

A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS

THE REALITIES OF LIFE AND LABOR

Migrant Farm Workers

What difficulties were faced by farm workers in the 1960s?

(These lessons are appropriate for units on: immigration, labor movements, reform and minority rights.)

Students will be able to describe farm workers' living and working conditions.

VOCABULARY

migrant farm worker

ACTIVITIES

I. Opening activity

Have students read together the introduction to the handout on farm workers.

II. Discuss the opening activity

Who are migrant farm workers? What types of work do they perform? What kinds of problems do you think they might face due to their work?

III. Group activity

Divide students into small groups and inform them of their tasks. Students should read and/or examine the materials provided to them and identify the problems of farm workers. Each group should have a reporter, recorder and materials handler.

- Instructors may wish to remove or conceal captions on photographs.
- The grouping of images can be rearranged, such as adding Photograph A of Group 4 to Group 3's photographs.

Group 1: Fieldwork

Group 2: Working the Table Grapes in the 1960s

Group 3: Living Conditions

Group 4: Children and Farm Work

Group 5: Poverty and Suffering Among Farm Workers

IV. Share learning

Each group's reporter:

- a) describes the materials used by the group
- b) explains the group's conclusion about the problems that farm workers faced and how they came to those conclusions
- c) shares the most important question or comment that the group had

Group responses should be written so they are visible to the entire class and students are given the opportunity to respond to the questions or comments of other groups.

VI. Assessment

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Have students draw up a list of questions they think would be important to ask a migrant farm worker in the 1960s about his or her life and work. Using two or three of these questions, students should work individually or with a partner. They should imagine that they are a farm worker who is being interviewed about his/her work and life. They are asked to describe the difficulties that they and others are facing as farm workers. They should respond in writing, being as specific as possible.

VII. Homework

- A. Read the short play “Forged Under the Sun” by Maria Elena Lucas. http://www1.cuny.edu/portal_ur/content/women_curriculum07/pdfs/womens_curric_lesson_4_11.pdf
- B. List the difficulties that Rosamaria and the other characters face as farm workers
- C. Explain which of these difficulties would be most difficult for you and why

MATERIALS TO BE USED

- Introduction to student handout
- Assorted photographs and documents for Groups 1–5
- Excerpt from “The Farm Workers’ Struggle for Self Determination” by Wayne C. Hartmire, Jr.
- Sheets for group work

For an additional lesson on the struggles of farm workers: go to the CUNY Women’s Leadership Curriculum: Lesson 4 “How Have Women Advocated for the Rights of Farm Workers?” http://www1.cuny.edu/portal_ur/content/women_curriculum07/pdfs/womens_curric_lesson_4_11.pdf

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INTRODUCTION

“In the twentieth century, large growers have dominated the agricultural industry in many parts of the United States. They own thousands of acres of land and rely upon large numbers of seasonal laborers to plant, tend and harvest their crops. Most farm workers have been immigrants from such places as China, Japan, India, the Philippines and Mexico. Since World War II, the majority of seasonal farm workers in America have been Mexican and Mexican American.”

From “*La Causa*, A History of the United Farm Workers Union *Huelga*”
<http://www.reuther.wayne.edu/exhibits/fw/before.html>

Migrant farm workers in the 1960s were among the most marginalized workers in the United States. A largely immigrant workforce, they lived without permanent homes and were denied the right to organize that other workers had won in the National Labor Relations Act of 1935. The largely Mexican and Mexican-American workers worked seasonally for large agricultural businesses for low wages, enduring backbreaking conditions under a labor system that gave them little control over their lives. (Group 1: Photographs of Fieldwork) Growers provided workers and their families with inadequate housing and many children worked in the fields with their parents. (See Group 3: Living Conditions and Group 4: Children and Farm Work)

Despite the terrible conditions they worked under and the overwhelming power of their employers, farm workers began to organize in the 1960s under the leadership of Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. Embracing the social justice tenets and symbols of the Catholic church (such as the Virgin of Guadalupe) and the rhetoric of the civil rights movement, the United Farm Workers (as their union was eventually called) organized farm workers through strikes, boycotts and by building support for their cause among sympathetic politicians and the public at large.

