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ANOTHER SAD CHAPTER IN THE FARMWORKERS' STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE

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This another story of the big people vs. the little people in the "good ol' U.S.A." In this case, the big people are the Gulf and western Products Company, one of the powerful conglomerates in our country. Among other things they own Paramount Studios, producers of such multi-million dollar money makers as "The Godfather." In Florida they are into tomatoes and sugar. Their sugar operation is one of the biggest in the state, and their Cheelanta mill a few miles south of South Bay and west of Highway 27 is well known in the Lake Okechobee area.

Not so well known are the several hundred Jamaican men, hard up for work, who leave their families, and spend five months attacking the heavy stalks of Gulf western cane with the deadly machette and living in huge, bleak dormitories with their endless rows of double-decker bunks. If a man is unable to cut his task (200 feet per hour or 8 tons per day!) or begins registering complaints about his working conditions or the food, he is liable to be summarily sent back to Jamaica and charged for his passage here and back. This fear of being "shipped back" is so great that the men are often extremely hesitant about talking to any "outsider" in the camp itself or when he makes one of his infrequent trips to town. (The company charges \$3.00 transportation to Belle Glade.)

The above is background for the tragedy that occurred in the pre-dawn hours on the first Monday of 1974. Three crews (the Florida Highway Patrol estimates at least 130 men) were packed into an enclosed 8'x55' van which had no windows and no light inside. To say that they were packed in like cattle would in no sense convey the true picture. We treat cattle much better. Something apparently went wrong with the steering mechanism and the van flipped over. One man was killed and 86 were hospitalized. Some of them critically injured. Somehow, in spite of that, Gulf and western says there were only 85 men in the van.

In the midst of this senseless catastrophe, there are several bitter ironies: the Highway Patrol says that Gulf and western is exempt from the safety standards of the Florida Migratory Carriers Law because the act exempts employers hauling their own workers! The Patrol also said that since the accident occurred on Gulf and Western's private property (the road from the mill out to Highway 27) it cannot file charges.

As if that were not enough, three weeks earlier, 39 Jamaican cane cutters were injured when a similar truck flipped off the same road after the driver said the shoulder gave way as he was easing his truck around a pothole. Four of those men are still hospitalized. Twenty-five others, who were released from the hospital but still unable to work, have been shipped back to Jamaica. What they have received or will receive in workman's Compensation is an important question for which we have no answer. Several workers who were in that first accident, hospitalized, and back at work now, indicated, on the day after the second accident, that no one had approached them about workman's Compensation yet.

At the time of both of these accidents, Gulf and Western had in its possession a memo from Mr. William Norwood, Regional Director of the Rural Manpower Commission in Atlanta, written on August 9th, 1973, granting the company permission to import Jamaicans for the cane harvesting season with the understanding that "fixed seats" would be provided for them in all vehicles transporting them to and from the fields. In fact, not only were seats not provided, but the men were jammed so closely together that, often times according to one of the patients in the hospital, they did not have room to put both feet on the floor, but had to put one foot on top of the other!

On Tuesday, January 8th, the day after the second accident, I was part of a small group of concerned persons, including a representative of the United Farm Workers and two clergymen, that went to the Gulf and Western camp where its Jamaican workers are housed and to the Glades General Hospital in Belle Glades. Our intention in both instances was to learn what we could about the two accidents, about the condition of the workers involved, and whether or not their rights were being upheld. What we found was hundreds of workers very hesitant to be seen talking to us; a Jamaican supervisor surprisingly willing to let us talk to workers who had been in the first accident -- he paged them for us; the Cuban personnel manager, who suddenly arrived on the scene, stopped our interviewing, and insisted that we go with him to his office, where, he said, he would call workers, one at a time, to talk to us. We went to his office with him but refused to be restricted by his limitations, asserting our legal rights as a result of "Peterson vs Talisman," a case regarding right of entry to farm labor camps which I had the privilege of being a part of two years ago. What information we did get made us all the more anxious to visit the Belle Glades hospital where most of the 83 men were patients.

When we gave the "pink lady" in charge of visitors' passes the names of some of the Jamaicans who were patients there, she, without hesitation, issued us passes to see them. On entering the first wing, I was confronted immediately by a sea of beds -- filling the corridors as well as the rooms. All Jamaicans and victims of the Gulf and Western accident. Every man I talked to had sustained a back injury and many also were suffering from neck and shoulder injuries. I went from bed to bed inquiring about injuries, assuring the men of my prayers, trying to determine if they knew their rights, particularly regarding the workman's Compensation. With but one exception the men were deeply grateful for my presence and my concern, indicated they really did not know their rights, and were sincerely interested in knowing how to protect themselves. One man appeared to be in considerable pain, and having expressed my concern, moved on to another bed.

At approximately 7:30 P.M., thirty minutes before visiting hours were over, two of us were notified by one of the nurses that we would have to leave. The doctor in charge, she said, had stated that only Jamaicans could visit Jamaican patients! (There was a rather large number of Jamaican workers in the hospital at the time visiting their injured brothers. Some of them had walked for miles to get there.) The two of us expressed great surprise over such a ruling and said we thought it was totally unfair but that we would leave. We were joined in the lobby by the others in our group

and were quietly talking there when a Belle Glades policeman entered the lobby and asked the "pink lady" and the woman behind the desk where the trouble was. We had been called by the doctor in charge to take care of the trouble. They both said that they knew of no trouble. Shortly thereafter, a very distraught man (whom one of our group recognized as the doctor in charge of the hospital as well as Gulf and Western's chief medical officer) burst into the lobby asking, "Where are the agitators?" "Where are the men that are disturbing our patients?" We stood up and started to identify ourselves to the doctor (though never believing for a moment that we had agitated or disturbed anybody,) but he was not interested in anything but getting us out of the hospital. We refused to listen to anything we had to say, and in a loud and boisterous voice insisted to the policeman that we leave immediately or that he would arrest us. The policeman, who seemed to be a little bit embarrassed by the whole thing, went outside on the front steps with us, where we were discussing the situation with him, with some of the Jamaican visitors standing nearby, when the doctor stalked out and announced that he was not going to allow a riot on his hospital steps. We were to leave the hospital once and for all, we were not to come back at any time, and the police were to see that we did not come back. Though the doctor would not let any of us identify ourselves, it was obvious that he was turning away at least one clergyman since Father Frank C'Loughlin was in our group and was wearing clerics.

What this amounts to is that over 80 Jamaicans are being held as virtual prisoners in a hospital by a doctor who is an official of Gulf and Western, the men's employer. They are being denied their right to see clergymen or attorneys.

This is being written on Friday, January 11th, and today's Miami Herald states that, as of yesterday, Gulf and Western had not filed workmen's compensation claims for the 36 workers injured in the first accident on December 16th! State Law requires that such claims be filed within 10 days of an accident or be subject to a \$100.00 fine. Gulf and Western, obviously, would rather pay the fine.

At the moment the Jamaicans are left with only the Gulf and Western to represent them, and that gives them little comfort indeed. The words of Isaiah come back!
"How long, O Lord, how long?"