

Prospects for Organizing Farm Workers in California:
A Report on Current Farm Labor Market Conditions

Proposal by

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California Institute for Rural Studies

Founded in 1977, the California Institute for Rural Studies (CIRS) is a private, non-profit, tax-exempt research and education organization with a focus on issues affecting agricultural communities in California. CIRS is the only research organization in the United States specializing in farm labor market issues and has achieved a national reputation for its work. CIRS is also novel in that it collaborates with community-based organizations, including labor unions, as a major component of its work.

On September 12, 1991, Dr. Don Villarejo, Executive Director of CIRS, presented invited, expert-witness testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Water and Power. He testified about the living and working conditions in farm worker towns of the San Joaquin Valley. Dr. Villarejo is also a member of the advisory board for the National Agricultural Workers Survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor. On June 5, 1991 he served as invited Chair of the Farm Worker Studies Symposium sponsored by California EDD and University of California Cooperative Extension.

CIRS is primarily supported by private foundation grants. Major support in the recent past has been provided by:

The Ford Foundation, 1985-1992, \$525,000

"Farm Labor and Rural Poverty Project"

Charles S. Mott Foundation, 1986-1992, \$113,300

"Rural Toxics Outreach and Assistance Project"

Rosenberg Foundation, 1989-1992, \$100,000

"Farm Labor and Immigration Reform"

California Council for the Humanities, 1990-1991, \$52,000

"Seeing the Invisible: Mega-Farms and the Rural Communities of California"

CIRS was the only California organization to win a Rural Economic Policy Program research award in a national competition sponsored by the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies. Amounting to \$74,000, the award supports the CIRS research project "Indigenous Oaxacan Migrants in California Agriculture: A New Cycle of Poverty." This project has conducted lengthy interviews with migrant farm workers from the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca and recently concluded a statewide census of Oaxacan migrant workers.

CIRS also conducts research under contract for a variety of public and private agencies. For example, Dr. Villarejo trained all attorneys and field investigators of the California Agricultural Labor Relations Board in methods of business investigation. At present, CIRS has the following contracts:

Commission on Agricultural Workers (Federal), \$51,595

"Case Study of the California Fresh Market Tomato Industry"

California Department of Health Services, \$75,000

"Agricultural Occupational Health and Safety: Sample of Fresno and Monterey County Farm Businesses"

California Department of Employment Development, \$77,251

"Farm Labor Contractors in California"

Agricultural Health & Safety Center, UC Davis, \$52,000

"Employer Management Practices and Farm Safety"

Farm Labor in California Agriculture

Summary

In order to properly consider the feasibility and design of a labor organizing campaign among California farm workers it is essential to have current information about the work force, economic conditions within the industry and the readiness of workers to organize. Who are the workers, where do they live and work, what is their primary language, what is their level of education, and what are their wages, annual earnings and working conditions?

We propose to prepare a research report on current farm labor market conditions in California agriculture. The report will be present an overview of the most important topics of interest and, as well, provide strong documentation in support of this overview. Secondly, we will evaluate general economic conditions and outlook for the most important segments of the industry, emphasizing the likely impact of the latest developments such as the proposed trade agreement with Mexico.

A separate section of the report would be devoted to each of the following major topics:

- * Who does farm work and what are the demographics of farm workers in California?

- * Agricultural employers and major trends in the industry.

- * Who are the unions in the fields today? What is the current status of César Chavez and the United Farm Workers?

- * Invisible communities: rural Chicano/Latino enclaves. What is the extent of political/popular support for Chavez?

- * What is current labor law: does it hurt or help?

- * What can be learned from the recent history of farm worker organizing?

An Executive Summary, Documentation Appendix and Bibliography will complete the report. A more detailed description of the proposed research report and of the sources to be consulted follows the Cost and Proposed Time-Line.

Cost and Proposed Time-Line

CIRS proposes to prepare the main body of the research report but to rely on the contributed assistance of Teamsters staff, by mutual and explicit agreement. It is the understanding of CIRS that one or more Teamsters staff would be assigned to assist with the field work component of this project.

Preparation of the CIRS contribution to the report would require fifty-five (55) work-days of CIRS staff time at a total cost of \$23,500. This is based on our standard research contract rate of \$50 per hour (\$50 per hr x 8 hr per day x 55 days =

\$22,000) plus \$1,500 to cover the cost of telephone, photocopies, FAX, postage and supplies.

Draft copies of the proposed report would be presented to designated Teamsters staff before January 31, 1992. This time-line assumes that Teamsters review of this proposal to prepare the research report, action for approval and execution of a research contract would be accomplished no later than November 1, 1991.

Farm Labor in California Agriculture

Detailed Proposal Description

Who does farm work in California?

How many farm workers? What is the distribution by geographic area, industry segment, and size of employer? What is the total of annual wages paid in agriculture and the distribution of total wages by industry segment and size of employer? Are there significant trends in the numbers of workers, in the total of annual wages, or in the size of employers?

Demographics of the labor force. What is the distribution of workers by age, gender, marital status, country of origin, ethnicity, educational level, years of experience in farm work and primary language?

