

FRUIT OF THE VINE: HEALTH OR WRATH?

In the California farm workers' three-year struggle for their rights, description of their medical problems has been forced into the background. But the medical problems remain very serious. Farm workers have a 25% higher rate of both infant and maternal mortality than the national average. Again compared to national rates, they suffer from twice as many cases of influenza and pneumonia, and over two and a half times as many cases of tuberculosis and other infectious diseases. Their accident rate is three times as great as the national rate. These statistics are summed up in the life expectancy of the farm worker -- 49 years.

Poverty and its attendant poor housing and nutrition are a large part of the cause of these poor health conditions. To improve the economic situation of the farm workers, their union, the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, has concentrated its efforts toward gaining their rights to organize and bargain collectively.

Not only poverty at home but conditions at work plague the farm worker. Earlier this year a random survey of growers in the Sacramento Valley found that of 191 growers investigated, 190 had violated California sanitation codes, such as having no toilet or hand washing facilities in the field, and no good drinking water. (No such violations have been found on any ranch where there is a union contract.) The farm workers must therefore relieve themselves in the field, cannot wash their hands afterwards, and if water is available, must often use a single cup.

Health problems are compounded by the entry of greencarders, and even more by illegal "wetbacks" brought in to break the strike. Both of these groups live the bulk of the year in Mexico; the greencarder is not required to have any physical inspection after his first entry while the wetbacks of course are never checked. That contact with wetbacks is frequent is shown by a report for the last six months where in Kern Co. alone, 2,200 wetbacks were apprehended. The much higher rate of communicable diseases in these groups than in domestic farmworkers clearly endangers the farmworkers. The consumer is also threatened by the unsanitary conditions in the field since table grapes are never washed before they reach the housewife because this would remove the layer of chemicals which retard spoilage.

The United Farm Workers are therefore not only attempting to organize to improve their economic situation but also to gain decent working conditions. You can help by not buying California table grapes, by requesting the manager of your local supermarket to please remove California grapes from his shelves, and by encouraging your friends to do the same. The boycott is necessary because the growers have imported so many scab laborers illegally that the strike could not succeed. For further information please contact the United Farm Workers, 1022 Bankers Securities Building, Philadelphia, Penna. 19107, telephone PE 5-7078.