

**Toward A Criterion For Evaluating Migrant
Farm Labor Policy Arguments**

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MIGRANT FARM LABOR POLICY ARGUMENTS**

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This article presents a criterion to evaluate policy arguments to address two long-standing policy concerns in American agriculture--the relative low wages of migrant farm labor and the availability of an adequate labor supply. It evaluates the institutional acceptability of three policy arguments on the basis of where they place the burden of support for migrant farm labor; that is, the degree to which they decouple the income security of the farmworker from the farm labor market. The article gives special attention to the economic and political feasibility of Kathryn Bissell's 1976 proposal to replace the existing migrant labor system with an employment corporation because of its adherence to the proposed policy evaluation criterion. The likelihood of policy to restructure the farm labor market is assessed and the suggestion is made that the idea of distributing the burden of support for the farmworker should be part of any serious discussion on the future of the migrant labor system.

All indications are that in the foreseeable future the demand for migrant workers in U.S. agriculture will at least remain stable and probably increase. The fastest growing sector of U.S. agriculture today is the fruits, vegetables, and horticultural specialties. An affluent and health-conscious population in the U.S. will continue to increase its fruit and vegetable consumption, translating into an increasing demand for agricultural workers. Although the North American Free Trade Agreement will shift some of the production of fruits and vegetables to Mexico, Mexican comparative disadvantages in many perishable commodities make it unlikely that we can eliminate the need for migrant labor in the U.S. in the near future. Nor is mechanization of agriculture an option to replace the migrant worker. Not only is mechanization of agriculture less than complete, but growers prefer workers over machinery because farm wages continue to fall relative to the price of machinery (Martin and Martin, 1994).

Two long-standing national farm labor policy concerns threatening the bright prospects of the fruits, vegetables, and horticultural specialties sector of American agriculture are the relative low income of migrant farm labor and the uncertainty of an adequate supply of workers. Public policy solutions to these two related problems are complicated by the fact that addressing one seems to aggravate the other. This has created an environment in which one is assumed to be for or against farmworkers. Unions and farm labor advocates, for example, generally oppose guestworkers. Agricultural employers, on the other hand, assert that alien farm labor is critical to their survival.

This article presents three contemporary "policy arguments" (Ball, 1995) to address these two farm labor policy concerns. It relies on an analysis of the root cause of labor problems and conflict in agriculture to develop a simple criterion to evaluate the political and economic feasibility of these competing policy arguments. Kathryn Bissell's 1976 proposal to replace the current migrant labor system with an employment corporation that would serve both the labor supply needs of the employer and the employment needs of the workers adheres most closely to the proposed policy evaluation criteria and is given special attention. It is suggested that the idea of distributing the burden of support for the farmworker should be part of any serious discussion on the future of the migrant labor system.

COMPETING INTERESTS IN LABOR-INTENSIVE AGRICULTURE

In April 1997, the U.S. Department of Labor issued a report on the roughly 1.6 million migrant and seasonal farmworkers who worked in fruit, vegetables, and horticultural crops in this country during 1994-1995. The report found that the majority of farmworkers are citizens (32%) or lawful permanent resident aliens (25%), but the percentage of undocumented farmworkers increased from 7% in 1989 to 37% in 1995. The report also found the percentage of foreign-born farmworkers had increased to almost 70%. In addition, the report described an industrialized agricultural sector that imposed low wages and poor working conditions in the context of a chronic oversupply of workers. This oversupply of workers was

also observed by the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform, which concluded that even if every undocumented worker were eliminated from the labor force, there would still be an adequate authorized labor supply (*Farmworker Justice News*, 1997a, p.12).

A more recent report released by the General Accounting Office in December 1997 reaffirmed the chronic oversupply of workers. The report concluded that a sudden widespread farm labor shortage requiring the importation of large numbers of foreign workers was unlikely to occur in the near future. In reviewing the H-2A nonimmigrant guestworker program, which allows the U.S. agricultural sector to bring seasonal foreign workers on a temporary basis when domestic workers are unavailable, the report concluded that there appeared to be no national agricultural labor shortage, although localized shortages could exist for specific crops or geographic areas (*Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs Washington Newslines*, 1998, pp1,12-13; *Farmworker Justice News*, 1997b, pp.3,5; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1998, p. 3).

