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International Migration Review, Vol. 19, No. 1. (Spring, 1985), pp. 135-143.

Stable URL:

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Conference Perspectives

*Migrant Labor In Agriculture: An International Comparison*¹

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The May 1984 Conference on Migrant Labor in Agriculture at the University of California-Davis discussed papers by 22 farm labor experts from 12 nations. Each industrial nation utilizes a different set of public and private policies to supply workers for labor-intensive agriculture, but none is entirely satisfactory. Labor-intensive agriculture is becoming more dependent on workers who are shut out of labor markets. Some countries have simply accepted foreign workers in agriculture, while others have adopted policies to integrate farm and nonfarm labor markets. Policies to reduce agriculture's reliance on workers-without-options include restructuring employment practices to employ fewer seasonal workers for longer periods, mechanizing production, and importing fruits and vegetables from nearby developing countries.

This article explains the salient features of labor-intensive agriculture, the various policies for obtaining seasonal farmworkers, and options to reduce farming's dependence on migrant labor.

LABOR-INTENSIVE AGRICULTURE

Most fruits, vegetables, and horticultural specialties that enter commercial markets are bought by the affluent consumers of North America, Western Europe, and Japan. Postwar affluence encouraged families in these nations to expect fresh fruits and vegetables year-round, and to trade-up from cheaper to more expensive commodities, for example, from apples to strawberries.

The demand for fruits and vegetables expanded as industrial nations experienced unprecedented economic growth and trade integration. Fruit and vegetable production shifted from small family enterprises near major urban areas to large and specialized farms. The major fruit and vegetable producing areas of southern France, Israel, South Africa, Florida, and California expanded in the 1950s and 1960s, when family farmers were being pushed and pulled into industrial jobs. Commercial fruit and vegetable farms dependent on hired workers replaced family farms.

¹ *Migrant Labor In Agriculture: An International Comparison* is available from Agricultural and Natural Resource Publications, University of California, 6701 San Pablo Avenue, Oakland, California 94608-1239, Price \$25.00, Publication 8501.

The family enterprises had depended on students, housewives, and other secondary workers to harvest fruits and vegetables, but the commercial farms that replaced them relied on adult workers who were primary breadwinners in their families. As citizens abandoned seasonal farm work for industrial jobs, the only persons who remained available for seasonal farm work were citizens excluded from regular jobs and immigrants for whom hourly farm wages exceeded the wage for a day's work at home.

A distinguishing feature of labor-intensive agriculture is the need for large numbers of workers during the critical harvest period. A farmer able to operate without assistance for 50 weeks suddenly requires a crew of 20 to 40 workers for a two-week period. Many of these harvest jobs require a great deal of physical effort, such as putting picked apples or peaches into a bag which will weigh 50 to 60 pounds when full, or stooping in the hot sun to pick vegetables.

Traditionally, rural school districts adjusted their schedules to enable students to work during the harvest, housewives entered the work force for several weeks, and local governments organized efforts to recruit harvest workers. Some harvests were made into local festivals, as the grape harvest in France. However, the concentration of fruit and vegetable production on fewer and larger farms has diminished the support for school adjustments and public appeals, and more women have entered the work force as full-time employees. The persisting demand for seasonal farmworkers as the traditional work force disappeared has forced farmers to modify their employment practices, to mechanize, or to rely on immigrant workers.

RESPONSES

The United States is the world's major producer and consumer of fruits and vegetables. The American response to the emergence of commercial farms and the disappearance of traditional work forces has varied across commodities and areas. Some corporate vegetable farms in California that each depend on 500 to 2,000 seasonal workers have raised wages because of union pressures, introduced a variety of fringe benefits, and developed seniority and training systems to retain qualified hand-harvesters. These seasonal factories-in-the-field employ citizens and legal immigrants in construction-style labor markets: offering high wages to seasonal farmworkers who obtain maximum unemployment insurance benefits when farm work is not available.

Most seasonal farm labor markets in the United States depend on citizen and immigrant farmworkers to be available when they are needed. Commercial fruit and vegetable farms in California, Florida, and Texas employ crew leaders or rely on labor contractors to recruit and supervise crews of harvest workers. These workers are often non-English speaking, so the bilingual foreman or contractor is the key intermediary who determines who

is hired and fired. Despite decades of federal and state labor regulations, these farm labor intermediaries often violate labor standards laws.

The American fruit and vegetable industry employs almost 1 million seasonal workers and pays annual wages of about \$4 billion. The production of fruits and vegetables is being concentrated on fewer and larger farms. However, a single farm may include three or four entities who could be considered the employer: the landowner, a labor contractor, a farm management company, or the enterprise which packs and markets commodities. This fragmentation of employment is especially noticeable in perennial crops: Nonfarm investors take advantage of tax laws to plant fruit trees and vineyards and then assume that a labor contractor or farm management company will assemble a harvest work force. Product-market competition and competition between farm labor intermediaries has kept most farm wages low, and so a rising percentage of the seasonal farm work force consists of immigrant workers.

