

Focus on Economics

Farmworker Women Speak About Wages

*Interviewed by Kris Adams,
1997 SAF Intern*

Although Vanessa says she can't consider what she makes in the field 'good money', she did get \$150 a week or \$7 a bin for picking oranges. She [got] paid by the hour [minimum wage] for tobacco and everything else [was] piece rate. Vanessa explains that "when you get paid 'piece rate' you take your full bucket to be dumped at the truck. There the crew leader will empty your bucket and give you a ticket which is usually worth 40 or 50 cents. At the end of the day the book keeper will take up your tickets, count them, and write down how many tickets you collected. At the end of the week the crew leader pays the farmworker according to the amount of tickets you collected throughout the week..."

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"When people ask me what I do for work, I say I'm a farmworker. They say, "That's not good." I say, "Well, it's not good when they take advantage of you. The most check I used to get was \$150 or \$160 [a week] working in the fields. I would work from seven to six, or from seven to five. We usually get paid by the hour; when we started it was \$4.00 an hour. Once we moved to Newton Grove, North Carolina they paid us \$4.25 an hour, but there was really no difference. When we picked camote [sweet potatoes] we get paid by the bucket. In an hour, when it is really good you can make like 50 buckets, but when it is not you can only make about 10. And the pickle, it's good when it's small. They pay you 35 cents a bucket, but when it is big they pay only 30 cents."

*From Fields Without Borders/ Campos Sin Fronteras:
An Anthology of Documentary Writing and Photography
by Student Action with Farmworkers Interns. To order,
contact SAF, (919) 660-3652.*

US Agriculture: Big Business Pays Poverty Wages

- \$ By the year 2000, agriculture is expected to generate 25% of the US Gross Domestic Product (Agricultural Council of America).
- \$ In 1996 domestic consumers spent 10.9% of their disposable personal income on food, three percent less than in 1970. Farmers only receive 23% of what consumers spend on food; the rest is for marketing, transporting, processing, and distributing foods (Agriculture Fact Book).
- \$ Almost half of all farms in the US employ hired and contract labor. Expenditures for labor only amount to 11.7% of total farm production expenditures (1992); the same amount is spent on fertilizer and chemicals (Runyan, 3).
- \$ Farm production expenses attributed to hired and contract labor is greatest on horticultural specialty farms (45%), fruit and tree nut farms (40%) and vegetable and melon farms (37%) (Agriculture Fact Book). On tobacco farms, hired labor expenses account for 20% of production expenses (Runyan, 3).
- \$ There are about 1.6 million farmworkers working on crops and 30% are migrants (1994). Eighty-five percent of migrant farmworkers are immigrants, and another 10% are US born Hispanics (Characteristics of US Farmworkers).
- \$ The median personal income for farmworkers (1994-5) is between \$5,000 and \$7,500. Twenty-eight percent of farmworkers have personal incomes under \$2,500 (Mines, 18).

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