Justice in the Fields
By Nick Hack

In this piece, Nick Hack talks about the agricultural labor in California. The paper explores the ebb and flow of the shifting tides of ethnicity in the state: What ethnic groups have been the major contributors to labor in Californian agriculture and what roles have they played? The author challenges the reader to consider the parallelism between land and labor exploitation and further explores local organizations that have been created to bring alternatives both in the management of the land as well as in the creation of opportunities for agricultural laborers.

At the turn of the Twentieth Century, Japanese and Mexican farmworkers went on strike in the sugar beet fields of Southern California with nearly 1,000 laborers refusing to work. In order to organize the fight against poor wages and working conditions, the Sugar Beet and Farm Laborer’s Union of Oxnard was formed in 1903, the first farmworkers’ union in the state. In its inaugural year, a Japanese President and Vice President, along with a Mexican Secretary, headed the union (Fugita, 1978).

Second generation Japanese American farmers rallied together to start the Nisei Farmers League (NFL) in 1971. This organization was formed in direct response to increased pressures and labor struggles with the predominantly Latino United Farm Workers (UFW) in the hope of protecting growers from union demands and to join together for security. The irony is that by the 1970’s, the NFL, a mostly Japanese institution, was both economically and politically pitted against a group whose members occupied a social position that the farmers had shared with them little more than a half century before (Fugita, 1978).

California’s history is one of constant change: it’s a story of redefining both land use and our relationship to it and one of fights for and shifts in power. It is a history of a constantly dynamic and transforming society. As can be seen in the previous anecdote, agriculture, arguably the foundation of California’s economy provides clear illustrations of these themes. For example, as humans diverted rivers and dug deep into the ground for water, the landscape and who had control over it changed: during this time, our society’s needs and wants, melded to this incomplete concept of “progress.” Just as agriculture illustrates these points, so too does farm labor—a more much specific focus—offer a microcosm from which to see this story and these changes. This historically informed political project attempts to do just that.

For over a year now, I’ve had the good fortune to work with the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA). As part of its attempts to create a more just society, ALBA offers a free, six-month course to interested farm workers (who are generally Latino)
teaching both the agricultural and business techniques necessary to become an independent, small organic farmer. While my previous experiences have been centered more towards outreach efforts, in my current political project I have been tending the demonstration plot of this incredible organization. My role with ALBA is mostly one of a groundskeeper. I weed, prune and pick up garbage, playing a very small part in keeping the Association’s demonstration plot clean, healthy and productive. ALBA uses this acreage as a training resource and testing ground for its farmers (those students who have completed the six-month course and who now rent land) and local community members.

At its core, the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association’s goal is empowerment. Instead of simply trying to resolve farm worker issues—which in itself is a noble and much needed cause—ALBA attempts to provide current farm laborers with the tools they need to take control of their futures and to open access and opportunities for change. Like the Japanese transition from farm labor to farm owner, from disenfranchised to empowered, ALBA hopes to open an avenue for current farm workers to take this same route. I have been fortunate in this last year to work with an organization undertaking such an important challenge, and to see first hand this transition take place.

Simultaneously, I have been researching the history of California agricultural labor. More specifically, I have directed my attention to answering the question, “Who or what ethnic groups have been the major contributors to labor in Californian agriculture and what roles have they played?” As suggested earlier, in looking at this question, there is not a set pattern for change: be it defeat or empowerment. While in the last 70 years many laborers of Japanese descent have been able to take control of their own destinies and become successful farmers, the fate of many Mexican and other Latino farm workers has been different. In this amount of time, the challenges facing Latino farm labor have changed little, with low wages, poor working conditions and discrimination continuing today (Pulido, 1998). While this project may not ultimately uncover the causes of these differences, it will serve to chronicle them.

However, where did this all start? Where or when did the farm worker simply become a human resource to exploit as we do our natural resources? How did the difference between farm labor and farmer come to exist? Looking back through history, the story goes all the way back to the start of Spanish Colonization.

