

## ***Don't Cry for These Cane Cutters***

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### **Body**

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Post columnist Colman McCarthy attacked our company directly and, in our view, unfairly in his op-ed column of July 18 ["Justice for Migrant Workers"]. McCarthy wrote that our company's guest workers are "exploited Caribbean blacks," "impoverished" workers who were the target of a company "scam." In his attack, he used such terms as "cheated," "shortchanging," "scamming," "conniving" and "vile."

He wrote that, thanks to a recent state court decision, "This time ... they'll be paid wages they agreed to work for." If McCarthy had bothered to call us or to visit our worker housing, he might have a different view.

For the record, the state court case did not involve the contract that Jamaican **cane cutters** signed and which the U.S. Department of Labor and the West Indies Central Labour Organization approved. Nowhere will he or the court find anyone who negotiated that agreement to confirm that the contract says the workers should be paid by a different method or were paid improperly. The terms of that contract were fulfilled, and every man earned far more than the U.S. minimum wage. The court ruling, which we expect to be overturned on appeal, was based on excerpts from a state employment agency document that Jamaicans never see.

The judge used isolated phrases from that document, and not the actual contract, to draw the false conclusion that workers were underpaid. In fact, **cane cutters** work an average of six to 6 1/2 hours per day and cut about 1.2 to 1.5 tons per hour. Their typical wage is close to \$ 7 per hour and is monitored by electronic timekeepers. Housing and medical care are free. Food is subsidized. At home they would earn \$ 3 per day.

Underlying McCarthy's use of pejorative language and broad generalizations is a paternalistic view that these responsible West Indian men should not be allowed to work in the United States for wages that are solidly middle class by their nation's standards. Rather, the men and their families should suffer Third World wages or unemployment in order to spare American journalists the sight of black men working to improve their families' lives. When American men take hard, dangerous jobs for high wages in Mideast oil fields, we admire their grit. When Jamaicans take jobs in Florida that are safer, less arduous and far more profitable than the same work in Jamaica, Americans see "exploitation."

Contrary to the column's insinuations, U.S. Sugar **cane cutters** in Florida are not rootless "migrants" who drift around the country in an exploited underground labor pool. They are documented workers whose housing and working conditions are the best in American agriculture. Our company's fields and housing are open to inspection by the press and by legal services representatives as well as by the U.S. and Jamaican governments. These are not the appalling waterless shanties depicted in "Harvest of Shame."

## Don't Cry for These Cane Cutters

The tragedy is not the conditions or wages of West Indian H-2A Program workers. Those conditions and wages are so desirable that most of the men return year after year, taking their profits home to buy land, invest in small businesses and educate their children.

Rather, the tragedy is that their jobs are being destroyed by the cost of constant litigation mounted by the professional activist lawyers McCarthy so admires. Those costs finally have forced U.S. Sugar to accelerate the mechanization of its harvest. This year we will hire 1,100 fewer cutters than last and will harvest a record 65 percent of the crop by machine.

This trend is not our choice. It is the sad result of a misguided idealism that would destroy men's lives in the guise of improving them.

The writer is executive vice president of the United States Sugar Corp.

## Classification

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