

# Deemed essential, US farmworkers face wage reductions, zero protections from COVID-19

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8 May 2020

From the apple, cherry, and pear orchards in Washington to the vineyards and strawberry fields in California's Central Valley, to the Midwest Corn Belt, the tobacco farms in North Carolina and the Florida citrus groves, the three million farmworkers who produce the lion's share of the nation's food, the majority of whom are undocumented migrants, exist on the edge of society.

It is of no surprise these agricultural laborers have been officially declared "essential workers," however the COVID-19 pandemic is yet another great burden thrown onto the shoulders of the most vulnerable and poorest workers in the United States.

Employed by agricultural and dairy farms they perform backbreaking labor in hazardous conditions for poverty wages—an average of just \$12.59 per hour—or make their wage by the barbaric piece rate system that discourages even the most basic health precautions such as regular handwashing, assuming such stations even exist.

Farmworkers lack access to basic medical care and suffer from significantly higher rates of diabetes, hypertension and health conditions such as heart disease and environmental cancers due to long exposure to pesticides. Hundreds die annually from sun and heat exposure, the leading cause of death in the industry.

Migrant and seasonal farmworkers in the United States are subject daily to extreme heat and often lack access to clean drinking water. There are approximately 500,000 child farmworkers in the US who forgo education to work alongside their parents in the fields helping them to boost their piece rate.

While real numbers do not exist, the advocacy group Farmworker Justice estimates that 70 percent or more of the workforce are undocumented and just ten percent fall under the H-2A seasonal guest-worker program. An agricultural worker with no documentation earns an average of 15 percent less than his H-2A or documented counterpart.

Large farms rely on new immigrants from Mexico, Central America, and South East Asia to work for extremely low wages. They live in cramped, unsanitary and inhuman conditions, including sleeping on bare bunks, or moldy mattresses on floors. Their quarters have poor ventilation, leaky roofs, hazardous wiring, ill maintained plumbing and showers, infestations of rodents, flies, mosquitoes and inadequate facilities for washing. They live in isolated areas far away from health clinics, grocery stores, and public transportation, and are often forced to pay exorbitant rates for rent.

The average life expectancy of a farm worker is a mere forty-

nine years, equivalent to the average life expectancy in the US in the year 1900. For the year 2017, the fatality rate due to work related injury was 20.4 deaths per 100,000 farmworkers.

Farm work is an industry of abject poverty and debt, racism and sexual harassment, long hours of stoop labor in the fields, abuse from bosses, and the denial of basic labor and human rights protections.

In such cruel conditions, it is impossible to imagine that any genuine care could be provided to prevent the spread of the coronavirus from a ruling state that has carved out such an inhuman existence for this underclass of laborers and is doing little to protect the working class as whole as it pushed to reopen the US economy.

Earlier this month, California governor Gavin Newsom signed an executive order to provide an additional 80-hours of sick pay for farmworkers, stating "I want you to know you're not disposable, you are essential, and you're valued...And I want from the bottom of my heart to extend my deep admiration and appreciation to you."

Newsom's words could not ring hollower as there have been no emergency rules put in place to protect agricultural workers from potential outbreaks of COVID-19 in labor camps this harvest season.

Crowded truck beds and buses carry them to the fields. While some farmworkers are able to spread out in fields, social distancing is difficult or impossible to maintain with farm equipment for planting or harvesting that requires large groups to labor in close proximity. The advocacy group Farmworker Justice estimates that one-third of farmworkers live in houses and apartments where multiple families share the same household.

The Trump administration's recent plan to spend \$19 billion to address the impacts of COVID-19 on agriculture will do nothing to help farmworkers. Analysis of United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) data by the Environmental Working Group (EWG) shows that in the 100 counties with the most farmworkers, more than \$590 million in recent trade bailout payments were sent, with no requirement that any of those funds be used to improve the conditions of farmworkers.

Thousands of cases and deaths from COVID-19 are reported in counties with large populations of farmworkers, according to EWG. Yet, farmworkers still face a gross lack of personal protection equipment from their employers such as masks and gloves let alone any real measures for supporting housing and

transportation options that will reduce the spread of the virus.