Native Labor and the Missions

The theme of oppression in agriculture is first seen in this history during the Mission era. Subjected to Spanish mission rule starting in the late 18th Century in California, Native Americans were subjugated, housed separately from both their society and the opposite sex. Spanish missionaries did this, for the native’s own moral protection. Disobedient natives and those who couldn’t temper their “carnal desires” (or more accurately, those who continued to express their own cultural identity) were disciplined, generally through beatings. Neophytes were forced to work as farm labor and were treated no differently (Monroy, 1990).

Native Californians under mission rule were subjected to long days of backbreaking labor under methods and scale unknown to them, and lived in
what Herbert Bolton called “practical slavery,” (Bolton, 1917). Despite the Catholic leader’s frustrations with what they perceived as laziness—explicitly recorded in such notes as that of Padre Lasuén’s: “If they are put to work, nobody goads them on. They sit down; they recline; they often go away and come back when it suits them” (Monroy, 1990). During this time, agricultural production boomed. By the time of its disestablishment, Mission San Gabriel, called the Queen of the Missions, had 163,578 vines, 2,333 fruit trees, 12,980 head of cattle plus 4,443 “cattle loaned to various individuals,” 2,938 horses and 6,548 sheep and grew wheat, corn, potatoes, beans, garbanzos, lentils, squash, watermelon and cantaloupe in abundance (Monroy, 1990). This great production was due in large part to the missionaries’ heavy domination. Reports of floggings and whippings, imprisonment and starvation were not uncommon (Monroy, 1990). In short, the life of a Native farm laborer was one of physical difficulty, cultural repression and punishment.

The Californios

Following the end of the Mission era, generations of Spanish speaking Californians took over the role as prime agricultural producers and dominators. Typically, Californio landowners held large rancheros on which they raised cattle for the hide and tallow trade; vegetable and foodstuff production was also common. However, on these farms relations between landowner and laborer were similar to those of the Mission years. Once again, Native Californians made up the backbone of the agricultural labor force and were treated with disrespect, condescension, and frequent brutality (Pitt, 1966). When looking at the relationship between farm owner and labor, Ellen Casper notes the similarities between feudal Europe and early California; in both cases, she says, a vassal-lord system reigned (Casper, 1984). Even in pay, racial inequalities were prevalent. Despite recorded references to the Californian Indians as “very industrious and trustworthy laborers,” Cary McWilliams notes that it was customary to pay a Native half the wages of a white or Mexican worker (McWilliams, 1935).

Bonanza Farms

In the book Factories in the Field, Cary McWilliams lays out a changing landscape, but one still firmly grounded in the oppression of the weak. “Prior to 1860,” he says, “farming in California was pastoral in character, i.e. chiefly the work of cultivating fields set out by the missions. But, after 1860, farming became a large scale industry,” (McWilliams, 1935). As fewer and fewer people controlled more and more land, sustained production of land lost importance. Massive fields of wheat and other extensive crops were cultivated as quickly and in as great quantities as possible. This was obviously hard on the land and crop yields quickly diminished. However, when one area became unproductive, farmers and landowners simply picked up their operation and moved to one of their many other vast plots. The era of Bonanza farms had begun.

Despite the incredible size of the fields, due to the use of extensive crops (i.e. those that require little outlay and labor), need for workers remained rather scarce, causing further problems for agricultural labor in the state. With demand low, value of workers was low as well. Because it was the least expensive resource, owners most frequently used Native labor, but Mexicans and whites
could be found swinging scythes in the fields as well (Casper, 1984). Once again, with only a small requirement for farmworkers, both landowners and the public largely ignored their mistreatment and needs.

*Shift to Intensive Farming*

At the turn of the 20th Century, those with power in agriculture started to increase exploitation of both human and natural resources. As people began to divert rivers, create huge canals, and suck water out of the ground in increasing quantities, farmers found they could produce a much different variety of crops and California agriculture began to change (Pisani, 1984). Capital and labor intensive crops began to sprout up throughout the state, requiring a radical shift in agricultural method. Donald Worster explains:

Irrigation farmers...had unrivaled access to credit, to the capital needed for maximizing their technological efficiency, and they gained political leverage to protect their position even in a highly urban state. Most important, they secured on their own terms a labor pool large enough to harvest their produce cheaply and, through collective strength, they kept those laborers firmly under control... (Worster, 1982)

This period in agricultural history marks the beginning of agricultural methods used in contemporary life today.