Concurrent with these reports on a chronic oversupply of workers have been agricultural interests' claims to the contrary, and their demands for new guestworker legislation to meet the labor needs of agricultural employers¹ (*Michigan Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Association*, 1997a, p.1,4; 1997b, p. 1,2,4; *The Great Lakes Vegetable Growers News*, 1997, p.20). In 1996, agribusiness supporters were unsuccessful in their attempt to enact a new agricultural guestworker program. They tried again in 1997 by introducing a bill to drastically alter the H-2A temporary foreign agricultural worker program granting agricultural employers easy access to an unlimited number of guestworkers each year (*Farmworker Justice News*, 1997b, p. 3,5). Lobbying efforts by farm labor advocacy groups were successful in defeating these reform measures and similar bills introduced in 1998.

Competing claims over an adequate supply of farm labor are not new. Neither are attempts by farmers to get the U.S. Congress to pass guestworker programs. During the lengthy congressional debate over Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), farmers succeeded in getting both the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate to include a guestworker program for agriculture. But opposition of unions and farmworker advocates to these

guestworker programs led to a compromise in the final bill. The compromise called for (1) legalization of then-illegal farmworkers under a Special Agricultural Worker (SAW) legalization program, and 2) monitoring the farm labor market for labor shortages. The fear that the newly legalized SAWs would leave seasonal farm jobs ultimately led to two other major agricultural provisions: the H-2 and the Replenishment Agricultural Worker (RAW) foreign worker programs. Under the H-2 provision (now H-2A), farm employers have to develop job descriptions, determine the number of people to be hired, guarantee a minimum wage, arrange for free housing, and then attempt to recruit Americans before they receive permission to bring in foreign workers. The RAW program was intended to admit immigrant workers if the exit of SAWs was likely to lead to farm labor shortages (Martin, Huffman, Emerson, Taylor and Rochin, 1995).

The maintenance of an adequate farm labor supply is only one of several labor problems and policy concerns in labor-intensive agriculture in the U.S. Another long-standing concern is improving the persistently relatively low returns for labor services in farming. In his foreword to *Seasonal Agricultural Labor Markets in the United States* (1984), Varden Fuller noted that many of the problems faced by seasonal and migratory workers in 1980 were the same ones they faced 30-40 years before. And what Fuller said nearly 20 years ago still rings true. Currently, migrant workers remain one of the most economically disadvantaged and impoverished occupational groups in the United States (Oliveira, 1992; U.S. Department of Labor, 1991; Griffith and Kissam 1995; Martin 1988; and Martin and Martin 1994). Indeed, it appears that farmworkers are outside the boundary of community morality rules (Jordan, 1996); the third-world conditions of American farm labor for most of this century have failed to change the agricultural sector and its dependence on a migrant labor system that relies on cheap and ethnic minority labor (Moses, 1993).

The historical plight and position of the migrant worker near the bottom of the American labor market prompted a belated call for action in the 1960s. As a result, the federal government began programs in the mid-1960s to help migrant workers and their families. These federal programs for migrant workers and their families multiplied during the 1970s and 1980s and by 1992, 12

different programs spend over \$600 million annually to assist migrant and seasonal farmworkers and their families. But in spite of all the federal efforts, migrant farmworkers remain one of the most economically disadvantaged occupational groups in the country. As Martin and Martin (1994) have noted, although the federal assistance programs established to help migrant workers and their families have enabled many individuals and families to escape agriculture and the farm labor market, these programs do nothing to raise the income level of migrants still in the farm labor market. In other words, when these programs are successful and farmworkers are able to leave the migrant stream, other migrant workers simply replace them; the migrant labor system is not changed—only the faces of the workers who need help are different.

CURRENT POLICY ARGUMENTS

In one of the more recent and insightful accounts on the need to increase wages and improve conditions of the migrant farmworkers in the U.S., Philip L. Martin and David A. Martin (1994) ask the reader to consider the following public policy question: "What would it take to alter the migrant labor system so that special federal assistance programs are unnecessary?" They make the case that the "migrant labor problem is not likely to be solved during the 1990s by some technological, social, or market revolution, such as mechanization, unionization, or NAFTA..... [arguing instead] that the federal government will have to take deliberate steps to improve conditions for migrant farmworkers; that the single most effective step would be to reduce the number of workers competing for farm jobs by better enforcing immigration and labor laws.... Enforcement and services are needed, but they will not solve problems in a labor market awash with workers."

