

# Florida Cane Cutters: Alien, Poor, Afraid

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BELLE GLADE, Fla. — Two West Indian sugar cane cutters, muscles bulging under their T-shirts, flattened themselves against the dark wall, careful that the floodlights illuminating the labor camp of wooden shacks did not touch their faces.

"If the supervisor sees us talking to a white man, we get sent home sure," said one cutter in a half-whisper. His companion nodded.

"We complain about the food here—we get sent home," the worker continued. "We say we want more money for the cane—we get sent home. Anything we do the supervisor don't like—we get sent home."

There are now more than 8,500 West Indian cane cutters, imported from Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Barbados and other islands, working in the sugar country around Lake Okechobee. They have become the center of what is shaping up as an epic conflict between the sugar growers and Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers union.

The growers say they must bring in the West Indians, because American farm workers will not cut cane. Without them there would be no cane harvest, the employers insist.

But the union charges that the growers are importing cane cutters to avoid hiring Americans who demand higher wages and better working conditions.

## Union Man Is Critical

"It is a classic example of the poor people of one country being used against the poor of another," said Eliseo Medina, a young Mexican who heads the union's operations in Florida.

The West Indian workers live in labor camps for the harvest season, October to April. The two cane cutters who hid in the shadow of the barracks to talk to a stranger were housed in the Saunders labor camp of the Glades County Sugar Cooperative Association.

As they talked late into the night, other men emerged singly from the barracks, walked 15 or 20 feet away from the doors and urinated.

The cane cutters in this labor camp are packed into bare wooden structures that have no toilets or running water. The communal toilet is more than 100 yards away.

"We are pigs," the first cane cutter said. "They take us for nothing but pigs, these great men, these sugar planters."

Federal law permits the planters to import workers only under certain conditions. One is

that the planters first certify that they have offered the jobs to American workers and that no Americans are available. Another is that the wages paid to alien labor must not depress local wages for agricultural workers. And the planters are required to maintain fair standards of pay and working conditions.

Union officials in Florida charge that the growers are making only a perfunctory recruiting effort to obtain American workers. In fact, the union says, the industry does all in its power to keep Americans from taking cane cutting jobs in order to keep labor costs for this work as low as possible.

Mr. Medina, showed a visitor thick folders of what he insisted was evidence that the growers failed to meet their obligation to try to attract American workers. He also presented case histories of Americans who showed up for jobs and were turned away or dismissed on some pretext after they were hired.

"But the main thing is that the working conditions of the cane cutters are deliberately kept so bad that Americans will not apply for the jobs," he asserted. The British West Indians, "Biwis" as they are called here, are poorly fed, housed abysmally and cheated on their wages, Mr. Medina charged.

## Union Accused of Blackmail

The Florida sugar growers, who control a \$200-million a year industry, deny any wrongdoing. George Wedgworth, president of the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative, charged in turn that the United Farm Workers was trying to "blackmail" the growers into recognizing the union and bargaining with it.

Bill Hunter, director of public relations for the Florida Sugar Cane League, told an interviewer that the growers had been unable to get American cane cutters since 1946. "There is a social taboo on this kind of work," Mr. Hunter said.

"Besides, American people don't like this kind of stoop work. It's too hard for them. Jamaicans can cut 200 feet an hour all day. That's about eight tons a day. But when we test Americans who come for jobs they can't even cut 150 feet an hour."

## Camps Hard to Reach

Official reaction to the dispute over the imported sugar workers has been mixed. A Labor Department staff report, never officially adopted by the department, found that many of the union's allegations were true or merited further investigation. But a United States District Court in Florida refused

to grant an injunction sought by the United Farm Workers, against the growers, finding that they had made an effort to hire American workers.

Talking to the sugar workers themselves to get at the facts of the situation is not easy. The West Indian labor camps are tucked away in the middle of the cane fields, which stretch mile after mile across the flat landscape where ripe cane—twice as tall as a man—rustles endlessly in the wind.

The planters surround these camps with wire fences and discourage visitors by setting up no-trespassing signs and watchful supervisors. Not long ago, a young reporter for a Palm Beach newspaper, John Purnell, was charged with trespassing after he visited the Saunders Work Camp, the camp with the toiletless wooden barracks, and attempted to talk to workers.

Once inside these camps it is difficult to get the workers to talk. Almost to a man they fear they will be deported if caught talking to strangers.

"I need this work, mon," said a cutter from Jamaica at the Saunders camp. "There are no jobs, no money at home and I have six children."

He was sitting on the bottom of one of the double-decker bunks that crowd the dimly-lit shacks. There were no chairs, no closets, no amenities of any kind. At night, before they sleep, the tired cane cutters lie or sit on their beds, silently listening to music on their transistor radios.

## \$2.55 a Day for Food

Those who do talk to strangers do so fearfully, eyes darting from side to side. Two workers from Saint Lucia who were willing to talk insisted the conversation be held out of the earshot of a group of Jamaicans. "They report us to the supervisor for sure," he explained.

The climate of the labor camp is almost tangibly prisonlike, not physically so much as psychologically.

But some of the workers do talk because they are angry. They are angry, they say, because they are packed into closed vans or open pickup trucks when they are driven to and from the fields. They are angry that they are fed rice three times a day, occasionally with some pork, or chopped ox tails and a couple of eggs, for which \$2.55 a day is automatically deducted from their pay.