*Chinese Struggle*

During the 1850’s, as a result of a labor scarcity and being driven from the mines, many Chinese immigrants entered into agriculture, unaware of the exploitative nature of the enterprise (Taylor, et. al. 1936). During the period that thousands flocked to California for the great Gold Rush, Chinese immigrants were coming into the state to get seek out opportunities as well. Despite their initial hopes, many Chinese found they received anything but a friendly welcome in the mines. At the same time, the boom of mining towns and the mining industry created a great need for people in agriculture to feed the hungry masses. These immigrants, mistreated and mistrusted by most whites, moved into the new and numerous openings in agriculture.

Construction of the great railroads brought thousands more into California. Ellen Casper discusses how “the Chinese, who were imported to work on the Central Pacific Railroad and became available for farm work upon its completion, were considered a cheaper source of labor than slaves would have been” (Casper, 1984). Indeed, public sentiment consistently drew this correlation between Chinese labor and slavery. In 1854, the *California Farmer* noted, “California is destined to be a large grower of Cotton, Rice, Tobacco, Sugar, Tea, Coffee, and where shall the laborers be found?...The Chinese! And everything tends to this—those great walls of China are to be broken down and that population, educated, schooled and drilled in the cultivation of these products, are to be to California what the African has been to the South. This is the decree of the Almighty, and man cannot stop it” (Taylor, 1968). Similarly, just as slavery cannot be removed from a look at the development of the South, Sucheng Chan notes that without Chinese labor, especially in the Sacramento Delta region, it would have taken decades longer to develop the land into “one
of the richest agricultural areas in the world" (Chan, 1986).

By the 1880’s, intolerance for Chinese among the general public (of which they were not considered a part) had elevated to a breaking point. Over the previous years, immigrants from Mexico had started coming into the state in larger numbers, filling the spot for cheap labor that the Chinese had previously occupied. In addition, large advertising campaigns were run to bring inexpensive African American labor into the state to replace those of Asian descent (Casper, 1984). With this need satisfied, with their ‘place’ filled by a new ethnic group, the Chinese were no longer desired. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, limiting more Chinese from coming into the country (McWilliams, 1935). Two years later, the advertisements had paid off, as a new wave of black workers, “exodusters,” answered the call to work. Chinese presence in the fields slowly but steadily diminished, forcing those who had helped build the country’s infrastructure, to now serve domestically those able to enjoy it.

**Japanese Success**

Throughout the 1890’s, significant Japanese immigration began and many immigrants gravitated towards work in agriculture. Due to previous experiences farming in Japan, this was a natural route to take. Consequently, during these years, the Japanese came to fill the seasonal agricultural labor market (Fugita, 1978).

Japanese workers had unheard-of success in the farming industry. Their tactics were new (i.e. the idea that they had tactics was new) and they used the farmers’ own greed against them. It was common for the Japanese to organize to enter the labor market, initially accepting extremely low wages to drive out other workers. Once the crops had ripened and were ready to harvest, they would threaten a work stoppage unless their demands were met. Such demands usually included options to lease or rent small parcels of a growers’ field, so that the laborers could produce their own food for consumption and sale (Casper, 1984). The resulting reaction is easily guessed: “Agricultural landowners soon came to despise the Japanese tactics and to fear their industriousness and skill as horticulturalists, for the Japanese were very good at farming and making productive land that others had little use for” (Casper, 1984). In 1909, the Immigration Commission estimated that 30,000 Japanese were working in California agriculture; a year later, Japanese associations in the state recorded 2/3 of all Japanese immigrants were gainfully employed as working in agriculture (Higgs, 1978).

