

## ***Justice In the Fields***

### **A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation**

**By the Rev. CJ McGregor**

**Delivered on September 2, 2018**

Labor Day, the first Monday in September, is a creation of the labor movement and is dedicated to the social and economic achievements of American workers. It's an annual national tribute to the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of our country. The first Labor Day holiday was celebrated on Tuesday, September 5, 1882, in New York City, in accordance with the plans of the Central Labor Union. The Central Labor Union held its second Labor Day holiday just a year later, on September 5, 1883.

In 1884 the first Monday in September was selected as the holiday, as originally proposed, and the Central Labor Union urged similar organizations in other cities to follow the example of New York and celebrate a "workingmen's holiday" on that date. The idea spread with the growth of labor organizations, and in 1885 Labor Day was celebrated in many industrial centers of the country. The first governmental recognition came through municipal ordinances passed in 1885 and 1886. From these, a movement developed to secure state legislation.

Last March I read a letter to the editor of the New York Times and saved it in a computer file I reserve for sermon ideas. I'm glad to use it today. The letter To the Editor is from Bruce Goldstein of Washington. He writes:

*"Our New Global Garden" covers many facets of the global supply chain of fresh produce but barely touches on the conditions of farmworkers who labor on fruit and vegetable farms in the United States and abroad. In fact, farmworkers' voices are absent.*

*Conditions for most farmworkers in the United States, Mexico and elsewhere are not what they should be. Wages are low. Fringe benefits are rare. Agriculture ranks very high in job fatalities and injuries. Even large farms are often exempt from labor laws, and enforcement of employment protections that do apply is generally weak.*

*Consumers are increasingly demanding to know how their food, whether grown here or elsewhere, is produced, including how farmworkers are treated. Companies at every level of the supply chain — growers, processors, marketers and retailers — need to commit to improving conditions for the workers.*

*There are projects to respond to consumers' concerns about labor practices. Such efforts will amount to false promises unless they truly involve farmworkers in their creation and development.*

*When companies claim that their fruits and vegetables are produced responsibly, consumers will want confirmation from the voices of farmworkers.*

While preparing this message I spoke with Uriel Zalava Perez, a leader of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. I invited workers to participate in our service and in our barbecue, but they will be participating in a farm worker justice protest in Miami today. Uriel and I reflected on a speech delivered by Lupe Gonzalo, a CIW farmworker leader, at an interfaith service for farmworker justice in July 2017 to conclude the month-long fast workers were participating in. Her talk was centered around *Isaiah 58:6 which is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free...*

Gonzalo said, “Over 20 years ago, farmworkers in Immokalee decided to break these bonds Isaiah tells us about. And they searched not only for freedom, but to ascribe value to their dignity.” She tells us that in 1997, six farmworkers undertook a fast that lasted more than 30 days to wake the conscience of growers about shameful wages and conditions. In doing so, they demonstrated to the world beyond what was then the forgotten town of Immokalee – that behind the red, juicy tomato that appeared on their dinner plate were men and women facing conditions of grave exploitation. These six farmworkers chose to use their own bodies to let their message be heard. Bodies that day after day confronted violence and misery in the fields.

Their sacrifice watered the ground of support from congregations in Naples and Ft. Myers. It created understanding, outrage, and determination among people beyond Immokalee. Thanks to the people of faith, students and consumers, they were victorious, bringing 14 corporations to the table and 90% of the tomato growers in Florida. In this, we have started cleansing the land of injustice. They sowed seeds that have started to bear the fruits of freedom, dignity, respect and hope.

But one of the most important changes that Gonzalo highlighted is that women are now able to work free from sexual harassment. For so many years men, have suffered in silence. They hushed themselves in the face of violence and harassment. Although changes have been achieved with thousands of workers, it is outrageous to think there are corporations who ignore the humanity of farm workers and only want to continue exploiting workers for an economic gain.

Cesar Chavez once said, “The food that overflows our market shelves and fills our tables is harvested by men, women and children who often cannot satisfy their own hunger. This is the paradox of Labor Day. I want us to reflect on the plight of the farm worker in our country. Migrant and seasonal farmworkers perform numerous tasks necessary for cultivating and harvesting a large share of our nation's food supply. But in spite of their back-breaking labor, the vast majority of agricultural workers do not enjoy the same rights and benefits that most of us take for granted.

