

Without Farmworkers You Wouldn't Eat

Jim Goodman - Retired Dairy Farmer and FFD Board Member

Frontline workers during this pandemic, who put their lives on the line daily, are rightly called heroes, but a better term might be victims. Cheering and clapping every day for health care and other "essential" workers does, I am sure, give them a much-needed and well-deserved morale boost. This pandemic has changed things; pre-Covid-19, working under stressful conditions, for low wages, often unseen and underappreciated was, for many, just the way it was.

Our Essential Workers List

Clearly, health care workers and support staff are at the top of everyone's essential workers' list, as they put their lives on the line daily to provide care, comfort, and hope while tens of thousands are dying. We all count on them, while hoping that the virus does not bring us under their care. Food chain workers are also deemed essential, and, just as in the health care industry, many essential workers, especially farmworkers are immigrants - 75 percent, in fact, according to the most recent National Agricultural Workers Survey. Undervalued and underpaid and doing difficult and dangerous work, they have always been essential to our food supply, but the pandemic has made that designation official.

Few Americans have ever been inside a food processing plant and witnessed the pace of work, the physical stress, and the close physical proximity the workers must labor under. It is impossible to socially distance, so this pandemic has added a new threat to their work, and it could soon severely impact our food supply. When Covid-19 necessitated processing plant closures. Smithfield chose to

blame the immigrant workers rather than the poor working conditions, low pay, and Smithfield's failure to ensure a safe working environment. I know the work ethic of immigrant workers. I've seen it in processing plants, in the fields of Immoakalee, Florida and on my own farm. Always, they were hardworking, competent, and just trying to make a decent home for themselves in this country that often does not welcome them and, in many cases, created conditions that forced them to leave their home countries.

Fragility of Our Food System

The fragility of our consolidated food system is clearly visible during this pandemic. Store shelves are at times empty, while farmers are forced to dump milk and plow under vegetable crops. We saw the lion's share of last year's Market Facilitation Program payments go to the largest farms, not small farmers or farmworkers. Now we see a similar situation playing out with Covid-19 payments: Farmworkers who have immigrated to the United States (who pay state, local, and federal taxes) will not, unless they have a Social Security number, qualify for federal stimulus checks or unemployment insurance.

Farm Workers are Essential

Farmworkers must continue to work every day as the pandemic changes our world. They have always worked for low wages while being exposed to agricultural chemicals and forced to live in substandard housing with poor access to health care. Now they are at even greater risk. An effective response to this public health emergency must include everyone, especially those who put themselves in harm's way to feed us. Farmworkers must

be provided with adequate personal protective equipment and the ability to practice social distancing while they work. Housing and transportation must be improved to eliminate cramped conditions under which workers are forced to live - conditions akin to living in a petri dish.

Paid sick leave and direct payments to farmworkers must be included in any future stimulus package, and congressional oversight must ensure that payments go to small farmers, ranchers, fishers, and farmworkers rather than targeting commodity growers and agribusiness corporations like the previous Covid-19 stimulus packages.

Readily available virus testing must be provided and, since farmworkers seldom live in communities that provide them access to health care, steps must be taken to set up field hospitals, as was done in cities across the country, before the virus spreads to vulnerable farmworker communities - because if they go down, our food supply goes down with them.

Rather than proposing to cut farmworker wages and put a hold on immigration, perhaps the President should consider the immigrants who feed us, care for us, and help to build our society. Perhaps he might also read a bit from his "favorite book" the bible and take it to heart?

"When an alien resides with you in your land, you should not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you, shall be to you, as the citizen among you; you shall love them as yourself for you were the aliens in the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19:33).

Beyond the Rural Urban Divide Cultivating Solidarity in Tough Times

By John Peck, executive director of Family Farm Defenders

With a critical election on the near horizon, many media pundits (and online bots) have been busy fanning the flames of the U.S. rural urban divide. The politics of resentment are certainly genuine and worth understanding - a challenge UW-Madison Prof. Katherine Cramer tackles in her book by the same name. The specter of a global pandemic on top of systemic racism in early 2020 exposed many of the deep divisions and chronic inequities in our society, but at the same time facing down this twin-headed threat has brought communities together. That is because peoples' concerns often overlap - regardless of history or geography - and when one recognizes that amazing things can happen. With sufficient empathy, trust, and creativity one can cultivate solidarity out of crisis and chaos.

My home State as an Example

Rural and urban folks across WI have many more mutual interests than contrived differences. Relatives and friends of Jacob Pero on the Bad River Reservation, of Tony Robinson from Madison's East Side or of Jacob Blake in Kenosha's Wilson Neighborhood have all been forced to confront and challenge the deadly consequences of police brutality. The rural family in Kewaunee or Lafayette County who's well water is poisoned with factory farm manure runoff can relate to an urban family in Milwaukee County who's tap water is toxic due to unmitigated lead contamination. Lack of Internet can be just as frustrating and disempowering for a family needing basic social services or doing virtual school classes no matter one's

address. Rural and urban folks are just as keen to have universal public healthcare, affordable housing options, reliable postal delivery, healthy local food, the list goes on and on. And when corrupt elected officials and greedy corporate executives collude to starve/sabotage and outsource/privatize such, people are bound to resent and resist this latest enclosure of our common wealth and natural heritage.

In This Tough Time

It is worth taking a moment to reflect upon and find heart in earlier episodes of grassroots solidarity that permeate our people's history (Thanks Howard Zinn!). Every place has such an inspiring legacy. I will share some of my WI favorites. When Joshua Glover was kidnapped by "slave catchers" in Racine back in 1854 and then taken in chains to the Milwaukee County Jail by federal marshals under the Fugitive Slave Act, who knew that hundreds of angry abolitionist immigrant farmers would promptly march on the city from surrounding counties, batter down the jail door and then hide Glover for days on their homesteads until he could secretly board a Lake Michigan steamer bound for freedom in Canada. The Wisconsin Underground Railroad would save many others fleeing bondage in the years leading up to the Civil War. For more on this saga, check out the book, *Finding Freedom* by Ruby West Jackson and Walter T. McDonald.

When seven people were killed in Milwaukee in May 1886 by the National Guard troops as part as nationwide eight hour day struggle (now known as the Bayview Massacre), popular support for labor

rights quickly spread across the state leading to more strikes in the mills in Oshkosh, in copper mines and lumberjack camps in the North Woods, as well as, in factories in Madison. Many UW students and faculty openly supported such labor struggles, leading to an elite backlash and a crude effort to fire one outspoken professor, Richard Ely. Fortunately, the UW Board of Regents rejected this idea and issued the now famous 1894 statement enshrined on Bascom Hall: *"Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere, we believe the great state of University of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found."*

The 1930s Great Depression and Dust Bowl generated solidarity.

The acclaimed conservationist, Aldo Leopold, organized farmers and unemployed workers to restore eroded watersheds and reforest denuded landscapes across the Driftless Region - and the amazing consequences of this effort remain evident in places like Coon Valley today. Under the New Deal, farmers and consumers formed hundreds of cooperatives as an alternative to corporations to provide goods and services at cost (with no profit motive) to their members. Wisconsin today remains one of the nation's epicenter for successful cooperative development. In 1933, when WI dairy farmers went on a strike to demand a fair (parity) price for their milk, they were supported by urban allies who helped intercept clandestine milk shipment. *Continued on pg.10*