

Handout 3.4 - Farmworkers

Nearly 80% percent of farm workers are migrant workers. Their back-breaking labor brings cheap fruits and vegetables to our tables. Yet their working conditions are some of the worst.

Before attending week three, if possible, please watch this two minute video on farm workers, created by the National Farm Worker Ministry:

<http://vimeo.com/7604731>

With or Without Papers—The Same Life in a Labor Camp

By David Bacon. New America Media:Immigration, Aug 31, 2010

(<http://bit.ly/aF2iMU>)

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA - On a ranch north of the Bay Area, several dozen men live in a labor camp. When there's work they pick apples and grapes or prune trees and vines. This year, however, the ranch has had much less work, as the economic recession hits California fields. State unemployment is over 12%, but unemployment in rural counties is always twice what it is in urban ones. Despite these statistics, however, unemployment among farm workers is largely hidden.

In the case of these workers, it's hidden within the walls of the camp, far from the view of those who count the state's jobless. Because they work from day to day, or week to week, there are simply periods when there's no work at all, and they stay in the barracks.

In the past, the ranch's workers were mostly undocumented immigrants. In the last several years, however, the owner has begun bringing workers from Mexico under the H2-A guest worker program. While there are differences in the experiences of people without papers and guest workers, some basic aspects of life are the same. For the last several weeks, all the workers in the camp have been jobless, and neither undocumented workers nor guest workers can legally collect unemployment benefits. Everyone's living on what they've saved. And since the official total of the state's unemployed is based on counting those receiving benefits, none of the men here figure into California's official unemployment rate.

The camp residents share other similarities. Poverty in Mexico forced them all to leave to support their families. Living in the camp, they do the same jobs out in the fields. All of them miss their families and homes. And that home, as they see it, is in Mexico. Here, in the U.S., they don't feel part of the community that surrounds them.

A permanent resident visa, or "green card," would allow them to bring their families, and perhaps eventually to become integrated into the community. But for people coming from Mexico to look for work in California fields, green cards are not available. Their only alternative is what they call "walking through the mountains" -- that is, crossing without papers -- or signing up as a guest worker. In addition, as one man points out, because farmers are in the U.S. during planting season, the fields they'd normally cultivate at home go unplanted.

Some of their options as unemployed workers are different, however, because of their different immigration status. Ironically, in one way, guest workers have a disadvantage they don't share with the undocumented. Guest workers have a visa, but they can only work for

the rancher or contractor who brought them to the United States. If they're out of work and leave the ranch to look for a job with another employer, they violate the terms of their visa and can be deported.

Undocumented workers, however, can and do look for jobs outside the ranch when work there gets slow. The dangers of deportation and working without a visa hang over their heads every day they're in the United States.

JOSE CUEVAS:

I'm 38 years old, and I come from Leon, Guanajuato, where there are a lot of factories making shoes. I spent 10 years working in those factories as a cutter. If you work a 10-hour day, you can make 1,100 pesos (about \$100) a week. That's not enough to support a family, even there. And I have three kids, who are still living there with my wife.

I came to the U.S. because of the economic pressure of trying to provide for them. I wanted them to get an education and just eat well, just so they'd be healthy. We all felt terrible when I decided to come here nine years ago. The kids were little -- they didn't really understand. But when they got older, they'd ask me why I had to be gone so long.

It's been five years since I've been able to go home. I came without any papers, just crossing the border in the mountains. When I think about my friends with papers, I wish I'd had the chance. But the truth is, I couldn't come that way.

There always used to be times when you could go back to Mexico. But it's too difficult now. To begin with, it costs about \$5,000 now to cross the border coming back. And the border has become very dangerous. It's not like it was before. If you leave, you're not sure you'll be able to get back, even walking through the mountains.

So I've been trapped here for five years. But I tried to take advantage of it, and not think too much about going back. I work here in the grapes and the apples. I knew about the work here from my wife's brothers. Years ago, a lot of people came here from Leon. Now I'm the only one. Lots of those other folks left, and I was the only one who stayed.

This year it's been harder. I've hardly worked on the ranch this year -- just a couple of months. I looked for other work, but there wasn't a lot. In January and February, I went to the day labor center near here, and got work pruning apple trees. I'm very grateful to them.

