

In the Strawberry Fields

The management of California's strawberry industry offers a case study of both the dependence on an imported peasantry that characterizes much of American agriculture and the destructive consequences of a deliberate low-wage economy

by Eric Schlosser

Just before sunrise farm workers appear on the streets of Guadalupe, California, emerging from the small houses, backyard sheds, basements, and garages where they spent the night. The men wear straw cowboy hats or baseball caps, windbreakers on this cool morning, sneakers, and ragged work clothes. The women have scarves and bandannas wrapped over their hair, hung around their necks, and tied across their faces, so that only their eyes can be seen. From a distance they seem draped in brightly colored veils. Soon a long line of vehicles is double-parked along Highway 1, awaiting passengers--not the spectacular Highway 1 that hugs the Pacific but a less familiar stretch, four miles inland amid the Santa Maria Valley, halfway between Los Angeles and Salinas. Here Highway 1 becomes Guadalupe's main drag, lined with Mexican restaurants, boarded-up storefronts, and bars. As dawn approaches, the procession of old Buicks, pickups, ancient school buses towing portable toilets, and beat-up vans heads for the neighboring fields. A handful of workers walk along the shoulder of the road, silhouetted by headlights. Two young men ride bicycles; most likely they slept outdoors.

When the sun rises from behind the coastal range, crews of thirty assemble at the edges of huge fields and start picking strawberries, slowly making their way down the long furrows, hundreds of men and women bent over at the waist, grabbing fruit with both hands. In the early-morning light it looks like a scene out of the distant past, the last remnant of a vanishing way of life--and yet nothing could be further from the truth.

Twenty years ago there were about 800 acres of strawberries in the Santa Maria Valley; today there are about seven times that number. The strawberry is one of the most labor-intensive row crops. It is risky and expensive to grow, but it can yield more revenue per acre than virtually any other crop except marijuana. On the same land outside Guadalupe where family farms raised dairy cows not long ago, strawberry farms now employ

thousands of migrant workers. Most of these migrants are illegal immigrants from Mexico, a fact that helps explain not only California's recent strawberry boom but also the quiet, unrelenting transformation of the state's rural landscape and communities.

Agriculture is still California's largest industry. For more than half a century California has led the nation in agricultural output; it now produces more than half the fruits, nuts, and vegetables consumed in the United States. Hundreds of commodities, from the mundane to the exotic, are grown in California, primarily in the Central Valley, an area that contains perhaps the best farmland in the world. In some respects, however, California agriculture is in decline. The value of its annual output, adjusted for inflation, has fallen 14 percent over the past two decades. During the 1980s roughly 20,000 acres of Central Valley farmland were lost each year to urbanization. Wide-open fields are giving way to subdivisions and strip malls. Water long used for irrigation is being diverted to cities and towns. Improved cooling and transportation systems have opened the American market to overseas competitors. Air pollution has begun to diminish crop yields.

Meanwhile, the fastest-growing and most profitable segment of California's farm economy--the cultivation of high-value specialty crops--has also become the one most dependent on the availability of cheap labor. Nearly every fruit and vegetable found in the diets of health-conscious, often high-minded eaters is still picked by hand: every head of lettuce, every bunch of grapes, every avocado, peach, and plum. As the demand for these foods has risen, so has the number of workers necessary to harvest them. Of the migrants in California today, anywhere from 30 percent to 60 percent, depending upon the crop, are illegal immigrants. Their willingness to work long hours for low wages has helped California to sustain its agricultural production--despite the loss since 1964 of more than seven million acres of farmland. Fruit and vegetable growers in the state now rely on a thriving black market in labor--and without it more farms would disappear. Illegal immigrants, widely reviled and depicted as welfare cheats, are in effect subsidizing the most important sector of the California economy.

The rise in the number of migrant workers in California, along with the growth in the proportion who are illegal immigrants, reflects a national trend that has passed largely unnoticed. During the 1960s it was commonly believed that within a decade there would be no more migrant farm workers in the United States. Experts predicted that technology would soon render migrants obsolete: if a crop could not be harvested mechanically by 1975, it would not be grown in the United States. Census figures lent support to this scenario. Philip L. Martin is a professor of agricultural economics at the University of California at Davis and one of the nation's foremost authorities on farm-labor demographics. According to his estimates, during the 1920s there were some two million migrant farm workers in the United States. During the 1940s there were about one million. And during the early 1970s, when Cesar Chavez's labor-organizing drive among migrant workers was at its height, there were only about 200,000. Then the number began to climb. Today it is impossible to gauge the size of the migrant work force with any precision, among other reasons because so much of it is composed of illegal immigrants. Martin believes that 800,000 to 900,000 migrant farm workers are now employed in the

United States. And not only are there far more migrants today but they are being paid far less. The hourly wages of some California farm workers, adjusted for inflation, have fallen 53 percent since 1985. Migrants are among the poorest workers in the United States. The average migrant worker is a twenty-eight-year-old male, born in Mexico, who earns about \$5,000 a year for twenty-five weeks of farm work. His life expectancy is forty-nine years.

The rise of the strawberry industry is in many ways emblematic of changes that swept California agriculture during the 1980s. The strawberry has become the focus of a California industry whose annual sales exceed half a billion dollars. American farmers now receive more money for fresh strawberries each year than for any other fresh fruit grown in the United States except apples. And strawberry pickers are not only the poorest migrants but also the ones most likely to be illegal immigrants. During the recent strawberry harvest I spent weeks traveling through three regions in California where the fruit is commercially grown, meeting workers, farmers, academics, and farm-labor activists. My trip took me through the Santa Maria Valley, where rural poverty has recently become entrenched and where cruel sharecropping arrangements have trapped farm workers under mountains of debt; through the area around Watsonville and Salinas, where about half the state's strawberries are grown and where this year's heavy rains made many hard lives even harder; and through northern [San Diego County](#), where the needs of farmers and real-estate developers increasingly conflict, and where a migrant work force lives in Third World shantytowns within throwing distance of expensive suburban homes. In the strawberry fields of California, I believe, one may find answers to many of the pressing questions raised by illegal immigration, along with some ethical questions that are much more difficult to resolve.

THE INDUSTRY: A SHORT COURSE

A strawberry field is not a beautiful sight. It lacks the charm and character of a citrus grove, an apple orchard, or even a field of corn. Strawberries now begin and end in plastic. Before planting, an entire field is sealed with plastic sheeting and injected with methyl bromide, a chemical brew that kills harmful microbes and nematodes. Then the sheeting is removed and workers install drip-irrigation hoses in the beds, cover the beds with new, clear plastic, and insert the plants through the plastic by hand. This plastic helps retain heat, keeps the soil moist, and prevents erosion. At the end of the harvest, workers rip the plants from the ground and throw them away, along with the plastic and the drip-irrigation hoses. Second-year plants tend to produce smaller berries.