According to Martin and Martin, the prospects are poor for a revival of unions that can solve the farmworker problem and raise farmworker wages. Effective collective bargaining will be impeded by the same factors that slow mechanization---the ample supply of workers. So long as unauthorized immigration continues, there will probably be little mechanization that eliminates the need for migrant workers or successful self-help union efforts that make farmworker service programs unnecessary.

Certainly organizing farmworkers into unions is made more difficult by an oversupply of workers. But even if it is agreed that undocumented migration needs to be restricted and labor laws enforced, it does not necessarily follow that workers will automatically see the benefits of unionization and organize, much less that growers will automatically embrace unionization or pay higher wages once these labor market reforms are made. More importantly, controlling the oversupply of workers is a necessary but not sufficient condition for effective collective bargaining. Indeed, the ability of employers to pay is as important for effective collective bargaining as is controlling the labor supply and organizing the relevant work force for effective strike activity (Craypo, 1986).

The importance of the employer's ability to pay as a factor in collective bargaining can be seen in the case of the Michigan and Ohio migrant and seasonal cucumber farm labor market. There, contractual vertical integration in the food processing industry dominates, and the growers' ability to pass on higher labor costs are constrained by pre-harvest contracts previously negotiated between them and the processors. The processors not only control the growers' ability to pay, but also much of the production process. Attempts at collective bargaining by the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) failed during the late 1960s under these product market structure conditions because farmers were unable to pay higher wages despite labor strike activity at the peak of the harvest season (Rosenbaum, 1994). And although the union was able to negotiate 32 contracts with tomato growers in northwest Ohio between 1968 and 1970, the agreements failed to remedy the membership's low wages, irregular employment, and adverse working and living conditions. While the union had achieved a history-making closed shop agreement by signing 32 contracts with growers, only a few of the explicit economic terms and conditions initially demanded were met. For the most part, the contracts served only to put in writing what before had been an oral understanding between the grower and the farmworker.

Faced with this reality, in the early 1970s FLOC abandoned its strategy of negotiating contracts with small growers and began a social campaign to involve processors in the collective bargaining process. This strategy finally paid off in 1986, when Campbell Soup

agreed to a three-party agreement for cucumber and tomato workers that included the union, the growers, and the food processors (Rosenbaum, 1993). By involving processing companies in the collective bargaining agreements, FLOC was able to get around the inability of farmworker employers to pay higher wages and provide better working conditions and benefits. A contractual framework was established that in effect shifted part of the burden of support for the farmworkers from the growers to the processors. These contractual arrangements, which have been renewed ever since, have contributed to the more harmonious labor management relations in the Midwest pickle industry over the last 12 years.

Rather than support Martin and Martin's national political response to reduce the number of workers by reforming immigration and labor laws, Baldemar Velásquez (1997), president of FLOC, calls for an international organizing response to the farmworker problem. According to Velásquez, America does not have at this time an administrative bureaucracy that aggressively enforces pro-labor laws. He calls for the protection of workers' rights everywhere and the creation of alliances to secure national and international unions and farmworker collective bargaining rights.

The alternative approaches offered by Martin and Martin and Velásquez are two of the more recent proposals about how to improve the migrant farm labor system and the low returns to labor in agriculture. A 1980 national conference on hired farm labor organized by Robert D. Emerson resulted in an edited volume in which an array of policy proposals were offered to address these migrant labor concerns. Policy alternatives ranged from general policies relevant for persons in poverty, of which farmworkers are a part, to those more specific to farm labor markets. According to Emerson, viewing farmworker policy within the broader spectrum of poverty, regardless of occupation, was extremely important partly because "a focus solely in the context of the existing farm labor market tends to point one in the direction of maintaining current participants within the market rather than considering overall welfare within the economy." Within the broader poverty perspective, income maintenance programs were thought to offer considerable appeal over various programs targeted for specific

occupational groups. Clearly, the sentiment at the time was to give attention to moving workers out of farm labor rather than reforming the labor market. Emerson's perspective can be contrasted with the policy arguments offered by Martin and Martin and Velásquez that focus on reforming the labor market to assist farmworkers who wish to remain in agriculture.