To learn more about the struggles of farm workers go to:
<http://www.reuther.wayne.edu/ufw.html>
<http://www.pbs.org/itvs/fightfields/index.html>

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Group 1: Fieldwork

Directions

1. Examine the two photographs
2. Complete the table. Be as specific as possible, referring to aspects of the photo or text when you can.

What do we see? (people, things, activities, mood)	What can we conclude?
Photograph A	
Photograph B	

3. What problems were encountered by farm workers? On what do you base your conclusions?
4. What questions or comments do you have about the photographs or farm workers?
5. Who took the photos and why? How might a photographer's point of view affect the image?

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Group 1: Photographs of Fieldwork

PHOTOGRAPH A

Young woman packaging grapes in the field. (c. 1970s)



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Group 1: Photographs of Fieldwork

PHOTOGRAPH B

Farm workers in the field using short-handled hoes. No date.



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Group 2: Working the Table Grapes in the 1960s

Introduction

The Documentation Project asked Maria Saludado Magana to write down her recollections about how table grapes in Delano were cultivated in the 1960's. In 1965, Maria was one of the first Delano Grape Strikers — she was nineteen years old. Today, 40-years later, she and her husband, Ralph, continue to work for the United Farm Workers at the union's La Paz headquarters in the Tehachapi Mountains east of Bakersfield. Besides her regularly assigned work, Maria tends to the gardens that form the burial site of Cesar Chavez.

Working the Table Grapes in the 1960's

The work of irrigating, fertilizing, disking the weeds in the rows between the vines was done throughout the grape growing season when needed or required.

About two weeks before December, farmworkers (men) began to prune the grape vines. This work lasted until February. After the Thompson Seedless vines were pruned, farmworkers (women) tied the canes around the guide wires.

After a vine was pruned, a total of six (6) canes remained, three (3) canes on either side of the main vine. If only five (5) canes were left, two (2) would be on one side of the vine, and three (3) on the other side. The tying lasted until the first week of March.

By the first of April, farmworkers began to cut grass and leaves from around the base of the vines.

In May, the vines began to flower into small grape bunches. Farmworkers pulled the leaves from around the bunches and untangled the bunches from around the guide wires, if that was necessary. Each bunch was left hanging down.

By the last week in May, the grape bunches had formed into a cluster of small grapes but each bunch needed to be trimmed down to leave only the bunches that would form into the highest quality grapes, called #1's. Secondary quality bunches are called #2's.

Another cultivation technique was called tipping, which ensure that each bunch was loosely formed. If the bunch was too tight, the bottom tip was cut off with a pair of grape clippers. Normally, the tipping was finished by the end of June.

During the growing season as the grapes were being formed, tractors periodically drove through the vine rows applying sulfur, which deposited a heavy yellow

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powder on the vines. Late in the growing season, the tractors sprayed a growth hormone on the maturing grape bunches to accelerate the rate of growth and the sizes of the grapes.

In August we picked cannery grapes first, and put them into boxes that weighed more than 36 pounds. Later in the month, the harvest, the harvest foremen formed the table grape harvesting crews of 5 persons per group, 4 to pick and a 1 to pack. The four workers went into the rows a distance of about 45 vines, picked table grape bunches, and then brought the loaded boxes to the front of the row where the packer was stationed. The packer placed the grape bunches stem up into the shipping crate on top of thin paper mattresses, then covered the grapes with a paper curtain and nailed the wooden slats to the crate to form the box top. Sometimes the packer used pieces of tissue wrapping paper to wrap each bunch in the box and packed it to look very pretty. The care taken at this point would depend on where the grape was being shipped and how it was marketed.

