

Keep the Union at Bay

The Racial Dimensions of Anti-Union Practices in US Agriculture and the Long Fight for Migrant Farm-Labor Representation

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Conclusion

Beyond the Politics of Plight

Upon signing the labor contract with the Farm-labor Organising Committee and the Mount Olive Pickle Company, many growers have left agriculture altogether and taken advantage of the tobacco buyout to just “take the money and go”. About five hundred growers simply left the North Carolina Growers Association, in an attempt to circumvent the labor agreement and continue to utilize the traditional exploitative labor practices it banned. The growers who remained in the association have either continued to externalize their production costs on the workers or complied with the union in its campaigns for better wages and working conditions. These four major responses to the labor campaign reflect two contradictory dynamics: on the one hand, they reflect some growers’ continued identification with agribusiness and their attempt to survive in the market by externalizing their labor costs on the workers; on the other hand, they reflect other growers’ identification with the workers in their demand for better working conditions for both groups.

Ten years after the bargain agreement, growers have been further losing ground. According to the North Carolina Farm Bureau, “approximately 50 percent of tobacco growers stopped growing after the buyout; smaller growers were forced out, and the 2,000 to 3,000 remaining farms got larger” (quoted in Oxfam 2011, 45). Strict dependence on the market has made it overwhelmingly difficult to survive on the land. “The risk-to-reward ratio is badly out of balance. [...] The grower is taking all the risk”, commented a grower in Sampson County, North Carolina (quoted in Oxfam 2011, 50). In this context, it cannot be expected that many North Carolina farmers will change their attitude towards the union. It is, however, important to highlight that farmers play a crucial role in this transition.

In his fascinating analysis of tobacco in North Carolina, Peter Benson focuses largely on the growers’ experience of the farm crisis. Benson introduces the case of Dwight Watson, a tobacco farmer who drove a tractor into Washington, D.C. wearing an ill-fitting military helmet and supposedly carrying explosive to publicize what he called the “plight” of tobacco growers (Benson 2012, 16). Benson quotes the social critic Susan Faludi (1999) and maintains that she would probably consider Dwight Watson as an ex-

ample of what she calls the “betrayal of the American man”. Citing scholar and social theorist Lauren Berlant, Benson moves beyond the notion of betrayal to speak of “imperilled privilege”, a “social strategy of reasserting and maintaining structures of comparative advantage and discrediting policies that aim to bring about a more equitable and just society as excessive concessions to undeserving constituencies and grave threats to the tacitly white family as the national icon” (Lipsitz 2006, 454-6; Berlant 1997, 6, quoted in Benson 2012, 16). The description that Benson provides of North Carolina growers fits the labor conditions of farm workers that we have so far described. According to Benson, the imperilled privilege of farmers unveils a sense of “power and entitlement at the same time as it was furled by farm loss and the feeling that power is slipping away” (Benson 2012, 19) In a sense, whenever we speak of farmers we find ourselves in a contradictory position which juxtaposes traditional privileges with current economic hardships - a situation whereby the recruitment of vulnerable farm-workers looks like an easy scapegoat. Benson speaks of the “plighted citizen” to describe the social construction of an innocent citizen forced to endure a situation of misfortune and disadvantage. At the same time, he goes on to say that

Reference to the plight of tobacco farmers seems congenial [...] but there is a political valence that is linked to the depiction of economic crisis and hard times as a uniform, national condition, the concealment of race and class stratification, and the appropriation of victimhood and discrimination for the benefit of white constituencies. (Benson 2012, 26)

In this sense, the politics of plight and victimhood help explain the apparent legitimacy regarding the continued abuse of migrant workers. In fact, victimhood and the collective feeling of being conspired against give legitimacy to any attempt to externalize economic decline onto others. In a sense, it can be said that white farmers hide the exploitative relationship they maintain with farm-workers behind victimhood and the politics of plight. In this perspective, it is true that farmers “have a lot more in common with farm-workers than they have with corporate agribusiness giants” (Velásquez 1998, 25). At the same time, we could paraphrase David Roediger and say that the farmer “creates a pornography of his former life [...] in order to insure that he will not slip back into the old ways or act out half-suppressed fantasies” (Roediger 1999, 95).

As I write, different sets of data have highlighted the continued emergency facing rural America. In December 2017, former farmer Debbie Weingarten used recent data from the Farm Household Income Forecast to expose the increase of suicides on US farms. According to the 2017 Farm Household Income Forecast (USDA 2017), farmers have experienced a 50 percent drop in net farm income since 2013. As a consequence, “slightly

more than half of farm households earn positive off-farm income". In other words, farmers must secure off-farm income to compensate for prices that remain below the cost of production. Quoting the Centre for Disease and Control Prevention study *Suicide Rates by Occupational Group*, Debbie Weingarten observed that people working in agriculture have a suicide rate higher than any other occupation (Weingarten, Mulkern 2017). In commenting on these data, psychologist and Iowa farmer Mike Rosmann wrote that "the rate of self-imposed [farmer] death rises and falls in accordance with their economic well-being ... Suicide is currently rising because of our current farm recession" (quoted in Weingarten, Mulkern 2017). Over the same months, a survey by the American Farm Bureau Federation and the National Farmers Union have shown that 74% of farmers and farm workers have been directly impacted by the opioid epidemic as well as 45% of rural adults (NFU 2017). AFBF President Zippy Duvall commented "we've known for some time that opioid addiction was a serious problem in farm country, but numbers like these are heartbreaking" (quoted in NFU 2017). In general, the farm crisis is becoming an emergency. In this sense, improving the living conditions in rural America requires that we abandon economic nostalgia and dissect the neoliberal forces that have contributed to destabilize rural communities before they deteriorate into conservative extremism (Benson 2012). Recognizing the interdependence of all rural actors and encouraging farmers to demand corporate responsibility is vital in order to challenge the ongoing racism and labor exploitation that pervades our societies. In this sense, making sure that growers become sensitive to the workers' demand for better working conditions is the first step towards reducing economic violence and improving democracy and labor conditions at all levels of the food-chain.