"Rice and pork, rice and pork, that is all we work for here is rice and pork," one of the Lucia workers complained.

When told that a spokesman for the sugar growers had said

that the West Indian worker were given rice because they were used to it and would get sick if they ate other things, he replied; "That is a lie. At home we eat yams, potatoes, cassava beans, breadfruit, all kinds of food."

There were indications that the imported workers receive poor treatment in the sugar fields. A group of workers from the Moorehaven (pronounced MORE-haven) camp was encountered in Belle Glade. One of the workers, who said he was from Saint Vincent's, showed his right hand. The skin on the palm had been worn away by his machete handle and the raw wound was ugly.

"I have to cut the cane any way," he said. "If I go to the doctor, the doctor say I can't work and if I don't work I don't get paid."

"They call that place Moorehaven but it isn't Moorehaven it is more hell," he said. "They are killing us there, mon."

The most frequent complaint by the sugar workers is about pay. By law the workers, who are paid on a piecework basis, are guaranteed at least \$2 an hour. Mr. Hunter, the industry spokesman, said that over the season, workers averaged about \$2.45 an hour.

United Farm Workers organizers who had worked as cutters charged, however, that the growers often underpaid their alien workers. Instead of giving them the guaranteed \$2 an hour, the growers paid by the piece and then adjusted the hourly records, the union officials said.

## Paychecks Shown

Mr. Medina, asserted that it was common, for example, for a "scratch boss" in the field to decide unilaterally that a row of cane was worth \$16 to cut. If the worker managed to cut only half the row in eight hours, he was credited with only four hours work on the pay records.

Mr. Medina produced stacks of photographic copies of the stubs of paychecks issued to the offshore workers. The stubs showed many cash payments—after compulsory deductions for food, transportation, savings and insurance—of, for example, \$59.69 for 60 hours work, \$35.59 for 52 hours work, \$76.09 for 83 hours work, \$66.61 for 71 hours.

"I don't know about no hourly pay," said one worker. "I get whatever the boss put on the ticket. If I say that's not enough money the boss he say 'If you don't like it why don't you go home.'"

Meanwhile, a number of

American farm workers contested the sugar industry's contention that no Americans would cut cane. A group of these workers in the town of La Belle, sat around under a shade tree on planks spread over boxes and spoke of their grievances. Whites, blacks, Chinese, men, women, they were united by their poverty and sense of injustice.

Evelyn Pinder, a black woman, said that she went to the U.S. Sugar Corporation in Clewiston and asked for a job as a cane cutter. A company doctor examined her and said she had very high blood pressure and was not fit for the work.

"I went to my own doctor the next day and she told me that my blood pressure was normal and I could do any kind of work. I need work. I am just about going hungry now. But those people don't want any Americans there."

Sandy Gennoe, who is white

said she had a similar experience at U.S. Sugar. "We are between seasons now. I don't get but one day's work a month. If we could get jobs cutting cane we'd grab it."

Another American, Juan Campos, said he was given a six-day trial and then was dismissed when he was unable to pass a test that required cutting 150 feet of cane an hour. "I was getting better at it and would have been able to cut fast enough in time. But they expect American workers to go in and do right away what Jamaicans have been doing for years. If we can't they send us away."

"The real reason the growers don't want us," insisted Sandy Gennoe, "is that they can pay those wetbacks less and they can dog them around. Those Jamaicans don't stop cutting the cane; they run all day. If they stop running they are sent back to the islands. The growers know they can't dog Americans around like that."

Dr. Marshall Barry, an econ-



A West Indian cane cutter in wooden barracks without toilets on a plantation near Belle Glade, Fla. He posed for the camera, though allowing a newsmen to photograph the living conditions there might lead to his dismissal.

omist at New College in nearby Tampa, who sometimes works with the union, told a questioner that using Government figures he estimated that there were now about 80,000 unemployed American agricultural workers in Florida.

## Camp Called Exception

Mr. Hunter, the sugar industry spokesman, insisted that the accusations made by the workers were false or misleading. "Those Jamaicans who said they weren't making at least \$2 an hour were giving you a bunch of bull," he declared. "We are a very closely supervised industry. We couldn't get away with underpaying our workers even if we tried."

Mr. Hunter added that the Florida growers had spent thousands of dollars in all parts of the country in an effort to recruit American cane cutters.

He also said that the housing conditions of the West Indian workers were not bad now and were improving. "The Saunders camp is the worst

there is. It is an exception and is due to be torn down." U.S. Sugar was said to provide adequate facilities for its imported labor.

A housing facility that Mr. Hunter said was representative was Camp No. 2, owned by George Wedgworth of the Florida Sugar Cane League.

A late night trip to Camp No. 2 confirmed that it was not as bad as the Saunders camp. But the housing consisted of long concrete barracks, with double-decker beds a couple of feet apart filling the interior. Naked light bulbs threw a sallow light on the grimy walls and bare concrete floors. There was an indoor lavatory that was filthy and offered no privacy.

One of the workers smiled sardonically when asked how he was being treated. "The white men love black men because the black men work so hard," he said.

Did he think, then, that this was a bad country?

"Ah, no, mon. It's not America. It's the damn companies."