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# **Summary Input from the Roots of Change Fund Workforce Workgroup**

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## **ROC Workforce Workgroup Summary “Meaningful Livelihoods”**

### **I. Problem Identification for the Food System Workforce (focused on agricultural labor)**

#### **Poor or no personal Relationships with Employers and/or the Anglo Community**

The lack of respect for people who produce food, both farmers and farm workers, has been exacerbated by the decades, if not centuries, of fighting between the two parties. In California the relationship between farmers and farmworkers has been weak and has not maximized the potential market power, political power and human power a healthy relationship between the two could yield.

Although there are differing perspectives on why this rift exists—cultural divide, historical baggage, racism, etc. having workers and their communities divided from the greater community where they work and live is a serious underlying cultural problem.

The public perception of farm workers is a perennial problem due to employers and the anglo community not having personal relationships with farm workers.

#### **Low Self-esteem & Poor Public Perception**

The public image of farm work, including the image held by employers, deeply impacts the self-image that farmworkers have of themselves.

##### **Physical Isolation**

Often times, workers leave their families in order to work and send them money. The physical distance causes a tremendous amount of emotional and mental distress, most notably depression and substance abuse. More than 95% of all agricultural workers in California are foreign-born, of which 96% are Mexican-born. The average age is 31. 64% are married, but 28% of them do not have their spouses living in the household. 54% are parents, but 26% live apart from their children.<sup>1</sup>

##### **Cultural Isolation**

The “illegal alien” immigration status of the majority of farmworkers leads to a plethora of cultural and financial barriers that cause societal isolation for workers. 96% of California farm workers speak Spanish as their primary language, 53% do not speak English and 57% cannot read any English.<sup>2</sup>

##### **Little Education**

Among California farm workers, 63% have completed up to a 6<sup>th</sup> grade education, 27% up to 11<sup>th</sup> grade and 10% 12<sup>th</sup> or higher.<sup>3</sup>

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### **Poor Retention and No Re-Generation of the Farm Labor Force**

"Kids of farmworkers don't want to be farm workers because their father doesn't get respect." (— quote from workforce workgroup)

It is unclear there will ever be a day when the son or daughter of a farm worker will want to follow in the footsteps of his or her father or mother. The problem of poor retention of existing workers is one that is linked to other problems, such as the relationship between worker and farm owner, work conditions, benefits, pay, and immigration status.

"70% of farm laborers are ineligible for unemployment, medical, SSI—but employers and employees are paying for it anyway." (— quote from workforce workgroup)

### **Lack of Respect**

The human dignity lost when many foreign workers enter into California farm work affects their decision to return to work, and often keeps them from encouraging their children to work in the same work or industry.

### **Lack of Adequate Housing**

The type of dwelling inhabited by the majority of California farmworkers in 2003 – 04 was the single-family home (62%). Another 29% lived in apartments, 6% in mobile homes, 2% roomed in dormitory or barracks-style housing, and 1% lived in duplexes and triplexes. Nearly all workers (96%) reported living off-farm in a property not owned or administered by their present employer.<sup>4</sup>

Although the above statistics may lead one to believe that the majority of workers are living comfortably in a single-family home, it is likely the farthest from the truth. The common scenario that is seen in both home and apartments is that dozens of workers live together often sharing one single room. During the ROC Fund Workforce Workgroup Central Valley tour this trend of many workers were living in the same units was evident.

### **Low Wages**

42% of California farm workers earn less than \$10,000 a year, 33% earn between \$10,000 and \$14,999, 20% earn between \$15,000 and \$24,999, and 4% earn \$25,000 or more.<sup>5</sup> In addition, these wages are heavily reduced through additional fees and costs for every transaction that can exploit their undocumented/'illegal' immigration. Hired farmworkers continue to rank among the lowest-paid workers of 14 major occupational groups, while having one of the highest unemployment rates.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Nature of Seasonal Work**

61%<sup>7</sup> of California farm workers have seasonal employment. During the Salinas ROC Fund Workforce Workgroup tour, the group visited several of the top 'pick-up' points in the Salinas Valley for hired farmworkers. The use of contracted labor to fulfill seasonal work is tied to the undocumented immigration status of workers, and the fact that many farmers do not want to take on the liability. Employers are therefore inclined to pass that risk on to a farm labor contractor to incur that liability.