In a series of legislation at the beginning of the 20th Century, lawmakers tried to stop the hard-working and productive Japanese from continuing to do so well in a response to what they viewed as the “yellow peril” (Pisani, 1984). In 1906, the federal government signed the Gentlemen’s Agreement with Japan to limit immigration, and in 1913 California passed the Alien Land Law. Without ever actually using specific terms, the state’s legislature tried to effectively bar all Japanese immigrants from owning, renting or leasing land. This attempt (which ultimately failed due to the ingenuity of the immigrants in getting around the law) came in response to the increasing numbers of Japanese farmworkers moving into independent farming and out-competing their white competitors. In 1900, only 39 Japanese
were farming independently in the entire United States; by 1910, the number had jumped to almost 2,000 in California alone. Only ten years later, the State Board of Control asserted, “there are probably more white laborers working for Oriental farmers than there are Oriental laborers working for American farmers” (Higgs, 1978).

This wave of anti-Japanese sentiment also resulted from similar demographic changes to those that growers had experienced with the Chinese. Just as Mexican immigrants allowed the displacement of Chinese workers, their continually growing numbers in California provided the landowners with a rapidly expanding pool of cheap labor (Taylor, et. al. 1936). After the Mexican Revolution of 1910, starving Mexican refugees presented growers with an amazing source of inexpensive, exploitable labor from which to choose (Casper, 1984). The Japanese simply had not remained lucrative labor force for the white farmers, and the tide turned against them. Fortunately, most Japanese had no intention of staying as farm labor. Within the next few decades, the Japanese would find themselves in the role of the farmer, with land and labor to manage and tough choices about workers to make on their own.

World War I

With the outbreak of World War I, many laborers changed directly from their dirty and torn agricultural uniforms into clean, crisp military-issue tan, looking for a way out of the constant labor/farmer struggle. Scores of other farmworkers, tired of the constant moving of a migrant’s life, with bad wages, terrible living conditions, and tyrannical farm owners, left for the cities and the jobs created by the booming wartime economy. This flight from the fields left growers with a problem they had not encountered before: a labor shortage (Casper, 1984). With this critical and paralyzing labor deficit, farmworkers became a much more valued commodity, yet were still discriminated against. A state commission reporting land colonization in California reported the prevailing sentiment in 1916: “that ignorant and nomadic farm labor is bad,” (Pisani, 1984). However, this attitude did not help to decrease the labor shortage. Accordingly, in an attempt to quickly remedy the problem, the United States government took a two-pronged approach toward solving this deficit.

First, the federal government called out to its citizens ineligible for service—mainly large numbers of women—to fill the void in the fields left by the nation’s fighting men. While the men were away overseas or working in wartime industry, women and teenagers filled many vacant spots (Casper, 1984). From California Land Army Camps, scores of women would pile out of their electric lighted bungalows in the predawn hours to travel on the rickety beds of old trucks to their respective fields. Singing songs and beaming with patriotic pride and a sense of duty, these women, most from the city but also coming from the entire spectrum of backgrounds, would work the long shifts and grueling labor that men had previously predominated in. Because of the conditions of their work—temporary and performed through a sense of responsibility instead of being forced into the situation—and because their living conditions were generally better than what other migrant laborers had experienced, most women enjoyed the work (Minor, 1919). And for all the same reasons, their bosses enjoyed it as well.
The second wave of attack on the labor shortage problem came in the form of labor contracts with Mexico. Due to the massive need for labor, the U.S. government had to look elsewhere for workers. Because of the growers’ success with using Mexican labor in the past and because of the proximity of the country, the U.S. and Mexican governments agreed to measures that would bring Mexican national laborers into the U.S. for a short period of time to work. After their contract expired, the farmworkers would be required to return to Mexico. While the program did bring thousands of Mexican workers into the country and probably saved hundreds of thousands of dollars in what would have been lost crops, ultimately there were major problems (Casper, 1984). When the workers went back to Mexico, they brought with them stories of exploitation, corruption, and mistreatment in the land of opportunity. The legacy of this program is long. From 1914 and extending until 1934, Mexican workers were the predominant farm labor force, and in those years are found to be more tractable than any other group (Casper, 1984).

