

# Who Makes the Garden Grow ?

## Poverty and Abundance in the Willamette Valley

by Roberto Franco

“If they don’t like it here, they should go back where they came from. They live better here than they do in Mexico.” These are commonly heard expressions in the Willamette Valley, where thousands of farmworkers—paupers in a land of opportunity—live and work year round or during the peak harvest season. It is not necessarily true that they live better here. By the standards of the American dream (clean and affordable housing, fair wages, and fair labor treatment, to name a few) they do not. It is also not true that we really want them to go home. We need them because no one else would pick the strawberries? Who would work in the nurseries? Who would process our gardenburger patties or our frozen fruits and vegetables?



Photos courtesy of the author and the Farmworker Housing and Development Corporation

Who would harvest those beautiful Christmas trees?

In 1996 approximately 47,000 migrant and seasonal farmworkers lived in Marion County, the heart of the Willamette Valley, accounting for about \$90 million dollars of the agricultural harvest in that county alone. The number of farmworkers in the valley is probably greater if we include those who are not registered with the state employment department or any other employment agency. In 1993 Oregon crops that depend heavily on the labor of migrant and seasonal farmworkers had a total value of almost \$600 million, a fifth of the state’s three billion dollar farm and ranch sales that year. The Willamette Valley contributes nearly 50 percent of the state’s total value in agriculture.

How does the Willamette Valley produce such wealth? The answer is the farmworker; in Marion county 40 percent of the total crop by value is picked by farmworkers. The pittance that trickles down to them from the growers indicates the priorities of our state officials and many of the

growers: profits and growers first, well-being of farmworkers second.

Growers, on the other hand, claim that all workers are covered by the state’s minimum wage. They brag about hardworking employees earning seven to eight dollars per hour. The truth is that growers paying the piece rate often do not keep track of hours worked. Many growers pay in cash and still subtract for social security. Reports and unofficial surveys made by Portland newspapers indicate that a large percentage of farmworkers make less than four dollars an hour. PCUN, Oregon’s farmworkers’ union and largest Latino organization, no longer refers migrant workers with complaints to the Bureau of Labor and Industries, which does not levy fines for violations. Instead, officials at PCUN send them to attorneys who seek penalties for underpayment. Spokespeople for the state claim that their priority is compliance, not fines. Unfortunately, without penalties too many contractors and growers play the long odds against getting caught.

Farmworkers are exempt from the protection of many federal labor laws. The official earnings of hired farmworkers continue to be well below those of all wage and salary workers and have fallen further behind other workers since 1990. In some



cases, real wages have declined. After paying for room, board, transportation, and clothing and sending a small amount of money to their families in Mexico or Central America, most pickers have little money left.

Poverty strikes especially hard at migrant farmworkers' families who face cultural and linguistic difficulties and are ineligible for welfare. The National Agricultural Workers survey indicated that in 1990 one-half of the seasonal agricultural services workers lived below the federal poverty level. Nationwide, more than 50 percent of farmworker households live below the poverty level, compared to 12 percent for all households.

The average family income of farmworkers in the valley ranges between \$10,000 and \$14,000 a year. One does not have to be a rocket scientist to figure out that even if the cost of housing for these people is 30 percent of their family budget, a family income of \$13,000 will never make ends meet. Yet, despite high unemployment among farmworkers and an inadequate supply of housing, the growers' and canners' lobbyists push for access to cheaper and more abundant labor.

Migrant workers who come to the Willamette Valley as contractors' crews are normally housed in camps owned by the contractor. In June of 1995, there was a total of 307 such labor camps registered with the state. Recently, it was reported in *Willamette Week* that camps in the valley are inspected by the state on average only once every seventeen years and that state officials seldom enforce rules or collect levied fines.

A typical labor camp consists of single-room cabins housing from six to 25 individuals, with a countertop two-burner gas stove and a round-shouldered refrigerator in one corner, a picnic table in another corner, and several bunkbeds in the back. These camps can become profitable centers for growers and contractors. Workers may be charged excessively high fees for lodging and food and for rides to and from the fields, banks, and stores. A camp owner or manager can collect \$6,000-7,000 in fees and rents from crews just during the month-long strawberry harvest.

Housing in town for year-round or settled workers is not any better. In 1991 the Oregon Farm Labor Housing survey reported that 40 percent of this housing is



*A typical labor camp consists of single-room cabins housing up to 25 people.*

in very poor condition, and 25 percent is totally beyond repair. Old motels and houses and deteriorated apartments are still the only kind of non-subsidized housing farmworkers can afford. It is typical to find nine individuals in a one-bedroom apartment. During the peak season, it is common to see workers and families living in the fields, parks, cars, established shelters, or even along river banks.

Is there a way out? In an ideal world, all the growers would work with activist organizations to provide subsidized housing for farmworkers. All the growers would spend, as some have done, hundreds of thousands of dollars to construct safe and sanitary farm labor housing. All these properties would be responsibly managed. The workers would get better wages and working conditions. The Immigration and Naturalization Service would not arbitrarily raid farms and canneries

implemented, and consumers could still buy their fresh vegetables and fruits at low prices.

In the real world, however, legislators cater to the growers and the farm owners who want to continue to earn high profits by lowering costs in a labor-intensive industry. In the real world, too many government officials and politicians ignore the moral issues of farmworkers' labor rights. They attempt to make labor more abundant without really protecting the current agricultural workforce, without assuring reasonable shelter, without providing real protection from exploitation. In the real world, we do not pay a fair price for produce.

Yet, none of us will break our backs for minimum wages; none of us will put our families into danger by living in substandard housing; and none of us wants our children exposed to toxic fertilizers and pesticides that farmworkers, including children, breathe every day.

We would not tolerate such working conditions because we are protected by laws that safeguard our health and well-being. To feed, clothe, and house our families under safe conditions is our right. Farm workers, whoever they are and from wherever they come, deserve this basic right.

#### Sources

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*Poverty strikes migrant workers' families the hardest.*

and deport whole families of reliable workers. Growers, in turn, would not feel compelled to support unfair measures in order to cope. All these changes could be

Roberto Franco, Executive Director of the Farmworker Housing Development Corporation, oversees design, development and construction of farmworker housing. He has a Masters degree in Community and Regional Planning from the University of Oregon.