Oneida, New York has become a hotspot of the virus in recent days. Oneida County officials say that 64 of the new positive cases in the county are related to workers at Green Hills Farm. In total, of the 300 employees at the farm, 139 have tested positive for COVID-19.

Monterey County in Salinas, California, a major lettuce producer, is referred to as the “Salad Bowl of the World.” The county had 185 confirmed cases as of April 28, many of which were connected to the local farms. An employee at Tanimura & Antle, one of the largest lettuce companies, reported testing COVID-19 positive on April 22.

On top of the immediate threat to workers lives exacerbated by their poor health and living conditions, the White House is working to reduce wage rates for foreign guest workers on American farms. This cruel attack on farmworkers is being touted as a measure to help struggling farmers in the US amid disruptions in the agricultural supply chain compounded by the outbreak.

In Florida, tractors are driving through bean and cabbage fields, plowing ripe vegetables back into the soil as Idaho farmers are burying millions of pounds of onions in ditches. Farmers in Wisconsin and Ohio are dumping thousands of gallons of fresh milk into lagoons and manure pits.

Lowering the minimum wage laws for workers with migrant visas will cut wages by about \$2-\$5 dollars an hour. In North Carolina, for example, this change would result in an hourly wage of \$4 an hour for farmworkers.

The loss of income affects not only these workers and their immediate families but also their family members who receive billions of dollars in remittances every year. Some 1.6 million households in Mexico depend on remittances from migrants in the United States as their most important source of income. The World Bank reported that migrant workers around the world sent some \$689 billion in global remittances in 2018.

Washington is touting the effort to slash farmworker pay as “wage relief” to US farm owners but the real aim is drive down wages for the entire working class, and where better to start than among the undocumented. Prior to the pandemic thousands of farms across the country were struggling to keep from going bankrupt, with a growing number of small family farms going out of business every month. The US Department of Agriculture had stated in February, prior to the onset of the pandemic, that it expected farm debt to rise to a record \$425 billion by the end of 2020.

The US State Department has also announced that it will begin processing more H-2A temporary guest worker visas to ensure US farmers have foreign workers in time for spring planting. These “guest workers” hold a limited, “nonimmigrant,” temporary work visa and in order to remain in the US they must keep their jobs and employers satisfied to return the following season.

Guest workers are also legally prevented from ever demanding a pay increase. H-2A program allows employers to reject any job applicant who demands a wage rate higher than the rate approved by the government also known as the “adverse effect wage rates” which are based on a USDA survey of what agricultural workers are paid in each state. This rate is \$11.71 per hour in Florida,

\$12.67 in North Carolina and \$14.77 in California. A citizen or legal resident who demands a higher wage rate can be rejected or fired as “unavailable” for the job and replaced by a guest worker.

Every aspect of the industry and punishing visa laws are constructed to keep wages as low as possible and hold the threat of deportation over the heads of both the documented and undocumented.

United Farm Workers (UFW) President Teresa Romero stated her support for the sick leave temporarily mandated by Newsom, stating that “Farm worker families and the families of farmers work, play, shop and worship together.”

“Protecting these small, tight knit communities is vital to the protection of our food supply,” Romero declared. However, the UFW takes zero responsibility for the inhumane conditions farmworkers must endure and in its sixty years of existence has been complicit in allowing the abject squalor of farmworkers to endure unchanged.

The Trump administration is now using the very desperate situation faced by farmers as a battering ram to slash wages and working conditions even further. Trump’s executive order utilizing the Defense Production Act forcing meat processing plants with outbreaks of COVID-19 to remain open is also by design aimed at compelling a workforce which is at least 30 percent immigrant to labor under inhuman conditions.

Farming, dairy and meat processing plants which have large numbers of immigrant and undocumented workforces have been at the center of the largest mass immigration raids by Immigration, Customs, and Enforcement (ICE) in recent years.

Immigrants continue to be at the forefront of the attacks on democratic rights in the United States. US citizens married to undocumented immigrants have punitively been denied stimulus checks that they would otherwise be entitled to under the CARES package to support themselves and their children. Forcing the meatpacking industry back to work amid major outbreaks while doing nothing to prevent the spread of the disease among agricultural industries are only glimpses of what is in store for the working class more generally.



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