Also in the 1920’s, Filipino labor began coming into the country in greater numbers from both Hawaii and the Philippine Islands. For a time this hurt the Mexican laborers as even cheaper Filipino workers undercut their inexpensive labor force (Casper, 1984). However, this would soon change, as one of the things Filipinos brought with them to the fields of California was a history of organized labor.

After the war, Mexican immigration supplemented by 30,000 Filipinos became the major source of labor supply (Salomon, 1998). Soon thereafter, groups of Filipinos were staging strikes for better wages, working and living conditions. In 1930, laborers started the Agricultural Workers League to initiate large-scale unionization of Filipino workers and in 1933, the Filipino Labor Union formed in Salinas (Salomon, 1998). Growers began to feel increasing pressure from their workers across the state and tensions grew. Suddenly, though, when in 1934 Congress passed the Philippine Islands Independence Act, importation of Filipinos came to an end and many returned to their newly freed homeland (Casper, 1984). Fortunately for the growers, a release valve presented itself for much of the pressure that had built up.

The Effects of the Dust Bowl

To some extent, white farm workers generally escaped the burden of prejudice heaped on “persons of color,” but their circumstances where little better in other ways. In the preceding years, whatever meager foothold they were able to acquire would be wiped out by the periodic depressions of the 19th Century. White farmworkers were present on the Bonanza farms of the mid to late 1800’s and were working in the fields with the Chinese, Japanese and Mexican workers after the shift to intensive agriculture (Casper, 1984). Yet despite this difficult past, nothing prepared white farmworkers for the effects felt throughout the state caused by the Great Depression and the drought that created the Dust Bowl.

By 1933, 75% of the agricultural labor force was Mexican, but this dominance in numbers would soon change (Casper, 1984). As thousands of white “Okies” swarmed into California from the Central and Southwester states, a move began to deport Mexican immigrants. During the 1930’s, 1,250,000
destitute white workers came to the Golden State to escape drought in Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma and other hard-hit states; unfortunately, there simply was not enough room, jobs or wages for everybody, and somebody had to leave (Casper, 1984). A surging nationalist movement made sure of whom the losers in this battle would be.

The living conditions of the masses that fled into California were simply horrible. Entire families were forced to live in shanties made of cardboard, burlap, or whatever other refuse could be salvaged for construction. Sanitation and hygiene were abysmal in most migrant encampments and many times children and adults went without food. At their jobs, these workers were harassed, intimidated and kept in order by involuntary debt and violence. In most places, local authorities worked with the growers to maintain this dominance (Steinbeck, 1936). One undersheriff from Southern California demonstrated this attitude, saying, “We protect farmers out here in Kern County. They are our best people. They are always with us. They keep this country going. They put us here and they can put us out again, so we serve them” (Casper, 1984). This power structure was extremely well established and constantly reinforced, all in an attempt to keep the workers powerless.

In 1936, when a series of John Steinbeck’s articles were published as the collection that would be eventually known as The Harvest Gypsies, Steinbeck thought that the white migrants from the Dust Bowl were here to stay and their demands and needs would change the way agricultural labor was treated in California. Steinbeck, however, had not counted on the advent of another World War.

World War II

Just as happened during the first, with the enrollment of the United States in World War II, the reality of farm labor again radically changed. In June of 1942, the masses of oppressed, beaten workers in agriculture found a beacon of hope. As the wartime economy and industries geared up, thousands of better paying jobs with good working conditions opened up. Again, many who had had enough of a life as farm labor enlisted or became part of the military complex. With this mass exodus out of agricultural labor, another shortage occurred (Casper, 1984).