California did not always dominate American strawberry production. In the early 1950s the state was responsible for only a third of the nation's strawberry crop. Then California strawberry production began to surge, impelled by new growing techniques, new plant varieties, and an abundance of inexpensive labor. From 1974 to 1994 California's strawberry output more than tripled; prices fell, and Americans doubled their consumption of fresh strawberries. Last year California shipped 76 million boxes of fresh strawberries (a box, also called a flat or a tray, holds a dozen pints and weighs roughly eleven and a half pounds), an all-time record. The state now accounts for 80 percent of

the strawberries grown in the United States and about a quarter of the world's commercial strawberries.

In a good year strawberries can be one of the most profitable row crops in California. But they are also one of the riskiest. The fruit attracts a wide variety of pests, including aphids, eelworms, and red spider mites. Even more threatening is the weather. No matter how carefully a grower prepares the field, no matter how well-bred the plants, the size of the harvest will be determined in large part by the weather. Ideal growing conditions for strawberries include cool nights and warm, sunny days, with no wind above five miles an hour and no rain once the berries have appeared. Weather that falls short of the ideal may quickly and irreversibly damage the crop. Frost can burn the blooms. A strong wind will rub leaves against the berries, marring their skin with brown streaks. A heat wave will stunt and soften the fruit. Worst of all is heavy rain. Strawberries are so fragile that prolonged rain opens small tears in their skin, and the tears are quickly infected with botrytis, a gray mold. A few days of rain can destroy an entire harvest of strawberries.

The market for strawberries can prove just as unpredictable and disastrous as the weather. The perishability of fresh produce exposes growers to considerable risk. Ten days after a strawberry is picked, it begins to spoil. "I can't stuff my berries into a silo like a wheat farmer does," one grower told me, "and then run computer programs to decide when it's the best time to sell." Wholesale prices for fresh strawberries fluctuate widely, from \$4.00 to \$22.00 a box, depending on the quality of the fruit, the supply, the time of year, and all sorts of imponderables. Growers who produce specialty crops do not benefit directly from any government price supports. Although the strawberry plants now grown in California often produce fruit continuously for nine months, a fourth to a third of the berries reach maturity at the peak of the harvest--a period that lasts only a few weeks. A grower has little choice but to accept the prevailing market price for those berries. Strawberries for processing, which eventually can be stored, sell for about twenty-five cents a pound.

The most successful growers cultivate a high-quality strawberry, have enough capital to ride out the bad years, and sell their berries through a prominent marketing consortium. Such growers may earn annual profits of \$10,000 to \$20,000 an acre. But others often find themselves at the mercy of the weather and of a volatile free market. As in most fruit and vegetable production, the steady profits are usually earned by the middlemen--processors, cooling houses, distributors--and not by the growers. In the strawberry industry a grower's annual losses can be huge. The cost of strawberry production is anywhere from \$12,000 to \$30,000 an acre. A fifty-acre strawberry farm producing high-quality berries requires an annual investment of at least \$1 million. There is very little a grower can do to limit the fixed costs: the payments on the mortgage or lease, for the plants, the pesticides, and the drip-irrigation system. The only cost over which a grower can exert any real control is the cost of labor.

Many strawberry growers play by the rules and treat their workers well. Indeed, strawberry pickers all aspire to jobs at farms affiliated with Driscoll Associates, where the fields are immaculate and the wages are the highest in the industry. Other

organizations--such as Naturipe, Sweet Darling, Calberi, Figueroa, Gold Coast, and Boskovich Farms--are also highly regarded. It would be wrong to imply that all strawberry growers routinely mistreat their workers; but some do. Since labor costs constitute 50 to 70 percent of the total costs in strawberry production, cutting labor costs can mean the difference between a profit and a loss, or between a bad year and a disastrous one. The temptation to break the law can be great. The punishments for doing so are rarely applied. And in recent years some growers have shown little self-restraint.

One of the easiest ways to reduce labor costs is to keep workers off the books. Growers are often obligated to pay unemployment taxes and workers'-compensation premiums for each of their employees, in addition to Social Security and Medicare taxes. Paying an "invisible worker" in cash lowers the cost of that worker by at least 20 percent. Ignoring California's rules about overtime--which in agriculture do not apply until the workday reaches ten hours--effectively cuts those wages by 50 percent. And paying less than minimum wage brings the greatest savings of all. The vast number of illegal immigrants in the migrant work force is an invitation to break the law. They are unlikely to approach authorities about a violation of the labor code.

Sharecropping is the most insidious means by which growers avoid responsibility for their workers. The sharecropper is a straw man, an intermediary, usually a middle-aged farm worker, to whom the grower shifts many of the legal and financial risks. Sharecropping has a long history in the strawberry industry. It is a practice that in the past few years has often resembled not so much a type of agricultural production as an elaborate, well-organized fraud.

THE NEW SERVITUDE

When I met Felipe (a pseudonym, as are all the other names presented without surnames), he seemed in bad shape. His clothes were dirty and torn, his face haggard and unshaven. His strawberry field looked like hell too. The rows were littered with rotting berries, old boxes, and soda cans. There were broken irrigation hoses; no plastic enclosed the beds. "Too expensive," he told me. "The company doesn't pay me enough." Nearby, his workers picked "cat-faces"--small, deformed berries--off second-year plants. Rain had seriously damaged the field. Felipe was selling his fruit for twelve cents a pound. He couldn't understand why the price for strawberries for processing was so low, but the terms of his sharecropping contract required him to accept it. "They use us all year as slaves," he said. "They pay us whatever they want to." He promised to send me legal documents proving his claims. The season was just beginning, and Felipe was already \$50,000 in debt--half of that amount rolled over from last year. He owed the IRS an additional \$5,000. "I can't remember any time I've been in good shape," he said. "I'm always down in the hole." Felipe had been a strawberry picker when his grower approached him one day and asked if he'd like to become a "farmer." Now, after sixteen years as a sharecropper, Felipe owns few assets and is ready to quit.

Sharecropping has existed in the California strawberry industry throughout this century, rising and falling in popularity according to changes in the law and the labor supply. At

various times the straw men have been called sharecroppers, sharefarmers, and tenant farmers. The underlying strategy, of shifting the greatest risks to the farm worker, has only become more refined. During the 1980s sharecropping thrived--not just for strawberries but also for raspberries, snow peas, and squash. Under a typical arrangement a grower assigned a portion of a strawberry field to a farm worker and his or her family. Instead of paying them wages, the grower promised to split the profits fifty-fifty. The sharecropper became the employer of record, responsible for hiring strawberry pickers, paying their wages, withholding their taxes, and checking their green cards. The grower was responsible for all other production costs and for the overall management of the strawberry farm. By setting up farm workers as supposedly independent operators, growers shielded themselves from labor and immigration laws--and from heavy losses. The sharecropper assumed a large part of the risk. He or she had no way of knowing whether there would be profits in a given year or whether the grower would share them fairly.

A number of hardworking and enterprising sharecroppers managed to succeed under this arrangement, earning enough money to become growers themselves. These farm workers turned farmers are now known as *mexicanos*, and the Figueroa family of Santa Maria is a notable example. But many sharecroppers did not fare so well. At the end of the year they had often earned less for their efforts than farm workers paid minimum wage. And sometimes they earned nothing at all.

