

Mennonite Central Committee

Economic Globalization Effects Migrant Farm Workers

By

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Globalization has affected the migrant farm worker in many ways. Today I will discuss three areas that I believe are the most important. The first will be laws that have failed to protect the migrant farm worker. Second the affects of NAFTA on the migrant farm worker and its affects on the border.¹ Thirdly I will discuss the forgotten people in the United States. As a migrant farm worker for twenty years I have expressed all of these concerns that will discuss.

My name is Alberto Rodriguez. I was born in Greeley, Colorado and migrated there until the age of nineteen. I have worked in sugar beat, onions, tomatoes, pinto beans, corn, wheat, cantaloupe and watermelons mostly in the Colorado area.² I would like to give you a glimpse into my life as a migrant farm worker not so you can feel sorry for me but so all of you can understand where I am coming from. My father and mother only had a grade school education but they both understood that we (my sister and I) needed to acquire an education. They would tell us that they would work hard so we did not have to. In Colorado we lived in a three room shack that did not have indoor plumbing or heating. We had to pump our water out of a well each day. We cooked and heated the house with an old wooden stove that must have been at least as old as the shack. As migrant students we were removed from school in March and not enrolled until September which was the next school year. In Colorado we worked from six in the

¹ See, North American Free Trade Agreement, <http://www.mac.doc.gov/nafta/>.

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morning until six in the afternoon. Our family worked by themselves most of the time. My family worked by the acre or by the pieces so this allowed us to work at our own pace. Life was very difficult for my family and me but look at me now here I am talking to you about my life as a migrant farm worker. I am one of the lucky ones. I made it out and acquired an education. Both my sister and I have an education something that I think would have not happened if we had not experienced the hard work in the Colorado fields.

We have spoken about how globalization has affected the farmer but not the farm worker. The first point I want to touch on is laws. How have laws or the lack of laws affected the migrant farm worker? I want to start this point with the story of my father and his brothers. My father worked in the Colorado fields until six years ago. On November of 2003 he passed away from cancer that was caused by the many pesticides that were used in the many fields he worked in. As a child I can remember planes spraying over our heads while we were still on the fields. They did not care about the workers only about the crops. At a young age I did not understand why they did such a thing. As a scholar in the making I now understand that it was all about the crops and the money that could be made from a bigger and better product. Laws did not protect my father or my family from the pesticides that were used in the fields. The story does not stop with the death of my father. My father was the last of eight brothers in his family. All of his siblings died from some sort of cancer that was a result of pesticides. I understand that farmers have to compete with global markets and genetically engineered products but why at the expense of peoples lives. It was not until recently that laws have passed to protect farm workers.

Laws that make sure that workers have restrooms, water, and age limits have all been passed in last ten years.³ Unfortunately my family did not get to benefit from these laws. One of

³ See, The Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act, <http://www.dol.gov/esa/regs/statutes/whd/0001.mspa.htm>.

the laws or aids to farmers that have affected migrant farm workers is subsidies. Subsidies pay farmers not to plant in order to allow prices to rise. The fact of the matter is the less the farmer plants the less the migrant has to work with. In the 1980s farm workers did not have the work they needed to support their families. We started to see a shift from farm working to the processing and manufacturing sector due to the lack of work in the fields.⁴ By the middle of the 1980s the United States saw a major need for farm workers. The United States government countered the void of farm workers with IRCA in 1986.⁵ The United States Government hoped to make it easier for farm workers to work and inject a new wave of workers to the United States. Other programs like H2 and the recent talks between President Bush and Mexican President Fox all revealed that a new wave of farm workers would arrive in the United States.

The next point I want to discuss with you is NAFTA and the effects it has had on the migrant farm worker. In recent years we have seen many American companies move into Mexico and inject new jobs into the Northern Mexican border. NAFTA has brought many Mexican workers from the Southern part of Mexico in search for a better life. The fact of the matter is that when these workers get to an area like Matamoros, Reynosa or Juarez they are faced with competition. Many of the companies or maquiladoras have them compete for wages with little or no benefits.⁶ Most of the Mexican migrants have sold all their belongings to make the journey and cannot return to their homes. Faced with subhuman working and living conditions they must make a decision, most often the decision is to swim the Rio Bravo. So the

⁴ See, S. Beth Atkin, *Voices from the Fields: Children of Migrant Farmworkers Tell Their Stories*, (Little, Brown: June, 1993) and Ruben Martinez, *Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail*, (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001).

⁵ See, Chad Richardson, *Batos, Bolillos, Pochos, & Pelados: Class & Culture on the South Texas Border*, (Austin : University of Texas Press, 1999) 162.

⁶ See, Ciudad Juárez, México, <http://ciudadjuarez.usconsulate.gov/>. Reports on the Dangers of the Border also S. Alcala Iberri, *Las Muertas de Juárez*, and Víctor Ronquillo, *Las Muertas de Juárez: Crónica de Una Larga Pesadilla*, (Mexico, D.F. : Planeta Mexicana, 1999).

same program that was decision to benefit both sides of the border in turn has made conditions for Mexicans very difficult.⁷

Once in the United States they are in direct competition with American migrants. As a child I can remember my father telling us he did not like the idea that wages were being pushed down by the influx of undocumented workers. He did not like the idea that a field would be filled with twenty to thirty workers when we were only four. The fact of the matter is that this is another reason why many farm workers move to the processing and manufacturing fields. In recent years the United States has seen this new wave of Mexican migrant workers moving in the processing and manufacturing fields leaving the same void for American farmers. Thus we come to see the new talks between Bush and Fox.⁸

The role of the migrant work has changed. Migrant workers have faced many obstacles in their endeavors. At the beginning of my life as a migrant farm worker I was faced with substandard working and living conditions. As life went on we were faced with laws that did not have any concern for the farm worker. As time went on we were faced with IRCA and NAFTA and other programs that did not improve the working or lifestyle of the migrant farm worker. Even though workers have moved into other sectors in the American job market leaving a void for farmers, wages have not improved for migrant workers. In the 1980s my family was making twenty dollars to clean an acre of sugar beats by 1995 they were making eighteen dollars for the same work. Although living costs had dramatically increased the wage rate had gone down. My father used to tell my mother what can we do this is all we know.

⁷ See, *Bordering the Future: Challenges and Opportunity In the Texas Border Region*, Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts July 1998.

⁸ See, Fox's Immigration Agenda Touches Nerves in Congress, Agricultural Personnel Management Program, <http://are.berkeley.edu/APMP/pubs/agworkvisa/nerves090801.html>.

The migrant worker and the Mexican have become the forgotten invisible people of America. Mexican workers are all around us and we do not seem to recognize them for their work. They are the people that process your food, cut your lawns, clean your houses and serve your food. In fact I tell my classes at the University of Texas Pan American that it does not matter what area they are in Texas, Colorado, Kansas or Washington if they want to see or meet a Mexican go to the local university or college cafeteria and you will find them. The fact MCC flew me here from South Texas to speak to you when all they had to do was go to the Bethel College cafeteria and speak to their staff. There are people there that are from the same area and have experienced the same things I have.⁹ But I do thank you for inviting me here to speak to you and MCC.

I have been one of the lucky ones that have been able to break the vicious cycle and acquired social mobility. Statistics are not in favor of the migrant worker. South Texas has a fifty percent drop out rate. We as the human race need to help migrant workers move out of the vicious cycle and better their lives.¹⁰

⁹ See, Sergio Arau, *A Day Without a Mexican*, 2004.

¹⁰ See, Richardson, Batos, Bolillos, Pochos, & Pelados.