

## California's Migrant Workers

### *A Caste System Enforced by State Power*

Bruce Neuburger

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California is by far the most important source of fruits, vegetables, nuts, dairy, meat, and other products of the U.S. food system. The list of U.S.-grown foods produced almost exclusively in California by the state's roughly eight hundred thousand farmworkers is a long one, including two thirds of the country's fruits and nuts, and one third of its vegetables. California growers employ one out of three of the nation's farmworkers. Some 70 percent of these workers were born in Mexico. Estimates are that at least 50 percent are undocumented, with little chance of changing that. They plant, cultivate, irrigate, harvest, pack, and haul a bountiful \$47 billion worth of farm products each year—17 percent of the total value of farm products nationally according to 2013 statistics. Their average annual income is \$14 thousand and 10 percent of farmworkers live in "informal dwellings" like garages, sheds, and abandoned vehicles. Despite many hazardous job conditions, only one out of three farmworkers has any kind of health insurance.

### Telling the Stories

"No one comes out here. No one knows what we go through," Roberto Valdez, a farmworker in the Coachella Valley town of Thermal, California, tells Gabriel Thompson, the interviewer and editor of *Chasing the Harvest*, a recently published book of interviews with farmworkers, growers, union activists, teachers, and others. And as one reads through the compelling stories that are told here, one gets a deep sense of what Roberto means, as well as a passionate urge to have others know of the life and work of those who labour in California's fields.

That is the thread that binds the seventeen people whose narratives are found in *Chasing the Harvest*—all have worked or are still working in California's fields.

As Executive Editor Mimi Lok notes in her introduction to *Chasing the Harvest*, the collected narratives, part of the Voice of Witness series, aimed to provide "a birth-to-now chronologised scope in order to portray narrators as individuals in all their complexity, rather than as case studies." The narratives were collected in the spring and summer of 2016, a busy time for farmworkers. As Thompson explains, "there were no hard and fast rules for selecting narrators, only that they reflected some of the diversity of California's farmworkers." *Chasing the Harvest* applies a microscope to a section of a

large panorama, bringing out graphic detail and insights into the lives and conditions of farmworkers today. This is what makes it such an informative and important book.<sup>1</sup>

Here is a taste:

*"I was sixteen or seventeen when the group I was with walked three days in the desert to get to Arizona.... We slept under the orange trees, and that's also where we worked. In my group there were about six people. Ten trees that way, there's another group, and so on. I think there were thirty, forty people living in that field of oranges." — Fausto Sánchez*

*"In the fields they never had bathrooms. We'd go out, at least two or three girls, and find the furthest possible place. We always wore layers, and we'd take a shirt off and cover ourselves, make like a little tent around us, so we could go to the bathroom." — Maria Elena Durazo*

*"When they fumigated the vineyards with pesticides, we slept nearby with our coolers blowing the chemicals into our trailer. We didn't have any protection." — Roberto Valdez*

*"But there are still mayordomos (foremen) that make their workers work 'til 4 p.m. From 6 a.m. to 4 p.m. in the heat. They're still working that long when it's over 100 degrees. Other mayordomos don't give breaks. They just won't give breaks." — Ismael Moreno*

*"I've seen many farmworkers washing themselves in the canal, bathing themselves in their underwear, washing their clothes. And besides the dangers of the pollutants, I've heard of cases where people passing by called the police on these poor people, because they were in their underwear!" — José Saldívar*

## Changing Eras

These stories have a special importance now. Media attention focused on field workers in recent years has mainly been in the context of the xenophobic campaign to demonise and criminalise immigrants more generally. In August 2018, right-wing commentator Laura Ingraham railed at length on Fox News about "Massive demographic changes...foisted on the American people...that none of us ever voted for, and most of us don't like." As she spoke, video clips of farmworkers harvesting vegetables played in the background.

There was a time when a different kind of public attention was directed toward California farmworkers. It began in 1965, when a strike of Filipino and Mexican grape workers in the Coachella and southern San Joaquin valleys erupted. For more than fifteen years, national grape and lettuce boycotts, a series of powerful strikes that defied mass arrests, marches, rallies, and numerous other actions in California and elsewhere, brought farmworkers into view for millions across the country. As Thompson puts it, "the UFW [United Farmworkers Union] sent striking farmworkers into the cities [as part of the boycott effort] where they told their stories. What they revealed was hidden crisis of labour abuse, unfair wages, and unsafe working conditions." In so doing, farmworkers and their union forged an alliance with religious

<sup>1</sup> ↪ Gabriel Thompson, ed., *Chasing the Harvest: Migrant Workers in California Agriculture* (New York: Verso, 2017)

communities, students, progressive and radical political activists, and other unions. This built unprecedented support in the struggle against powerful California agribusinesses.