The California Supreme Court ruled in 1989 that sharecropping arrangements in the pickle industry did not permit growers to ignore the state's workers'-compensation laws. Sharecroppers were not independent operators, the court said, and growers could not avoid their legal responsibilities simply by inventing a new name for their employees. But after subsiding briefly, sharecropping reappeared a few years ago in the strawberry industry, in a new version that makes the old one seem enlightened and humane. Behind many of the current sharecropping schemes are growers and former growers determined to eliminate all risk from the business of producing strawberries. Instead of paying the operating costs of a strawberry farm, these growers--now called commission merchants--lend sharecroppers the money for operating costs at interest rates as high as 19 percent. Under the old arrangement, if things went wrong, sharecroppers simply would not be paid for hard work; under the new one, they are being saddled with thousands of dollars of debt.

Mike Meuter, an attorney at California Rural Legal Assistance in Salinas, thinks that as much as half of the strawberry acreage in his area, which includes Watsonville, is being farmed by sharecroppers. A survey by CRLA staff members in Santa Maria found that half to three quarters of the acreage in the valley is being sharecropped. These estimates may be high, but there is no doubt that the practice is once again widespread. Jeannie Barrett, a CRLA attorney who has watched sharecropping arrangements come and go around Santa Maria for almost twenty years, thinks the new version is the worst yet. "It's basically a form of debt peonage," she says.

One of the largest commission merchants is Kirk Produce, which sells fresh strawberries under the brand names Sunshine, Sunrise, and Sundance, and processed berries, through a subsidiary, to Borden's, Kraft, Heinz, and Knott's Berry Farm. The company was founded by David Kirk, a prominent strawberry grower; a number of the other leading investors are strawberry growers as well. Kirk Produce contracts are such works of art that the lawyer who drafted them, Peter M. Gwosdof, has copyrighted them. In order to demonstrate that the sharecropper is not an employee of Kirk's, the contracts stress that "no partnership, joint venture, co-farming, tenant farming, or other business relationship" has been created. But elsewhere they make clear that when the "Independent Farmer/Grower" leases the land from Kirk and borrows the money to farm it from Kirk, he or she also must pay for utilities and irrigation through Kirk, grow berries that satisfy the quality demands of Kirk, and sell all those berries only through Kirk at a price determined solely by Kirk. Moreover, Kirk has the right to retake the land at any time and terminate the lease if the sharecropper's farming practices do not meet with Kirk's approval. Termination of the lease does not eliminate the debt.

Most of the sharecroppers who sign these contracts--which can be as long as thirteen pages, single-spaced--cannot read them. The contracts are entirely in English, whereas the vast majority of sharecroppers are Spanish-speaking farm workers who have little experience with legal documents. One study suggested that the average sharecropper outside Watsonville had the equivalent of a fifth-grade education. The Kirk contract recommends seeking "independent legal and/or accounting advice" before signing. But the opportunities for upward mobility are so limited among farm workers, and the desire to have one's own farm is so great, that farm workers are eager to sign such agreements. Only later do they realize the true cost.

Commission merchants have a very good deal. After lending their money to the sharecropper, they get money back in three ways: as payment for services rendered (Kirk supplies the plants, fertilizer, insecticides, and packing materials), as interest payments, and as repayment of the original loan. In addition, commission merchants charge a fee for every box of strawberries sold and often collect a cooling charge of a dollar a box. Sharecroppers must sell all their berries to their commission merchant, regardless of the price being offered. Sharecroppers often complain that they are not receiving the full value of their fruit. Often they are right. Every sharecropper I met in Santa Maria was receiving \$5.00 a box for fresh berries, though the official market price ranged from \$8.00 to \$14.00 a box at the time.

The documents that Felipe later sent me revealed the kind of bookkeeping that often takes place. They stemmed from an investigation of his case by the Market Enforcement Branch of California's Department of Food and Agriculture. Over the course of eighteen months a commission merchant named Ag-Mart Produce was found to have overcharged or underpaid Felipe by \$118,320.62. On days when the market price for strawberries was \$8.75 a box, Felipe sometimes received \$7.00, \$5.00, or \$1.74 for his boxes. On other days the commission merchant sold hundreds of boxes of Felipe's berries for which Felipe was paid nothing at all. By the time California's Department of Food and

Agriculture made these findings, Ag-Mart Produce had stopped doing business in the state.

Some of the worst violations of state and federal labor laws are being committed by sharecroppers overwhelmed by the pressure to repay their debts. Even the most compassionate sharecroppers are in a bind: the workers often have to be paid at the end of each week, but the commission merchant usually pays for the sharecropper's berries every three weeks. The commission merchant also deducts service charges and interest payments directly from the sharecropper's check, so that little money may be left for the workers. As Kirk's attorney, Peter Gwosdof, explained in an interview, Kirk Produce is not a licensed "finance lender"; it obtains funds through a federal land bank, and is therefore exempt from state usury laws. Kirk can charge whatever interest it likes--though, Gwosdof assured me, Kirk does not profit from these loans. Bill Hoerger, a CRLA senior attorney, thinks the loans are designed to make the sharecropper appear to be a real businessperson. The commission merchants often don't need the loans to be repaid in order to make a profit. Under the old system, such loans were operating costs; under the new one, bad debts make good write-offs at the end of each year. One well-established strawberry grower, who finds the new sharecropping arrangements despicable, told me there's nothing new about the scheme. "Read Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*," he said, "for the best description of how this whole system works."

Two years ago California's labor commissioner cited Kirk Produce for failure to obtain workers'-compensation insurance for employees hired by one of its independent growers, Rudolfo Contreras. Kirk appealed the citation, claiming that Contreras was a self-employed businessman who used his own skills to complete a job after hiring his own workers and acquiring his own materials. The hearing officer ruled against Kirk, a decision later upheld by a superior-court judge and a state appeals court. "The [Kirk] agreements afforded Contreras no real opportunity to make a profit," the Second District Court of Appeals concluded. Regardless of what these contracts asserted, Contreras was essentially "a supervisory employee"--not a self-employed entrepreneur. The large debts kept Contreras beholden to Kirk, the judges found, and "forced Contreras to do [its] bidding on a long-term basis."

Kirk Produce may now seek a review of this decision by the California Supreme Court. If the courts upholds the ruling that Kirk's sharecroppers are, in fact, employees, and not independent growers, then future litigation may erase their debts. Anne Hipshman, the attorney arguing on behalf of the state labor commissioner, believes that Kirk Produce has trapped these farm workers "in a form of servitude." Gwosdof, Kirk's attorney, denies the charge. He says that it is in everyone's best interest if the independent grower has a good year, and adds that the company is always on the lookout for "talented, successful growers."

Before signing with Kirk, Rudolfo Contreras had no previous experience as a grower or as a businessman of any kind. His agricultural background was gained picking apples, cherries, plums, and peaches for three years. During his vacations he had picked

strawberries for a week or two each year. Although he was an "independent grower" for Kirk Produce, with a debt of about \$70,000, his only personal assets were a pickup truck and an old tractor, both of unknown value.

