

## AGRIBUSINESS' 'NAKED, GREEDY GRAB' (2/01)

Corporate growers and their political allies are once again singing that whiney little ditty about how "Americans won't do stoop labor."

Which means they're once again calling for a revival of the bracero program that for 22 years provided farm employers with an unlimited supply of cheap, docile and captive Mexican labor to do work they claimed domestic workers were unwilling to do.

Congress killed the program in 1964 for very good reasons. Growers were blatantly abusing the Mexican braceros, hiring them through the government for jobs sought by less compliant U.S. workers so as to keep pay and working conditions at miserably low level.

In almost every one of the 35 years since then, demands have been raised for a return of the braceros. This year, the charge is being led by two Republican governors, Jane Hull of Arizona and Gary Johnson of New Mexico.

It's quite understandable why they and their agribusiness friends are lobbying Congress for a new bracero program. Like the old program, it would guarantee growers a workforce of desperately poor Mexicans who would come and go on demand, have no say in how they were treated and would not dare complain lest they be replaced by other poor workers waiting eagerly at the border.

Those seeking a new program naturally deny that such exploitation is their purpose. Why, they're only trying to fill jobs which, however vital to our well-being, Americans just don't want. You know the tune: "Americans won't do stoop labor."

Oh, sure. Then who is it that cleans our sewers and collects our garbage? Who are the cement masons, who spend virtually the entire workday on their knees? Our roofers, who work with hot tar all day? And the many others who perform similarly rough work?

They, of course, are Americans who are treated with dignity, paid a decent wage, given decent working conditions and not thrown into direct competition with desperate foreign workers.

Farm workers, however, generally are offered pay at or below the legal minimum and few, if any, of the fringe benefits and protections against health

and safety hazards and arbitrary and illegal employer actions provided most non-agricultural workers. Many are denied even such basic on-the-job amenities as fresh drinking water and toilets.

There are plenty of domestic workers available for farm jobs, for despite the country's supposed economic boom, unemployment rates remain at double-digit levels in major farm areas. But rather than hire Americans who might demand the decent treatment accorded other U.S. workers, growers have been hiring easily-exploited recent immigrants – nearly 40 percent of them undocumented – who are too vulnerable to demand anything.

The immigrants generally are not eligible for the unemployment and welfare benefits and other government aid that makes domestic workers less willing to accept growers' arbitrary terms.

A few growers get their immigrant workers through a federal "guest worker" program that was set up after Congress terminated the bracero program. But the vast majority of growers won't use it because it requires them to provide housing, transportation and other benefits to the immigrants supplied them and to make at least some effort to show that hiring the immigrants would not have an "adverse effect" on domestic workers.

The growers' political allies would give them a new bracero program by modifying the guest worker program to eliminate most of the requirements they find distasteful. Thus they could continue hiring seasonal workers strictly on their own wretched terms with considerable help from the federal government.

"In an industry that regularly amazes people at the degree of its greed, this is about the most naked, greedy grab for cheap, exploitable labor that you could possibly imagine," notes Mark Schacht of the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation.

No amount of nonsense about Americans being unwilling to perform the vital task of harvesting the food that sustains us all can conceal that reality.