The government’s response to this second labor deficit was similar to their prior response. California Governor Olson notified the War Manpower Commission, the Secretary of Labor, Secretary of State, and Secretary of Agriculture saying 20,000 Mexican workers were needed immediately and 159,000 would be needed by October of 1942 (Casper, 1984). Due to the numerous problems that arose under the first labor contract program with the United States, Mexico was understandably wary of such an endeavor. However, eventually the request was successful; the result being that between 1946 and 1949 federal officials negotiated a permanent contract labor program with Mexico called the Bracero Program. Even during the period of time leading up to the actual negotiation and eventual completion of the agreement, however, the Mexican labor workforce was coming back into California. In 1947, after the influx of impoverished whites during the Depression years receded, minorities, mostly Mexican Americans and Mexicans, again made up the majority of the farm labor force (Casper, 1984). Once again, growers found themselves in the position
of having a large and growing pool of cheap, exploitable labor.

Legacy of the Bracero Program

While it officially ended in 1964, the patterns of ethnic makeup and oppression of farm labor established by the Bracero Program have largely remained in place in contemporary society (Casper, 1984). Agricultural labor still maintains its racial diversity with Chinese, Hmong, Filipinos and others still present in the fields, but Mexican and Latino labor by far currently play the greatest role in California agriculture. This is apparent in various ways; one being through the ethnic composition of farmworker unions. Latino and Mexican laborers largely make up the membership ranks of the United Farm Workers (UFW), a union that came to state and national attention during the 1965 Delano grape strike and who are arguably one the more powerful farm labor unions (Pulido, 1998). This numerical dominance is evident in the union slogan, Sí se puede.

While Latinos seem to play the largest role in agricultural labor today, and have done so in waves for many years, the history presented somewhat lacks from its brevity. This brief history of California agricultural labor provides a sense of the shifting ethnic tides so prevalent throughout the state, but it is by far a simplified version of the story. Throughout its history here, farm labor has been an extremely ethnically varied community. While certain peoples have dominated the scene at one time or another, many less numerous groups—such as the Slovaks, East Indian, and many others—have always been present as well. The major trends found in the green fields and long rows of this truly Golden State are outlined, but the whole picture is much more complicated. Donald Worster sums up this long history nicely, though, when he says,” Class conflict, in other words, was what the California story in agriculture was all about.”

Where are we today?

To understand our present reality, as we have seen, we must consider the past. During the 1965 Delano labor strike, less than 20% of employers provided the drinking water, toilets, hand washing facilities and periodic rest stops required by law. Additionally, farmworkers had the highest occupational disease rate in California (twice that of all other industries combined), 15% more agricultural laborers in general were hospitalized for serious injuries suffered on the job, and 36% more babies born to farmworkers as compared to other mothers died in infancy (Casper, 1984). While 30 years may sound like a long time and some progress has been made, little has fundamentally changed. Agricultural labor still makes the lowest hourly wage out of any industry worker (Schlosser, 2001). The great number of helicopters that are seen swooping down and discharging their toxic loads nearly on top of lines of hard-at-work laborers contributes to the maltreatment of the workers. Today’s oppressive situation is sickeningly visible, yet many times is kept out of sight.

Political Project

As I have mentioned, working with the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association I have been tending the demonstration plot, mostly weeding, but also picking up garbage, attending to droopy plants, etc. As of now, I define politics as influencing decision-making on all levels, be it personal, regional,
While in my current work with ALBA I am not directly trying to influence anybody’s decisions, I am doing so in a more abstract way. The demonstration plot is meant to serve as an example for the small farmer education program graduates who are currently working at being independent, small organic farmers. The crops planted, techniques used, and maintenance provided for the plot can act as a tool to show these new farmers what methods work and what does not. In this sense, my work goes to influence the beginning farmers’ decisions on what and how to farm. Also, I hope that in doing this work, I will add one small piece to a much larger movement, goal and effort that will provide for greater social and environmental justice in the world. Any action that works towards this goal is considered political action.