While awaiting a definitive ruling on their status, sharecroppers struggle to repay what they can. Every sharecropper I met was in dire financial straits. A sharecropper often feeds his or her family by listing a phony worker on the payroll and keeping those wages. Visiting sharecropped fields at random, I heard the same story again and again. I saw the same look of fatigue. Pedro was the only sharecropper I met who didn't seem distraught. He had a soft, round face and a moustache. He was thirty-six, but looked a decade older. He had picked strawberries for eight years, and then driven a truck. He said that one of his acres had flooded and was now lost for the year. The strawberries on his remaining thirty-four acres had been damaged by the rain. After six years of sharecropping Pedro was \$125,000 in debt, most of it rolled over. I asked how he managed to run up so much debt. "I don't know," he said, shrugging. "All I know is I owe it." None of these disasters seemed to have affected his cheerful mood. What mattered most to him was providing work for his migrants and the pride of being his own boss. "I don't care anymore about material things," Pedro said as he surveyed the workers in his field, and plastic torn from beds flapped in the wind. "I'm a Jehovah's Witness."

THE SEARCH FOR A PEASANTRY

California never enjoyed a period in which family farms dominated the rural economy, employing hired hands who could expect someday to own their own land. Its society never remotely resembled the Jeffersonian ideal. Monopolistic patterns of land ownership established under Spanish and Mexican rule were unaffected by California's admission into the United States. The vast bonanza wheat farms that emerged in California during the mid-nineteenth century offer the earliest example of modern American agribusiness, a model soon emulated by the state's fruit and vegetable growers. California's agricultural potential seemed limitless. The soil was rich, the climate was almost perfect, and water for irrigation was abundant. All the state lacked was an army of laborers to harvest its apples, melons, oranges, and dates. The historian Cletus E. Daniel has called the initial phase of large-scale agriculture in California "the search for a peasantry." First Chinese and then Japanese worked the fields, until the Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Gentleman's Agreement of 1907 limited their supply. In the early years of this century Mexicans were hailed as the solution to California's perennial farm-labor shortages. The Mexican, it was argued, would not only work hard for low wages whenever needed but also go home when no longer required.

There was complete freedom of movement between California and Mexico until 1929, when undocumented immigration to the United States became a crime--a misdemeanor carrying no legal punishment. By then 70 to 80 percent of the migrant farm workers in California were Mexicans, and the Mexican population of Los Angeles had grown larger than that of any city in Mexico except the nation's capital. Illegal immigrants from Mexico have long been a mainstay of California's rural economy; the proportion of illegals in the state's population is little different today from what it was four decades

ago. Midwestern migrant workers, the "Okies" immortalized by John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*, were a historical anomaly. For nearly eighty years the vast majority of California's migrant workers have been Mexican immigrants, legal and illegal. The nationality of these migrants over generations seems as unvarying as the nature of the work. Most of California's produce is harvested today exactly as it was in the days of the eighteenth-century mission fathers.

Machines have been invented to harvest almost every kind of fruit and vegetable grown in the United States. Such machines are introduced, however, only when the cost of mechanization is lower than the anticipated costs of paying migrants to do the same work. During the 1970s the United Farm Workers achieved great success organizing migrants in the California grape and lettuce industries. The influence of the UFW extended far beyond these crops; simply the threat of unionization persuaded many growers to raise wages, offer benefits, and improve working conditions. At about the same time, California adopted some of the most pro-union legislation in the country, guaranteeing farm workers the right to collective bargaining, a minimum wage, and unemployment compensation. As labor costs increased, mechanization became a top priority for California growers. But successive Republican governors, George Deukmejian and Pete Wilson, gutted the Agricultural Labor Relations Board and relaxed enforcement of the state's tough labor laws. Union workers were fired; illegal immigrants replaced them; and growers avoided prosecution for workplace violations by hiding behind the legal fiction that labor contractors and sharecroppers were the actual employers of migrants. Hard-won benefits such as sick leave, vacation pay, family housing, and health insurance were eliminated. The living and working conditions of migrants steadily declined.

At the beginning of the 1980s the UFW had perhaps 60,000 members. Today it has between 5,000 and 10,000. Migrant workers have become so cheap in California, largely owing to illegal immigration, that they are increasingly being used not just to pick fruits and vegetables but to pack them as well, right in the fields. Automated packinghouses employing union workers are rapidly going out of business. Instead of the mechanization of California agriculture, a prominent labor expert recently observed, we are witnessing its "Mexicanization."

LA FRUTA DEL DIABLO

The San Andreas labor camp is a small slum set amid rolling hills and strawberry fields not far from Watsonville. For most of the year this bleak collection of gray wooden barracks has about 350 residents, mainly strawberry workers and their families, but at the peak of the harvest hundreds more cram into its forty apartments. Last summer there was a major outbreak of tuberculosis at the camp, fueled by crowded living quarters and poor building design. The bedrooms occupy a central corridor of the barracks; none has a window. A superior-court judge recently held the landlord responsible for maintaining "a public nuisance" and for violating local fire, health, safety, building, and zoning codes. Nevertheless, the tenants continue to pay \$500 a month for their two-bedroom apartments

and feel lucky to have a roof over their heads. As I walked around the camp, there were children everywhere, running and playing in the dirt courtyards, oblivious of the squalor.

It was mid-April, and heavy rains the previous month had flooded hundreds of acres, scattering bright-blue plastic barrels from the nearby Smuckers plant across local strawberry fields and embedding them in the mud. Many fields that had not been flooded had still been damaged by the rains. The sky was overcast, more bad weather was coming, and a year's income for these workers would be determined in the next few months. Half a dozen strawberry pickers, leaning against parked cars, told me that at this point in the season they usually worked in the fields eight or ten hours a day. Only one of them was employed at the moment. Each morning the others visited the strawberry farm on a nearby hillside, inquired about work, and were turned away. The foreman, who had hired them for years, said to try again next week.

Harvest work in the strawberry fields, like most seasonal farm work in California, is considered "at will." There is no contract, no seniority, no obligation beyond the day-to-day. A grower hires and fires workers as necessary, without need for explanation. It makes no difference whether the migrant has been an employee for six days or six years. The terms of employment are laid down on a daily basis. If a grower wants slow and careful work, wages are paid by the hour. If a grower wants berries quickly removed from the field, the wages are piece-rate, providing an incentive to move fast. A migrant often does not know how long the workday will last or what the wage rate will be until he or she arrives at the field that morning. There might be two weeks of ten-hour days followed by a week of no work at all, depending on the weather and the market.

This system did not arise because growers are innately mean and heartless. Harvests are unpredictable from beginning to end. Many growers try to guarantee their workers a certain amount of income each week. Among other things, it makes good business sense to have reliable and capable workers returning each year. And yet there is no denying where the power lies.

