Migrants are being forced out of their Mexican, Central American, and Caribbean communities to fulfill the role of exploited labor in our current food system. They are forced out of their communities because policies, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), have severely limited their economic participation, and resulted in a loss of many jobs, especially those of small farmers who can’t compete with the price of imported subsidized American produce. In the U.S. industrial model of agriculture, modern food policy and practice allows farmworkers to be treated as commodities and provides few health and safety protections. In order to genuinely talk about a just food system we must first address labor inequalities.

Farmworkers often receive pay below poverty wages, live in substandard housing, experience intimidation, threats and harassment, and risk their health by performing arduous and repetitive tasks in hazardous environments for extended periods of time.

Pesticides are poison and should not be used in agriculture. Ever year approximately 1.1 billion pounds of pesticides are applied to agricultural crops in the United States. Pesticide exposure causes farmworkers to suffer more chemical-related injuries and illnesses, including cancers, reproductive and development health disorders, than any other workforce in the nation. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), there are about 10,000-20,000 pesticide poisonings that occur each year among farmworkers. Exposure to pesticides endangers farmworkers, rural communities, and consumers with the associated health concerns. There is ever-increasing evidence from various disciplines that support these claims.

The EPA’s Worker Protection Standard (WPS) is the primary set of federal regulations aimed at reducing the risk of pesticide poisonings and injuries among farmworkers. The WPS requires agricultural employers to comply with basic safety measures such as pesticide safety training, notification of pesticide applications, and emergency medical assistance. However, the EPA admitted that even when there is full compliance with the WPS, “risks to workers still exceed EPA’s level of concern.” In 2014, for the first time in over 20 years, the EPA proposed revisions to the WPS. The final rule of the WPS is due to be released in September 2015.

Photo Credit: Jamie McCaffrey - https://www.flickr.com/photos/15609463@N03/7578738408/
Building Food Justice Solidarity
BY: NELSON CARRASQUILLO, GENERAL COORDINATOR

CATA is ready to achieve our goal of Food Justice for all workers, farmers, and consumers. It is fundamental to this goal that we work to build solidarity with those who are aware of the importance creating a more just, fair, and safe food system be in solidarity with our work. Through the Food Justice Campaign, we intend to garner that solidarity and channel it to promote justice for workers along the food chain.

We intend to engage our membership, our friends and allies, and organizations that have a common interest in the health of workers. We want to provide the tools, information, and direction for like-minded individuals and organizations so we can move forward in one united effort. If we are to achieve change, it will come as the result of working from the ground up, community by community and state by state, up to the national level. Currently, we are working in Maryland, Pennsylvania and New Jersey where we have our main base of support. We want to dialogue with consumers, farmers, and farmworkers, bringing each group’s interest together to achieve a common goal. We intend to spread the Campaign throughout the Northeast as we continue to push for the highest social justice standards to prevail in the food system.

The common thread of the work is to create steps that enable participants to commit to work together around the issues of workers’ rights and access to affordable and healthy food available to all. The key to this collaboration is the realization that together we are stronger and that working together benefits everyone. CATA’s migrant worker members strive for this achievement, realizing that it will be a long process of struggle and that it will require the engagement of our friends and allies so that together we will be able to work towards justice for all.

You can support the campaign and buy Food Justice Certified products. Some Whole Foods stores carry Food Justice Certified lentils, beans, and grains in the bulk bin section. Look for this label to know you are supporting workers rights and food justice with you purchase.
Since the announcement of the proposed revisions, CATA has conducted intensive outreach so that farmworkers’ first-hand experiences of pesticide exposure are known to regulatory agencies and the general public. In our region, CATA organizers have received testimonies from farmworkers detailing increased rates of exposure.

Although there is some improvement with proposed revision, we do not expect the final rule to provide comprehensive protections for farmworkers because of EPA’s lack of guidance and oversight of state-based compliance measures and enforcement.

Beyond outreach in our local communities to ensure that the geographically, socially, and economically isolated farmworker populations do not continue to be ignored, CATA has collaborated with like-minded organizations and consumers. With the WPS announcement in September, we will spread awareness and educate key regional players in our food system about alternatives.

