



◆ SIEMBRA ◆

A Newsletter for Farmworker Friends and Advocates

December 2010

Harvest Season

Jessica Culley



It's a hot, humid night in July when CATA organizers Jessica and Manuel arrive at a peach farm in Southern New Jersey. The workers are scattered – some are cooking in a sweltering kitchen where 24 men share 2 stoves – they heat up the tortillas for their dinner on the bottom of the oven while making a big pot of chicken stew with potatoes. Others are engaged in a nightly soccer game outside – Guatemala versus Mexico. Still others are waiting their turn for a shower after a 10 hour work day.

Everyone is so busy that they had forgotten about the pesticide training that CATA organizers came to do, but after finishing up their cooking, a group of fifteen workers gather in the kitchen around a picnic table, while others stand around the edges leaning against the walls to participate in this “charla” (workshop).

During the training where workers learn about the symptoms of pesticide poisoning, basic first aid, and basic measures that they can take to protect themselves, they also begin to talk about the things in their workplace that problematic. Besides the fact that 24 guys share only 2 stoves for meal preparation, they also share only 3 showers – which are just water pipes sticking out of the walls. They don't always have access to toilets and water for hand washing while they are working. The mattresses on their beds when they arrived were stained, old and not very comfortable. More people gather as the night wanes on – talking about the things they find unfair, but unsure of how to talk to the “patron” (boss). Most of them are new this year, working on a temporary agricultural worker visa, and don't want to jeopardize the small bit of legitimacy that this visa

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***CATA is a non-profit, migrant
farmworker organization
governed by and comprised
of farmworkers who are
actively engaged in the
struggle for better working
and living conditions.***

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A Letter from Nelson's Desk...

The Obama Administration, with a majority in the House of Representatives and in the Senate was unable to promote Comprehensive Immigration Reform in its first two years. This majority was due to the support of the Latino community, who heard his Presidential campaign promise for immigration reform in his first year. Contrary to what was expected, the Obama Administration turned its efforts towards border closure with Mexico and raising the numbers of deportees to more than 600,000 per year. Meanwhile, they justify the lack of action for immigration reform on the opposition of the Republican Party for not making an effort for immigration reform.

That is to say, that both parties, Republican and Democrat, for different reasons and in their own interest, promised heaven and earth but nevertheless in practice have done the contrary of what they say.

The problem is the Latino community in the United States is not politically organized to the extent that it can force political parties and its representatives to fulfill their promises. That is why it is important to recognize this reality and define the course of action for the Latino community in general.

We have indicated in other occasions, that it is nearly impossible to deport 12 million human beings. On the other hand, by pressuring the migrant community they are creating the conditions to force them to leave the country voluntarily. They try to achieve this by pressuring employers not to hire undocumented workers. This in the context of the current economic crisis, creates the environment in which workers in general see their salaries shrunk and those that are unemployed to look for those jobs currently taken by the immigrant community.

CATA addresses this situation through a campaign directed towards enabling the awareness and understanding of both our own Latino community and supporters that it is in their own interest to support the migrant community. In this way, instead of accepting passively the lowering of wages and protections and accepting in low wage jobs, to do the efforts to promote the concept of Job for All, Living Wage Salaries and Adequate Working Conditions and be Treated With Dignity and Respect.

We must promote stopping the persecution of the migrant community, through a Moratorium of deportations. We must continue to work so that the local police stop collaborating with ICE. We must demand unity among the Latino community so that it can act concertedly towards achieving the respect of all politicians and hold them accountable for their promises.

It is the priority of the immigrant community to stay in this country and work to achieve a just Immigration Reform and generate the necessary political power to achieve it. That is why it is our priority to direct our efforts toward achieving this goal.

provides them.

Every year CATA organizers visit anywhere from 75-100 farm labor camps scattered around Southern New Jersey from the cranberry bogs of Burlington County in the north to the tomato fields in southern Cumberland County and over to the farms bordering the Delaware River in the West. On these visits they contact 1000-1500 workers over the course of the summer – providing information on services available to farmworkers, sharing the work of the organization, recruiting participants for pesticide trainings, workers' rights trainings, HIV prevention trainings and more – always striving to build the relationships that allow workers to disclose if and where they have suffered from labor abuses.

Early in the season this year CATA organizer Manuel Guzman met a worker from Oaxaca on a farm in Salem County. This worker told a story of having worked the majority of the previous season at a neighboring farm, but over a period of several months, the owner never paid the workers their complete wages – only enough every week so that they could buy groceries. This group of workers had filed a complaint with the Department of Labor, and despite the fact that more than 6 months had passed, they hadn't yet received payment. While this worker continued working on a nearby farm, most of the others (from a group of 20) had scattered – many returning to Oaxaca or moving to other states for work.

In both of these situations, CATA organizers strive to identify with workers what actions they want to take and how the organization can support them. In the case of the group from the peach farm, after several meetings of being unsure of how to proceed, they decided to talk to the farm owner when they collected their

checks. CATA organizers provided interpretation and support, but in the very moment, each worker quietly collected his check and returned to the camp without saying a word. It remains to be seen what, if anything, might happen before the season ends.