The strawberry has long been known to migrants as "*la fruta del diablo*"--the fruit of the devil. Picking strawberries is some of the lowest-paid, most difficult, and therefore least desirable farm work in California. Strawberries are fragile and bruise easily. They must be picked with great care, especially those that will be sold fresh at the market. Workers must select only berries of the proper size, firmness, shape, and color. They must arrange the berries neatly in baskets to catch the shopper's eye. Learning how to pack strawberries correctly can take weeks. The worker is often responsible not only for gathering and packing the fruit but also for tending the plants. The drip-irrigation system has to be checked continually. Shoots and runners have to be removed. Rotting berries have to be tossed away, or they will spoil the rest. When a piece-rate wage is being paid, workers must perform these tasks and pick berries as fast as they can. There is a strong undercurrent of anxiety in a field being harvested at a piece rate. Workers move down the furrows pushing small wheelbarrows; they pause, bend over, brush away leaves to their left and right, pick berries, place them in boxes, check the plants, and move on, all in one

fluid motion. Once their boxes are filled, they rush to have them tallied at the end of the field, rush back, and begin the process again.

Strawberry plants are four or five inches tall and grow from beds eight to twelve inches high. One must bend at the waist to pick the fruit, which explains why the job is so difficult. Bending over that way for an hour can cause a stiff back; doing so for ten to twelve hours a day, weeks at a time, can cause excruciating pain and lifelong disabilities. Most strawberry pickers suffer back pain. As would be expected, the older one gets, the more one's back hurts. Farm workers, like athletes, also decline in speed as they get older. The fastest strawberry pickers tend to be in their late teens and early twenties. Most migrants quit picking strawberries in their mid-thirties, although some highly skilled women do work longer. Age discrimination is commonplace in the fields--it is purely a question of efficiency.

The hourly wages paid to strawberry pickers vary considerably, depending on the grower, the type of berry being picked, the time of year, and, often, the skill of the worker. Wages are higher in Watsonville and Salinas than in southern California, because of the greater distance from Mexico. Growers producing top-quality berries for the fresh market may pay as much as \$7.00 or \$8.00 an hour. At the height of the season, when berries are plentiful and many growers pay a piece rate of \$1.25 a box, the fastest workers can earn more than \$100 a day. But wages at that level last for only a month or so, and even during that period most workers can't attain them. When a crew of thirty picks at a piece rate, three or four will earn \$10.00 an hour, five or six will earn at or below the minimum wage, \$4.25 an hour, and the rest will earn something in between.

The availability of work, not the pay scale, is of greatest concern to migrants. Despite the hardships that accompany the job, there is an oversupply of people hoping to pick strawberries. The fear of unemployment haunts all farm workers in California. Each harvest brings a new struggle to line up enough jobs for a decent income. The average migrant spends half the year working and a quarter of the year looking for work.

Another constant worry is finding a place to sleep. Santa Cruz and Monterey counties have some of the highest housing costs in the country. Long popular with tourists and wealthy retirees, the area has also begun to attract commuters from Silicon Valley. The residents of Watsonville and Salinas are determined to preserve the local farm economy, despite enormous pressure from developers. Agricultural land that currently sells for \$20,000 an acre could be sold for many times that amount if it were rezoned: there are strawberry fields overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The determination to preserve agricultural land has not, however, extended to providing shelter for agricultural workers. Since 1980 the acreage around Watsonville and Salinas devoted to strawberries has more than doubled, and the tonnage of strawberries produced there has tripled. But the huge influx of migrant workers to pick these strawberries is forced to compete for a supply of low-income housing that has been inadequate for decades.

The few remaining labor camps for single men are grim places. Campo El Toro, a group of whitewashed buildings surrounded by chain-link fences and barbed wire, desolate

except for a rosebush in front of the manager's office, looks like a holding pen or an old minimum-security prison. The Englund labor camp is reputed to be one of the best of its kind. Inside the barracks the walls are freshly painted and the concrete floor is clean. A typical room is roughly twelve feet by ten feet, unheated, and occupied by four men. Sheets of plywood separate the steel cots. For \$80.00 a week, a price that most migrants cannot afford, one gets a bed and two meals a day. I have seen nicer horse barns.

Migrant workers try to avoid the labor camps for reasons other than cost: the risks of having possessions stolen during the day and of sleeping beside strangers at night. Whenever possible, migrants stay in residential neighborhoods. They pool their resources, relying on relatives and friends. In Watsonville three or four families will share a small house, seven or eight people to a room. Migrants routinely pay \$100 to \$200 a month to sleep in a garage with anywhere from four to ten other people. A recent survey of garages in Soledad found 1,500 inhabitants--a number roughly equal to a quarter of the town's official population. At the peak of the harvest the housing shortage becomes acute. Migrants at the San Andreas labor camp sometimes pay to sleep there in parked cars. The newest migrant workers, who lack family in the area and haven't yet learned the ropes, often sleep outdoors, in the wooded sections of Prunedale, trespassing, moving to a different hiding place each night. A few years ago, on hillsides above the Salinas Valley, hundreds of strawberry pickers were found living in caves.

LOCKED INTO DEPENDENCE

The immigration history of Guadalupe, California, can be read in the names and faces adorning headstones in its small cemetery. The Swiss and Italian and Portuguese surnames belong to families that settled in the Santa Maria Valley around the turn of the century, growing beans and sugar beets, running cattle, and raising dairy herds. The Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino names belong to the first wave of farm workers, some of whom managed to acquire land of their own. Spanish surnames greatly outnumber the rest, marking the recent graves along with plastic flowers and images of saints. There is a sepulchral custom in Guadalupe, practiced for generations: most of the headstones bear sepia-tinted photographs of the deceased. Walking through the graveyard, one sees at a glance the slightly different ethnic traits and the subtle variations in skin color--long the basis of economic status and rivalry. Now all these faces stare in the same direction from the same place, arranged like crops in long, straight rows.

For most of this century the Santa Maria Valley had a diverse farm economy. Although migrants were a large seasonal presence, the area lacked the huge industrial farms that dominated the landscape elsewhere in California. The acreage around Guadalupe was devoted primarily to field crops and irrigated pasture. The cattle ranches and dairy farms were owned and managed by local families. Fruits and vegetables, though an important source of revenue, occupied a small portion of the agricultural land.

Then, from the early 1970s to the late 1980s, the Santa Maria Valley was transformed. As field crops and dairy products became less profitable, farmers either switched to high-value specialty crops or quit farming. Much of the land in the valley was bought by

outside corporations, such as Mobil and the Bank of America. Irrigated pastures became strawberry fields (dotted with oil wells) on leased land. The number of migrant workers soared. In 1960 Guadalupe's population was 18 percent Latino; today it is more than 83 percent Latino. The middle classes fled to the nearby city of Santa Maria, leaving behind a rural underclass. Half the families in Guadalupe now live below the poverty line.

Juan-Vicente Palerm has spent the past twelve years studying the social and economic changes in the Santa Maria Valley. The director of the University of California's Institute for Mexico and the United States, Palerm is an anthropologist by training; his early fieldwork traced the lives of Spanish guest workers in northern Europe--migrants imported by treaty to labor in factories and fields. He is an imposing figure, with the graying beard of a patriarch, and has a remarkable grasp not only of labor-market dynamics but also of how every crop in the valley is planted, tended, marketed, and sold. I spent a day with Palerm and one of his graduate students, Manolo Gonzalez (who picked strawberries for a year as part of his research), driving the side streets of Guadalupe, touring the fields, and discussing how the growers of California and the peasants of rural Mexico created an agricultural system that has locked them into mutual dependence.

