

DANGER AND DEATH IN THE TOBACCO FIELDS

By Dick Meister

Amid all the well-deserved concern over the deadly effects of tobacco on smokers, we've largely overlooked tobacco's other major victims the workers who harvest the poisonous stuff for the great profit of tobacco companies, often because they have virtually no other way to make a living.

Most work in the fields of North Carolina, the country's leading tobacco producer, Every summer, nearly 100,000 harvesters are at work in the state's tobacco fields, some as young as 12, most of them Mexican immigrants. The workers' pay and working and living conditions are truly abominable.

Year after year, thousands of the workers are afflicted with "green tobacco sickness," which is caused by overexposure to the highly toxic nicotine in tobacco leaves that's absorbed into their bodies.

Victims feel a general weakness or shortness of breath, severe headaches, vomiting, dizziness, cramps, heightened blood pressure or speeded-up heart rates. At the least, they break out in rashes. The symptoms frequently last for several days.

Workers' body temperatures, already high because of the southern heat in which they work, are raised even higher by the nicotine, which sometimes leads to dehydration and heat strokes that kill them.

Yet many workers get little or no medical attention. They're lucky if they even get rest breaks during working hours. Most work for growers who do not provide health care benefits and who are exempt from the law that requires employers to make Workers Compensation payments for employees who are hurt on the job.

Workers whose productivity declines because of tobacco sickness face firing or being turned over to government authorities for deportation, as do those who dare complain about working conditions or demand union rights. Employers are well aware that there are many more desperately poor immigrants to take the place of fired or deported workers.

One-fourth of the workers are paid less than the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour, most of the others barely above the minimum.

Living conditions, described as "inhumane" in recent reports by the AFL-CIO and others, generally are as bad as working conditions. Most workers live in crowded, dilapidated, frequently rat-infested shacks in labor camps or in stifling, broken-down trailers near fields that are sprayed regularly with dangerous pesticides.

Finally, however, there's genuine hope for change. It rests primarily with the AFL-CIO's Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), which has helped thousands of workers in other crops in North Carolina and elsewhere win decent treatment.

Backed by an array of community and religious groups, FLOC has been waging a nationwide drive seeking collective bargaining agreements from growers to improve pay and conditions. They've pressed their demands by tactics such as threatening to lead boycotts of the companies that buy the growers' crops for manufacturing cigarettes and other tobacco products. They're aiming as well at the supermarket chains and others that sell the products.

The main target has been R.J. Reynolds, which alone manufactures just about one of every three cigarettes bought in this country. FLOC and its allies are attempting to force Reynolds and other tobacco companies to demand that their grower-suppliers improve pay and working conditions or lose their business.

But realistically, what are the chances of success in a drive to provide

decent treatment for the highly exploited and until now virtually powerless tobacco workers?

FLOC President Baldemar Velasquez says the chances are good, despite the great wealth and political influence of those who are resisting the demands of the union and its growing numbers of supporters.

As evidence that it can be done, Velasquez cites the union's five-year long boycott that in 2004 finally forced a major North Carolina corporation, the Mount Olive Pickle Co., to raise the price it paid for cucumbers as a way to finance higher pay for the company's workers. Mount Olive also agreed to allow union organizers to circulate in its labor camps.

There's also the example of the grape boycott waged in the sixties by the United Farm Workers led by Cesar Chavez. The odds were at least as heavily against the UFW, and we know how that turned out, don't we.

The struggle in behalf of the workers is certain to continue in any case, the struggle to erase what, as Velasquez notes, is a national shame "the deplorable condition of the tobacco workforce that remains voiceless, powerless and invisible to mainstream America."

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