

## **Earnings and Working Conditions in the Strawberry Industry**

Presented at the April 11, 1997 Teach-in at San Francisco State University

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The California strawberry industry has experienced remarkable growth in production and revenue in the past several decades that reflects what is surely one of the great business success stories of our time. More generally, without much public attention, our state's vegetable and fruit industries have seen a two-thirds increase in annual production, measured in tons, over the past twenty years. Most people think that agriculture is in decline, urbanization replacing fields and orchards. Yet the truth is just the opposite. We have more land in trees and vines than we have ever had, and more acreage in vegetable production than ever in our state history. What has occurred is that land that had been used for pasture or field crops such as oats, barley and wheat has been converted to other use. Thus, while our state's total cropland acreage has declined, our agriculture has become more intensive, replacing extensive crops with trees, vines, vegetables, berries and ornamental horticultural crops.

This growth in production is nowhere greater than in the strawberry industry. From 286,900,000 lbs. per year in the three-year period 1969-71, to 1,221,000,000 lbs. per year in the period 1993-95, this amounts to 425% increase in just twenty-five years. Most of this increase is due to higher crop yields: larger berries, more berries, higher quality berries.

Increased production is usually associated with increased labor demand, although increased productivity per worker is what employers hope to accomplish. If we take account of improvements in productivity in fruit and vegetable production in California, then we find that overall seasonal farm labor demand has increased by about 25% in the past quarter-century in our state. In other words the fruit and vegetable industry has needed more hour of work to achieve this growth in production.

No fruit or vegetable industry requires more labor per acre than does strawberry production. Labor economists have estimated that each acre of growing strawberries needs about 1,000 hours of hand labor each year. From transplanting new plants in the fall to cultivating, weeding, irrigating and harvesting the following spring and summer, manual labor is the key to a successful strawberry crop.

I am convinced that a substantial labor surplus exists in rural and agricultural areas of California, which means that a more than adequate labor supply is available to meet this increased demand for hand labor. The most important source of this surplus labor supply has been new immigration. While the flow of unauthorized immigrants continues unabated, government policy, supported by immigration advocates, has contributed to this surplus of agricultural labor. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 not only regularized the immigration status of millions of previously undocumented workers, it also was a positive stimulation to all of Mexico and Central America. IRCA's message was simple: if you can find employment as an undocumented worker in

the U.S., then you have a chance to ultimately get a green card and become a legal permanent resident.

In California agriculture today, more than 92% of all farm workers are foreign-born. A generation ago, fully half of all agricultural employees in our state were U.S.-born. In less than thirty years we have become more dependent on foreign-born farm workers than at any time in the last century.

How have workers fared in this period of remarkable growth in farm production? First, as to wages, it is clear that real wages have declined. Published data suggest that the decline in wages has amounted to about 25% in the past quarter-century.

The great surplus of available agricultural labor and the decline in importance of labor unions during this period are, in my opinion, the two most significant factors contributing to this fall-off in wage rates and earnings. Farm employers and labor contractors have been able to bid down wages: in many cases farmers have fired their own crews and brought in labor contractors at lower rates of pay.

Where do strawberry workers stand today?

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Most profitable crops - real wages are down today  
Increase in wages recently among some growers - some health plans being offered  
Gang jobs - even less standing workers employed  
So if performance

3 major shippers - workers control the industry - Monasters, Orinella, Peters

VCM Farms - Whippleman owns Will-Put

Biggest labor event in the nation this year

Delphos Sign market and local standing campaign

Calgene