

On Farmer-Farmworker Solidarity, In Words and Action

By: Anthony Pabnke, FFD Vice President

The issue of immigration is divisive. I realize that many, in fact, millions of people in the United States embrace the Trump administration's call for mass deportations, the construction of the border wall, and the end of sanctuary cities (without getting too far into the legal details, such cities seek to separate and specify the powers of federal immigration officials with respect to local police officers). Meanwhile, millions of people resist, and are beginning to take a stand against the current administration in their words and actions.

This emerging mass movement against the Trump administration's immigration policies is taking many forms, in Wisconsin and elsewhere, from protests at airports in early 2017 against the travel ban, to expressed support for DACA recipients (DACA, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, is an Obama-era executive order that exempted from deportation children who had arrived to the United States before they turned 16 years old. The Trump administration has chosen to not renew the program, thereby potentially removing legal status for approximately 800,000 youth if the US Congress does not pass a new law.) As an organization, Family Farm Defenders has criticized on various occasions Governor Walker's attempts to penalize sanctuary policies.

Representing Family Farm Defenders as a member of La Via Campesina, I had the opportunity to travel to Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, in November of 2017, to discuss how rural communities can mobilize around the issue of immigration. The delegation was 20 or so in number, with Via Campesina members coming from Spain and Italy, to Canada and Haiti. We spent



four days noting similarities and differences across the world in policies, movements, and demands. I learned of the Haitian immigrants who had left their country after the 2010 earthquake to work in the construction of World Cup stadiums in Brazil, leaving when their labor was no longer required and then traveling throughout Latin America to the city of Tijuana on the US/Mexico border hoping to enter the United States. Thousands are currently stranded there, subject to repeated harassment, as well as periodic assault, and in some cases, death. People sought improved lives for themselves and their families, exchanging their labor for the hope - which many still possess - of a better future. I also learned that immigration policy in Canada is quite different when compared to the United States - the majority of farmworkers who arrive to the country do so legally, while currently there are projects in the works on how farmworkers may become permanent residents after a certain period of time. Imagine that - workers, who for their years of labor that help feed a population, earn the right to remain within that same country!

In one discussion focusing on the

United States, Tirso Moreno, of the Florida-based Florida Farmworker Association, noted that the Obama administration deported more immigrants than any other President (over two million). He noted that the Obama administration sought to only deport immigrants who had committed certain kinds of crimes, such as felonies. Trump ended this policy with an executive order he issued in February of this year, granting immigration officials unlimited discretion at "apprehending anyone who is deemed suspicious of violating federal immigration law (January 25th, Executive Order - Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements)." Who is considered "suspicious," now, is up to the discretion of individual immigration officials when they encounter whoever in the street. Does this policy sound characteristic of 'a nation of laws' to you?

The executive order also targets sanctuary cities, calls for the hiring of 5,000 more immigration agents, and establishes the goal to conclude the construction of a physical wall on the southern border between the United States and Mexico.

We discussed that, yes, Obama deported more immigrants than any prior President, but that the concrete actions taken during the first year of Trump's rule - from ending DACA to the wall proposal - is having the effect of making the lives of immigrants and their families inhospitable.

On the last day of our meeting in Juarez, we staged a protest at the U.S.-constructed border wall and attended a meeting of former Braceros. The Bracero program, which existed from 1942 - 1964, was a partnership between the United States and Mexico government that brought close to five million farmworkers to labor mainly in Texas, California, and in the Northwestern United States.

After the Braceros program concluded, as we learned, many were not given just compensation for their work. To this day, thousands continue to organize for equal pay for equal work. The protest as the border wall was a reminder that as the Bracero program ended, immigrants continued to arrive to work in the United States, some within the legal confines of the H2A program. The vast majority of others, however, arrived without legal authorization, beginning more so in the 1990s after NAFTA displaced small farmers throughout Mexico.

During lunch one day, I spoke with Tirso Moreno about immigration, as



Prior to Hurricane Irma, Florida Migrant Farmworkers on the job!

well as on the impact of Hurricane Irma on rural Florida. What he told me was shocking - the hurricane, which swept through Florida in September, had destroyed many farmworkers' homes. Yet, not only were homes devastated, but so were many large farms that specialize in tomatoes, oranges, as well as ferns. Federal assistance became available for some individuals in Florida, but to qualify, one needs to be a citizen. This has left the 40 - 50,000 farmworkers who Tirso's organization represents in an extremely precarious position - not only are their homes in pieces, but their ability to secure a living from working in the fields is placed in jeopardy because many large farms have been destroyed. As federal assistance is available for citizens, and the majority of farmworkers do not have legal status, this leaves thousands upon thousands of people dependent on donations to survive.

The experience I had at Juarez, as well as reflecting a little on the history of farm labor in the U.S. - from the Bracero program, to now - reveals that farmworkers are not new in the United States, but have been present for decades. In terms of feeding our neighbors and communities, farmers and farmworkers - and also food service and industry workers - are essential. It is impossible to think about U.S. agriculture without farm labor, yet instead of recognizing this, our government chooses to criminalize labor and not reward it. The problems that immigrants face, for instance, not receiving equal pay for equal work, as well as the hope of seeking a better life for one's family and making tremendous sacrifices in the process, should make folks in rural America realize there is a great deal of commonality between farmers and farmworkers. We have let immigration policies promoted by a billionaire, whose only connection to nature and land comes in the form of golf outings, divide two groups of people who, in their day-to-day work, are truly quite similar.

The political divisions that surround immigration will not disappear in the near future. The struggles, in Congress and the streets, will persist, most likely, throughout the Trump years and after. What's required now is for you to decide if you will stand with immigrants, and how to express support in words and action.

ASK: Donation for Florida Farmworkers

\$10 \$25 \$50 \$100

In light of the recent hurricanes that have destroyed their homes and places of employment, and the current government's harmful immigration policies, thousands upon thousands of farmworkers live in extremely precarious conditions. The vast majority continue to struggle to pay their bills, living in remote rural areas and with few employment opportunities. A small donation would go a long way to helping a farmworker's family.

If you would like to help:

Checks can be made out to The Florida Farmworkers Association, and sent to:
1264 Apopka Blvd., Apopka, FL 32703

Or payment can be made online, on the Florida Farmworker Association website at:
<http://www.floridafarmworkers.org/>