

# FARMWORKERS

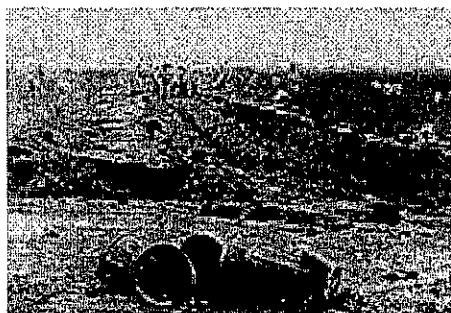
and

## FARM LABOR CONDITIONS



**Do you eat apples, oranges, grapes, lettuce, strawberries, tomatoes, cucumbers, or products made from "table" fruits and vegetables? If you do, then you are directly linked with farmworkers whose labor in the fields and processing plants has helped provide you with these foods. These farmworkers suffer deprived conditions while helping to provide other Americans with this essential commodity, for which they may receive less than 1% of the price you pay for the foods you eat.**

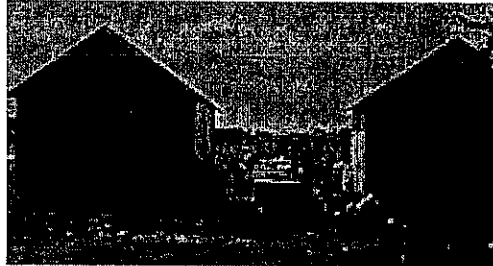
It is a paradox that the farmworkers whose labor helps feed others in America are themselves one of the most **socioeconomically deprived** groups in the country. The disadvantaged living and working conditions of farmworkers have been well-documented for over a century. These conditions include *physical labor* that is often strenuous and deforming, with earnings that average far below official *poverty* levels. *Child labor* is common and begins a life-long pattern of deprivation, including an average sixth-grade education. *Housing* and *sanitation* are generally substandard, including one-room family cabins in labor camps and the lack of water and toilet facilities in the fields. *Health conditions* are among the poorest in the nation, with an average life expectancy of only 49 years and with rates of infectious and chronic diseases, malnutrition, infant and maternal mortality well above national averages. In addition, farmworkers are often subjected to *hazardous working conditions*, such as being sprayed with dangerous pesticides. Despite such conditions, health care and other basic *services* are frequently unavailable or inaccessible, and farmworkers generally do not receive *fringe benefits* such as workers' compensation and medical insurance, which are taken for granted by other American workers. They also experience overt and covert *discrimination* of many sorts.



**Farmworkers suffer many *deprived labor conditions* while helping provide other Americans with food. These include long hours of stoop labor in hot fields, substandard wages, lack of fresh water and sanitary facilities in the fields, and child labor. An estimated 43% of this crew picking tomatoes in an Ohio field in 1981 were under 15 years old.**

The approximately 65,000 farmworkers who each growing season come into the central Midwest states of Ohio,

Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois generally share these deprived conditions. Most are Mexican Americans, native or naturalized U.S. citizens, and most others are in the country as legal immigrants. Most originate in the lower Rio Grande valley in Texas, though many have moved their base to Florida where they can work citrus crops during the winter. These farmworkers come into the Midwest following the midcontinent migrant stream to work mostly with vegetable and fruit "table crops," such as tomatoes, cucumbers, cherries, and apples.



**Farmworkers are usually provided with *substandard housing* in labor camps, including cabins where a whole family is crowded into the same small space with no privacy and even converted chicken coops infested with lice.**

One of the greatest disadvantages experienced by farmworkers is being *denied* the opportunity to *participate in decisions* that affect their well-being. This is basically a consequence of the agricultural and political system in which they work. Despite well-documented deprivations, farmworkers are either specifically *excluded* from some key labor laws, such as the National Labor Relations Act, or have *legal standards* reduced for them, as with many child labor laws. The table crops industry in the Midwest is a good example of an abusive system. The system is dominated by large *multinational corporations*, whose policies and operations are designed around their annual production and profit goals. These corporations stipulate unilateral contracts with *growers* before the Spring planting season, specifying such conditions as price structures, strains of crops to be planted, and pesticide use. The growers receive comparatively high returns from these crops, though they are subject to weather and other risks. Growers in turn arrange with *crewleaders* (labor contractors) to recruit field workers, for which crewleaders receive returns usually based on the earnings of their workers. At the bottom of the system are the *farmworkers*, who perform the actual labor in producing the crop. These farmworkers are subject to a host of decisions made at higher levels which affect their living and working conditions. For example, since they are usually paid by a "piece" rate (such as a set price for a basket of tomatoes) rather than hourly wages, they are not subject to minimum wage laws. In the pickle industry, the "sharecropper" system has imposed even more severe abuses. Farmworker families are treated as independent contractors rather than laborers, and thus are denied even minimal benefits like workers' compensation and are exempt from such labor standards as child labor laws. The effects of this system on farmworkers are poverty wages, underemployment, poor housing and sanitation, and exposure to hazardous pesticides. Farmworkers have had *little opportunity for input into these decisions*, and, at best, can only react to them once they learn of impending or actual events.