A third policy argument focusing on reform of the farm labor market was proposed by Kathryn Bissell in 1976. In contrast to the policy arguments made by Martin and Martin and Velásquez, which are primarily concerned with increasing farm wages and improvement conditions of migrant farmworkers, Bissell's proposal also addresses concerns by agricultural employers over the availability of a sufficient supply of field workers. She proposes to replace the existing labor system with the Farm Workers Corporation (FWC), an autonomous federal agency that would function as an alternative labor supply system as well as the employer of domestic farmworkers. As an alternative labor supply system, FWC would service the employers of record for all farmworkers. It would hire all U.S. citizens and legal resident aliens who wish to be employed as farmworkers. To arrange the supply of workers needed at required times, FWC would supplant the current labor-jobbing system—that is, the crew leaders, foremen, labor contractors, etc.—with existing federal-state structures for collecting and publicizing job openings, such as the state employment services, farming corporations, and private grower applications.

As the employer of domestic farmworkers, FWC would also be responsible for providing the supplies of all farm labor. FWC would be structured so as to relieve the basic economic, political, sociological, and legal deprivations which farmworkers, especially migrants, suffer in U.S. society. It would be responsible for providing adequate safe and sanitary housing for farmworkers, for providing field supervision and adequate health and sanitary facilities, and for developing and providing adequate formal and informal educational opportunities. FWC would also have the power to supply the benefits industrial labor enjoys that today tend to elude farmworkers. As the employer of farmworkers, FWC would also furnish those services previously supplied by the labor contractor—transportation, field needs, supervision, record keeping, etc.

FWC would also act as the agent of farmworkers in collectively negotiating wages and working conditions with farming corporations, grower associations, and independent growers. In addition, a national farm union would be created (or an existing union expanded nationwide) in order to protect farmworkers from possible abuse by FWC.

FWC would be federally funded not by the payroll tax route, which would add to the food bill, but preferably by a very small levy on the gross income of all farm and non-farm production units. According to Bissell, such an approach to funding would place the burden of the support of farmworkers on those who profit the most from cheap labor. After all, Americans, except for the farmworkers themselves, have profited from the present farm labor system in terms of relatively low cost food and the consequent increase in spendable income. Growers would continue to pay the hourly wage or the piece rate as at present, but would make the payments to FWC.

EVALUATING FARM LABOR POLICY ARGUMENTS

Martin and Martin's policy proposal argues for the federal government "to take deliberate steps to improve conditions for migrant farmworkers... [and] reduce the number of workers competing for farm jobs by better enforcing immigration and labor laws." Although such an economic approach confronts the basic economic cause of low wages—namely, an excess in labor supply—agribusiness reaction would appear to make this approach politically unfeasible (Bissell, 1976). This negative reaction can be understood in terms of what Friedland (1991) calls "the distinctive price characteristics of agricultural production," which makes labor one of the few production expenditures over which agricultural producers have some margin of control. It is this feature of the farm labor market that makes it difficult to generate income security for farmworkers.

Given that labor costs represent the more significant variable costs in hand-harvest agricultural production, Friedland's analytical observation lies at the heart the labor problems and conflict in agriculture. It helps explain the strong interest employers have in guestworker programs, and why it is unlikely that policies to

address low wages in agriculture will be enacted any time soon (Friedland, 1991). Aside from the ethnic and class status of the workforce, it's this labor economics aspect of agricultural production that helps explain why farmworkers historically have lost the struggles to determine policy in their favor.

The recognition that support for the farmworkers is an integral part of the labor problems in agriculture is also useful in evaluating the political and economic feasibility of the different policy arguments that have been proposed to address these problems. It suggests an evaluation criterion premised on the degree to which the income security of the farmworkers is decoupled from the labor market.² For example, policy arguments that place the burden of support for the farmworker solely on agricultural employers are considered less politically feasible than if the burden of support was somehow shared across the general polity.

