Florida Cane Cutters: Alien, Poor, Afraid

By PHILIP SHAECOFF Special to The New York Times
BELLE GLADE, Fla. — Two West Indian sugar cane cutters, their muscles bulging under their T-shirts, flattened themselves against the dark walls, careful that the floodlights illuminating the labor camp of wooden shacks did not touch their faces. "Don't talk to a white man," one of them said in Creole, when talking to a white man, we get shot, home sure," said one cut-ter in a half-whisper. His companion nodded. "We don't complain about the food here—we get sent home," the worker continued. "We say we want more money for the cane, we have to work harder— 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 sugar cane cutters, imported into the West Indies, in the Spanish-speaking countries around Lake Okeechobee. They have become the center of a debate on race relations and the conditions of 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 in Florida. Without cane, there would be no cane harvest, the employers insist.

But the union charges that the growers are importing cane cutters to avoid hiring American workers for 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 Elisio Medina, a young Haitian who helped organize the union's operations in Florida. The West Indian workers, he said, are "in the labor camps for the harvest season, October to April. The town is quiet. The only sound is the shadow of the barracks to talk to a stranger were housed in the barracks, there were no white people around. They worked in the Glades County Sugar Cooperative Association in Belle Glade.

Their life is one of hard labor. The workers are housed in crowded wooden barracks, 20 feet away from the doors and the urine. The barracks in this labor camp are packed into bare wooden structures that have no toilets or running water. The communal toilet is more than 150 feet away.

"We are pigs," the first cane cutter said. "We take for nothing but pigs, these are the "sugar planters," these are the workers who grow the cane." The labor department staff report, never officially adopted by the United States District Court in Florida refused to grant an injunction sought by the growers, finding that they had made an effort to improve the situation. Talking to the sugar growers themselves at the farms, they found that the situation is not easy. The West Indian labor camps are 25 to 50 miles away from the fields, where the cane is harvested. These camps with wire fences and outbuilding, visited by union organizers on trips to the cane fields, were over-run with labor camps, where cane cutters live in crowded quarters.

Mr. Medina, a 26-year-old Haitian, showed a visitor a list of names, including those of cane cutters who had been injured or killed on the job. Some of the cane cutters were not paid for their work, and others were paid only a fraction of the minimum wage. Mr. Medina charged.

The Florida sugar growers, who own a $200-million a year industry, are not doing well. George Wedgwood, president of the Sugar Cane Cutters and Mill Workers Union, said in an interview that the United Farm Workers, who now represent more than 200,000 cane cutters in the United States, were unable to get American cane cutters since 1946. The labor force has been reduced by 50% in the last 10 years.

The climate of the labor camps is almost totally primitive, the houses are not insulated, the workers are completely exposed to the elements. The workers are housed in crowded quarters, with no windows, no doors, no light, no heat. The workers are paid about $2 an hour, which is less than the minimum wage. The workers are paid only for the cane they cut, and they are often paid less than the minimum wage. The workers are not paid for their work, and others are paid only a fraction of the minimum wage. Mr. Medina charged.

A day in the life of the cane cutter is like this: a 4-to-6 a.m. start. The workers are up by 4 a.m., and they work until 10 a.m. They are then given a break for lunch, and then they work until 6 p.m. The workers are not paid for their work, and others are paid only a fraction of the minimum wage. Mr. Medina charged.

Paychecks Showed

Mr. Medina, a 26-year-old Haitian, who has worked as a cane cutter for 10 years, said the growers pay about $2 an hour, which is less than the minimum wage. The workers are paid only for the cane they cut, and they are often paid less than the minimum wage. The workers are not paid for their work, and others are paid only a fraction of the minimum wage. Mr. Medina charged.

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