Since we cannot count on policymakers to ameliorate the realities on the ground, then we must look to alternatives such as the Food Justice Certification. The Certification is a collaborative stakeholder-process that was created to be a viable model for fairness in the food system. The standards for certification are based on a set of criteria that verify and recognize agricultural and food businesses who subscribe to a strong set of standards that value the rights of workers and farmers in addition to environmental stewardship. Food Justice Certification addresses workplace health and safety, fair wages for workers and fair prices for farmers, child labor, and other issues. Currently, the certification is active in the Northeast, Southeast, the West Coast, and Canada.

The U.S. industrial model of agriculture relies on cheap labor, toxic chemicals, and unsustainable fossil fuels. Food Justice Certification is a step towards creating a new food system; one that respects everyone in the food chain, including the environment.

HELP US GROW THIS MOVEMENT by promoting the Food Justice Certification where you live. Connect with us to find out exactly how at (856) 881-2507 or cata@cata-farmworkers.org.
Support RadioCATA!

RadioCATA, CATA’s low-power, FM community radio station is almost ready to start broadcasting! CATA members have been working hard for more than a year to fundraise and plan in order to get this station up and running. Members see the radio station a crucial communication tool in order to unite the migrant Latino community as they struggle for justice in their workplaces and communities.

The station will be available on 102.5 FM in Bridgeton, NJ and streaming online for the rest of the world to listen on our website, www.cata-farmworkers.org.

We would love for our supporters to get involved. We are having our station build the end of August and will begin broadcasting in September of this year. Please consider a donation to help with equipment and construction costs. Everyone who donates will get a RadioCATA sticker and shout-out on our new station once we start broadcasting!

Through the radio station, we intend to provide news reports and information on issues concerning the migrant community including immigration, worker’s rights, and healthy food access, as well as inform people of CATA’s meetings, trainings, workshops, and other activities. A space will be created to talk about questions and concerns that members have in their workplaces and communities. There will also be music and other cultural programming!

If you would like to donate, send a check made out to CATA to PO Box 510 Glassboro, NJ 08028 or donate online through our website—www.cata-farmworkers.org. Just make sure to say it’s for the radio station. Thank you!
Workers at Kaolin Mushroom Farms went on strike on April 1, 1993 due to unfair working conditions, low wages and constant harassment from the supervisors to increase productivity. They called for elections which the Union won with an overwhelming majority. The company, Kaolin Mushroom Farms, appealed the election and it was not until 1998 that the Pennsylvania Labor Relations Board decided in favor of the Union and negotiations started soon afterwards. They reached an agreement for the first contract in January of 2002. When the contract was due to be renegotiated in 2005 the company called for a decertification, which they lost, forcing them to negotiate a second contract.

It took 10 years of struggle to negotiate the first contract, and now the third contract is due to end in 2016. During this time, many of the workers who initiated the struggle in 1993 have returned to Mexico, retired, or taken on work in other companies. At the present time, the majority of the members of the Union were not present at the beginning of the struggle and most of them have very little previous experience participating in a union. This created a gap between the original leadership and new workers that lack the historical perspective of the struggle of the Union.

A significant number of workers have attributed the decent wages and safe working conditions that they have received to the good will of the employer rather than as a result of having a union. Kaolin has consistently told the workers that they pay workers well because they work hard, and that the Union takes advantage by charging dues for the benefit of a few leaders.

Just recently in the last year, the company convinced several workers to take on a role as spokespeople and to denounce the Union and call for a union decertification vote. The Union responded by making the contract available to all workers, by holding meetings with workers about their rights as union members, visiting workers, representing workers in every instance of abuse, and holding the company accountable to the letter of the contract.

Unfortunately, the lack of knowledge about the Union and the lack of experience by the workers proved to be too wide a gap to overcome, and many workers never connected their working conditions and wages to the Union contract. Many believed the company’s story that the company could make positive changes for the workers if they didn’t have to negotiate with the Union anymore.