The immigrant farmworkers in U.S. agriculture fall into several categories:

- H-2 workers are legal foreign workers admitted to harvest apples in the mid-Atlantic states and sugar cane in Florida after the U.S. Department of Labor agrees that unemployed Americans are not available to do these jobs.
- Border commuters have immigrant visas which permit them to work in the United States while they live in Mexico and commute to U.S. jobs.
- Green-card workers also have immigrant visas which entitle them to work in the United States, but most of these workers from central Mexico remain in the United States for six to nine months.
- Illegal or undocumented workers are working in the United States without legal permission.

Although the exact dimensions of each immigrant group cannot be determined, green-card and undocumented workers are believed to be the largest groups.

France has a commercial fruit and vegetable agriculture which resembles that of the United States. France employs about 500,000 seasonal workers in agriculture, including 100,000 seasonal immigrants. Even though France stopped foreign worker recruitment for year-round jobs in November 1974, employers could still recruit seasonal farmworkers in Spain and North Africa. French farmers employ Spanish families for four to six weeks during the fall grape harvest, and they employ Morrocans and Tunisians for at least four months in other fruits and vegetables.

The French government has adopted several policies to reduce illegal immigration and the country's reliance on foreign workers. Fines for employers who knowingly hire illegal aliens are \$3,000, although judges are reluctant to impose fines on farmers who allege that such penalties will

bankrupt them. The French government has attempted to encourage unemployed citizens and resident immigrants to do seasonal farmwork, but farmers report that such local workers are only half as productive as seasonal immigrants. As in the United States, French farmers find local workers to operate equipment and to fill nonfarm picking and processing jobs, but the seasonal farm work force is increasingly foreign.

The long-run options for French agriculture include mechanization and permitting labor-intensive crops to shift to Spain and North Africa. Both options have their costs: Mechanization will displace many small farmers whose fields are too small to utilize machinery efficiently, and increased competition from Spain and North Africa will depress land prices.

Italian agriculture is the domain of the part-time farmer: Fully three-fourths of Italy's 3.3 million "farmers" report that they are principally engaged in nonfarm occupations or retired. However, these small and part-time farms are more dependent on hired workers than other European farmers because most Italian farms include labor-intensive commodities; for example, half of all Italian farms grow grapes.

The wages and characteristics of hired workers vary widely within Italian agriculture. In 1982, Italian agriculture employed 5.5 million family workers and 1 million hired workers, but 88 percent of the family workers and 75 percent of the hired workers were employed only part-time in agriculture. Thus, during the three-week cherry harvest, only 20 percent of the work force consists of professional farmworkers employed six months in agriculture; the others are students, nonfarm workers on vacation, and retirees who are hired directly by the farmer and paid cash wages to avoid payroll tax deductions. The six-week apple harvest offers lower wages to more women farmworkers, as does vegetable agriculture. In some instances, women do farmwork exactly 51 days for an employer so that they earn a year's employment social security credit.

During the 1970s, Italy was transformed from an emigration to an immigration land, and today includes some 800,000 illegal immigrants. Tunisians most frequently become illegal farmworkers, especially in Sicily. Illegal Tunisian workers are often employed in the southern Italian grape harvest. However, the majority of Italy's family farms hire Italian workers.

British agriculture is more dependent on hired workers than elsewhere, while Dutch agriculture is dominated by family farms. Britain employs about 700,000 persons in agriculture, and the Netherlands 270,000. In both countries, the number of seasonal farmworkers has stabilized as the number of family workers continues to decline. Dutch agriculture relies on fewer than 7,000 seasonal hired workers (mostly students and housewives), and British farmers employ perhaps several thousand migrants to harvest fruits.

The agricultures of both Britain and the Netherlands developed unique institutional responses to changing labor markets. In the Netherlands, relief

cooperatives were established to provide experienced replacement workers for one-person farms whose owner-operators become ill or take vacations. Britain establishes minimum wages for different classes of farmworkers, encouraging farmworkers and employers to organize in order to present evidence of the need for periodic adjustments. This minimum wage system encouraged the development of well-defined jobs and skills, and led to the establishment of public training programs for workers to obtain the skills needed to work for wages in agriculture.

Germany recruited foreign agricultural workers at the turn of the century, and foreign industrial workers in the 1950s and 1960s. Germany's population density (62 million people in an Oregon-sized land area) means that most of Germany's farms are small to mid-sized operations near towns, from which seasonal farmworkers are recruited. Farming in Germany is a seasonal occupation; fully 70 percent of the family and hired workers are employed in agriculture only part of the year.