Other things being equal, the national policy recommendations offered by Martin and Martin presuppose that the burden of support of the farmworkers rests solely on the grower. Velásquez's argument is more politically acceptable to employers because it shifts somewhat the burden of support for farmworkers away from the farm employers and toward the food processors, which increases the economic feasibility of farm operators. Therefore, Velásquez's private policy argument ranks higher in terms of institutional acceptability by agricultural employers compared to the proposed solution by Martin and Martin. Already, as a result of three-party agreements established by the union, processing companies have begun to take some responsibility for the welfare of farmworkers. Antagonism by growers toward unionization in the region also has lessened as a result of these relationships.

However, the Velásquez proposal limits the burden of support for the farmworkers to only the processing sector of the food industry. The implication of this strategy is that different food processors have to be brought to the bargaining table. Although this been accomplished to a limited degree in the pickle industry in the Midwest, food processors in other industries have not joined in. Nor does it appear likely that the Velásquez strategy will be implemented in other labor-intensive agricultural industries. This

strategy would also appear challenged by the difficulties associated with organizing internationally.

Compared to the policy arguments proposed by Martin and Martin and by Velásquez, the recommendations offered by Bissell are most consistent with the evaluation criterion being suggested. Kathryn Bissell's proposal is the one that recognizes the importance of the economic feasibility of the farm operation and the need to look at shifting a significant share of the burden of support away from the agricultural employer. The funding scheme for her employment corporation shifts the majority of the burden of support for the farmworker from the agricultural employers to the rest of society through a small tax on all corporations. By calling on all farm and non-farm production units alike to share in the support for the farmworkers, Bissell's policy argument, in effect, acts to decouple the income security of the farmworker from both the labor market and the income security of the agricultural employer. By contrast, the burden of support is retained with the agricultural employers under the Martin and Martin proposal. Although the Velásquez proposal does address the need to shift the burden of support from agricultural employers, under his proposal the burden of support remains with the growers but is shared with the processors.

THE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL FEASIBILITY OF THE BISSELL PROPOSAL

How is the Bissell proposal advantageous to farm labor employers in increasing the economic feasibility of labor intensive farm operations? First of all, the FWC proposal would reduce non-wage expenses of labor. For example, the expense of field management would be eliminated, as would be certain bookkeeping responsibilities. In addition, higher farmworker wages would reduce the risk of not having an adequate supply of labor. The long-term participation of farmworkers in agriculture also seems to be enhanced by the role of FWC as the farmworker employer responsible for providing safe and sanitary housing and, health and educational services. Above all, however, FWC would rely on a funding scheme that does not place the burden of support for the

farmworker solely on the agricultural employer. Although gross farm incomes would be taxed to fund FWC, the rate would be very small (compared to the case where the agricultural employer is the party solely responsible) because the largest percent of the funds would be derived from taxes on non-farm production.

From the perspective of farm policy, FWC can also be viewed as helping address the low farm income problem that in various forms has always been the central preoccupation of agricultural economists (Fuller, 1984). Policies to improve the economic status of farmers have been based on the view that farmers are caught in the "farm problem" created by price and income -inelastic product demand in agriculture. Prior to the 1950s, parity prices, production adjustments, and marketing efficiency had been the acceptable way to deal with the farm problem. Another line of thought, popular since WW II, was the view that farm prosperity would depend upon the elimination of the redundant claimants against aggregate farm income. Hence, the link was made between the need to accelerate technological advances, off-farm mobility, and farm prosperity. However, as was noted earlier, the mechanization of agricultural production is not likely to reduce the demand for labor in the near future. However, the same objectives sought from technological advancement, namely farm prosperity through the elimination of claims against farm income, can be obtained by decoupling the income security of the farmworker from the income security of the farmer.

When viewed from the perspective of society as a whole, FWC also would have the advantage of alleviating a number of economic, political, and social problems (Bissell, 1997). The prosperity of the rural sector, for example, is linked to the welfare of farm labor, as higher farmworker wages and propensities to consume locally translate through multiplier effects into higher levels of expenditures in many rural areas. From this point of view, reforming the migrant labor system can serve as a "firebreak" against decapitalization and the growing rural dollar drain, which tends to reduce purchasing power and restricts rural commercial service and professional enterprises. The firebreak effect of the FWC proposal can be contrasted with the leakage effect that would result from H2-A guestworker type programs, as most foreign workers would have a higher propensity to save. As can be seen

from this example, the decision to continue to rely on citizens and resident permanent aliens rather than single foreign workers has positive implications for the different economic interests in the rural sector, not only agricultural employers.