### **No Retirement**

Not only are less than 1% of farm workers provided pension plans, but they pay into a public social security system that they never benefit from. The majority of Mexican-born workers that plan to return to Mexico are not investing in their Mexican social security and will not incur any investment in their years worked in the States. Currently, the

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average number of years that a worker remains in agriculture is 10.9 years.<sup>8</sup> In other words, farmworkers lose close to 11 years of investment in retirement savings.

### **Lack of Health Coverage**

Almost 1 out of 3 farm worker men (32%) have never been to doctor or a clinic in their lives.<sup>9</sup> In comparison to other Californians, farmworkers in the state have an elevated risk of leukemia, stomach, cervical and uterine cancers.<sup>10</sup> Nearly 70% of farm workers in California lack health insurance and of those that were covered, only 7% were provided health coverage through various government-funded programs intended to serve low-income persons.<sup>11</sup>

### **Poor Transportation**

Given that anywhere from 60 to 70% of California workers lack proper immigration status, they also lack proper driving authorization. Nonetheless, 39% of all workers are driving their own car. When unlicensed drivers are pulled over for any traffic violation, their vehicles are impounded for a minimum of 30 days, leading to an impoundment fee that is often more than the value of the vehicle, which inevitably results in the loss of their vehicle.

28% of workers ride with others, 4% take a labor bus, truck or van and 27% go with a 'Raitero'. For those that pay for their rides, 5% pay less than \$10/weekly, 33% pay between \$10 and \$19, 43% pay \$20 to \$29, and 20% pay \$30 or more.<sup>12</sup>

### **High Occupational Hazards**

Agriculture is one of the most hazardous jobs in California with 4 heat-related deaths this summer (2005), monthly pesticide drift exposures, and other occupational illnesses. In 2003 – 04, nearly a quarter (24%) of farmworkers in California reported suffering from at least one musculoskeletal problem. This is 4% higher than in 2001 – 02 and 6% higher than in 1999 – 2000.<sup>13</sup>

## **II. Possible Root Causes**

### **Contracting**

Contracting of pesticide applications, management services, harvesting, packaging, and other services is highly correlated to a loss of civil liability for matters that negatively impact farm workers such as unpaid wages, drift exposure, and bodily damage. Contracted labor, on the other hand, has the benefit of longer terms of employment for workers who may be working various farms/companies/commodities, but for one contractor.

### **Shipper/Packer/Retailer Demands**

Harvesting demands and demands on quality controls, work speed, and quantity push workers to have unrealistic demands. For example, if a worker is required to test for taste, color, or size of a specific fruit he may not be able to pick as much as he would otherwise, and therefore gets paid less.

In addition, shippers dominate trade associations which dominate political agendas.

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“In a perfect world, people would eat the produce that is naturally in season and simultaneously relieve the pressures that force many farmers into using harmful pesticides.” — Phil McGrath, Ventura County Reporter 9/28/05

### **Large Scale Monocropping (Specialization)**

The size of an operation often determines whether or not a farm owner knows the names of all the farm employees in his/her operation. The size of operation may also determine the economies of scale that can allow an operation to pay better wages, provide health insurance, pension or other benefits.

### **Immigration Status**

Farm work pays at a level that does not attract many workers; nor are there other benefits that would recruit and retain domestic workers—such as housing, health coverage, etc. Hence, the only workers willing to work for the level of pay and benefits are foreign, largely Mexican, workers. Due to our existing immigration policy, this workforce is currently here illegally, therefore, 70% of farm labor workers are ineligible for unemployment, medical, and SSI—but employers and employees are paying for it anyway.”

This so-called underground economy is according to Wendell Berry “worse than slavery because slaves were considered assets.”

Immigration status is an additional factor in costs for workers’ ability to get basic services including phone, gas and other utilities that require credit cards, social security numbers or other forms of financial credit that new immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants lack.

### **Lack of constant communication with loved ones**

There is a natural, human need to interact with those that love us and that we love for a healthy mental and emotional life. This is not so easy when your methods and avenues of communication are limited and high cost. Given the bounty of communication technology available to us at this time the feasibility to improving the affordable means of communication between workers and their loved no longer should be as grave as that of previous generations of foreign farm workers.

### **Seasonality**

The short growing season and pseudo dispensability existence of farmworkers is affected by seasonality. If crops were diversified then workers could spread their work out over a longer part of the year. The agricultural sector needs to address the natural cycle of agricultural commodities, and how various operations can be coordinated in order to maximize the number of days each worker is employed. This coordination exists with other resources, like water, where the scarcity and seasonality of its supply is managed much more efficiently and creatively.