According to author Daniel Rothenberg: "Farmworkers commonly suffer abuses that would be inconceivable in other industries. They are threatened, cheated out of their wages, housed and transported in dangerous conditions, and in the most extreme cases, held in debt. Farmworkers have always been recruited from among the most vulnerable members of American society-- recent immigrants, the homeless, the rural poor--and have consistently been denied the legal protections provided to other workers."

Let us name some of the living, working and health conditions of our nation's approximately two million migrant and seasonal farm workers:

#### Below-Poverty Wages.

- Farmworkers in the United States earn an average of \$8,000 per year.
- According to the New York Times, farmworker wages have declined by 20% or more in the last twenty years; after accounting for inflation.
- Farmworkers have the lowest annual family incomes of any U.S. wage and salary workers.
- Two-thirds of our nation's migrant households, and seventy percent of our nation's migrant children, live below the federal poverty line.
- Many farm workers are paid by the amount of the crop they harvest-by "piece rate." For example, cucumber pickers in North Carolina receive approximately 65 cents for each 33 pound bucket they harvest. This averages out to around \$3.90 per hour.
- In the state of Florida, many tomato pickers have not had a pay raise in over 20 years. They still earn between 40-50 cents for each 32-pound bucket they pick. (source: Coalition of Immokalee Workers; Immokalee, Florida.)
- In the state of California, thousands of agricultural employers routinely violate federal and state labor laws by underpaying, sometimes entirely stiffing, tens of thousands of farm workers; according to the "Sacramento Bee" newspaper. The newspaper also reported that thirty-five percent of vineyard employers did not pay their workers the minimum wage. None of these employers were prosecuted for minimum wage violations.

#### Malnutrition and Hunger.

- As a group, farmworkers suffer a higher rate of malnutrition than any other subpopulation in the country.
- Only ten percent of farmworkers receive Food Stamps.

#### Hazardous and Unsanitary Working Conditions.

- Farm work is one of the most hazardous occupations in the country.
- Our nation's farmworkers face a greater risk of pesticide exposure than any other segment of the population. Pesticide exposure can cause a variety of health problems, such as; nausea, vomiting, dizziness, rashes and burns. Long-term effects of pesticide exposure can include cancer, sterility, birth defects, and damage to the nervous system.
- Federal laws and regulations give farmworkers exposed to pesticides inadequate protection. The EPA estimates that farmworkers suffer up to 300,000 acute illnesses and injuries from pesticide exposure each year.
- According to the United States General Accounting Office: "Many hired farmworkers are unprotected by federal regulations for field sanitation. The absence of drinking water, handwashing facilities and toilets in fields constitutes a serious health hazard to hundreds of thousands of hired farmworkers farms with 10 or fewer workers are exempt from OSHA field sanitation standards."

- According to the Wall Street Journal: "Despite their long hours and usually arduous toil, California farmworkers are often forced to do without clean toilets, toilet paper, soap, paper towels and fresh water for drinking and handwashing."
- An investigative report by the "Miami Herald" newspaper found that many Florida farmworkers face sweatshop hours, slum housing, poverty pay, and criminal abuse at the hands of third-party contractors; who house and feed the workers "for fees that keep them destitute and in debt."

#### Slavery in the Fields.

- In five cases since 1996, a dozen Florida farm labor contractors, smugglers and their associates have been sent to prison for enslaving and exploiting farmworkers.
- In June of 2002, three citrus contractors were convicted in federal court on charges of conspiring to hold hundreds of workers as slaves, threatening them with violence and holding them hostage over alleged \$1,000 debts; according to the Associated Press. \*\*\* Farmworkers suffer higher incidences of heat stress, dermatitis, influenza, pneumonia, tuberculosis, and pesticide-related illnesses than other occupational groups. Few, if any, farmworkers have health insurance; and very few are covered through Medicaid.

There are many other issues such as child labor, lack of education, emotional issues, third world housing, lack of protections and eligibility for benefits. But we know – we know that the willful disregard of farmworkers’ humanity will not go unanswered. Today, this Labor Day, we are here breaking one more fast, a fast for justice. We must appeal to legislators. We must speak out about companies, industries, and individuals that deny basic human rights and fair pay and safe labor practices. We must remember that each time we sit at the table we thank and pray for those who made it possible for the food we eat to make it to our table. Let us celebrate Labor Day but let us remember those who have yet to achieve the benefits of this celebration and do something about it. Let our celebration not delay justice in the fields.

May it be so.