That was many decades, wars, and crises ago, at a time when liberation struggles, civil rights, and revolutionary

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movements across the world and in the United States challenged racial injustice and imperialism. While the farmworker movement itself never broke beyond the bounds of a struggle for better wages, benefits, and working and living conditions, the energy and broader strategic vision that was part of the social movements of that time gave the farmworker struggle energy and initiative. The farmworker struggle hit up against a system of class and racial oppression, informing and inspiring the broader movement of which it was a part.

Entering the 1980s, a shift away from rebellion and liberation across the planet, and the rise of the conservative tide of neoliberalism, brought the era of upheaval in the fields to an end. Sharp conflicts emerged within the UFW over which direction it should take. Expulsions of key activists and disillusionment more broadly sent the union movement into retreat. The sapping of organised strength dissipated the gains previously won. A weakened union was devastated by the growers who had fought hard to oppose it.

In 1986, the Immigration Reform and Control Act, broadly known as “la amnistía,” brought a million new workers into the fields under the Special Agriculture Workers’ Program (SAW). Workers were able to gain legal status with a letter from a grower—and growers gave out a lot of letters. The flood of new workers under SAW allowed employers to push down wages, end benefits previously won under union contracts, and abandon reforms previously granted, further undermining living and working conditions.

The growers applied lessons learned fighting the union movement so as to make a repeat of that kind of movement more difficult. They blacklisted and otherwise drove union activists from their farms. They parcelled out their work to “independent labour contractors,” thus fragmenting the workforce. They tore down many labour camps that had been centres for organising in the days of upsurge.

As veterans of the farm struggle aged, new workers came. A new generation of farmworkers faced conditions similar to those their predecessors had risen against. Only the context now was different—memories had faded, political moods had changed. The rosy dawn of neoliberalism, privatisation, and broad attack on unions had materialised.

Roberto Valdez, like most of those whose stories are told in *Chasing the Harvest*, came into the fields after the dust of the years of upsurge had settled. A few, such as Rosario Pelaya, had been in the ranks of the rebellion or witnessed its descent. Each would have to contend with the conditions as they now encountered them.

## A Compulsion for Migration

In the narratives, all who come north from Mexico (there are several U.S.-born growers whose stories are also here) reflect on their personal reasons for migrating.

When Rafael Gonzalez Meraz, a young farmworker, is rejected by the girl he is pursuing because of his poverty, he leaves his home in Colima, Mexico, and goes north to find the work he hopes will change his life's prospects.

Silvia Corraera marries at fourteen to escape her difficult life in a small village near Puebla. When her husband is robbed of money borrowed to buy fireworks to sell in Acapulco, she comes north across the border with him and her young son.

Fausto Sanchez, from a large family of impoverished Oaxacan farmers, leaves his southern Mexican village to work as a migrant in the Mexican state of Sonora. When work in Sonora is slow, he joins fellow workers on a trip north of the U.S. border—part of a new migratory circuit of indigenous Oaxacans to California fields.

At the age of nine, Beatriz Machiche begins crossing the border at San Luis Rio Colorado, Sonora, with her family to work in the lemon orchards in Arizona. By age fourteen, she joins the farmworker struggle in the Coachella grape fields.

### The Roots of Mass Migration

All these stories are part of what has been a mass migration north, rooted in a history of colonial domination, exploitation, and racial oppression.

Farming in California as we know it today has its origin in the mid-1800s, when U.S. merchant capitalists and slave holders briefly united to seize the vast northern Mexican territories. “Robber baron” opportunists rushed in after the conquest to grab the extensive Mexican land grants. Abundant labour was needed to realise the land’s enormous potential for wealth production. It was slavery—the powerful engine of capital accumulation—that served as California growers’ ideological model for their labour system.

A white supremacist society proclaimed its right to exploit nonwhite immigrants as its Manifest Destiny. Successive waves of mainly nonwhite immigrants supplied the labour to feed this so-called California dream.