Moving in the direction of a migrant labor system where the welfare of the farmworker is decoupled from the income security of the agricultural producer will require going beyond rural areas to gain national consensus. The impact FWC could have on the food bill is thus an important consideration. Currently people have the idea that improving the lives of the farmworkers threatens our abundant supply of cheap food. But as Martin (1993) has noted, "Doubling farm wages, and thus practically eliminating farmworker poverty, would only raise retail food prices by less than 10 percent." This increase in prices would be less; however, under FWC where the cost would be distributed across all business firms, not just across agricultural employers and other food interests.

In proposing FWC, Bissell argued that widespread use of non-resident aliens (green-carders) had a harmful effect on both sides of the border. In Mexico, American dollars earned by work in the U.S. enlarge the money supply while the goods created by the work remain in the U.S. side of the border, leading to inflation. In the U.S., the non-resident aliens, like the undocumented workers today, create a labor surplus that produces downward pressure on the wage rate. In addition, Bissell argued, the undocumented worker takes jobs the government, by its immigration policies, ought to have reserved for its own citizens.³ Legalized foreign labor, like H2A workers, have a similar effect.

At the same time, however, this preference for domestic workers need not necessarily have a negative effect on individual foreign workers, and may even have a positive impact on them. In the long run, an instrument like FWC could serve to minimize the abuses in the use of foreign workers as well as to put upward pressure on the wages they receive. Although FWC would probably lead to fewer jobs available to foreigners, a likely effect would also be to increase the aggregate income of individual foreign workers. This may have an appeal to Mexican governmental officials.⁴

Finally, the idea of having a governmental entity like an FWC to address the problems of farmworkers and employers is not as

farfetched as it first appears. The federal government has intervened in the past to provide an adequate supply of labor by facilitating the temporary participation of guestworkers in agricultural work during periods of high short-term seasonal labor demand. Under the bracero(field hand) program, for example, the U.S. government went so far as to guarantee the contracts issued to braceros, making the government responsible for fulfilling any contractual provisions that U.S. farmers failed to satisfy (Martin and Martin, 1994). Nor, for that matter, is it preposterous to have a governmental entity take full responsibility for addressing the problems of the farm laborers. In fact, the idea of making a governmental entity responsible for addressing farmworker problems is consistent with the recent recommendation by Martin and Martin to create an interagency council to improve national-level coordination of existing programs in different agencies to better serve the farmworker (Martin and Martin, 1994). This having been said, there is nothing in the evaluation criterion being proposed that precludes the use of a private organization to accomplish similar objectives. In light of the recent political trend toward privatism, a private approach to this problem is worthy of consideration.

In sum, the advantages from such an employment corporation as FWC accrue to farmworkers, farm operators, and to society as a whole. Farmworkers would gain socially, politically and economically. The FWC also offers advantages and extensive savings to the employers of farm labor who would have reductions in the non-wage expense of labor; field management would also be eliminated. Society would benefit from the elimination of a number of social, economic, and political problems. Resources drained from the rural sector would be partially restored from the added farm labor income spent in local areas. The increased well-being of farm laborers would come with increases in rural community prosperity. Moreover, there should be no increases in food prices. Finally, there would also exist the political prospect of improved U.S.-Mexico relations. Given the advantages of FWC to multiple stakeholders, the Bissell proposal should have a good chance of gaining institutional acceptability.

Unfortunately, however, that is not entirely so. The reality is that farm owners and operators and those who profit from cheap

farm commodities control the political structures, the law, and the apparatus of the law, which they use for the systematic oppression of the farm labor force. Although under the current labor-relations system the burden of support for the farmworker lies with the agricultural employer, the political reality is such that aside from the economic gains that may accrue under the proposed arrangement, there is little incentive to restructure the labor system in agriculture.