Immigration patterns. What fraction of current farm workers are recent immigrants and what fraction are long-term U.S. residents? Many current farm workers became legal U.S. residents under provisions of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA). What is the present immigration status of current farm workers? What fraction are undocumented or improperly documented and does this vary with geographical region or industry segment?

Wages and working conditions. What are current wage rates, overall and by industry segment? What are the typical annual earnings of a California farm worker? How have wages changed in recent years? What is the size distribution of the annual earnings of farm workers? Does this vary with industry segment? How many year-round jobs are there as compared with seasonal jobs? What is the trend in recent years in the fraction of seasonal vs. year-round jobs? Since many jobs are seasonal, how many different jobs does a seasonal worker typically have in the course of a year? How many weeks are seasonal workers without a job? How many workers have employer-provided health or dental insurance? What about employer-provided housing, transportation to work or other benefits? To what extent are employers' social costs being shifted to employees?

Migration patterns. The main migration patterns are follow-the-crop and shuttle (Mexico-single U.S. destination). What fraction of workers are settled vs. migrant (both types)? Does this vary with industry segment or geographical region? Have these patterns been changing in recent years? What role has IRCA played in these trends?

Reliance on social services. A network of government-supported services has been developed to provide assistance to low-income or migrant farm workers. To what extent are people using

welfare, unemployment insurance, Workers Compensation benefits, community clinics, migrant housing programs, child care or job-training services?

Are workers ready to organize into unions? What evidence do we have regarding recent labor actions or spontaneous strikes? Have there been any recent successes? What is the significance of the recent formation of self-help organizations?

Agricultural employers and major trends in the industry.

What are the main trends in agricultural production in California? Is farming being phased out? Are some industry segments in decline and are others becoming stronger?

Who are the employers? Growers, shippers, packers, labor contractors and agricultural services. What are the trends? what is the distribution by size, by geographical region, by industry segment, and by season.

What are the major trends among various types of employers? Why are labor contractors becoming more important? What is the best strategy for dealing with labor contractors? Do they have any vulnerable points?

What are the major problems facing California producers? The following subjects come up in such discussions: uncertain water supplies, movement to or away from labor-intensive crops, shippers moving away from harvesting and relying on labor contractors, crops, geographical regions or industry segments increasing or shrinking in importance.

Who are the biggest employers? CIRS maintains a detailed computer data base of current farm businesses in California. This data base lists 26,500 farms. We will provide a detailed listing of the largest California farm businesses, including business name, address, telephone, estimated annual crop sales, harvested crop acreage and major crops.

Can key targets be identified? Principal employers, particular crops, geographical regions, who has the most year-round employees, other criteria.

Who are the unions in the fields today?

Current situation of César Chavez and the United Farm Workers? Active contracts by crop, certifications but no contract, contested cases on appeal. Where does the United Farm Workers get its financial support and what is the extent of direct financial support from the AFL-CIO? What is the role of support from churches, Hispanic political leaders and liberal groups? Who are the current leaders? Where are the former leaders, and could they relate to the Teamsters? Possibilities for cooperation and/or attacks on a Teamsters organizing drive. What is the current status of Chavez' relations with local community leaders in important agricultural communities?

Other non-IBT unions. Independent Union of Agricultural Workers (Painters), United Food and Commercial Workers, Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Workers. How many contracts? How many certifications?

What is the effect of many unions competing for the support of

workers? Do workers tend to vote "no union" when competition is especially fierce?

What is the role of mutual-benefit, self-help organizations? Are they building future support for union organization?

Is there any pattern to the changes in union representation over the recent period? Do contract renewals seem more difficult to obtain? Is there evidence that employers are actively exploiting inter-union competition?

Invisible communities: rural Chicano/Latino enclaves

Where do farm workers live? Are these communities developing in different ways from other parts of California? If so, how are they developing? What community networks exist that may be able to provide support for an IBT organizing drive? What kind of political leadership has developed in these communities?

What is the role of government-supported services in these communities? California Rural Legal Assistance, community health clinics, job-training agencies, housing agencies, immigration clinics. To what extent are agencies or offices within agencies loyal to the United Farm Workers, or might they be neutral or actually support a Teamsters organizing drive?

Spanish-language media. Radio stations, print media. To what extent are they accessible? What about English-language media?

Significance of mutual-benefit, self-help organizations. Which towns, ethnic groups, political base? Mixteco self-help groups and their base in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca.

Current labor law: does it hurt or help?

California's unique Agricultural Labor Relations Act (ALRA) and the relationship to the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA). How much cooperation/antagonism is likely from the ALRB? Can organizing be done under the NLRA? Is there any advantage to one or the other?

To what extent does the ALRA support/limit organizing drives in California? Is the current makeup of the ALRB likely to change?

What about three-party agreements, such as those of Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) in Ohio and elsewhere between Campbell's Soup, growers and FLOC? Is this a useful model for the California produce industry?

Recent farm worker organizing drives: what can be learned?

United Farm Workers organizing drives in the 1960s and 1970s. What was done right/wrong? Are there old United Farm Workers hands around who might be able to provide some guidance? Chavez claimed that farm worker organizing could never be accomplished without massive support from other sectors of labor as well as from the general public. Does the evidence support or contradict this claim? What is the extent of current worker support for Chavez?