

BACKGROUND

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Migrant Farmworkers: America's New Plantation Workers

by Christine Ahn with Melissa Moore and Nick Parker†

In June 2003, Artimo and his brother, Mario, crammed into the back seat of a car driven by immigrant smugglers known as coyotes. They were on their way to Washington to pick apples and cherries. Throughout their journey across the mountainous terrain from Tijuana to San Diego, they were forced to crouch down to avoid being seen. When sirens began to wail, the driver sped up, lost control, and collided into another car. Although Artimo suffered three broken ribs and other injuries, he was the only one to survive.¹

Thousands of migrants risk death and incarceration daily by crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. In the blistering 115-degree Arizona May heat in 2001, 14 immigrants perished in the rugged desert days after smugglers abandoned them.² In 2003, 17 immigrants, including a 5-year old boy, died of dehydration in the back of an abandoned truck in Texas.³ Despite the danger, 'illegal' migration rates jumped 25 percent last year,⁴ and deaths have risen since 1994. Approximately 99 people die annually from exposure to heat, cold, and dehydration, compared with an average of six deaths in 1994.⁵

Why are so many thousands risking their lives to cross the border? This background explores how trends in food production and developments in government policy foster conditions that make U.S. farmworkers ripe for exploitation.

The Plight of U.S. Farmworkers

More than two million year-round and seasonal migrant farmworkers, including 100,000 children, work in the U.S. About two thirds are immigrants, of whom 80 percent are from Mexico. Just 14 percent of all farmworkers have full-time work.⁶

Agricultural work is among the most dangerous occupations, with injuries and illness disabling farmworkers at a rate three times that of the general population.⁷ In California, the average death rate for farmworkers is five times that of workers in other industries. Approximately 300,000 farmworkers in the U.S. are poisoned by pesticides annually.⁸

Farmworkers are paid poverty wages in spite of these risks. Three out of four U.S. farmworkers earn less than \$10,000 annually, and three out of five families live below the federal poverty line.⁹ Living conditions are equally harsh as migrant housing commonly lacks plumbing and working appliances, and is often next to pesticide-treated fields. Farmworkers spend more than 30 percent of their income on this sub-standard housing.¹⁰

Farmworkers seldom have health care, disability insurance, vacation, or a pension, and rarely apply for welfare. In a 1997-98 study, only five percent of farmworkers reported having health insurance covered by their employers for non-work related injuries, 28 percent reported compensation for work-related illnesses, and only one percent of workers used Social Security or disability insurance. Just 13 percent of farmworker families receive Medicaid, 10 percent get Food Stamps, and 10 percent participate in the Woman, Infants, and Children program.¹¹



Migrant strawberry picker.

PHOTO: David Beason

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The Systemic Exploitation of Farm Workers

The \$28 billion U.S. produce industry¹² is 85 percent cultivated and harvested by hand,¹³ mostly through the backbreaking labor of our nation's farmworkers. We assume that their poverty subsidizes lower prices for the food we eat, however, according to journalist Eric Schlosser, "Maintaining the current level of poverty among migrant farmworkers saves the average American household (just) \$50 a year."¹⁴

While the average farmworker in the U.S. earns \$7,500 per year, Archer Daniels Midland, the world leader in producing soy meal, corn, wheat, and cocoa, reaped \$1.7 billion in profits in 2003; its CEO, Allen G. Andreas, received over \$2.9 million in compensation.¹⁵ Dole, the world's largest producer of fresh fruit, vegetables and cut flowers generated \$4.8 billion in revenues in 2003.¹⁶

U.S. Immigration and Labor: Laws Designed for Exploitation

Historically, immigration and labor laws have worked hand-in-hand to systematically violate the rights of agricultural laborers. To overcome labor shortages in 1917, the U.S. Department of Labor allowed farmers to recruit Mexican farmworkers into the U.S. without the standard head tax and literacy tests.

Labor shortages caused by World War II resulted in the 1942 U.S./Mexico Bracero Program. Bracero contracts ranged from one to six months, and employers were required to provide food and housing, pay local wage rates, cover medical expenses, and provide transportation between Mexico and the farm.¹⁷ These clauses, however, were rarely enforced and growers routinely exploited Braceros by shorting the hours they worked or changing the rate of pay once the work was completed.