By relying on poor migrants from Mexico, California growers established a wage structure that discouraged American citizens from seeking farm work. The wages offered at harvest were too low to sustain a family in the United States, but they were up to ten times as high as any wages Mexican peasants could earn in their native villages. A system evolved in which the cheap labor of Mexican migrants subsidized California agriculture, while remittances from that farm work preserved rural communities in Mexico that might otherwise have collapsed. For decades the men of Mexican villages have traveled north to the fields of California, leaving behind women, children, and the elderly to look after their small farms. Migrant work in California has long absorbed Mexican surplus labor, while Mexico has in effect paid for the education, health care, and retirement of California's farm workers.

Whenever migrants decided to settle in California, however, they disrupted the smooth workings of this system, by imposing higher costs on the state--especially if they married and raised children. That is why the Immigration and Naturalization Service has traditionally rounded up and deported illegal immigrants in California immediately after the harvest. Nevertheless, millions of Mexican farm workers have settled in the United States over the years, many of them becoming American citizens. Although agricultural employment has long been a means of entering U.S. society, low wages and poor working conditions have made it an occupation that most immigrants and their children hope to escape. Farm labor is more physically demanding and less financially rewarding than almost any other kind of work. A migrant who finds a job in a factory increases his or her income fourfold. As a result, the whole system now depends on a steady supply of illegal immigrants to keep farm wages low and to replace migrants who have either retired to Mexico or found better jobs in California.

Juan-Vicente Palerm believes that today there are not only more migrants shuttling back and forth from Mexico but also more Mexican farm workers settling permanently in California. Throughout the state towns like Guadalupe, Calexico, Cutler, and McFarland are becoming enclaves of rural poverty. In the Santa Maria Valley the increased production of fruits and vegetables, higher yields per acre, and an extended growing season have created thousands of full- and part-time jobs for farm workers. Broccoli fields now occupy more than 20,000 acres, requiring a large supply of resident workers for a staggered harvest that lasts most of the year. Celery and cauliflower production have also increased the number of reliable jobs. Perhaps 40 percent of the farm labor in the valley is currently performed by workers who live there. Many farm workers now own houses. A privileged few may earn as much as \$50,000 a year. But the strawberry fields have drawn thousands of poor migrants to the area. Only 12 percent of the work force at a strawberry farm can claim year-round employment. And cultivating the fruit is so labor-intensive--twenty-five times as labor-intensive as cultivating broccoli--that strawberry production now employs more farm workers than the production of all the vegetables grown in the valley combined. Most strawberry pickers hope to find jobs in the nearby vegetable fields, where the wages are better and the work is less arduous. Turnover rates are extremely high in the strawberry work force. But there is no impending shortage of potential migrants. The rural population of Mexico has tripled since the 1940s, and now stands at roughly 30 million. "In terms of absolute numbers," Palerm says, "there are far more Mexican peasants today than ever before."

A growing proportion of the strawberry pickers in the Santa Maria Valley are Mixtec Indians--some of the poorest and most exploited people in this hemisphere. Soil erosion and declining crop yields in the mountains of western Oaxaca have forced the Mixtecs to become migrant workers. According to Michael Kearney, a professor of anthropology at the University of California at Riverside, their choice is simple: "Migrate or starve." Mixtec Indians increasingly dominate the lowest-paid jobs in California agriculture. In Tijuana you often see the wives and children of Mixtec farm workers, small and dark and beautiful, dressed in the bright colors of their native villages, selling Chiclets to tourists on the street.

Until the late 1970s almost all the Mexican farm workers in California were mestizos with strong cultural links to communities already in the state. The new migrants present social workers with unusual challenges. In addition to the ninety-two dialects of Mixtec, there are at least half a dozen other pre-Columbian languages spoken by the indigenous peoples of Oaxaca. Perhaps a fifth of the Mixtec farm workers in California speak no English or Spanish. Throughout their migratory route Mixtecs are the victims of robbery and discrimination. In central Mexico they must run a gantlet of officials demanding bribes. In Tijuana they are preyed upon by smugglers, rapists, and thieves. In San Diego County they have been the targets of "beaner raids"--random beatings administered by white teenagers from the suburbs and by Marines from Camp Pendleton.

In Guadalupe many of the settled farm workers resent the new arrivals from Oaxaca. Illegal immigrants often crossed picket lines during the 1980s, helping to drive the UFW from the valley. Hourly wages have declined by 40 percent over the past decade, and

there is widespread underemployment. Labor contractors now actively recruit illegals, who work for less money and raise fewer objections than legal residents. At harvest time Guadalupe's population of 5,500 swells by as much as half, placing great demands on local services. Palerm's researchers once discovered twenty-two people living in a two-bedroom apartment. The city government is bankrupt. Last year much of Guadalupe's housing for migrants was razed or condemned. Local officials hope to turn Guadalupe into a tourist attraction, an authentic "Mexican" town. The bars and cantinas along Highway 1 have been repainted, and destitute migrants, who might scare away the tourists, have been strongly encouraged to go elsewhere.

Despite the hardships of their long journey, Mixtecs hoping to sustain their native villages have a strong incentive to find work in California. Wages in Oaxaca are about two or three dollars a day. Wages in the strawberry fields of Baja California are about five dollars a day. A Mixtec farm worker in the Santa Maria Valley, making ten dollars an hour at the peak of the strawberry harvest, can earn more in one day than he or she could earn back home in a month.

A RELIANCE ON MISFORTUNE

In 1951 the President's Commission on Migratory Labor condemned the abysmal living conditions of illegal immigrants employed as migrant farm workers in the United States. At the time, workers were found living in orchards and irrigation ditches. They lived in constant fear of apprehension, like fugitives, and were routinely exploited by their employers, who could maintain unsafe working conditions, cut wages, or abruptly dismiss them with little fear of reprisal. In many cases the life of these migrants was, according to the commission, "virtually peonage." The commission estimated that 40 percent of the migrants in the United States--at least 400,000 people--were illegal immigrants. Their presence in such large numbers depressed wages for all farm workers; that was "unquestionable." Indeed, illegal immigrants had begun to displace native workers not only in agriculture but also in nonfarm occupations such as construction. The commission argued that the only way to stop the flow of illegals was to impose harsh punishments on those who employed and exploited them. It suggested fines, imprisonment, and a strict prohibition of interstate commerce in any goods produced or harvested by illegal immigrants. "We depend on misfortune to build up our force of migratory workers," the commission concluded, "and when the supply is low because there is not enough misfortune at home, we rely on misfortune abroad to replenish the supply."