### **Historical Lack of Relationship between Farm worker and Farmer**

### III. Suggested Fundamental Solutions

#### Popular Enforcement through Popular Governance

- GOVERNANCE through OWNERSHIP. Integrated ownership/production/marketing/distribution is the best way for governance. Taking the Organic Valley structure a step further. “Unless we tackle the pressure of the retailer/shipper structure of demands we are always going to be in the same situation.” (—quote from workforce workgroup)
- POPULAR GOVERNANCE. There are several ideas that relate to popular governance: For example, there are over 100 Food Policy Councils in USA. Bellingham Food Coops financing future farms- urbanites financing future farms. This involves the idea of consumers knowing their relationship to the price of food. Supporting a structure that allows us to change purchasing practices so that they truly dictate the labor conditions and livelihoods that are demanded. **Regional Food Labeling Campaign** would have realistic demands on what is in season and would demand indirectly (and directly) less pesticide use and a normal pace of work. Another idea is **Worker Certification**—gold star for sustainable practices conducted/voted by workers of their employer (contractor, grower, shipper, etc.).
- JOINT LIABILITY. The integration through vertical integration is an ownership structure that may take some time to attain and perhaps not always logistically feasible. However, in lieu of such integration the existence of joint liability for products and all production practices, including labor practices, between shippers-farmers-contractors-workers should be in place to ensure that the responsible production and treatment of workers takes place across the board.

#### Retaining and Regenerating the Labor Force through Benefits, Housing, and Earnings

This requires an integrated labor force that is eventually largely domestic or at least retains a legal(documented) Mexican/foreign workforce by being able to provide housing, health coverage, pension, etc.

- HEALTH COVERAGE. Employer provided health coverage will be more affordable through diversified and complementary models that will receive public subsidization for workers and their families. A necessary element to accomplish state and federal medical coverage direct & indirect subsidization of healthcare is that workers have legal residency for qualification! In addition, the Mexican government is developing their subsidized health coverage for Mexican working abroad and their families remaining in Mexico. The Mexican costs for health coverage are particularly affordable and will absolutely allow for greater coverage at a much more affordable cost as well as greater coverage for the families that remain in Mexico. ([www.ucop.edu/cprc/cmhi](http://www.ucop.edu/cprc/cmhi))
- Safe and Affordable TRANSPORTATION. Immigration reform that will legalize workers' status will allow for them to have the option to drive their own vehicles and/or be driven by a licensed driver. In addition, the Agricultural Industries Transportation Services, agricultural worker vanpool program, provides safe and

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- more affordable transportation for workers. The AITS program should be expanded beyond the limited area of coverage it currently services in parts of the Central Valley. The need for this program exists across the state.
- **STABLE WORK.** Attaining year-round work is a balance between seasonality and human resource management. Labor Halls, Labor Planning Zones—could be used as models to foster the regional management of the shared use of labor within a given region. Guest worker programs, such as H2As, have the potential to be incorporated into this type of management system, so that if a worker is invited to work in the U.S. the length of time promised to that worker could be extended for a longer period of time, if not year-round, and for more years. Coordination alone will not combat the existing high levels of seasonality. **Crop diversification** is also needed in order to have longer seasons. Through diversification we will move away from monocropping farms. Diversity can mean planting several varieties of grapes for example, so you can have several weeks of ripening instead of three days. Or you could have greater crop rotation which will allow for greater production throughout the year. Finally, a minimal lengthener of duration of employment is locally demanded harvesting and production rates that would require a normal pace of work, which is slower than today's harvesting rates and would inevitably add to the days of work annually.
  - **Adequate and Affordable HOUSING.** Like health coverage, the availability to provide publicly subsidization of housing options for workers will be multiplicatively higher with the legal residency of the workers that alone will increase the amount of eligible federal and state dollars allotted for each region.
  - **SAFE WORKPLACE.** The willingness and confidence of workers to point out unsafe working conditions and essentially prevent accidents and deaths will be increased with a documented workforce that is free of the fear of deportation. A safe workplace is also very highly related to the level of popular enforcement that is attained.
  - **Pension and Other BENEFITS,** like Paid Holidays and Vacations, Free Meals. The amounts of fringe benefits that can be provided at very low or moderately low costs are worth taking the time to invest in. Public pensions are particularly going to increase with a documented workforce that will receive credit for the payroll investments made daily. In addition, like the health coverage, the Mexican government is developing an investment plan for Mexicans abroad that are not directly paying into the Mexican social security system, but can do so through direct payments in the next year.
  - **OPPORTUNITIES for ADVANCEMENT.** For some workers, farm work is rather stagnant and there seem to be no opportunities to grow and learn. However most farm operations have a great amount of diversity of tasks and jobs, but not a lot of field workers taken on different roles in the operations, like sales. One particular skill that can foster more mobility is Learning English!
  - **Established GRIEVANCE Procedures.** Due to the very informal settings of many farms and the high use of contracting, there is a specific need for employers to develop a grievance procedure so that difficulties, miscommunications,