Even when there wasn't work on the ranch here, we could work other places and still live in the camp. They never charged us rent. When they have work, they expect you to work for them. You're living in their housing. Some of the jobs are paid by piece-rate. When they pay by the hour, it's about \$9.85 per hour.

Sometimes, if we're working, we eat meat every day. But when you're not working, you eat tortillas and salt. That's the normal thing. Before coming here, when I was living in Mexico, we didn't eat meat very often.

When you're here, you're always thinking about Mexico. This is going to be my last year. I've decided to stay in Mexico, and to try not to think about coming here anymore. I've put some money into a house and a little land. I'll go back to work in those shoe factories. I still know how to do all the work there. We'll suffer economically, but I hope we'll be OK. Who knows?

Here everything is just work. It's all very serious. Mexico feels more free. Living here, it's not

your country.

My oldest son is studying psychology, and will go to the university in Leon. He has a good future because he studies, and I support him. I hope for a good future for my other kids too, and I'm hoping that they'll have a future in Mexico. I don't want them to leave. With more education, I hope they won't have to.

RODRIGO HUERTA:

I'm 21 -- not married yet. I come from Tlazezalco in Michoacan, where my father works in the fields. My grandfather has some land, and so his sons rent from him.

My father worked in the U.S. many years ago, in the 80s, before I was born. He just worked one year and never went back. Then my brother went to Atlanta eight years ago.

I actually never planned to come here. I always said, I'm not going. But now look. Here I am. I have a dream -- to build a house, get married, and have a family. I have someone in mind, but you can't rush it. She told me to go, so I'm hoping she'll wait for me.

I never wanted to come to the U.S. by walking through the mountains. But one Christmas Eve, my aunt asked me if I'd ever thought about coming here. At first I wasn't that enthusiastic, but then I began thinking about it.

Every Christmas, she goes back to Michoacan. She said, "They're hiring people, and they asked me to give them a hand." So they brought me here, on an H2-A visa. Now I've been coming this way for three years.

The bosses here on the ranch arrange for the visa. Then the foreman meets us at the border. We have to pay our own expenses to get there from our town. They pay for transportation and food from the border to the ranch here. The first two times we came in at Nogales, and this last time through Tijuana.

The foreman takes us to the appointment with the consulate, where they tell you if you've been approved or not. If they don't approve you, you have to go back home. This last time, two of us weren't approved. The consulate asked them if they had experience working in the fields. They'd worked in factories. They said you need two months experience working in the fields to come here.

The visa only lasts for six months. We're only supposed to work on this ranch. I guess we could work other places but you'd be breaking the agreement, so it's better not to risk it. But we haven't had work here for several weeks.

In the last two years, I really haven't made a lot of money. But the pay is better here. It's easier to save, because you're not spending so much. In six months, you can save what it might take you two years at home.

In my town there aren't any factories so the work is all in the fields, but there's not much work there. Some weeks you work three days, and in other weeks, you don't work at all. The economy is bad all over. Here you can eat meat every day if you want. The way things are in Mexico, you can't buy meat every day.

To me, I just have a temporary life here. I have friends here who invite me to play football, but it's not a real team. I could never join one, because I'm not here during part of the football

season. So I just play with friends.

Here I'm always living against the clock. I'm not here to make a home. That's just the way my life is here. Temporary. In reality, my home is my town, Tlazezalco. I wouldn't trade it for any other.

ANTONIO PEREZ:

I came here because of the poverty. There's work at home, but just a little. I rent a little land on which I plant corn and garbanzos, and raise some animals. But you can't actually live on the money you make farming. It just helps a little.

I'm always working in other jobs, in someone else's fields, or on a hog farm. When I work for someone else, I get paid by the day. When I work for myself, it depends on the price of what I'm able to grow, or how much I get for an animal I raise. The corn price has been the same for a while -- 70 or 80 pesos. Sometimes, you can sell it, but other times you just feed it to the animals.

There are times when my family can survive this way. But if you have a big family, it doesn't really give you anywhere near enough money.

So my aunt got me to come here on an H2-A. We'll see how it works out. I haven't decided if it's worth it yet. We're not here for that long, but you always want to be with your family.

I'm not planting anything this year either, because I'm here during the planting season.