I have mostly accomplished my goals of promoting social justice and organic farming (which anybody who works with ALBA does), but believe that we can never truly and fully accomplish the ultimate goal of creating a just and equitable world for its inhabitants. I have spent a great deal more than the required ten hours in the demonstration plot, because it simply takes more time than this to make a difference in even a half-acre of agriculture. When I leave after my few hours on Saturday mornings, there is a visible difference in the rows where I worked, which depends greatly on what work is done exactly. In two hours I may only successfully weed half of a row if I am doing the more precise work of pulling up small weeds around the base of young transplants; in the same time, however, I can get three rows thinned out of the largest weeds among well-established crops. Like the work towards my ultimate goal will never be complete, the need for weeding never ends; all I can do in each situation is to try to begin to get the problem under control. In a speech, Cesar Chavez said, “All my life, I have been driven by one dream, one goal, one vision: To overthrow a farm-labor system in this nation that treats farm workers as if we are not important human beings,” (Hofrichter, 1993). While Chavez took a much more vocal and strong route to achieve this goal, the same philosophy drives ALBA. Any work to serve ALBA is work toward forwarding this cause, to overthrow an unjust system. Weeding may seem small, but sometimes small rocks make big ripples. I can only actively work for what I believe in and hope that this will be the case.

Despite the amount of time I have worked with ALBA now, there is always something new to learn about it. After spending over a year there, I feel I have a good sense of what ALBA is and what it does, yet the education never stops. As the spring trails off and the acreage shifts into winter mode, I have really felt the sense of constant change that exists at the Rural Development Center out in the Salinas Valley, the ALBA site where I spent my time. Whether it’s the constant transition of one crop to the next, simply watching the growth and budding productivity of different plants, or the shift from one demonstration plot coordinator to the next, things are always changing, always fluid. On one hand, being around this transforming human and agricultural landscape is slightly unsettling—one never knows who or what is going to be there when the next work day arrives—but it is also exhilarating in a subtle, subdued way. Constantly seeing positive growth, to continually experiencing a dynamic environment, in which both the
organization and people are slowly but always getting stronger, is an amazing opportunity. However, ALBA, like any non-profit organization, has its struggles also. At this point though, their development and outcomes are outweighing their struggles.

If anything, my values have not changed due to my political action and research, they have only deepened. Going out to ALBA every week and seeing the new farmers work towards lives of greater self-control provides an appropriate backdrop, while at the same time reading and understanding the terrible reality of the history of farm labor in California. Reading and then seeing first hand how oppression has shaped and scarred our landscape and people drives these points home with a deep poignancy. Yet besides strengthening my values, such as the intense belief that we can neither exploit people nor the land for our own profit, my assumptions have been shaken by the complexity of reality as well. Knowing how the mostly Spanish-speaking farm labor is treated today and then discovering how the Spanish-speaking Californios treated their farm labor, the Native Californians, makes me step back. Learning how the early Spanish land grants set the stage for the huge landholdings of today changes how I see the world. None of this makes the current and past oppression a bit more excusable—it is not—but it shows me over and over that no peoples have a perfect history and nobody can estimate the future. Violence begets violence and oppression begets oppression. The only choice we have is to eliminate both.

Policy Recommendations

One of the hot political topics throughout the Fall of 2003 has been the issuance of driver’s licenses to immigrants. A new bill, signed by the former Governor Gray Davis during his fight against being recalled from office, gave undocumented immigrants the right to obtain a license to legally drive in California. Unfortunately, the state’s new governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger—an immigrant himself—made a successful attempt to repeal the bill. While this bill in itself held minor importance (in the sense that a lack of license doesn’t necessarily stop unlicensed driving), the significance of the fight for it was huge. This bill represented so much more than a right to drive legally on the back roads and six-lane super highways of California; this bill represented the state government and people’s attitude towards our neighbors, our friends, and strangers who fall into the harsh category ‘illegal.’

The passing of this bill is the first step on a road that should have been traveled long ago. As has been shown, throughout the history of California agricultural labor, immigrants have been marginalized and dehumanized in the cruelest and most degrading ways. A great number of people were treated as sub-human because of the color of their skin, the status of their citizenship or their job. Even whites experienced this discrimination as “Okies” from the Dust Bowl flooded into California during the 1930’s, only to be met with hostility and thorough domination. By accepting the responsibility for our history and attempting to change the wrongs of the past right now, today, we can start to make the world a more equitable place.