By the early 1960s, farmworkers argued that the Bracero Program lowered wages by producing a surplus of workers. Farm labor organizers accused growers of consistently using Braceros as strike-breakers — a tactic specifically prohibited by the legislation — while Braceros who organized strikes were often deported.¹⁸ In 1964, amid heavy pressure, the Bracero Program was terminated.

Similar to the Bracero program, the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act created the H-2A visa category for "other temporary

workers," allowing agricultural employers to recruit workers from other countries.¹⁹ Under the H-2A program, U.S. employers, foreign workers, and their governments sign working contracts, thereby eliminating the U.S. government's involvement and liability. H-2A Program migrant workers are not protected under the 1983 Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act, the main federal legislation regulating farmworker labor.²⁰ The fact that they do not have the right to unionize and bargain collectively may help explain why the H-2A program is expanding rapidly. In North Carolina, the number of H-2A guest workers expanded from just 168 in 1989 to 10,500 farmworkers by 1998—an increase of 6,250 percent.²¹

Dolores Huerta, co-founder of the United Farm Workers Union of America (UFW), believes working conditions for California farmworkers have improved over the past 30 years. California state law now mandates access to faucets, toilets, and cold drinking water,²² although even these basic laws are seldom enforced. Decreasing farmworker union membership has paralleled the decline of America's unions. Today fewer than 10 percent of all strawberry pickers are unionized.²³

Consolidation and Contracting Depress Wages

Major structural changes in the agricultural system, including consolidation and farm labor contracting (FLC), have created fierce competition among growers, who justify exploiting farm laborers to survive.

Consolidation

Since the 1980s, large food retailers have increasingly purchased directly from grower-shippers so now 20 large food retailers control 52 percent of retail grocery sales. With 19 percent of all grocery sales, Wal-Mart wields tremendous power over prices paid to producers.²⁴

The food-service industry of fast food restaurants and cafeterias is also consolidating. For example, A&W, KFC, Taco Bell, Long John Silver's, and Pizza Hut are owned by Yum Brands, which contracts with Unified Food-service Purchasing Co-op to supply produce for all their fast-food restaurants. As a result, all tomatoes purchased for Taco Bell restaurants come from a single broker who buys them from just five or six growers.²⁵ As a handful of huge produce buyers dictate the

"There are economic interests who want to perpetuate a global low-wage work force and maintain the pool of exploitable labor of Mexicans in the United States and Mexico."

— BALDEMAR VELASQUEZ, FARM LABOR ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

entire U.S. market, many small farmers are being displaced. In Florida, the number of tomato farms dropped by 38 percent from 1992-1997. Meanwhile, the top 10 Florida growers ship 70 percent of all tomatoes.

With such power over the market, super-market chains, food-service conglomerates, and wholesalers demand rock bottom prices, often negotiating prices prior to planting. These prepurchase agreements have the effect of shifting risk to growers, who view labor as the only expense they can cut.²⁶ Growers claim that a shortage of legal workers willing to do farm labor forces them to hire undocumented workers, whose fear of deportation often stop them from challenging low wages and poor working and housing conditions.²⁷ An example of this downward wage pressure can be seen in wages paid to tomato pickers. In 1980, they earned minimum wage by picking just over seven buckets of tomatoes. By 1997, pickers had to fill 13 buckets. Today in Immokalee, Florida, the fastest tomato pickers must fill between 100-150 buckets to earn \$40-\$60 a day, while slower pickers who fill 70-80 buckets earn only \$28 a day. During the harvest season, tomato pickers work seven days a week, 10-12 hours daily, and earn just \$7,500.²⁸

The Farm Labor Contractor System

Farm labor contractors recruit, transport, pay, and supervise farmworkers, which allows for notorious abuse. Contractors now hire 20 percent of farmworkers nationwide and 40 percent in California. According to one California contractor, "Farm-labor contracting exists for the grower's benefit.... By using a contractor, a grower avoids... labor laws."²⁹ Over the last five years, people associated with FLCs have been implicated in several interstate slavery operations.

