



FARM WORKERS IN AMERICA: PROFILE OF

Human dignity and the right of farm workers to organize are the basic issues of the California and Arizona grape strikes.

Farm workers are striking for the right to build a community union of their own, which can provide social and economic justice through the proven procedures of collective bargaining.

For decades, farm workers have been denied the rights of collective bargaining and Union representation elections guaranteed other workers under Federal law. As a result, farm workers have never been able to build a Union or gain those benefits enjoyed by workers in most other American industries. California grape workers earn an average of less than \$2000 a year. Most are Mexican - Americans, Filipinos, Blacks, and Puerto Ricans who face segregation and discrimination in the fields and rural communities where they live and work.

Grape pickers are seasonal mi-

grant workers, who receive no unemployment insurance for those months when they are unemployed. Migrant families often live in crowded barracks-type labor camps which are fenced off to visitors and sur-

rounded by NO TRESPASSING signs.

Locked in a cycle of migrancy and poverty, over half of all farm worker children never get past eighth grade in school.



"Chavez has made an effort on behalf of people who suffer so tremendously in this country, namely, so many of our farm workers, particularly the Mexican - Americans and others of minority groups who have not had the protection of the laws as exist in so many other elements of society."

Robert F. Kennedy, 3/10/68

Farm workers' infant and maternal mortality rates are 125% higher than the national average, and incidence of infectious disease, including TB, is 300% higher than the national average. Direct exposure to pesticide poisons contributes to an occupational disease rate among farm workers twice that of other industries. The average life expectancy for migrant workers is only 49 years, compared to a 70-year life span for the average American.

Politicians have excluded farm workers from most protective labor legislation passed over the last 30 years. But even the few existing health, safety, sanitation, and labor laws are openly violated by the growers, who know that pro-Agri-Agribusiness officials will not enforce them. Child labor is common in the vineyards. Ignoring sanitation laws, growers create a public health hazard by subjecting men and



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women to the indignity of working in fields without toilets or handwashing facilities. Labor contractors frequently pocket social security payments, preparing a bleak future for elderly workers.

Powerless, farm workers must endure inhuman and exploitive working conditions. Table grape workers do not have contracts. Company stores cheat them of their meager earnings. There are no holidays or vacations with pay, only the lay-off when the harvest is done, when the worker is discarded like a used and no longer needed piece of equipment. Workers do not have health or pension plans, unemployment insurance, or (except in a handful of states) even workmen's compensation for accidents. Safety provisions, especially for workers exposed to poisonous pesticides, are nonexistent. Cool drinking water is rarely provided, although summer harvest temperatures often top 105°.



supervision are common. Workers can be fired at any time without explanation.

In the past, because laws have been unenforced or are designed to be unenforceable, legislation has failed to lighten the heavy burden of injustices heaped upon farm workers

ers. Only a strong union and written contracts can guarantee that these abuses will be ended and that employers will deal with their workers with fairness and respect.

Contracts signed by wine grape growers have successfully solved almost all these problems at the ranches under contract. The Union is asking for similar contracts with grape growers and hopes someday to extend these protections to other farm workers. There is no attempt or intention to "control" or "dominate" agriculture or any segment of agriculture, as some anti-union propagandists have charged. We are seeking those basic rights, benefits, and protections which most other American workers have enjoyed for 20 years or more.

ABOVE: Women and children work in the fields, to supplement the meagre earnings of their husbands.

LEFT: Farm workers are herded, transported like cattle, to and from work.

