

Farmworkers and Covid-19

As the new coronavirus spreads out of US cities and into agricultural communities, farmworkers fear for their lives. Immokalee is an area known for tomatoes, a community within the wealthy Naples-Marco Island Statistical Area. But it is inland, more than 50 miles from the nearest hospital, and almost 40% of its roughly 24,000 people live below the poverty line. Greg Asbed, a MacArthur fellow and cofounder of Coalition for Immokalee Workers (CIW), describes Immokalee's agricultural workers as "imported largely from Mexico," living in crowded "clustered housing" and suffering "generations of grinding poverty and neglect." (*Herald Tribune*, 4/13/20) The biggest buyers of produce, like Publix and Walmart supermarkets, were asked to pay a "penny-per-pound" premium as aid for workers' families, but they declined because they are not the employers. Workers are employed by agribusiness, labor brokers, and the individual farm owners. Unincorporated Immokalee is rated a very undesirable place to live in the desirable state of Florida, where agriculture is the second largest industry after tourism. It has high crime, poor wages, and inadequate medical care. As tomatoes rot on the vine, not worth the wages for picking because restaurants and schools are closed in the crisis, workers have no work. No wonder they are asking for a field hospital in case the virus hits their clustered housing.

As Florida welcomes thousands of well-off new residents every year, agricultural areas are left out of the boom. A key word in Asbed's description is "imported." Less than 30% of agricultural workers speak English. The majority are on H-2A Temporary Agricultural Visas. These run for a maximum of three years and require return to home country for at least three months while employers apply for each one-year renewal. There are fees to be paid, paperwork to do, and dislocation required each time. Described in the statute as necessary for "jobs Americans won't do," these permits have no minimum-wage guarantee, no full-time full-year guarantee, no Social Security and no Medicare benefits. Yet they are very burdensome to keep up. US government estimates put the proportion of completely undocumented farmworkers at 70%. Many of these are probably lapsed, trapped, H-2A visa holders.

The National Farm Workers Ministry calls it like it is: “slavery.” Cesar Chavez, who organized farmworkers in California in the 1950s, knew that American citizenship was the most important key to being treated as an equal. An “imported” worker, temporary visa or not, is just being trafficked by our own government for the commercial interests and the pliable lawmakers who have encouraged the elimination of these originally American jobs. “Guest worker” programs have never worked anywhere.

Farm labor deserves the respect, decent wages and gratitude of every American who eats. In the mid-20th century, farm work was still a family enterprise and an entry-level job for teen-agers and college kids working their way through. The school year even used to begin after Labor Day to allow the children to bring in the harvest with their parents and neighbors. With the influx of cheap foreign labor and the falling birthrate in the USA, agribusiness, contract labor brokers and government intervention have made it into slave labor by people who don’t even have the language to ask for what they need. We have created an immigration policy—both enforced and unenforced--that destroys the health and dignity of work. Yet churches and well-meaning non-profit organizations support illegal (“sanctuary”) immigration, and that is what lapsed H-2A visas have become. Generations of grinding poverty.

Florida’s Governor Ron DeSantis has asked for E-verify, but the agriculture industry is one of the biggest opponents of requiring that farm workers have either verifiable citizenship or verifiable work visas. No one wants to pay more for food, but it is immoral to let farmworkers suffer in slavery. USDA stats for 2020 show that American household expenditure on food, almost half of which is dining out, is less than 10% of disposable income. The poorer the country, like Pakistan, the more of the household budget (over 50%) is spent on food. The US is the wealthiest country with the cheapest food in the world. Those who come here think it is a free society, with opportunity and upward mobility. For lapsed-visa agricultural workers it is not. This is not a problem Walmart and Publix can solve; elected officials at the state and federal level must enforce the law, and if they don’t like it, fix it. If the result is having to pay more for tomatoes, I will happily do so to help end slavery in America.