

NO WATER, NO TOILET, NO ELECTRICITY (5/01)

Imagine workers who must be at their job site 24 hours a day, alone and on constant call. Whose crumbling living quarters at the sites lack electricity, running water and bathrooms. And whose pay is less than \$1,000 a month.

No, this is not a historical column about the working and living conditions endured by workers in previous centuries. This is about the conditions being imposed in the 21st century on workers whose U.S. employers argue, in the best 19th century manner, that they just cannot afford to treat them better and that the workers are in any case satisfied.

The workers are shepherders, who perform that ancient and vital task for some 67,000 ranchers across the country. Few, if any, workers have been more exploited. Yet almost nothing has been done to try to improve their conditions. But finally, there's some movement in that direction, led by a private service agency in California, whose sheep industry is the nation's second largest.

Like most shepherders throughout the country, those in California are mainly temporary immigrants working under a federal program that allows ranchers to sign them to three-year contracts if the ranchers can show they have tried and failed to recruit domestic workers for the jobs. There are hardly any other requirements. Ranchers are not even required to pay the legal minimum wage.

Not surprisingly, very few U.S. workers are interested in the jobs, given what the ranchers offer. But minuscule as it is, the pay is much more than the immigrants can make in their home countries. To those desperately poor workers, it's enough to make up for the miserable working and living conditions.

Typical of California's immigrant shepherders is 42-year-old David Quispealaya, who complained to an Associated Press reporter that he is "a prisoner without visitors, without a family." He nevertheless remains on the job because the pay is three times what he could make at home. He needs the money to support his wife and eight children in Peru.

Peru is a main source of the state's 300 or so shepherders, along with Chile and Mongolia.

Among the Chileans is 37-year-old Vincente Quilodran. Like virtually all the other shepherders, he lives in a dilapidated mobile trailer, 7 by 13 feet.

"The linoleum is worn to plywood," said the AP's Brian Melley in describing Quilodran's quarters. "His mattress has a permanent droop and the plastic upholstery has been peeled from seat cushions at his table to reveal brown foam full of divots. Flimsy cabinets are painted silver and holes are patched with duct tape."

There was, of course, no running water, toilet or electricity.

During the summer, some of the shepherders don't even have trailers for shelter. They live in tents.

The attempts to improve the California workers lot were launched by Central California Legal Services. Its director, Chris Schneider, urged the state's Industrial Welfare Commission, which sets the pay rate and other conditions for the immigrant workers, to raise their pay of \$750 a month to more than \$2,000 and order significant improvements in their housing accommodations.

But the commission would do no more than agree to increase monthly pay to \$900 in July and to \$1,200 in July of next year.

Even that extremely modest and obviously inadequate action riled sheep ranchers. They complained it would expose them to even greater competitive pressures from Australia, New Zealand and other countries with large sheep industries that have been undercutting them.

They also worry that it will lead to better pay and conditions in other states, where compensation is even worse than in California. Shepherders in Arizona, for instance, are paid a mere \$650 a month.

"I hope everybody is not as crazy as California," declared Dennis Richins, a Utah rancher who heads the sheep ranchers' Western Range Association.

There's no reason to treat workers differently, he said, since most of them "are clamoring to come back." They, of course, currently have little choice but to accept whatever is offered them. Those who seek more, rancher Ramon Echeveate told the Industrial Welfare Commission, are "good for nothing" workers – "boys," he called them – who've come to the United States to stir up trouble.

Such arguments should sound familiar to students of history. For that's pretty much how employers responded in past centuries to workers who dared demand decent pay and working conditions.

The struggle to overturn the employers' reactionary ways is not over. Those demanding better treatment for California's shepherders promise to press their demands on the State Legislature and to make theirs a national campaign in behalf of some of the most exploited workers in American history.