In the case of the worker in Salem County, CATA organizers have accompanied him several times to talk to his employer while also being in contact with the Department of Labor. The Department of Labor says that they closed the case and issued a decision in the workers' favor – yet still, this worker hasn't received a check from either the DOL or his former employer. He and we continue to follow up – it seems that there is some light at the end of the tunnel for him, although whether any of his fellow workers who were impacted will ever receive any money is anybody's guess.

In the midst of situations like this, we also meet many workers who are more or less content with their working conditions. This past summer, we collaborated with a radio reporter who wanted to do a story on farmworkers. At one camp, he was deeply affected by the conditions in which the workers live. While the house was clean and organized, the workers wash their clothes by hand and hang them outside. Twelve workers share one small kitchen for their food preparation. He kept asking them how they felt about the house, and eventually one of the workers, a member of CATA, told him that they felt good about the house because although it might not be a pretty house, that they didn't get wet at night or get cold in the winter. Their expectations may be a little low, but these workers also were sitting around outside after work having a beer with the farmers' son and generally felt well treated and respected for their work and experience.

My Summer in Bridgeton

Eliot Gee

Drive into Bridgeton, NJ from any direction and you will see miles of farmland. A wide variety of fruits and vegetables are produced here, mainly through the labor of the migrant community living in the city. It would seem only logical that the workers who grow this food would have access to it once they return home each night, yet this is not the case.

For the nine weeks that I lived in Bridgeton as a CATA intern, I went to the same places as everybody else to buy food: the chain supermarkets such as IGA and Acme. Instead of offering local produce, these stores sell processed food at what appears to be a low price. Out of concerns over affordability and time, I soon found myself

falling into a pattern similar to that of the people who shopped beside me: filling the grocery cart with cans and bags rather than expensive imported vegetables from South America or California. Though I was well aware of the health problems this kind of food causes, it was difficult to find much else to eat.

My work with CATA focused on recording the views of residents of Bridgeton and the surrounding region in regards to awareness of the connection between work, food, and health. I also spoke to farmers to learn about their difficulties growing and selling produce. It quickly became clear that issues of money and convenience dominate the food system of today and are hurting farmers as well as shoppers.

In interviews regarding CATA's Food Justice Project, many of the people I spoke to raised concerns over the limited options currently available to them. There is a growing awareness of the dangers of exposure to pesticides while working in the fields, and now workers are realizing that the vegetables they are eating are contaminated and pose a health risk as well. Unfortunately, there are currently few alternatives: the limited Friday farmer's market and far off farm stands cannot hope to compete with the supermarkets.

But their problem is not that of demand: people want pesticide free food.

If the local farmers are struggling, then it makes sense to unite their need for customers with the workers' wishes for

healthier food. The result would be a drastically different system, but it would benefit food consumers as well as producers. This change won't be easy, but it is possible.

(My final movie further explains the Food Justice Project's development. It has slightly different English and Spanish versions and is available through CATA. Contact the Glassboro office at 856-881-2507 or email at cata@cata-farmworkers.org)



Eliot Gee is a Princeton University Student who interned at CATA during the Summer of 2010 through the Princeton Internship in Civic Service (PICS) Class of 1969 Community Service Fund.

The Food Justice Project

Richard Mandelbaum

Over the years, CATA has trained thousands of farmworkers in pesticide awareness and safety. Increased awareness by our membership connecting pesticide exposure and health problems has promoted their desire for healthier food. They are all too aware that the food available to them is heavily exposed to pesticides and chemicals and that it is not safe for their children.

This limited access to healthy food occurs because market-based distribution and retail networks have created neighborhoods where the only option is often food that is less nutritious and higher in price than what is offered elsewhere. As a result, farmworkers have identified the need for increased access to healthy, nutritious and affordable food for themselves, their children, and their

community and for this to be done under socially and environmentally just conditions.

The Food Justice Project (FJP) is a natural progression of CATA's health and safety work, with the goal to build a network of partners including organic and other local farmers, retailers (including cooperative stores), and community-based organizations to create an alternative food supply that will have a tremendous positive impact on the health and well being of farmworker families, low-income communities, and small farmers.

CATA is currently seeking funding to implement the Food Justice Project over a three-year period.

SAVE THE DATE!



April 1, 2011

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EarthShare Celebrates New Jersey

Join us for an evening celebrating the bounty and beauty of New Jersey through art, wine and food! This celebration features environmental awareness and the members of EarthShare New Jersey (ESNJ). Guests are invited to enjoy the sounds of Stringzville and participate in the eco friendly chance and silent auctions which feature exclusive environmental experiences, tickets to sports events/concerts/shows, and items from some of your favorite businesses across the state.

April 1, 2011

Advanced Tickets – \$45 / Tickets at the Door – \$55

For ticket information, contact Joyce Krauss at 609-989-1160 or info@earthsharenj.org.
CATA is a proud member of ESNJ. For more information, go to their website at:

www.earthsharenj.org

Yes, I want to be part of CATA's history in the farmworkers' struggle for justice!

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