

TOBACCO'S OTHER VICTIMS (11/07)

Ideally, tobacco should be outlawed. But as long as people continue to use the deadly stuff, those who harvest it for the great profit of tobacco companies deserve far better than the miserable pay and working conditions imposed on them.

“Miserable” is not an exaggeration. Consider North Carolina, the country’s leading tobacco producer. The state’s \$500 million-a-year crop is harvested by more than 25,000 workers, most of them Mexican immigrants. Some are documented “guest workers,” some undocumented. Some are as young as 12, as state law allows.

The harvesters make at most about \$7 an hour or about \$7,100 a year for dangerous, back-breaking work and most work for growers who do not provide health care benefits and are exempt from the law that requires Workers Compensation payments for employees who are hurt on the job.

Thousands of the workers are afflicted yearly with “green tobacco sickness” caused by overexposure to the highly toxic nicotine in tobacco leaves that is absorbed into their bodies. Symptoms often last for several days. Victims may feel a general weakness or shortness of breath, for instance, headaches, vomiting, dizziness, cramps, heightened blood pressure or speeded-up heart rates. At the least, they break out in rashes.

The nicotine also raises workers’ body temperature, already high because of the southern heat in which they work, even higher – sometimes to the point of causing life-threatening

Yet many workers get little or no medical attention. They’re lucky if they even get rest breaks during their working hours.

Living conditions are generally as bad as the working conditions. Most of the workers live in crowded, dilapidated, frequently rodent-infested shacks in labor camps or in broken-down trailers, many without so much as a fan to cool the stifling summer air and most near fields that are regularly sprayed with dangerous pesticides.

Workers who dare complain about their working or living conditions face the prospect of being fired or turned over to government authorities for deportation.

But there’s finally hope for change, thanks to the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), an AFL-CIO affiliate that has helped thousands of workers win agreements from employers in several states to raise their pay and

benefits and otherwise treat them decently. That includes some 7,000 farm workers who harvest other North Carolina crops for pay at least \$2 an hour higher than the tobacco workers get.

Backed by an array of community and religious groups including the National Council of Churches, FLOC has launched a drive to win agreements from tobacco growers, primarily through pressures on one of the largest and most influential of the tobacco companies that buy their crops. That's RJ Reynolds, whose eight brands account for one of every three cigarettes sold in this country. As FLOC notes, Reynolds continues to make billions while those who pick the tobacco that goes into its products live "in abject poverty."

Reynolds' officials have so far refused even to meet with FLOC representatives to discuss the union's demand that tobacco workers be granted union rights and an agreement that would recognize "their need for dignity, respect and safe working conditions."

Reynolds asserts that it should not deal with the union or other worker representatives because the tobacco workers are not employed by the company. They work for the growers who sell the tobacco they pick to Reynolds and other companies, which set the price and thus determine how much they can afford to pay the workers.

But as FLOC President Baldemar Velasquez notes: "The farmers don't control the system. Those companies control the money, and they benefit the most from the stoop labor of these workers. We're saying, 'Hey, you need to own up to the situation that you're implicated in.'"

And if they don't own up?

Velasquez points to the union's five-year-long boycott that finally forced another major North Carolina corporation, the Mount Olive Pickle Co., to raise the price it pays growers for cucumbers in order to finance higher pay for their workers and to allow union organizers into their labor camps. Velasquez also mentioned the possibility of union demonstrations at meetings of Reynolds' shareholders' and actions against companies that Reynolds does business with.

The fight for tobacco workers will continue, in any case, "until Reynolds commits to joining us in addressing this national shame . . . the deplorable condition of the tobacco workforce that remains voiceless, powerless and invisible to mainstream America."