It was not until the early 1900s, after previous waves of immigrants from Asia were banned or proved inadequate, that California and Southwest growers turned decisively to Mexico. Mexican workers first were brought north along the railroad routes built from the interior of Mexico to the U.S. border to facilitate U.S. economic domination and exploitation of Mexico. Over time, a plundered Mexican economy became a source of colonised labour on which California agriculture has fattened itself ever since.

And, it should be noted, around 80 percent of the U.S. farm labour force today are immigrants, the majority of whom are from Mexico. California’s farm labour system is now that of the whole country.

### La Migra

*Colonised labour can only be sustained by a system of repression and control.*

Oscar Ramos, as the undocumented child of a migrant family, lived in fear of being taken away from his family who worked in Hollister and lived in a local labour camp. “Immigration agents would raid the camp regularly.... We’d stay with a baby sitter, someone’s grandma.... I remember one day when I must have been five...and Immigration showed up

at the camp and took a few people. She [the babysitter] got put in their van. She's in their van...looking back with a sad face, waving good bye."

Fausto Sanchez worked in the onion and garlic fields in the small town of Kerman. He remembered "that you had to hide from Immigration. You couldn't walk around during the day; you weren't free to go to the store. When you got up at five in the morning, you went directly to the field.... At night, or on Saturdays or Sundays, you'd do your shopping because on Saturdays and Sundays the migra [Immigration] wasn't out."

One day, Silvia Corraera is at the El Paso airport awaiting a flight to San Jose. She recalls: "I saw that all these Immigration agents were sitting near the stairs, at a table. Instead of crossing in front of the agents, we tried to sneak behind them, and when they saw us do that they became suspicious. That's why they caught us."

Beatriz Machiche remembers that "one day in the fields harvesting grapes, and people in the fields started to shout—'La migra is coming! They have dogs!'.... Immigration officers...started chasing people. They grabbed a few. My mom got

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some boxes out of our car and hid people under them." Years later, Beatriz became the coordinator of a migrant education program for farmworker children. "But la migra is just a fact of life for many of these children.... As soon as there's less work in the fields, that's when la migra comes out looking for

people...if you're missing a tail light, or maybe they'll stop you for some other reason. These children are losing family members all the time."

### "Where There's Oppression, There's Resistance"

"Where there's oppression, there's resistance" was a popular saying in the 1960s that came out of the Chinese Revolution. There is no mass resistance to conditions in the fields at present. But resistance in other forms continues.

In 2005, Roberto Valdez nearly lost his sixteen-year-old son to heat stroke. That same year, twelve farmworkers died from heat stroke. Later, standing before senators in a Sacramento hearing room, he said: "The hands that you see are the hands that harvest the lemons...the strawberries your children eat...the grapes you see in the market.... We're dying out there in the fields." Roberto has used a cell phone camera to make and post short films of what he has witnessed in the fields. "This is the labour force of the United States. These are the people that nobody wants, earning their bread every day. These are the people that the politicians don't want, but while they sleep...all these people are working in the fields across California." He invites Donald Trump to come take a look.

When Maricruz Ladino is raped by a supervisor at a Salinas vegetable-packing plant, she summons the courage to denounce him. She is fired from her job, then shunned by other employers. Then, "agents from ICE arrived at [her] apartment at six in the morning. It was April 27, 2007—a date [she]ll never forget." She is taken to San Jose, then Oakland, shackled and flown to Tijuana, where she is dropped off at four in the morning. Still, she continued to fight. In 2013, she was featured in a Frontline documentary, *Rape in the Fields*, exposing widespread sexual abuse of farmworker women.

Heraclio Astete takes a job as a shepherd to help his family in Peru. He faces desperate conditions and contracts Valley Fever, which nearly ends his life. Recovered, he "began to organise a shepherders' union in Bakersfield." He recounts: "Victor and I would go out at night to meet with shepherders in all the different pastures and fields.... We also



gathered their stories—we had to show that there was abuse of sheepherders going on.” A protracted struggle goes on. In 2001, the California legislature passed a law improving sheepherders wages and working conditions. The struggle to have that law enforced, however, persists.

Oscar Ramos finds his early life experience in the fields helps him connect with the children of farmworkers who are his students at a Salinas’ Sheridan middle school. “It used to be we’d lose half our students in the fall and winter, because most of those students had parents that were traveling for farm work.” He challenges that aspect of the migratory system and succeeds in helping students achieve better results, including entry to college.