Congress ignored the commission's recommendations, and for the next two decades it was a crime to be an illegal immigrant in the United States but not a crime to employ one. In 1986 Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which demanded broad sanctions against the employers of illegal immigrants. But these sanctions have rarely been applied. There are approximately 873,400 private employers in California--and only about 200 federal inspectors to investigate workplace violations of the immigration code. Moreover, the federal penalties for employing an illegal immigrant are mild. A first offense may result in a fine of \$250, a third offense in a fine

of \$3,000. Instead of stemming illegal immigration, IRCA has actually encouraged it. In response to growers' fears that the new sanctions on employers would create a shortage of farm workers, Congress included in the bill a special amnesty for illegal immigrants who could prove that they had done farm work in the United States during the previous year. It did not demand much proof. Backed by Congressman Leon Panetta and Senator Pete Wilson, both from California, the Special Agricultural Worker (SAW) program was expected to grant legal status to 350,000 illegal immigrants. Instead more than 1.3 million illegal immigrants--a number roughly equivalent at the time to a sixth of the adult male population of rural Mexico--applied for this amnesty, most of them using phony documents in what has been called one of the greatest immigration frauds in American history. More than a million illegal immigrants were eventually granted legal status; many were soon joined illegally by their wives and children. Instead of shrinking the farm-labor force, IRCA has guaranteed an oversupply of workers. Counterfeit green cards, Social Security cards, driver's licenses, and SAW work histories--the documents necessary to obtain employment as a farm worker--can be easily obtained in rural California for \$50.00. The process usually takes about an hour.

Pete Wilson, now the governor of California and a candidate for President of the United States, has lately expressed support for a new guest-worker program, one that would openly recruit migrant workers through a formal agreement, and would guarantee their wages, their living conditions--and their return to Mexico at the end of each year's harvest. The U.S. government operated a similar endeavor, called the Bracero Program, from 1942 to 1964. Migrants who enrolled were shuttled to huge holding pens at the border, forced to await employment with numbers hung around their necks, and then stripped naked and sprayed with a delousing agent before being allowed entry into the United States. Once in this country, the braceros were all but powerless and were bound to a single employer. The Bracero Program was terminated amid revelations that its guest workers were being widely abused. Historians now agree that the program established the social networks and migratory patterns responsible for the subsequent waves of illegal immigration. Indeed, during the program's existence there were often more illegal immigrants than braceros employed in American agriculture.

Despite all these facts, Juan-Vicente Palerm does not rule out lending his support to a new guest-worker program. He has no illusions about such arrangements, having witnessed their implementation in Western Europe during the 1960s, their successes and ultimate failure. His willingness to consider a guest-worker program today is based on pragmatism. The living conditions of migrants in California have become so bad that something must be done at once--and a guest-worker program, while no solution, is at least a first step. The North American Free Trade Agreement permits the free movement of American capital across borders without offering any legal protection to Mexican migrant workers. Palerm believes that the terms of a guest-worker program could guarantee migrants some of the basic rights they do not enjoy today. Even if illegal immigration continues alongside the officially approved migration, those farm workers within the program will no longer have to live underground. Palerm is organizing a community-based coalition in the Santa Maria Valley to address problems facing new

immigrants and rural youth. Growers, farm workers, teachers, health workers, and other citizens from Guadalupe are joining to find some common ground.

Opponents of guest-worker programs have long based their objections to them on principle. More than a decade ago Sidney Weintraub and Stanley R. Ross, then at the University of Texas, asserted that "guest worker" is simply a modern euphemism for an indentured laborer. A guest-worker program legally embraces the concept of second-class citizenship, creating a group of people in this country who have limited rights. Aside from the philosophical objections that can be raised, many argue that such programs simply don't work. "There's nothing more permanent," one economist has said, "than temporary workers." Guest-worker programs were discontinued in Europe because large numbers of Algerian, Moroccan, and Turkish workers chose to settle instead of returning home.

Leo Chavez, a professor of anthropology at the University of California at Irvine, thinks that Governor Wilson's anti-illegal-immigration campaign and his plan for a new guest-worker program share an underlying rationale. The author of *Shadowed Lives* (1993), a study of the role illegal immigrants now play in the San Diego economy, Chavez finds it ironic that young Mexican men are to be actively recruited for work in California while Mexican women and children are to be expelled. "It's quite simple," he says. "The state wants their production, but not their reproduction."

Mexican farm workers have long dominated the agricultural labor force in California and the Southwest, but only recently have they begun to migrate throughout the United States. Mexican farm workers, many of them illegal immigrants, are now picking raspberries in Oregon, detasseling corn in Iowa, harvesting tobacco in Virginia, and tending plants in New Jersey nurseries. Moreover, the same method long used to employ illegal immigrants in California agriculture--the reliance on intermediaries, such as labor contractors--is being used to employ them in construction work, janitorial service, and the garment industry. The majority of illegal immigrants in California now work in nonfarm occupations and come from regions throughout Mexico, including Mexico City. Michael Kearney anticipates that the indigenous people of Chiapas will soon join Mixtecs in the migratory stream. Farm-union organizers strongly oppose a new guest-worker program, while others ask why the government should serve as a labor contractor for agricultural interests, when nonfarm industries are just as eager to hire low-wage workers. A guest-worker program is unnecessary, opponents say, when so many farm workers already in the United States are struggling to find work.

Philip L. Martin, who served for four years as a member of the Commission on Agricultural Labor, a group mandated by IRCA, believes that the most effective way to improve the lives of farm workers is simply to enforce the existing labor and immigration laws. Lax federal enforcement has amounted to a tremendous subsidy for fruit and vegetable growers, one that has distorted the economics of those industries. "Cheap labor benefits agriculture in the short run," Martin argues. "But it also helps to blind farmers to the technological changes they will have to make in order to compete with foreign producers, who have access to even cheaper labor." As long as the United States tolerates

the employment of illegal immigrants in agriculture, Martin believes, the farm-labor market will continue the endless cycle in which farm workers quit for better jobs and illegals arrive to replace them. "We have essentially privatized the immigration policy of this country," Martin says, "and left it in the hands of California's growers."

Joaquin Avila, a former president of the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, thinks the distinction between legal and illegal farm workers is less important at this point than the level of wages being paid. The labor-market interdependence of the United States and Mexico, a relationship that evolved over decades, cannot be severed overnight. Until economic development in Mexico has diminished the underlying need for migration, he says, the emphasis within the United States should be on making sure that all workers, regardless of their nationality, are paid a decent wage and protected from exploitation. Doubling the minimum wage would help farm workers enormously, says Marc Linder, a professor of law at the University of Iowa who has long represented migrants. Over the past eight years the minimum wage has declined in value by 33 percent. Doubling it would end a great deal of misery while adding little to the retail cost of most fruits and vegetables.

Despite the many policy options regarding farm workers, the most likely scenario is that nothing will be done--or that things will get much worse. The new Republican leadership in Congress has vowed to cut off all federal funding for legal-services organizations like CRLA by 1997 and wants to restrict the types of cases they can handle. The House majority leader, Dick Armey, hopes to eliminate the minimum wage. The plight of migrant workers has been deplored by presidential commissions and congressional subcommittees for nearly a century, and yet little has fundamentally changed. Growers still exercise a great deal of political influence, while farm workers possess virtually none. Except for a flurry of attention every few decades, the American people have greeted the whole subject with indifference. The nation's fresh produce is less expensive as a result--but not much. Maintaining the current level of poverty among migrant farm workers saves the average American family about \$40.00 a year.