NAFTA-Forced Migration from the Mexican countryside

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and other economic liberalization policies have transformed rural Mexico, pushing 1.7 million subsistence farmers from their land to migrate to work in export factories, maquiladoras, or to fields and cities in the U.S. NAFTA critics estimate that as many as 15 million more Mexican farmers — one in six — could soon be displaced,³⁰ with projections of five million of those migrating to the U.S. in search of jobs.³¹

Philip L. Martín, a leading farm-labor demographer, estimates that just seven percent of 900,000 migrant farm workers employed in the U.S. pre-NAFTA were undocumented.³² Ten years later, half of the two million U.S. farmworkers are undocumented.³³

This dramatic migration of farmworkers, the vast majority from Mexico, can be traced to neoliberal, free-market reforms like NAFTA. Free-trade agreements, as well as World Bank requirements and Mexico's own big-business-friendly policies, have brought reductions in public expenditures and government programs for farmers and the poor. Elimination of price support for corn and other basic food items began in 1985 when Mexico signed the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and was later accelerated under NAFTA.

In the first seven years of NAFTA, the Mexican government's investment in agriculture dropped by 90 percent.³⁴ As a result, Mexican farmers who received more than 33 percent of their income from the government through farm-support payments between 1990 and 1994 received only a 13.2 percent subsidy from 1995 to 2000.³⁵

These free-market measures have only increased hunger. In 2001, the United Nations estimated that Mexicans experienced a 39 percent drop in their purchasing power since NAFTA began.³⁶ The price of tortillas — which provide 59 percent of the Mexican population's average caloric intake³⁷ — has risen approximately 40 percent (adjusted for inflation) since the devaluation of the peso and the implementation of NAFTA in 1994.³⁸

Today one in four Mexicans are small-scale farmers. Since NAFTA, 80 percent of rural Mexicans live in poverty, with 60 percent living in extreme poverty.³⁹



PHOTO: David Bacon

Three strawberry workers led a UFW march after they won their jobs back.

About 60 percent of Mexico's cultivated land is planted in corn, employing nearly three million farmers—40 percent of Mexican agricultural workers.⁴⁰ Since NAFTA, price floors for corn have disappeared; government subsidies for Mexican farmers have been greatly reduced. Meanwhile, U.S. corn-growing enterprises still receive 40 percent of their income from federal subsidies⁴¹ and account for 25 percent of corn consumed in Mexico.⁴² This dumping of U.S. corn in the Mexican market at artificially low prices has forced Mexican corn farmers to abandon growing for local markets. Mexico has gone from producing most of its food for domestic consumption to importing 40 percent, primarily from the U.S.⁴³

Conclusion

The federal prosecution of six cases of involuntary servitude in Florida shocked an American public that believed slavery no longer existed here in the U.S.⁴⁴ But slavery in the fields exist because of government policies and market forces that have created a global food system that systemically displaces small farmers and exploits farmworkers.

Nationally, there are several dynamic farmworker movements challenging these exploitative practices of large agribusinesses and corporations. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers has organized a boycott against Taco Bell, the largest purchaser of tomatoes from Immokalee, Florida, demanding one penny more in the piece rate per pound, an increase that would almost double

the workers' pay. In North Carolina, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) has waged a boycott against Mt. Olive Pickle Company, demanding that farmworkers have the right to negotiate their working conditions with farmers and the company. And in California, the UFW recently launched a boycott of Gallo Winery, to demand that the family-run business provide health care benefits to their workers. Dolores Huerta believes that there are very "strong foundations in place for farmworkers to be unionized nationally."⁴⁵

WHAT YOU CAN DO

As Baldemar Velasquez of FLOC says, "Those that derive their wealth with predatory and selfish calculatedness from the misery, poverty, and helplessness of the working poor are powerful but not invincible."⁴⁶ Educate yourself, your friends and family by visiting the farmworker web sites, sign up for their list serves, and support their campaigns for fair and living wages, decent working and living conditions, and health care. You can also share this backgrounder by sending friends to www.food-first.org/backgrounders.

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