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mistreatments, etc can be handled appropriately. This process will allow for much greater levels of respect for workers and amongst workers.

- Fair and integrated EARNINGS. In addition to receiving living wages, earnings are a way to further integrate workers into operations. There are many creative ways to foster integration through earnings, which is not the same as piece-rate, quota or production or quality-based incentives, but real integration into the overall operation. Profit-Sharing through bonuses or investment ESOPs are a couple of examples.

It is important to reiterate that all of the above will be more efficiently attained through a workforce that is here legally!.

### **Staying Connected**

The vast availability of communication technology begs for a resourceful and targeted investment in communication technology that will mitigate the physical distance that workers have between their spouses, children and entire families. Prioritization should be made with the states of highest immigration flow: Michoacan 26%, Guanajuato 14%, Jalisco 11% and Oaxaca 10%.<sup>14</sup>

### **Healing Relationships Between Farm workers and Employers/Anglo Community**

Farmers and farm workers have more in common with each other than the general public.

The need to integrated the cultures of farmers and workers is more important today than perhaps ever before, with the hundreds of Minute Men arming themselves along the US-Mexico border and the growing political scapegoating of a failing economy of immigrants 'stealing' jobs and public resources. The need for employers and white Californians to step up and defend the importance of having workers for both financial and moral reasons is imperative!

### **Re-Investment in Mexico Rural Economy to Reduce Labor Supply**

## **IV. Indicators**

Through the exploration of the Workforce Workgroup, it was deciphered that the following indicators could measure the possible impact of a sustainable labor force in the state of California:

Pesticide use, particularly restricted use materials  
Household income, Wages  
Training of occupational hazards and rights  
Families vs. unaccompanied males that are employed  
% of workers employed through contracting  
% of workers living legally in CA  
% of workers with decent living conditions, # of people in one house  
% of workers with health coverage

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> US Department of Labor, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy, Office of Program Economics. 2000. National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS). A Demographic and Employment Profile of United States Farmworkers.

<sup>2</sup> Aguirre International, June 2005. The California Farm Labor Force Overview and Trends from the national Agricultural Workers Survey.

<sup>3</sup> Aguirre International, June 2005. The California Farm Labor Force Overview and Trends from the national Agricultural Workers Survey.

<sup>4</sup> Aguirre International, June 2005. The California Farm Labor Force Overview and Trends from the national Agricultural Workers Survey.

<sup>5</sup> Aguirre International, June 2005. The California Farm Labor Force Overview and Trends from the national Agricultural Workers Survey.

<sup>6</sup> California Institute for Rural Studies. Fall 2001. *Who Does California Farmwork? Rural California Report* Vol. 12, No.3.

<sup>7</sup> Aguirre International, June 2005. The California Farm Labor Force Overview and Trends from the national Agricultural Workers Survey.

<sup>8</sup> Aguirre International, June 2005. The California Farm Labor Force Overview and Trends from the national Agricultural Workers Survey.

<sup>9</sup> The California Endowment. 2001. *Suffering in Silence: Who Are California's Agricultural Workers?*

<sup>10</sup> Mills PK, Kwong S. November 2001. Cancer Incidence in the United Farm Workers of America (UFW), 1987 – 97. *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* 40(5):596 – 603.

<sup>11</sup> The California Endowment. 2001. *Suffering in Silence: Who Are California's Agricultural Workers?*

<sup>12</sup> Aguirre International, June 2005. The California Farm Labor Force Overview and Trends from the national Agricultural Workers Survey.

<sup>13</sup> Aguirre International, June 2005. The California Farm Labor Force Overview and Trends from the national Agricultural Workers Survey.

<sup>14</sup> Aguirre International, June 2005. The California Farm Labor Force Overview and Trends from the national Agricultural Workers Survey.