The picker's responsibility was to cut the better grapes, the #1 grape that was more attractive and demanded a better price. The pickers helped the packer move to the next packing station when they had finished with the previous one.

The packed table grape boxes would be stacked 10 boxes high in rows of 50 or 60. The swampers (men) came by with trucks and swamped the boxes into the truck.

In the 1960's, this harvest work paid \$.90 per hour and \$.10 per box. The number of boxes was counted at the end of the day for each work group and the money was divided into equal shares among the 5 persons in the harvest crew.

Source: The Farmworker Movement Documentation Project
<http://www.farmworkermovement.org/introduction/index.shtml>
http://www.farmworkermovement.org/essay/019%20Saludado_Maria%20Magana.pdf

VOCABULARY

Disking the weeds: using a disk to clear weeds away before planting

Canes: the stem of the grape plant

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Group 3: Living Conditions

Directions

1. Examine the two photographs
2. Complete the table. Be as specific as possible, referring to aspects of the photo or text when you can.

What do we see? (people, things, activities, mood)	What can we conclude?
Photograph A	
Photograph B	

3. What problems were encountered by farm workers? On what do you base your conclusions?
4. What questions or comments do you have about the photographs or farm workers?
5. These photos come from United Farm Workers' collection. How might the photographer's point of view affect the image?

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Group 3: Living Conditions

PHOTOGRAPH A

Children of Farm Workers at a Labor Camp in Florida, March 1969



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Group 3: Living Conditions

PHOTOGRAPH B

A child standing in front of a derelict house, no date.



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Group 4: Children and Farm Work

Directions

1. Examine the photographs and read the Senate testimony of Rudolfo Juarez.
2. Complete the table. Be as specific as possible, referring to aspects of the illustration or text when you can.

What do we see? (people, things, activities, mood)	What can we conclude?
Photograph A	
Photograph B	

3. From the illustrations, what problems do you think farm workers' children encountered? On what do you base your conclusions?
4. What questions or comments do you have about the photographs or farm workers?
5. These photos come from United Farm Workers' collection. How might the photographer's point of view affect the image?

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Group 4: Children and Farm Work

PHOTOGRAPH A

Child laborers harvesting onion crops



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Group 4: Children and Farm Work

PHOTOGRAPH B

Man and children working in the fields



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Migrant Farm Workers

In the following testimony from a 1969 Senate hearing, migrant farm workers from Florida and Texas discussed their experiences and problems. Since 1970, fresh fruit consumption in the United States has risen sharply, increasing the demand for hand labor. Living and working conditions for migrants remain poor in much of the country.

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/7024>

Statement of Rudolfo Juarez, of Okeechobee, Fla.

Mr. JUAREZ. Mr. Chairman, members of the subcommittee, I have prepared a statement that I would like to present to you. This statement is based on what I myself lived through since I was old enough to work and became a migrant at the age of 5. Based on my experience and how I continue to see the way my people suffer, in this statement I would like to express my feelings, as well as my opinions, and the feeling and opinions of others that I have worked with side by side in the fields.

Of all the groups living in poverty, the migrant farm worker and his family in general suffer the greatest socioeconomic deprivation. The migrant farmworker and his family travels throughout the Nation, living from day to day, depending upon his luck that the crops are good and that nothing happens, for instance, while he travels on the road.

Him and his family will eat as little and as cheap as he can, for he has very little money to get there. If his car breaks down, the mechanics overcharge him as much as they feel they can get away with. Because of bad weather and the time that lapses between each crop, it is impossible for him to save any money—plus the high cost of living, plus the excessive amount of rent that he has to pay for the rat- and roach-infested pigpen that him and his family are forced to live in while he lives in Florida.

So when crops are over in the State of Florida, there is no way that he can continue to survive, so he migrates. And because of that the migrant farmworkers have had great difficulties in their employment relationships, much of this arising out of exploitation and abuse by irresponsible farmers and crew leaders who sometimes underpay them, short count them, and overcharge them for transportation. Crew leaders on occasions, collect wages from the employers and then abandon the workers without paying them.