About 185,000 workers are employed in German agriculture, but only 16,000 are foreigners. As in other industrial countries, most foreign workers are employed outside agriculture, but in Germany, farms operate with a lower fraction of immigrants than do nonfarm businesses. Unions negotiate salaries and hourly wages for full-time farmworkers, but most hand-harvesting jobs are filled by seasonal workers who earn piece-rate wages. Wages for year-round farmworkers are increased up to 76 percent by mandatory and voluntary fringe benefits such as social security and vacations. However, farmers employing seasonal piece-rate workers pay only a flat payroll tax of 2 to 10 percent, so German farmers have substantial incentives to employ only seasonal workers.

Fruits, vegetables, and vineyards employ most of the full-time and seasonal workers. On these labor-intensive farms, seasonal workers do much of the work. German farmers complain that the employment service cannot supply enough seasonal workers, so they recruit workers privately, often the spouses of legal foreign workers who do without work permits. Even though German farmers face fines of up to \$35,000 for hiring foreigners without work permits, it appears that many foreign women illegally harvest vegetables around the major German cities.

Switzerland has a similar pattern of family farms, but it has considerably more foreign farmworkers. Most foreign farmworkers are employed on fruit and vegetable farms, where they earn wages comparable to those offered in nonfarm jobs. There are reported to be very few illegal alien workers in Swiss agriculture.

Israel has a small but very efficient and export-oriented agriculture. The 300 cooperative kibbutzim include about 3.5 percent of the Jewish population in enterprises that adhere to the principle of self-reliance. Moshavim are more heterogeneous production cooperatives, and private Jewish and Arab

farmers produce most of Israel's citrus, wine, olives, and almonds.

The cooperative kibbutzim and moshavim farmland belongs to the state or to the Jewish Agency. The kibbutzim stress the production of irrigated and mechanized field crops such as cotton. Some moshavim imitate the kibbutz in cooperatively producing mechanized field crops; others produce labor-intensive vegetables on individual plots. The kibbutzim are recognized as leaders in mechanization, as they strive to produce high-value crops without hiring labor. However, kibbutzim employ supplemental labor for the summer harvest, and these additional workers include foreign (student) volunteers, Israeli youth in organized youth movements, military personnel who receive credit for compulsory service while working, and otherwise nonworking members of the kibbutz, such as school children. The moshavim also employ volunteers and relatives, but moshav farmers are more likely to hire workers on a daily or monthly basis.

Private Jewish farmers produce labor-intensive crops by hiring daily workers and relying on labor contractors. Arab farmers sometimes rent or sharecrop their land or operate it with assistance from seasonal workers.

Some farmers in Israel and California rely on foreign migrants. However, Israel's migrants can return home daily or weekly, so they tend not to settle in the Jewish areas of Israel, whereas many Mexican farmworkers who remain six to nine months in California eventually settle in the state. Labor contractors are active in both areas, but in Israel they permit Arab women and children to work for wages on Jewish farms, a practice that would be rare without a male Arab contractor. In both Israel and California, modern export-oriented agricultures depend on poor rural economies to supply seasonal workers, but Israel is unique for the contrast between the antagonism of Arabs and Jews and the cooperative spirit of its production organizations.

The demand for food in the oil-exporting Gulf states jumped sharply in the 1970s, and the oil-rich nations responded by importing farm commodities and importing farmers and farmworkers. Rapid population growth, preferences for imported products, and relative prices that favored oil exports and food imports have made governments worry about their vulnerability to the use of a "food weapon" if oil importers decided to withhold grain.

Oman is a country of perhaps 1 million which has imported food and farmers to replace its own work force which migrated to Saudi Arabia. Oman's complex irrigation system began to break down, and the government responded with increased assistance funds and imported farmworkers. However, imported workers depress local farm wages and accelerate the exodus from farm work of Omanis, leaving a vacuum that is only partially filled by local women. Omani agriculture is trapped into a system with low wages that discourage a restructuring of production, but jobs abroad and changes in social attitudes make it unlikely that marginal increases in wages will draw Omanis back into farming.

Egypt is a major food importer and labor exporter. Government planners responded to the call for food self-sufficiency and complaints of labor shortages by subsidizing the mechanization of farming. Tractor subsidies have encouraged the mechanization of plowing, but Egypt's small farms may not justify so much imported equipment. If the 2 million Egyptian workers abroad return to a mechanized agriculture, they may add to Cairo's burgeoning population and bloated government payrolls.

Japan has a family farming system in which many "farmers" earn much of their income from nonfarm jobs. Japanese agriculture uses very little hired labor, and hired workers tend to be members of neighboring farm families. Women traditionally did the most difficult hand tasks in rice farming, tasks that have since been mechanized. Unlike other Asian nations, Japan has few hired workers because of its small-farm tradition and government price and immigration policies. Other Asian nations with plantation farming systems have a demand for hired workers.