That many workers at Kaolin believed the company and voted against the continuation of the contract was a hard shock to many of the members of the Union. Subsequently, leaders of the Union reflected on the situation and recognized that they had not been proactive enough in communicating the importance and relevance of the Union to its membership.

An appeal of the decertification election was made because, according to Pennsylvania Labor Law, decertification elections are prohibited while a contract is in effect. This appeal was rejected by the PA Labor Relations Board so now the Union will appeal to the courts.
This summer, I spent some of the most fulfilling and educational weeks of my life as an intern at CATA. When I applied for this position, I was a Princeton freshman interested in medicine, agriculture, human rights, and Spanish--it seemed like a perfect job to explore my own interests in a way that could most benefit others. Interning at CATA has taught me about the sobering injustices in the food industry, of which we are all consumers, but also that there are dedicated individuals committed to the slow but necessary process of change.

I embarked upon a project to study healthcare access for farmworkers. I interviewed several farmworkers who had received medical services in the United States as well as a few clinicians and outreach workers. I read literature on related studies, and poured over websites dedicated to farmworkers. Finally, I developed a report which describes the options and challenges that farmworkers of all backgrounds may have when trying to get health care. This report can be found on CATA’s website, and I hope that it both informs the public and CATA’s organizers about the pressing injustices that farmworkers face, as well as possible routes for improvement.

Working with CATA, a membership-based, grassroots organization, has shown me that movements for social change need to listen to and empower marginalized people, rather than throw resources at them. I have volunteered with organizations who did not listen to or respect the desires of the community they intended to serve, and as a result ended up aggravating rather than alleviating economic, social, and racial inequalities. CATA is unique in that it governs itself by the desires of its constituency. By guiding farmworkers through the “see, judge, act” process, it encourages people to be cognizant of the injustices in their own community, alert to the avenues for social change, and united in fighting injustice. Through this process, people realize their power and importance, as well as their right to want a better life for themselves and their families.

What really surprised me, however, were the ways in which CATA outreach workers planted these seeds of empowerment. When CATA organizers visit the farm labor camps, they do not preach or lecture; they converse casually and respectfully about how someone’s day went, where they are from, and where they are going. First and foremost, they listen to whatever people have to say; in doing so, they establish themselves as friends and equals, ready to work together for better living and working conditions.

As much as I have been enlightened and impressed by the type of work that CATA does, however, listening to the life stories of our farmworkers has deeply troubled me. I have seen tiny rooms contain ten cots where tired workers go to rest after working since sunrise. I have met people who are forced to make caring for a serious health condition take a back seat to the demands of their job. So many men have gone without seeing their wife and children for years. I have come to understand that, of the hundreds of dollars I have spent on my own food just this summer, only a small fraction will go to the people to whom I should be most grateful for it.

And so my eyes have been opened to the sad injustices of our society, but also to CATA’s inspiring attitude towards social change. I am sad that I could only spend two months observing and helping such a wonderful organization, but I feel as if I am responsible to continue helping the farmworker population because I have learned so much about them; I guess you could say that knowledge is power and empowerment.
CATA to Celebrate Annual Assembly in September

CATA will hold its Annual Assembly September 20, 2015 in Kennett Square, PA. The Annual Assembly is held every other year in between General Assembly to review the past year’s work and make sure we are moving forward with the organization’s goals that were agreed upon. CATA members from New Jersey, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Delaware come together to share what each state has been working on and discuss future plans and goals.

Keep up with CATA on Facebook!
Just search for CATA - The Farmworker Support Committee to see pictures and updates of our members and the work that we do.

CATA is proud to be a member of EarthShare New Jersey (ESNJ), a non-profit organization created and directed by member organizations to represent us in employee workplace giving campaigns.

Please consider making a donation to CATA through your workplace. Don’t have a workplace giving campaign at your office? Contact CATA to assist you in setting one up. The code for CATA for the Federal Campaign is 39411 and the NJ State Campaign is 3341. Visit www.cata-farmworkers.org for a complete list. For more information on ESNJ go to www.earthsharenj.org.
Yes, I want to be part of the farmworkers’ struggle for justice!

Here is my donation of:

$30  $50  $75
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