His mobility deprives the migrant of many of the basic social services that are available to the local poor such as welfare, medical coverage and care, vocational rehabilitation, and day care for children. More than often his housing does not meet code standards.

Our children are pulled out of schools so that they may help provide for the family in the fields or at home taking care of smaller children so that mothers can work. . . .

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Group 5: Poverty and Suffering Among Farm Workers

Directions: Read the account of The Rev. Wayne C. Hartmire, Jr., of the difficulties faced by farm workers in the late 1960s then respond to the following questions.

1. How did the Rev. Hartmire describe the housing conditions of the farm workers?

- 2a. Were farm workers receiving a fair share of the profits of their industry based on the difficulty and importance of their work?

- 2b. What were working conditions like for the farm workers?

3. Why does the document use the phrase “powerlessness” in referring to the farm workers’ status? (Give at least three examples that would support your answer.)

4. How does the document portray the farmers who hire the migrant farm workers? Do you feel that this is a fair portrayal — why or why not?

5. Why do you think farm workers were paid low wages? How do you think they could have improved their wages and working conditions?

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The Delano Grape Strike in California began in 1965, led by Cesar Chavez, who became president of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee. The strike began a long campaign for economic and social justice for migrant farm workers. The UFWOC used not only the strike, but also national boycotts of grapes and hunger strikes by Chavez himself to hurt the growers economically and bring national media attention to the plight of migrant farm workers. Fearing the power of the UFWOC, growers responded by bringing in strikebreakers to replace the striking workers and by signing “sweetheart deals” with the Teamsters Union. Often with the aid of local law enforcement, growers harassed strikers, using violence and intimidation.

To learn more about the United Farm Workers go to:

<http://www.reuther.wayne.edu/ufr.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/itvs/fightfields/index.html>

Excerpt from “The Delano Grape Strike”

The Delano Grape Strike: The Farm Workers’ Struggle For Self Determination. February 1969

By: The Rev. Wayne C. Hartmire, Jr., Director, Calif. Migrant Ministry

“When we are really honest with ourselves we must admit that our lives are all that really belong to us. So, it is how we use our lives that determines what kind of men we are. It is my deepest belief that only by giving our lives do we find life. I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally non-violent struggle for justice. To be a man is to suffer for others. God help us to be men!” (Cesar Chavez)

I would like to talk about the nature of the agricultural industry, conditions in the fields and trace the history of the Delano strike and in so doing try to address the basic human issues involved in the farm worker’s struggle. I will then deal more directly with some other statements made in Mr. Grant’s article. I am not writing as a detached student of this struggle. The California Migrant Ministry has been at work in the fields for 25 years. I have known Cesar Chavez for more than 7 years. Our staff has been present from the beginning of the Strike in September 1965. Our concern is for dignity and full life for workers, their families and indeed for all men in the agricultural community. We believe that self-determination for farm workers is one crucial element in a more just and human future. We believe that farm workers must have a strong organization of their own if they are to improve their life situation and we have tried to help them gain the strength needed to bring about that measure of equality that will make possible bargaining with their employers.

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California's Most Powerful Industry

California agriculture is big business! Gross agricultural income in 1966 was a record \$3.95 billion dollars. Since then it has topped four (4) billion dollars. California agriculture and related industries, by their own testimony, account for 33% of the jobs in the state. Farm workers are pressing for change against the determined resistance of the state's most powerful and influential industry. . . .

The farm workers' struggle for organization and bargaining may be focused today on table grapes but it is in fact a struggle with the will of the entire industry. And as many people in other states have noticed, it is a struggle with agricultural labor users all over the nation. If farm workers are to succeed against the resistance of the industry, they must succeed in Delano and in table grapes. If they can gain the right of organizing and bargaining in wine and table grapes then all farm workers may share in the benefits and the dignity of new found organizational strength.