Fausto Sanchez, a Mixteco speaker from Oaxaca learns English at night school and then gets a job with the California Rural Legal Assistance defending Mixteco-speaking workers from the myriad abuses they suffer as the most exploited of California’s farmworkers. “I remember a case.... There was a pesticide company spraying some carrot and potato fields here in Arvin. They didn’t follow guidelines for the pesticide they were using, and a cloud of it drifted into the homes of fieldworkers nearby.... We helped get compensation for twenty-five or thirty families.”

Maria Elena Durazo takes her experience in the fields as an inspiration in her work to turn an obtuse business union, UNITE HERE in Los Angeles, into a more responsive, democratic union. “There are a lot of similarities between the workers in our union and farmworkers. Undocumented status, for example: you have to get past that particular fear.... So when undocumented workers do commit to organising, they really put a lot on the line. It’s a level of courage that is just so inspiring.”

## Is It the Work?

Oscar Ramos spoke nostalgically of youthful days in the fields: “We’d be out there and there’d be a song that everyone

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liked and everyone would be singing.... The sharing of food was just wonderful.... We all had lunch together, and we’d share whatever we brought. Everyone!” Beatriz Machiche recalled, “I’ve always liked work in the fields.... You’re free, it’s sunny, filling up onion boxes, chilies, grape boxes. You bring your radio and you sing; you eat on the ground with your colleagues. You’re not afraid to get fired because you’re not dressed properly. And you’re the same as all the other workers, you can laugh and joke around.” Even Rafael Meraz, a crew

foreman says, “I’m not really looking forward to retirement, because I’m happy here. Joking with the other workers, you don’t get bored.” Roberto Valdez remarks that “people who’ve worked in the field can do any work without difficulty.... The work itself isn’t the problem.” It is not the nature of the work that makes being a farmworker in the United States so oppressive, dangerous, difficult, and even deadly. It is toiling in a society where only the wealth extracted from the workers has real value. It is working in a society where the labour has value and the labourer is despised and treated as a disposable commodity or a necessary nuisance—a potential danger and a useful scapegoat. It is not the work, but the social system in which that work is performed.

## Searching for Alternatives—Grower Narratives

Two California growers, Harold McClarity and Jim Cochran, are part of the narratives of Chasing the Harvest. Their experiences in the era of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam war movements and other struggles of the 1960s become an

impetus in the search for alternatives to the prevailing farming and labour systems. Cochran becomes a pioneer of organic strawberry farming on his small central coast farm. McClarity becomes a large and successful Central Valley tree fruit and grape grower. Their experiences and outlook could well make for a useful discussion on the viability—or impossibility—of genuine alternatives to an exploiting system, within the framework of that same system.

## Conclusion

In the era of Trump and his anti-immigrant fascist mongering, California stands out as a kind of fortress of tolerance—after all, it is a sanctuary state. This was not always the case. California was at one time, arguably, the most overtly racist state in the United States outside of the former slave states—ground zero for the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Operation Wetback in 1954, and Proposition 187 in the mid-1990s. Something changed—partly demographically, partly due to persistent struggle, and partly because of the country's dependence on the very people Trump and his kind like to bash.

But if we should become too taken by the signs of progress in California toward embracing diversity and opposing overt white supremacy, *Chasing the Harvest* will help bring us, literally, back down to earth. It is not a sweeping analysis of exploitation nor does it seek to unearth the mainsprings of that exploitation. But it does give a compelling and powerful picture of what exploitation and oppression—indeed, what an apartheid labour system—looks like up close. It brings us face to face with the fact that this is a society that cannot sustain itself, cannot feed itself, without a labour system that ensnares hundreds of thousands in a web of extremely oppressive social relations; a system that is, in all but in name, a caste system enforced by state power. They are a starting point for challenging that which needs to be upended, for this oppressive and life-crushing farm labour system cannot be allowed to stand.

The interviews in *Chasing the Harvest* flesh out a part of this picture—an important part. And they are an important beginning for grappling with this history and this current reality.

These narratives are meant to be used also as material for school curriculum, so that students can engage with experiences that are both little known and intimately connected to our lives and well-being. They offer the possibility that these windows to the world of farmworkers will inspire students to seek out causes of injustice and to uncover the system that has produced them. They are a starting point for challenging that which needs to be upended, for this oppressive and life-crushing farm labour system cannot be allowed to stand.

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❖ **About the author:** Bruce Neuburger is a retired teacher who worked in the fields of California for a decade in the 1970s. He is the author of *Lettuce Wars: Ten Years of Work and Struggle in the Fields of California* (Monthly Review Press).



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