South Africa has a dual agriculture: The 70,000 white-owned commercial farms are completely dependent on 1 million black workers, while 1.1 million subsistence black farms produce only a small fraction of total farm output. White-owned farms employ 15 percent of the work force to generate 6 percent of Gross Domestic Product.

White farmers are dependent on nonwhite labor. Over three-fourths of the hired farm work force is black, and the remaining 23 percent are "colored" workers. About 27 percent of the black farmworkers are migrants, and most of these migrants come from the TBVC countries — Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda, and Ciskei — countries recognized only by South Africa. Generally, white farms have been substituting blacks for colored workers and women for men.

The South African government intervenes in the farm labor market by establishing offices abroad to recruit farmworkers. Most farmworkers bring their families to the farms that employ them, and the farm employer is responsible for their housing, education, and health. Farmworkers receive very low cash wages, and are thus dependent on the farm employer. Farmworkers were not included in the labor laws that extended collective bargaining rights to urban black workers. Employment in South Africa's commercial agriculture is decreasing, and prospects are for slightly better conditions for the fewer remaining workers.

Agriculture will continue to mechanize and shed farmers and workers, but at an uncertain pace. In the United States, fruit and vegetable harvest mechanization proceeded rapidly in the 1950s and 1960s, but was slowed in the 1970s by the availability of low-wage workers and changing research priorities. The public-private research system which has produced many of the labor-saving devices for agriculture has come under attack because production is concentrated on fewer and larger farms, allowing critics to

allege that mechanization research benefits only large farmers.

Labor-intensive fruit and vegetable production in the United States has evolved from a seasonal and local business to an industry of large farms producing commodities for distant markets. As perishable fruits and vegetables become more storeable, competition from other countries will become more apparent. In the early 1980s, wage differences and exchange rate fluctuations made developing nations competitive producers of a variety of fruits and vegetables.

IMPLICATIONS

Fruit and vegetable production has been transformed from an industry of small family enterprises to a commercial agriculture dominated by seasonal factories-in-the-fields. These commercial fruit and vegetable farms remain large employers despite mechanization because affluent consumers encouraged the expansion of production faster than labor-saving machines displaced farmworkers. However, the harvest work forces on these commercial farms are increasingly (immigrant) workers who are excluded from nonfarm labor markets.

The evolution of labor-intensive agriculture has important implications for the agricultural, employment, immigration, and trade policies of industrial nations.

- Industrial nations must recognize that commercial fruit and vegetable farms resemble manufacturing and construction enterprises more than traditional family farms, and thus policy makers should distinguish between labor-intensive farms and other kinds of farming.
- Government employment policies which train workers for full-time jobs will leave a labor vacuum in seasonal industries such as agriculture, a vacuum that will be filled by legal and illegal immigrants unless governments restrict immigration, promote mechanization, or encourage imports.
- Government policies can ratify the presence of immigrant farmworkers by not erecting barriers to their admission, or they can seek to minimize the presence of immigrant workers by enforcing labor standards laws, promoting mechanization, and encouraging imports of labor-intensive commodities.
- Trade policies can affect the farm work force by influencing the choice between imported workers and imported commodities.

The major dilemma for most industrial nations is to be consistent in the formulation of these interrelated policies. However, consistency requires decisions about the structure of agriculture and farm wages that policy makers are reluctant to make.

The conference papers suggest that fruit and vegetable agriculture will evolve to resemble other labor-intensive industries such as garment manufacturing. Instead of protectionism, industrial nations could adopt strategic policies that seek to retain the production of commodities amenable to mechanization, such as processing tomatoes and almonds. Fruits and vegetables that are currently hand-harvested can be segmented into those that can be handled mechanically and those that are cheaper to produce abroad and import. Finally, some very high-value commodities could continue to be hand-harvested in industrial countries. This expected segmentation of production is similar to that of garments and other manufactured products: Industrial countries produce standard and mechanized products that have high transportation costs and high-value products that command premium prices, while the in-between products migrate to areas with lower production costs.

Industrial nations appear destined to engage in a form of commodity triage, maintaining the production of some commodities, mechanizing others, and importing the rest. However, commercial fruit and vegetable farmers resist declarations that certain commodities must be mechanized or imported, and their appeals for immigrant farmworkers make it difficult to eliminate illegal immigration. Unless a country is willing to rigorously enforce immigration laws, the papers presented at this conference suggest that the size of a country's commercial fruit and vegetable sector is one proxy for the number of illegal immigrants in that nation. By this criterion, the United States and France have the most illegal immigrants in agriculture and Japan the least.