

Farm Worker Organization Capacity-Building

Problem Statement

Despite prolonged drought, freezes and floods, California agriculture has expanded greatly over the past twenty years. Driven by increased consumer demand and aggressive export strategies, the annual production of California fruit and vegetable crops, measured in tons harvested per year, has doubled. Together with ornamental horticultural products, labor-intensive commodities now account for about three-fourths of the farm-gate value of California crop output.

Simultaneously, California farms are becoming even larger, as medium-scale family farmers are displaced by corporate giants such as Dole Food Company. Today, the biggest 4% of California farms are responsible for 2/3 of all of the state's agricultural output.

Both factors contribute to a remarkable paradox: fewer, bigger farms producing more labor-intensive commodities require increasing amounts of hand labor. Our state's farms need 1/5 more hours of hand labor today as compared with twenty years ago. But few California-born workers are willing to perform heavy manual labor under today's wages and working conditions in the fields. So workers from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and other nations to the south stream into our state, with or without immigration papers, to fill the seasonal jobs that few Americans would even consider.

Today, more than 92% of our state's farm labor force is foreign-born. Twenty years ago about half of farm workers were foreign-born. We are now more dependent on foreign-born farm workers than at any time in this century.

The current generation of field workers are less well-educated - averaging just six years in Mexican schools - and more culturally and socially isolated than were their predecessors. Most recently, significant numbers - estimated to be 50,000 - indigenous migrants from southern Mexico and Guatemala have come to the U.S. to work in the fields. Their distinctive stature and appearance, indigenous dialects, and cultural differences further isolate them from mainstream society. It is no longer unusual to find work crews composed primarily or entirely of non-Spanish speaking indigenous migrants.

At the other end of the employment spectrum, ever-larger farm businesses have learned how to effectively employ contemporary technology and sophisticated legal strategies to combat farm labor unions and advocates. Paper farms are created to circumvent federal subsidy limitations, labor contractors and custom farm management entities are created to further isolate the real farm owners from any liability - and responsibility - for their employees, and all of the latest accounting and legal devices are placed in the service of keeping labor costs to a minimum.

Small wonder that the real wages of farm workers have declined by 25% in the past fifteen years alone, that farm labor unions are now regularly sued for the value of crop losses growers have "suffered" during harvest-time strikes, that 42,000 on-the-job farm injuries are experienced by California farm workers each year and that farm labor unions and advocates have seen the gains of the past twenty-five years being steadily eroded.

But labor unions and advocates continue their difficult work. The recent resurgence of the United Farm Workers Union, a few legal victories won by attorneys for California Rural Legal Assistance and others, and the formation of self-help organizations among new immigrant workers in several parts of the state are testimony to the endurance of the human spirit in the face of set-backs in the fields.

However, there is a large, and increasing gulf, between the sophisticated legal and accounting strategies of farm owners and operators, and the capacity of farm worker organizations of all kinds to respond. In large part, this is due to the imbalance of economic resources available to each. But it is also the case that farm worker organizers, attorneys and advocates frequently lack the knowledge base they need in agricultural economics, business investigation, accounting and related skills. In turn, this can be understood in terms of the relatively small number of dedicated activists who remain in this area of work after twenty-five years of low pay and the related high rate of turnover among the other staffers. While there are a few individuals and organizations available who can provide these skills, their services are often too costly for organizations of poor people to afford, further compounding the imbalance.

Organizational capacity-building in fundamental agricultural economics, business investigation, and rudimentary accounting practices among farm labor unions, attorneys and advocates can provide a sound base for their continuing work. Just as non-Spanish speaking organizers must learn to become proficient in Spanish to successfully organize farm workers, farm labor organizations need to learn the fundamental skills of today's business world to be able to effectively

compete, let alone to actually have a chance of winning gains for the people they represent.
Proposal

We propose to conduct two intensive four-day in-service training workshops for farm labor union activists and attorneys affiliated with non-profit agencies which explicitly serve current farm workers. The focus of the training will be to build the long-term capacity of farm labor unions and service organizations to meet their own objectives, as they define them.

The workshops will combine experiential with formal training by providing each participant with a field research assignment to be concluded in the course of the workshop, with group review of the outcomes. Planning meetings have already been held with leaders of several organizations to specifically define needs and to provide some preliminary guidelines for the sessions. The workshop design envisions the following major components:

- Overview of California Agriculture
- Business Investigations in Agriculture
- Production and Marketing Agreements
- Financial Statements
- Taxes and Their Impact on the Structure of Business Arrangements
- Field Work Practicum
- On-line computer access to business information

Trainers are Don Villarejo and Marc Lumer. Both have extensive backgrounds and expertise in agricultural business as well as experience in support of social change organizations. Lumer is a CPA who has served as an expert for labor unions in post-strike damage litigation. MORE BIO DETAILS NEEDED. Villarejo is an experienced activist with more than thirty-five years experience in social change. His special expertise is business investigation, most particularly in agriculture; clients have included all of the major farm labor unions and legal service providers. He is the author of Research for Action, a widely used guidebook for community activists.

A special feature of the workshop will be the production of a workbook of materials, which will serve both as workshop text and as guidebook for future work.

Day 1

Overview of California Agriculture

- Major segments and standard practices in each
- Significant trends in production and marketing
- Labor market factors - labor market intermediaries, trends in labor costs
- External factors - globalization, natural resource policy, consumers, finance

Fresh market Industry

- Fresh vegetables - grower-shipper deals, decline of agricultural cooperatives
- Fresh fruit - agricultural cooperatives, independent packer-shippers
- Market orders and supply control mechanisms

Processing Industry

- Processing tomatoes, other vegetables - cooperatives, independent processing companies
- Fruit canning industry
- Frozen processing industry
- Global competition

Special topic - the "joint deal"

- Marketing the product as the primary goal
- Role of the packer-shipper
- Role of the grower
- Legal agreements
- Financing

Special topic - production and prices

- How much is being produced and sold?
- What factors determine price?

Special topic - land owners, farmers, contractors, harvesters, packer, shippers

- Who are the players?
- Who owns whom?
- Role of financing
- Case study: strawberry industry