



The Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group

P.O. BOX 608, BELCHERTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS 01007 • PHONE 413/323-4531 • FAX 413/323-9594 • NESAWG@smallfarm.org

Farmworkers Within the Framework of a Sustainable Agriculture

Richard Mandelbaum

CATA organizer and NOFA certified organic grower

Our current food system is based upon exploitation:

- *Exploitation of the land* through its goal of maximizing profits while eroding soil fertility.
- *Exploitation of consumers* by feeding them poisons along with their food.
- *Exploitation of farmers* by squeezing them into debt through forced competition with subsidized corporate agriculture, and
- *Exploitation of farmworkers*, who work and live in conditions far more deplorable than almost any other sector of Society (a notable exception being Native Americans).

As many others involved in this project will no doubt explore the first three of these issues, this paper will focus on farmworkers, who are too often neglected in the debate on sustainability.

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt, on the heels of the Dust Bowl and in the midst of the Great Depression, pushed the National Labor Relations Act through Congress, he made a concession to Southern Democrats. These particular politicians had refused to sign on to the NLRA if labor rights were extended to agricultural workers, the reason being that they did not want African American workers to gain equal rights to organize. As a result agricultural workers,

along with domestic workers, the other sector dominated at that time by African Americans, were the only workers excluded from rights granted by the NLRA, a situation which remains unchanged today. Besides it being a flagrant human rights violation to exclude any sector of society from legal protections afforded everyone else, this injustice indicates a wider state of affairs: Although slavery ended over one hundred thirty years ago, the United States system of agriculture continues as a legacy of a slave based agricultural economy,, from its exported-oriented monoculture controlled by ever fewer and wealthier hands, to its oppression of workers in subhuman conditions.

A clear example of this is the INS sponsored H2A program, and its newly expanded version, the H2C program, often referred to in government doublespeak as "guestworker programs." H2A workers, most often Mexican citizens, arrive at the United States under contract with a particular farmer. They have no right to seek other employment. In other words, if they quit or are fired, they are deported. When the season ends, they are sent home. Although this clearly falls far short of slavery, it also falls far short of freedom. H2A creates an environment in which immigrants working under abusive conditions feel an enormous pressure to tolerate that abuse, or be sent home without the

money they had been counting on for their families. Provisions that the employer make a sincere effort to recruit local workers first, and that require state agencies to certify a labor shortage, are rarely enforced. In June of 1998 the General Accounting Office issued a report in which it definitively concluded that there is "no agricultural labor shortage now", and yet the Department of Labor approved 99% of H2A applications through 1996 and 1997. In addition, the provisions to protect workers' rights, much touted by the pro-H2A lobby, are, the GAO concedes, "difficult to enforce." H2A is becoming increasingly common in the Northeast, as more and more farmers, clearly seeing the benefits the program offers them, submit applications to the DOL.

H2A is merely an exaggerated form of the everyday reality of all farmworkers in the U. S. Enforcement of labor, pesticide, and housing laws is token at best; we have dealt with this firsthand in our work in Southern New Jersey and Pennsylvania. In truth workers have little recourse when, for example, they have been sprayed with pesticides while working in the fields (something which occurs farm more often than most people realize). Reporting to an agency such as the Department of Labor or the EPA results only in a slap on the wrist, and often workers are fired in retaliation, or at the very least not rehired the following season. The intimidation is even greater for those workers who are undocumented, as the INS exponentially increases its enforcement through workplace raids. Thus we see that while pro-worker laws are given little more than lip service, anti-worker laws such as those pertaining to immigration status are being vigorously enforced by the government.

All this amounts to an effective subsidy to agricultural employers: Instead of responding in a "free Market" by improving conditions and benefits, employers are not held accountable to regulations. Instead of granting visas to those workers whom our

current food system relies upon, our government intimidates and deports them while creating a program to bring in workers on a quasi-indentured status. The only recourse farmworkers have at present is to organize and put direct pressure on growers to improve conditions. However, this too is often thwarted: In June of this year the INS raided a mushroom farm in Berks County, PA, in which workers had voted to unionize, despite an internal INS working order to not interfere in labor disputes.

In its report *A Time to Act*, the USDA National Commission on Small Farms recognized these policies as subsidies to large scale agriculture to the detriment of small-scale family farmers, "who cannot compete with large farms because they have access to cheap labor." The report goes on to state that "ultimately, small farmers will earn fair incomes only if farmworkers on large farms are paid fair incomes." This points to the need not only for more dialogue and understanding between family farmers and farmworkers, but even more so a need for strategic alliances to be formed against corporate agricultural interests. This requires much more than an alliance of convenience due to the existence of "a common enemy"; it requires the promotion of an alternative economic model, that of sustainability. Such an alliance will require leaps of faith for many who are accustomed to animosity between farmers and farm labor, but the alternative is for small farmers to continue to play by the rules written by corporate agriculture, a game they are losing and will continue to lose.