***Child labor* is common among farmworkers, whose children have to perform work long hours in hot fields in order for the family to survive. Education is a lost dream for these people, and this begins a life of poverty and deprivation. Child labor is against the law in the United States, but most states reduce the minimum working age for farmworkers, and even the laws that exist are unenforced.**

In general, farmworkers experience conditions far below what is considered normal standards by most other American workers. Other "migrant" workers, such as those in the petroleum industry, are not subjected to such conditions. Farmworkers are an essential link in the production of food for other Americans, a product as vital to the national well-being as petroleum. They also make significant contributions to the local and regional economies where they work, both in agricultural production and in spending much of their income in the same area where it was earned. Farmworkers are worthy of receiving the *same protections* and of enjoying the *same benefits* as other American workers, not only as *human beings* but as *valuable contributors* to the American economic system.



Although there are strict laws against spraying *pesticides* on workers and entry into sprayed fields, these are often ignored. Consequently, over 3,000 farmworkers are exposed to dangerous pesticides each year. Many of these agents are in the same chemical class as military nerve gasses and seriously damage the body's neural systems. Many pesticides are also known or suspected cancer-causing and birth-defects agents. The health hazards of these chemicals are often first identified in exposed farmworkers.

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## How Can Farmworkers' Poor Conditions Be Resolved?

Some people say that if conditions are so bad why don't farmworkers find *other* kinds of jobs, and indeed this is the premise of some government service programs for farmworkers. But this *presumes* that a variety of desirable jobs are available in the national economy, when even a "normal" unemployment rate is over 6% of the work force. This perspective also ignores the fact that farm labor is *essential* in agricultural production of many foods, so when one person does leave farm work *another* steps in to take his place. Thus **deprived conditions** persist for decade after decade, *regardless* of who performs the actual labor. Also, many farmworkers really *prefer* their occupation. Not only have they developed the necessary job and life skills for this kind of work, but many *enjoy* working outdoors, having their families together, and other aspects of farm work. The main **challenge**, then, is how to make farm work an occupation with *acceptable conditions* for those people whose labor produces food for other Americans, rather than to *cycle* people through an occupation that inherently involves deprived conditions.



One of the large wineries in the central valley of California which employees farmworkers to tend, pick, and process grapes. Large *agribusinesses* could on their own initiative provide farmworkers with greater rewards for their essential labor, but

historically this has rarely happened.

Other possible "solutions" have also not proven effective in resolving the basic causes of farmworkers' deprived conditions. For example, one potential solution is for those with the greatest resources in the agricultural system, **agribusinesses**, to pass on voluntarily some of the benefits they receive to the basic production workers who provide them with their products. Historically, this has rarely occurred, and so has little probability of being an effective solution, particularly since benefits given *unilaterally* can also be withdrawn unilaterally.



The county court house in Frankfort, Indiana, where a grower was cited for running an unregistered migrant labor camp. The farmworkers involved were housed in converted chicken coops, and children were exposed to dangerous equipment and pesticides. The grower received only a reprimand and was instructed to improve the camp to minimum requirements by the next harvest season. Farmworkers are not covered by many *labor laws*. Where they are included, standards are often far below that of other American workers ... and even these are rarely *enforced*.

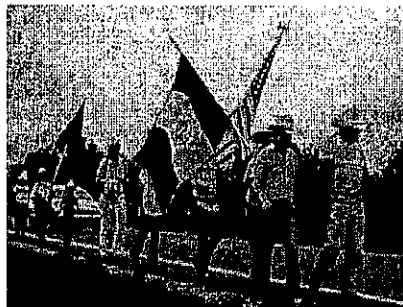
Another possible solution is extending to farmworkers the same **legal rights** enjoyed by other American workers. As already indicated, farmworkers experience general *lack* of legal protections, *reduced standards*, and *unenforced* rights. Legislation, then, has sometimes provided minimal working and living standards for farmworkers, but has generally proven to be an inadequate and ineffective solution.



A public clinic for farmworkers in Florida. Public assistance programs are important resources for farmworkers. But such programs address the symptoms rather than the *cause* of farmworkers' poor living and working conditions.

Another possible solution is provision of **public assistance programs** for farmworkers. Currently, there are a number of health, nutrition, education, and other government programs available to farmworkers. These programs reflect the humanitarian concerns and social responsibility of many Americans. But such programs are not always *accessible*.

Also, a number of farmworkers do not utilize programs even when they are available, saying that they work hard to support their families and that their sense of *dignity* is more important than the services received. Most important, assistance programs tend to address only *survival* needs, and so they do not resolve the **cause** of the basic deprived conditions experienced by farmworkers for generation after generation. Farmworker leaders argue that such public assistance programs are in effect political **subsidies** for agribusinesses, since they do not have to provide their workers with the *same wages and benefits* as other industries and since *taxpayers* in essence bear the costs of these subsidies rather than the employers.



In 1983, FLOC farmworkers marched from Toledo, Ohio, to Camden, NJ, to present their cause directly to Campbell Soup, a cause that was realized three years later with union elections and contracts. When all the alternatives for improving farmworkers' conditions are considered, it is the *farm labor movement* that has made the most significant and lasting impacts.

When the various alternatives for improving farmworkers' living and working conditions are considered, only the **farm labor movement** has historically proven to be truly effective. This includes the **Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC)** in the Midwest.

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