Poverty & Suffering Among Farm Workers

Some may ask: Why is such organizational strength necessary? Are conditions really that bad? "No other segment of our population is so poorly paid yet contributes so much to our Nation's wealth and welfare." So speaks the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor in its discussion of seasonal farm workers in the U.S.A. But as Mr. Grant implies it may be unfair to lump California farm workers into national conclusions since farm workers in California are paid more than in any other state (excepting Hawaii where farm workers are organized). California's Welfare Study Commission made the following statement in referring to farm workers: "one occupational group *in California* is so deeply locked in poverty that it is set off from all others." Allan Grant quotes the Governor's Advisory Commission on Housing but overlooks the following conclusion of their study: "Fewer than 20 percent of the California farm worker families covered in our study lived in dwellings which could be considered adequate by present standards of health, safety and comfort. Sixty-three percent of the dwelling units occupied by general field workers, the only toilet facilities were pit privies. Thirty percent of the dwellings had no bathing facilities, and 25 percent lacked even so basic a necessity as a kitchen sink with running water. These conditions, to be discussed in detail in the body of the report, offer little evidence of improvement in the relative economic and social position of the agricultural worker in California. He remains, as he has since the state's early transition to intensive labor use farming, among the most poorly paid, poorly fed, and poorly housed of California's citizens." . . .

California farmers are not especially cruel or corrupt. They are men like us who happen to have too much power over the lives of their workers. They have become accustomed to an over-supply of poor and unorganized workers, which

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has allowed them to control all the important decisions about wages and working conditions. Being human, they have paid more attention to their own economic interests than to the interests of the workers. As a result workers in agriculture have been denied the improved wages and working conditions that are commonplace in industry. The vast majority of farm workers in California do not have contracts; they do not get overtime pay; too often they do not even know their rate of pay while they are working; there are no holidays or vacations with pay; they do not have health or pension plans; in many instances they must provide their own tools & equipment; safety provisions are minimal; there are no regular rest periods; toilets and sanitary drinking water may or may not be provided. Farm workers go to work not knowing how long the day will be or how many days of work there will be in that week. Workers are laid off in the middle of the day, in the middle of the week, for days or weeks at a time with no notice and no clear indications of when work will be available. If a male worker is told to show up for work at 6 A.M. and the equipment is not ready or the trees are wet and he does not work until 10 A.M., he is not paid for those 4 hours. Speed-ups and abusive supervision are all too common. Farm workers can be fired at any time without explanation. There are no established channels for grievances. The many who will dispute these realities can point to examples of better wages and working conditions but their examples do not represent the experiences of the majority of unorganized farm workers in California and the U.S.A. The farm workers' powerlessness on the job crushes his dignity and leaves him no alternative but resentment and suffering. Justice demands that there be a change—for the sake of workers, the industry and the larger community.

<http://farmworkermovement.org/essays/essays/MillerArchive/030%20The%20Delano%20Grape%20Strike.pdf>

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DISCOVERING HISTORY IN TODAY'S NEW YORK TIMES

1. The documents included in this unit reveal the plight of migrant workers, the difficult work that they perform and the hardships they face in providing for their families. Review references in the document to sources online such as www.pbs.org/itvs/fightfields/index.html to learn more about the struggles of the migrant farm worker. For another view of immigration laws and the difficulties facing farmers in hiring enough workers to complete their planting and harvest, review the article in The New York Times by Paul Vitello, "Immigration Issues End a Pennsylvania Grower's Season" (April 2, 2008). Or, research additional articles on the various issues faced by migrant workers and the farmers who hire them. What remedies would you suggest to address these problems?
2. Research the United Farm Workers and some of the organizational strategies used to target awareness of the plight of the workers and their demands for a better life. Locate an article in The New York Times that presents either the migrant workers' point of view or the farmers' point of view on current immigration laws and restrictions. Comment on the article and prepare a list of suggestions that might benefit both workers' lives and farm productivity.