By granting the privilege of a license, a bit of recognition was shown to those who make the state’s booming agricultural industry possible. Almost anybody in agriculture, and most economists, can agree that to maintain the agricultural system we have today
(although it is one that arguably needs to be changed); we must have an inexpensive and large labor pool. Immigrants both documented and not, are currently the basis for this pool. Without their hard work and acceptance of low wages and tough working conditions, Jane and Joe Consumer would find themselves shocked at the price of produce and food goods. As a society, we rely on this group, yet we continually treat its members as if they have no value. This is unacceptable.

Allowing driver’s licenses is a small step, but it is one in a much needed and deserved direction. As the thousands upon thousands of undocumented immigrants head out to the fields each morning before dawn to pick the majority of the food for the state, the nation, and many other parts of the world; most are breaking the law by driving illegally, by driving without a license. To punish people for trying to live and improve their lives and for accepting and doing well the jobs that few others are willing to take is simply ridiculous. Instead of subjecting these groups to laws and regulations that force them to live as an underclass, all steps necessary and possible must be taken to insure that they are privileged with every right, and yes, every responsibility, of being a first-class citizen. To do any less reflects the nature not of the oppressed, but of the oppressor; it shows exactly how human we, who dehumanize and hold down, really are.

In the Declaration of Independence, the nation claims that “all men are created equal,” and that all have equal protection and rights under the law, yet in practice we deviate far from that truth. In reality, the law and our society show that regardless of whether humans are all created equal, we do not all have equal rights, equal privileges, or equal access and opportunities. Withholding the right to drive from certain peoples based on place of birth is but one small example of this. By defining and restricting citizenship as we do, we essentially state, “All are equal, except for these groups.” The lack of service and rights provided to immigrants, both documented and not, create the need for such organizations such as ALBA. Were the premise of universal equality true and practiced, no association focusing on the ‘underserved’ would exist; nobody would be underserved in a nation of equality.

As citizens with a voice, we have the responsibility to work with others to fix this problem. Through our everyday actions and decisions, through our dialogues with others, through volunteering or other political action, however it is defined, and through making our voices heard and our opinions known, we can improve our homes, neighborhoods, cities, states and nation. Together we can create a more just and equal world. Sadly, it took a comic book hero to realize a fundamental truth; it took a fictional character called Spiderman to say: “With great power comes greater responsibility.” Yet despite its origins, still, in our reality the phrase holds true. As those with power, we have a duty to others—not as legal or undocumented workers, but as human beings—to make our world one of equal access and equal rights for all. We must act on that responsibility; we must take action now.

Conclusion

As I dig deeper and read further into the history of California, time and time again social issues and environmental issues are fundamentally connected; that truly as Donald Worster said, “Nature’s fate is humanity’s as well” (Worster,
In the creation of the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association, this interconnectedness is taken into account. Tying the social justice of empowering farm laborers with the environmental ethic of teaching organic farming is the only way to achieve true success and progress. As the history of California shows, those who exploit do not differentiate between different ‘resources.’ They poison and exploit the land just as they poison and exploit the people. Whether we do it to the land or to our friends, families and neighbors, when we exploit, we inflict violence upon the world and upon the very things that give us life—we attack our most precious resources. We must not choose to live in such a world of violence or else nobody and nothing will ever be safe. A world of equity and a world of justice is a world of non-violence in all forms.

Every time I drive home from ALBA, I pass a large field known as “The Farm.” Every time I go by, I see a group of laborers out working the land. There they are, in the blazing heat and the drenching rain, in the hours before dawn and in the pitch black of a foggy Monterey night. There they stand with tools in hand or hunched over, concentrating on the little patch of dirt in front of them. However, these workers also stand over 20 feet tall; they are the smiling, painted figures of a local artist, set in the field as a tourist draw. You can see them from the freeway in their clean clothes and romanticized forms. Yet as I pass under the gaze of these happy figures, I notice the humans toiling in the fields behind them. Those workers, the real ones, are out in the same rain, exposed to the same cold and the same terrible heat. And every time I leave this scene of dichotomized reality, I can not help but think to myself with a sarcastic but mostly sad grin, “You’ve come a long way, baby.”

References