This brings us to another point. The term sustainability is in danger of losing all meaning as it is co-opted by corporations in the same way they are co-opting "organic". The sustainable agriculture movement will ultimately fail if it does not effectively distance itself from corporate interests by making clear that the definition of sustainability is inherently opposed to the interests of agribusiness. The sustainable agriculture movement will fail if

agricultural sustainability is not debated within the broader context of political and social sustainability, and if it fails to include social justice for all sectors of society as one of its core goals. Some will inevitably argue that such a broad definition will weaken the sustainable agriculture movement rather than strengthen it. This is not the case, and the need for such an inclusive and expansive outlook will become clearer as we realize that at its core, the issue of sustainability is not an economic or political question. It is not a question of improved environmental regulations, fairer economic policies, appropriate technology or progressive farming methods. At its core this is a question of culture.

In pro-sustainability circles the terms corporate agriculture and agribusiness are often used interchangeable, but in fact they are not synonymous. "Corporate agriculture" refers to a particular economic scale and structure, whereas "agribusiness" refers to a mentality. It is a belief system. A farmer who owns ten acres can be an agribusinessman as much as the CEO of Monsanto, so long as he or she views the land and workers *primarily* as economic resources to be exploited for maximum profit. To the farmworker interested in decent wages and a safe, respectful work environment, it matters little what size the farm is. Small farmers are often the worst abusers of pesticides, the worst exploiters of workers, the worst caretakers of the land. We who are dedicating our lives to a sustainable future must make it clear that it is not corporate agriculture per se that we are opposed to; it is agribusiness in any way, shape, or form.

What is needed then, is an alliance to be formed amongst the various groups opposed to the agribusiness mentality. This would include small scale organic and sustainable farmers, farm workers' organizations, environmentalists, labor organizations, and concerned members of the

public. As a regional, grass roots farmworkers' organization, we at CATA have begun this process of forging alliances with each of these other groups, and have found that we share many overlapping interests and concerns. Although we have far to go, and much more to learn, what we have found so far is the following:

- Family farmers are realizing that it is their interest to fight for improvements in farmworkers' living and working conditions in order to level the playing field in what is now a subsidized agriculture weighted heavily toward agribusiness.
- Labor organizations are realizing that the existence of an underclass of oppressed workers drags down wages and conditions for all laborers in the U.S.
- Environmentalists are realizing that achieving justice for farmworkers will by definition reduce pesticide use and groundwater contamination.
- And similarly, consumer groups are realizing that by protecting farmworkers they will de facto be protecting their own families. For example, current EPA pesticide tolerances are based upon consumers; there are no occupational tolerance levels. If these levels were set to occupational exposures, as they should be, consumers would be exposed to far fewer chemicals than they are now.

We are already seeing an increase in these sorts of links. Farmers are realizing that they must organize as they are converted more and more into virtual employees of the multinationals. Labor and environmentalists have teamed up to fight NAFTA and fast track legislation.¹ Farmers are linking themselves directly to consumers through innovative ideas such as CSA's. The farmworkers' equivalent of this would perhaps be workers' cooperatives, which

could like directly to consumers the same as CSA's do. Environmentalists have allied themselves with organic and sustainable farmers, and the list goes on.

These alliances need to be solidified and taken further. For example, in Europe organic agriculture standards include provisions for improved working conditions. Unfortunately, there seems to be little interest on the part of the Northeast Organic Farming Association in such a move, and there will inevitably be even less interest within the USDA as they institute the National Organic Program. Yet it is just this type of holistic approach that is needed. In these days when consumers are protesting with their pocketbooks in shoe stores against sweatshops in foreign lands, they should also be protesting with their pocket books in the supermarkets, not only against chemical agriculture as they seek out organic produce, but also against the sweatshop like conditions on farm too many of our farms.

This idea of sustainability that we are putting forth to the public is ultimately a question of ethics. We certainly must address specific economic, technological, and political issues, but if we lost sight of this underlying premise, "sustainability" will inevitably be usurped and degenerate into a buzzword for minor reform, when what is needed is far more fundamental.

1. Interesting, the environmental degradation exacerbated by NAFTA has been cited by the National Heritage Institute in San Francisco as one of the major causes of cross-border migration of Mexicans to the U.S., most of whom end up working in agriculture. And so we see that these governmental policies taken as a whole are self-reinforcing.