Societal attitudes, tradition, and widely held beliefs of justice also seem to factor into the complacency that surrounds the need to address labor problems in agriculture and the institutional acceptability of FWC. Farmworkers historically have been victims of what is called "moral exclusion" (Jordan, 1996). They are perceived by society as being outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply. As members of society outside the scope of justice, they are perceived as nonentities, expendable, or undeserving; consequently, harming them appears acceptable, appropriate, or just. Before the basic notion of shifting the burden of support from agricultural employers gains acceptance, society needs to include farmworkers within its moral boundaries.

CONCLUSION

Given the upward trends in the production and consumption of fruits and vegetables in his country, it is unlikely that the demand for domestic migrant labor will diminish any time soon. It is also unlikely the migrant farm labor problems will cease to be a social concern in the future. Indications are that the management of farm labor will be more challenging due to increased number of participants who have entered the migrant labor system through the various programs responsible for the welfare of farmworkers.

An attempt should be made to establish a migrant labor system that addresses the dual problems of low income among agricultural workers and the uncertainty of agricultural labor supply. The effectiveness of policies to address these conditions can be evaluated by assessing the degree to which these policies uncouple the income security of the farm worker from the labor market and the income security of the grower. Policies that successfully meet this criterion would begin to address the root

causes of the low incomes of farmworkers. If agricultural employers are not the sole carriers of the burden of support for the farmworkers, they will be less inclined to rely on cheap labor and to make claims that alien farmworkers are necessary to their survival. Because distributing the burden of support for the farmworker is pivotal to any sustainable solution, it should be part of any serious discussion on the future of the migrant labor system.

What will it take to make the idea of decoupling an essential ingredient in any serious discussion of the future of the farm labor system? What is the likelihood that the FWC proposals or a similar proposal aimed at addressing the root cause of labor problems and conflict in agriculture will be adopted into policy? Bruce Goldstein, director of the Washington, D.C.-based Farmworker Justice Fund, Inc, believes that before Congress will give serious consideration to policy arguments like the FWC or others that shift the burden of support away from the agricultural employer, the agricultural industry must first buy into the idea (personal communication, November 11, 1997). Sadly, though, the traditional cost-cutting and conflict-driven labor-management relations paradigm dominates in agribusiness. Unless there is some type of social campaign that upsets the status quo and breaks down the rigid boundaries of moral exclusion that lie at the root of the traditionally low wages and poor working and living conditions of farm labor, it should not be surprising that inaction rather than action will dictate the political discourse on the future of the farm labor system.

It is important to remember that shifting the burden of support and decoupling the income security of the farmworker from the agricultural employer is important as a policy evaluation criterion. Its acceptance or disapproval as a policy criterion does not necessarily mean acceptance or disapproval of FWC or any other mechanism that would achieve a similar objective. Indeed, a number of policy arguments could be devised that conform to the policy criterion to shift the burden of support away from agricultural employers. Nevertheless, a key to advancing such an agenda is for the agricultural and food industry interests to accept the idea. Any campaign to advance policy arguments that decouple the income security of the farmworker from the labor market ought to also give serious consideration to this aspect of the problem.

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ENDNOTES

1. Under the U.S. treaty arrangement with Mexico, large number of foreign workers were imported for fieldwork during the post WWII boom. Increasingly larger numbers of braceros were imported from 1942 to 1959, after which the number of imported workers each year began to decrease until the bracero program was ended in 1965 (Bissell, 1976, p. 1-3).

2. This terminology is borrowed from Gus Standing's (1991, p.57) policy arguments for what he and others call "basic income." He argues for social policy to "decouple income security from the labor market," especially if the labor market cannot generate income security, as is the case in the migrant farm labor market.

3. In today's context, American society has to decide how much responsibility it has to reserve jobs for its own citizens and lawful permanent resident aliens. If this is a high priority, the FWC is an instrument by which these "domestic" workers get a first crack at farmworker jobs. In a real sense, the debate over guestworker programs is a debate over whether as a nation we wants to move in the direction of Western Europe, where foreign-worker programs are less the exception than the rule, or whether agricultural jobs will continue to be the domain of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent resident aliens.

4. Given the significance of foreign labor in agriculture today, sources familiar with the congressional debates over the new guestworker programs are of the opinion that any proposed solution to these issues should be treated in context of international

negotiations, at least with Mexico to begin with. (Bruce Goldstein, personal communication, November 11, 1997).

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