BOWING DOWN TO THE MARKET

One morning in San Diego County, I met a strawberry grower named Doug. We sat and talked in a trailer on the edge of his field. Doug's father and grandfather were both sent to an internment camp for Japanese-Americans during the Second World War. Upon their release the grandfather bought a used truck. At first he worked for other farmers; then he leased some land. Doug's grandfather spoke no English, and so Doug's father, still a teenager, assumed an important role in the business. The two grew vegetables with success and eventually shifted to strawberries, shipping and processing the fruit as well. On the land where their original farm once stood, there are now condominiums, a park, and a school. Doug grows strawberries a few miles inland. His fields are surrounded by chain-link fences topped with barbed wire. An enormous real-estate development, with hundreds of Spanish-style condo units, is creeping up the hills toward his farm. Many of the farmers nearby have already sold their land. Doug has spent most of his life in

strawberry fields, learning every aspect of the business firsthand, but now he isn't sure he wants his children to do the same.

"Farming's not a glamorous business," Doug said. "Farmers don't have a high status in this community. In fact, we're resented by most people." With all the hassles today from the state and from his neighbors, he sometimes asks himself, "Hey, why do this?" He worries about water costs, about theft, about the strawberries from New Zealand he saw in the market the other day. This year's rain wiped out a quarter of his early-season berries, just when the market price was at its peak. Doug cannot understand the hostility toward growers in California. After all, agriculture preserves open land. He thinks Americans don't appreciate how lucky they are to have cheap food. He doesn't understand why anyone would impede strawberry production by limiting his access to migrants. "My workers are helping themselves," he said. "I respect these people. They work damn hard. And my jobs are open to anyone who wants to apply." Every so often, he said, college kids visit the farm, convinced that picking strawberries would be a nice way to earn some extra money. Doug laughed. "They don't last an hour out here."

We stepped from the trailer into bright sunshine. Workers moved down the furrows under close supervision. Doug takes great pride in being a third-generation grower. He is smart, well-educated, and meticulous, and it showed in his field. But I wondered if Doug and his workers would still be there in a few years.

Doug picked a berry and handed it to me, a large Chandler that was brilliantly red. I took a bite. The strawberry was warm and sweet and fragrant, with a slightly bitter aftertaste from the soil.

That evening I inadvertently met some of Doug's workers. Ricardo Soto, a young lawyer at CRLA, had brought me to the edge of an avocado orchard to visit a hidden encampment of migrant workers. Perhaps half the migrants in San Diego County--at least 14,000 people--are now living outdoors. The shortage of low-income housing became acute in the early 1980s, and large shantytowns began to appear, some containing hundreds of crude shacks. As suburbs encroached on agricultural land in northern San Diego County, wealthy commuters and strawberry pickers became neighbors. At one large shantytown I visited, women were doing their laundry in a stream not far from a walled compound with tennis courts, a pool, and a sign promising COUNTRY CLUB LIVING.

The suburbanites do not like living beside Mexican farm workers. Instead of providing low-income housing, local authorities have declared states of emergency, passed laws to forbid curbside hiring, and bulldozed many of the large encampments. San Diego growers appalled by the living conditions of their migrants have tried to build farm-worker housing near the fields--only to encounter fierce resistance from neighboring homeowners. Although the shantytowns lower nearby property values, permanent farm-worker housing might reduce property values by an even greater amount. "When people find out you want to build housing for your migrants," one grower told me, "they just go ballistic."

The new encampments are smaller and built to avoid detection. At the end of a driveway, near a chain-link fence, I met a young Mixtec who lived in such an encampment. His name was Francisco, and he was eighteen years old. He looked deeply exhausted. He had just picked strawberries for twelve hours at Doug's farm. I asked what he thought of Doug as a boss. "Not bad," he said politely.

The previous year Francisco had picked strawberries from April until July. He had saved \$800 during that period and had wired all of it to his mother and father, in the village of San Sebastián Tecomaxtlahuaca. This was Francisco's second season in the fields, but he had not seen much of San Diego County. He was too afraid of getting caught. His days were spent at the farm, his nights at the encampment. He picked strawberries six days a week, sometimes seven, for ten or twelve hours a day. "When there's work," Francisco said, "you have to work." Each morning he woke up around four-thirty and walked for half an hour to reach Doug's field.

At dusk thirteen tired men in dirty clothes approached us. They were all from Francisco's village. They worked together at Doug's farm and stayed at the same encampment. They knew one another's families back home and looked after one another here. The oldest was forty-three and the youngest looked about fifteen. All the men were illegals. All were sick with coughs, but none dared see a doctor. As the sun dropped behind the hills, clouds of mosquitos descended, and yet the migrants seemed too tired to notice. They lay on their backs, on their sides, resting on the hard ground as though it were a sofa.

Francisco offered to show me their encampment. We squeezed through a hole in the chain-link fence and through gaps in rusting barbed wire, and climbed a winding path enclosed by tall bushes. It felt like a medieval maze. As we neared the camp, I noticed beer cans and food wrappers littering the ground. We came upon the first shack--short and low, more like a tent, just silver trash bags draped over a wooden frame. A little farther up the path stood three more shacks in a small clearing. They were built of plywood and camouflaged. Branches and leaves had been piled on their roofs. The landowner did not know the migrants lived here, and the encampment would be difficult to find. These migrants were hiding out, like criminals or Viet Cong. Garbage was everywhere. Francisco pointed to his shack, which was about five feet high, five feet wide, and seven feet long. He shared it with two other men. He had a good blanket. But when it rained at night, the roof leaked, and the men would go to work soaking wet the next day and dry off in the sun. Francisco had never lived this way before coming to San Diego. At home he always slept in a bed.

Beyond the sheds bushes crowded the path again, and then it reached another clearing, where two battered lawn chairs had been placed at the edge of the hill. There was a wonderful view of strawberry fields, new houses, and the lights of the freeway in the distance.

Driving back to my motel that night, I thought about the people of Orange County, one of the richest counties in the nation--big on family values, now bankrupt from financial speculation, unwilling to raise taxes to pay for their own children's education, unwilling

to pay off their debts, whining about the injustice of it, and blaming all their problems on illegal immigrants. And I thought about Francisco, their bogeyman, their scapegoat, working ten hours a day at one of the hardest jobs imaginable, honest work, and sleeping on the ground every night for months so that he could save money and send it home to his parents.

We have been told for more than a decade to bow down before "the market." We have placed our faith in the laws of supply and demand. What has been forgotten, or ignored, is that the market rewards only efficiency. Every other human value gets in its way. The market will drive wages down like water, until they reach the lowest possible level. Today that level is being set not in Washington or New York or Sacramento but in the fields of Baja California and the mountain villages of Oaxaca. That level is about five dollars a day. No deity that men have ever worshiped is more ruthless and more hollow than the free market unchecked; there is no reason why shantytowns should not appear on the outskirts of every American city. All those who now consider themselves devotees of the market should take a good look at what is happening in California. Left to its own devices, the free market always seeks a work force that is hungry, desperate, and cheap--a work force that is anything but free.

*Copyright © 1995 by The Atlantic Monthly Company. All rights reserved.
Original article appeared on: <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/95nov/strawber.htm>*