

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:
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by Student Action with Farmworkers Interns. To order,
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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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Farmworkers Cannot Reap the Benefits They Harvest

Although the system of producing and obtaining food is one of the most essential tasks of all economic systems (Martin, 13), our society undervalues the vital importance of farmworkers to agriculture. The lack of government efforts to assist farmworkers reveals a history of neglect (Taylor, 9). As a result of this neglect, in 1995 over three-fifths of farmworkers lived below the poverty line, up from 50 percent in 1990 (Mines, 25).

Economic Importance of Agriculture

Not only is agriculture fundamentally important as a source of food, it is also a substantial part of the United States' economy. The United States exports over five billion dollars (1990) worth of fresh and processed fruits and vegetables harvested by migrant and seasonal farmworkers (Martin, 12). Fruits, vegetables and horticultural specialties (FVH) rely on the labor of hired farmworkers. This is the fastest growing sector of US agriculture which accounts for one-sixth of the value of all farm products in the US. Exports of these crops are rising (Martin, 161).

North Carolina has the second largest (1995) net farm income in the US (after deductions), totaling \$2.9 billion (Agriculture Fact Book, 35). Almost one-third of the

total land area in North Carolina is farm land (1992), and of that, 62.4% is cropland. The rest is in woodland, pastureland and rangeland (Census, 6). Crops, most of which rely on hired farmworkers, account for 43.5 percent (1992) of North Carolina's total agricultural cash receipts (gross sales).

Farmworkers in Poverty

Despite the economic importance of agriculture to the US and North Carolina, consumers and government place very little value on agricultural labor. In 1961, US Representative Coad from Iowa stated, "Presumably these growers believe that there will always be a sufficient amount of poverty in the world to provide workers who are willing to perform jobs that higher class people will not accept. This theory is based, of course, on placing a very low economic and social value on these jobs associated with the harvest" (Linder, 46). Persons immigrating from Mexico and other developing countries—many of whom the government authorizes through the H2 program—to perform farmwork in this nation's wealthy farm economy do not share in the prosperity. Farmworkers face low earnings, unstable seasonal employment, and few possibilities for economic mobility within the rural sector

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(Taylor, 1). Overall, hired labor accounts for only 11.7 percent of all US farm expenses (1992), about the same amount spent on fertilizer and chemicals (Runyan, 3).

The national average wage (1995) for hired farmworkers in the fields is \$6.13 per hour (Agriculture Fact Book, 27), and \$6.14 per hour in North Carolina (NCDA&CS). Between 1982 and 1990, the wages of hired farmworkers, when adjusted for inflation, decreased by 1.5 percent and the piece rate wage decreased by 4.6 percent (Heppel, 60). Even though farmworkers' wages increased between 1990 and 1994 by five percent, when adjusted for inflation, farmworkers' weekly earnings are still only 69 percent of all wage and salary workers' earnings, including clerical, sales, and professional specialty workers. Farmworkers receive lower annual family incomes than all wage and salary workers (Runyan, 14-15). Employer-provided housing and other benefits do not compensate farmworkers for their low earnings. During the 1980s and 1990s, employer-provided benefits shrunk while wages stagnated, shrinking their effective earnings (Martin, 13).

Labor Legislation Excludes Farmworkers

Many federal labor policies that were enacted in the 1930s keep farmworker wages low and working conditions poor

(Martin, 21), thus benefiting agribusiness and consumers at the expense of farmworkers. New Deal legislation, including the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 (NLRA) and the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA), imposed national limits on the exploitation of labor. The NLRA protects workers' efforts to organize and join unions and the FLSA sets the minimum wage, overtime provisions and child labor laws. However, both Acts barred farmworkers (the largest category of workers excluded) from the protections they provided to other workers (Linder, xv). Although the FLSA was amended in 1966 to cover farmworkers (Linder, 221), small farmers were excluded from minimum wage provisions. This leaves only 38 percent of farmworkers (1989) entitled to the federal minimum wage requirement (Linder, 125). Other pieces of legislation which many farmworkers are excluded from include pension plans, unemployment insurance and workers' compensation (Linder, xvi).

Low wages and farmworkers' exclusion from federal and state labor regulations maintain a power imbalance between employers and consumers and farmworkers. Farmworkers have few other job options and do not usually have the economic power to negotiate for increased wages, nor the political power to change policies (Martin, 21).

Small Price of Justice

The cost of paying decent wages to farmworkers is minuscule. The average household, 2.6 persons, spends \$270 per year (1993) on fresh fruits and vegetables consumed at home. Most of these fresh fruits and vegetables (about 85 percent) are hand harvested. Farmers receive about 21 percent of the \$270 spent on fresh fruits and vegetables. Farm labor, including supervisory labor such as crewleaders, receives about \$19 of the \$270 spent by each household each year. If farmworker wages are increased by fifty percent, from an average of \$5.00-\$6.00 per hour to \$7.50-\$9.00 per hour, holding the number of farmworkers constant, and completely passing down the cost to consumers, it would only cost the average household less than \$10 a year. This is an annual increase from \$270 to \$280 (Taylor, 89-90).

In order for farmworkers to be paid a living wage for the essential work they perform, federal and state labor standards should be extended to farmworkers and consumers should be willing to pay the small increase in food prices. The time has come for the government and consumers to recognize the important contributions of farmworkers to society and the economy by ensuring that farmworkers receive decent wages.

