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The Human Cost of Food: Farmworkers' Lives, Labor, and Advocacy

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The Human Cost of Food: Farmworkers' Lives, Labor, and Advocacy

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Abstract

The Human Cost of Food: Farmworkers' Lives, Labor, and Advocacy. Edited by Charles D. Thompson, Jr., and Melinda F. Wiggins. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002. xv, 320 pp. ISBN 0-292-78177-6, \$50.00 (cloth); 0-292-78178-4, \$21.95 (paper).

unions need to return to a logic of mutual aid to renew themselves.

An interesting issue left mostly unexplored in the book is the relationship of its argument to other debates concerning the direction organized labor should take. The authors do discuss the “mutual gains unionism” or “value added unionism” promoted by numerous industrial relations scholars. This brand of unionism, they argue, is still confined within the servicing logic of action and is unlikely to renew unions. They also note that their perspective is compatible with the “organizing model” promoted against the “servicing model” by some labor activists and sympathetic labor educators and academics. However, almost all proponents of the organizing model also argue that organizing must be done to build a powerful social movement to fight against workplace injustices and for broader social justice. In short, they connect their critique of the servicing approach to concepts like “solidarity” and “social movement unionism.”

Are “mutual aid” and “solidarity” identical? Related? The authors do not address this question. Their choice of member assistance programs as examples of “mutual aid” may indicate that they are thinking of something quite removed from “solidarity,” if that term means mutual support and organization against employer abuses. None of their examples of mutual aid have much to do with the employer, or with a struggle to force an employer to treat the work force better. If this is intentional, the authors’ prescription for union renewal may simply entail self-help of a Salvation Army type, rather than build solidarity and organization to struggle against adversaries.

Or perhaps this is not the intent. The book itself is unclear on this topic. In any event, further discussion and clarification of what exactly “mutual aid” means, and particularly how it relates to concepts like “solidarity,” would be most useful.

This stimulating and insightful book should provoke much discussion and debate. The topic of potential union renewal is a central one for all concerned about the fate of the U.S. industrial relations system and of the nation itself.

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Economic and Social Security and Substandard Working Conditions

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The brief opening dedication in *The Human Cost of Food: Farmworkers’ Lives, Labor, and Advocacy* both honors a group of college students (Student Action with Farmworkers, or SAF) who work to improve conditions for some of the nation’s two million farmworkers and memorializes an activist, Oliver Townes, whose death was partly due to his lack of health benefits, a deficiency shared with the farmworkers to whom he was devoted. The dedication thus neatly stakes out the authors’ goal: to promote identification with, and advocacy for, the migrant and seasonal workers who help put food on our tables.

This collection of 11 essays by advocates, attorneys, academics, and service providers is a readable and practical teaching aid targeted to interested activists, be they undergraduates, clergy, or individuals in other walks of life. The sympathetic accounts of farmworkers’ struggles clearly convey the economic, social, and political powerlessness of America’s largely immigrant and invisible agricultural labor force. Approximately half of all farmworkers are in the United States illegally; most earn poverty-level wages and live in secluded, employer-owned camps or in overpriced, rundown rooms in town; many suffer health problems; some migrate between the United States and Mexico; many are unfamiliar with our laws and customs; and their unorganized voices are drowned out by the clout of the agribusiness lobby. Simply put, migrant and seasonal farmworkers are denied the dignity and justice that a civilized society owes people who contribute to its welfare. But as Charles Thompson writes in the introduction, the never-ending supply of newcomers desperate for work virtually ensures continuation of the status quo.

Each chapter focuses on some aspect of farmworkers’ lives or on the political-economic forces controlling them. Readers learn about workers’ families and traditions, about their housing, health, and children’s education, and about the disappearance of small farms, the importation of foreign “guestworkers,” farm

labor organizing, and labor law's unequal treatment of agricultural workers. They read about the abuses, betrayals, and humiliations that have been, and still are, visited upon farmworkers. And they learn about the fleeting moments of joy and pride that brighten the workers' days.

The text is long on qualitative reporting and description (of laws, aid programs, living conditions, and the like) but short on statistics and analysis. Given the paucity of hard data on farm labor and the difficulty of studying a transient and undocumented work force, these are understandable flaws. Still, the book may leave readers wanting more. A section on farm economics exploring the interrelationships among farm size, technology, input costs (including labor), market prices, and profitability while scrutinizing the role of food processors, supermarket chains, farm subsidies, foreign trade, and immigration policy would have provided context. Framing farmworkers' plight within an analytic model dealing with power or social change movements, say, would have added critical perspective. And closer examination of issues tangentially raised in various chapters, such as the importance of well-connected allies within mainstream society and the array of obstacles that hinder farmworker organizing, would have filled analytic holes. The book also disappoints by failing to stay focused on southern farmworkers, the group the editors intended to highlight.

Readers familiar with the literature on farmworkers might also appreciate a more nuanced approach to complex issues. The discussion of agricultural exceptionalism—the exemptions from and inferior treatment of farmworkers by laws that cover nearly all other private sector workers—is one example. It singles out the political power of agribusiness interests and the industry's hearty appetite for profits as the root causes of farmworkers' less protected status. Attorney Greg Schell, the chapter's author, argues that advocates' traditional strategy of nibbling around the exemptions by pressing for new laws and policies that mitigate the worst symptoms of farmworkers' vulnerability only reinforces their exceptionalism. Schell would end farmworkers' disfavored treatment by bringing *all* of them—not just those employed on the largest farms, who are sometimes covered—under existing protective labor laws. He would impose similar regulatory restraints (on child labor, for example) and enforce them with equal vigor. But this formulation is too simplistic: it overlooks features in

certain laws that are unsuited to farmworkers' particular needs.

Consider the National Labor Relations Act, which pointedly excludes agricultural labor. Given the structure of the farm labor market, with its chronic oversupply of labor, loose job categories, high turnover, short job tenure, and confusion about who is actually the employer (the farm owner/operator or the labor contractor who assembles crews and moves them from job to job), the NLRA might further frustrate farmworkers' attempts to organize. The act does not permit, or severely constrains, multi-employer bargaining units, card check or expedited elections, and secondary boycotts—the types of measures that would more effectively safeguard farmworkers' rights to self-representation. Schell rightly urges the inclusion of farmworkers under the act's protections. But he might have taken the next step and noted the need to modify some provisions and add others as necessary to make the rights enshrined in the act meaningful for farmworkers. (Occupational groups such as wait staff, temporary service employees, and fast-food workers whose labor market characteristics do not conform to the manufacturing model underlying the NLRA would likewise benefit from such changes.)

Despite these criticisms, Charles Thompson and Melinda Wiggins have compiled a collection that gives students and others newly committed to the farmworkers' cause an up-close view of their lives and a path to action. Each chapter begins with the words of a farmworker or intern from SAF, the North Carolina-based organization that Wiggins directs; many suggest strategies and tactics for activists. The volume ends with three appendices: a 14-week syllabus with discussion topics, readings, and activities; a directory of farmworker-related organizations; and a sample of supplemental readings and videos. Works cited in the text are also listed.

The shame exposed by this volume and others like it is that not much has changed for farmworkers since the Depression. Unfortunately, even the most well-intended initiatives will have little impact in the absence of a radical turnabout in Americans' sense of social responsibility toward the agricultural underclass.

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