs.

Once in the United States, people without immigration documents are in constant risk of being caught by the border patrol or "la migra." In agricultural areas, border patrol agents can often be seen stopping people they suspect of being illegal at laundromats, at grocery stores, near health centers, and after church services. Fear of being caught often keeps farmworkers from obtaining the services they need.

In some areas, community groups have protested the raids conducted by the border patrol. Farm labor advocates, unions, and agricultural groups have come together in hopes of gaining legal status for many of the workers who are in the United States illegally. At the time of this writing, several proposals have been introduced in Congress to grant an amnesty to these workers and /or to expand the temporary guest worker programs.

Community relations

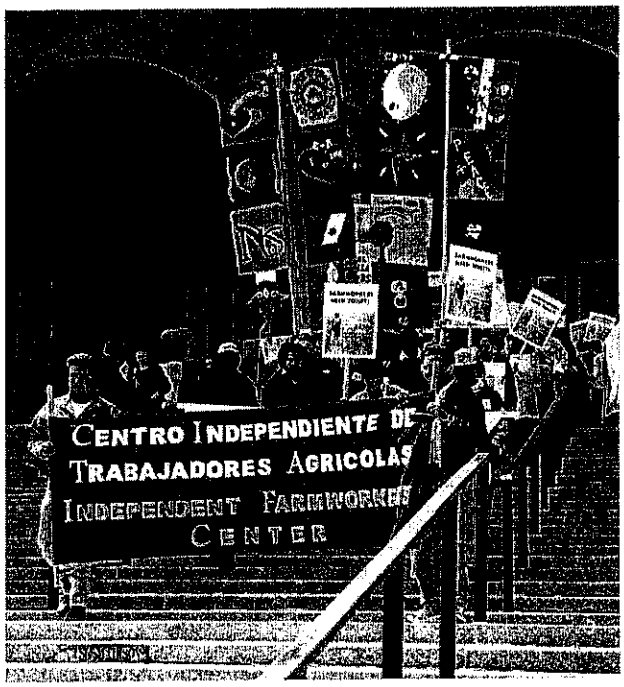
Life is not easy for farmworkers in the rural towns to which they travel. They often face discrimination at the hands of store owners, landlords, local residents, and police. The anti-immigrant backlash became so strong during the 1990s that laws were enacted by Congress restricting legal immigrants' access to federal assistance programs such as Medicaid, food stamps, and welfare. Many of those laws are now being repealed as candidates for political office try to attract Latino voters.

News accounts tell of immigrant workers being exploited by employers, beaten up in random acts of violence, and stopped by police because of the color of their skin. Police profiling and harassment of Latino and black workers in rural towns are widely reported.

Farmworkers lead separate lives—isolated from others in the same town. The ever-widening gap between rich and poor, white, black, and brown, serves to exacerbate the isolation. Stereotypes about farmworkers and lack of contact between groups can lead to misunderstandings and tensions between residents and workers.

Seeking change

Throughout the twentieth century, public attention has been focused, though fleetingly, on America's migrant farmworkers. John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* chronicled the struggles of an "Okie" farm family forced to leave their land and head for work in California. Bitter strikes by California workers resulted in violent confrontations with growers and police and spurred commission hearings and government



intervention. In the 1960s the Thanksgiving broadcast of Edward R. Murrow's "Harvest of Shame" revealed to American consumers the stark reality of the conditions under which farmworkers lived and worked. Robert Kennedy stimulated media reports during his senate campaign when he visited labor camps in upstate New York and with his support for the United Farm Workers union. However, through the years public attention has failed to spur governmental actions that would result in significant improvements for farmworkers or change the structure of the farm labor market.

Workers themselves have sometimes turned to union and community organizing as a means of improving their circumstances. Accounts of spontaneous worker strikes and small, fledgling farmworker groups can be found in many states throughout the twentieth century. Most of these efforts were largely unsuccessful. Even the California strikes, as large and violent as they were, failed, and the workers' powerlessness persisted (Daniel).

The most successful and most famous farmworker organization is the California-based United Farm Workers (UFW) union founded by César Chávez and Delores Huerta. Through hunger strikes and marches, Chávez's nonviolent approach won the support of church groups and politicians. The California Agricultural Labor Relations Act, with oversight by a sympathetic board, and widespread consumer boycotts enabled the UFW to win historic contracts for workers. Now headed by Chávez's son-in-law, Arturo Rodriguez, the UFW has placed a renewed emphasis on organizing workers and has expanded into other states such as Florida and Washington.

In Ohio, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) founded by Baldemar Velasquez obtained a historic contract that included processors, farmers, and farmworkers. This three-way contract reflected the way the market was structured in Ohio, recognizing the influence of the processors who purchased the vegetables.

Other unions and farmworker organizations seeking improved working conditions include PCUN in Oregon, the Farmworker Association of Central Florida, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in Florida, CATA in New Jersey, CITA in New York, META in New Jersey, and the Teamsters in California.

Conclusion

As consumers, we benefit from the hard work of our nation's farmworkers each time we eat fresh fruits and vegetables. Some workers may be fortunate and find steady work from employers who pay good wages and provide decent housing. However, many are at the mercy of a system that does not reward their hard labor.

It is easy to think of farmworkers as people who are different from us. Yet they have the same hopes and dreams as we do. We may see photos of groups of men in fields or in labor camps, but these are usually not single men. They are husbands and fathers, brothers and sons, working to earn money to send to their families. They are proud people who work hard to support themselves and their families and through no fault of their own, bear the brunt of our nation's agricultural policies.

> In the end, farm work is an employment category and farm laborers are a collection of men, women, and children who engage in a particular type of work within a specific industry. Farmworkers' poverty does not relate to any essential element of the workers themselves—their skills, abilities, social positioning, attitudes, or nationality—but instead is an expression of the inequities of the farm labor system (Rothenberg, preface to paperback edition, 1998).

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