FARM WORKERS BUILD NEW ORGANIZATIONS

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Despite six years of drought and the intrusion of urban development California's agriculture has achieved even greater levels of production. In the past 20 years the state's total output of fruit and vegetables has increased by 50%, from 19 million tons in 1973 to 29.6 million tons in 1992. Our farm system has responded to our collective desire for more fresh fruit and vegetables.

Less well understood is that the farm labor force has expanded, in part in response to increases in farm labor demand represented by much higher levels of production. But more important in sending new waves of immigrants was the collapse of the Mexican economy in the 1980s, as symbolized by the devaluation of the peso. Millions of workers went elsewhere to survive. Most came to the United States, especially to California.

The well-intended Special Agriculture Worker (SAW) visa program of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) not only made it possible for more than one million undocumented agricultural workers to obtain U.S. residence visas, it also acted as a magnet. The SAW provision requiring at least 90 days of unauthorized farm work between May 1985 and May 1986 sent a message throughout Mexico: to qualify for a U.S. residence visa you needed to work as an unauthorized worker first. Even today, long after the end of the SAW program, unauthorized farm workers carefully save their pay stubs in the hope that future INS programs will lead to regularization of their immigration status.

New immigrant farm workers who came into California during the 1980s and 1990s have little or no connection to the farm labor organizing of the past. For most of these recent immigrants the name César Chávez is recognized as referring to Julio César Chávez, the championship boxer, and not to the late farm labor organizer.

Equally significant, the new immigrants include increasing numbers of indigenous migrants from southern Mexico and Central America. An estimated 30,000 Mixtec, Zapotec and Triqui native American workers are now working in California's fields. Their native language is not Spanish; instead they speak one of the pre-Columbian dialects, such as Mixtec. And, as in Mexico, their dark skin, short stature and distinctive appearance makes them objects of discrimination and other abuse from mestizo Mexicans and Mexican-Americans.

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Most Californians are not aware of these changes in the fields. But even fewer are aware of the decline of the United Farm Workers. In the 1970s the UFW had between 75,000 and 100,000 members; today it claims 20,000 members and fewer than 5,000 are working under union contract. Thus, most members are in the new category of "Associate Member." As Arturo Rodriguez, the new President of the UFW, has explained, "For a modest annual fee, farm workers who don't work under contract can receive benefits and services."

The union with the largest number of U.S. field workers under union contract is the Teamsters, Local 890, which represents about 7,000 agricultural workers employed by Bud Antle, Inc. Owned by Dole Food Company, Antle is the nation's largest fresh vegetable producer and is headquartered in the Salinas Valley. Local 890 is headed by Frank Gallegos and is now the largest Teamster local in the nation with an Executive Board composed entirely of Latinos.

At the same time a new wave of community-based organizing is underway in rural California. Led by long-time farm workers, the new organizations are rooted in agricultural communities, mostly in the San Joaquin Valley. Among the Mixtecs, there are several new organizations. In Livingston (near Merced), Rufino and Vicente Dominguez are building La Organización del Pueblo Explotado y Oprimido. In Fresno, Filimón Lopez heads Asociación Cívica "Benito Júarez," named after the first (and only) indigenous president of Mexico. In Stockton, Luis Magaña serves as coordinator of Organización de Trabajadores Agrícolas de California, with three branches in Merced, Stanislaus and San Joaquin Counties. And other small groups have formed in Arvin (near Bakersfield), in the Salinas Valley and in Vista (north of San Diego).

In other parts of the U.S., similar community-based groups or labor unions have formed to fight for justice for farm workers. The largest of these is the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, based in Ohio and led by Baldemar Velasquez. But others have been established in New Jersey, Florida, New Mexico and Texas.

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CIRS is a non-profit public interest research and education organization specializing in the problems and concerns of rural California. Don Villarejo, a long-time political activist, has been Executive Director of CIRS for many years, and is highly respected for his research and organizing skills. CIRS maintains a library in Davis (with several unique collections) for public use. CIRS publications include books about water use, organizing and investigative research, farm labor, etc. Contact CIRS for a list of its publications. — Ed