

## LABOR

# Mechanization threatens farmworkers

By Susan Stern  
Pacific News Service

SACRAMENTO, CA.—California's farmworkers, riding the crest of political success, ironically may have won themselves right out of their jobs.

Though they have triumphed in the long and often bloody battle for unionization, defeated the mighty Teamsters in contract disputes, and reaped major workers' benefits from the government, a new and more formidable opponent has entered the fray: the mechanical harvester.

California growers are discovering that the new machines not only are cheaper than the union wage demands, but also that they don't go on strike.

As the tomato harvest begins this month some 11,300 California farmworkers will be replaced by electronic tomato sorters, according to the State Assembly Office of Research.

In the next 10 years mechanical harvesters will replace 80,000 farmworkers—nearly a third of the state's current agricultural labor force—predicts United Farm Workers lobbyist Michael Linfield.

In five major California crops mechanization is already underway, eliminating jobs and drastically changing the face of farm labor from that of men in the fields to one of women on assembly lines.

In some crops, such as wine grapes and cling peaches, mechanization (where adopted) has eliminated virtually all harvest workers but the machine operators. In other crops the machines have taken over in stages. The new electronic tomato sorter is the final stage of mechanization for canning tomatoes, for instance.

## Women replacing men in jobs.

The mechanization of California agriculture began when the mechanical tomato harvester was introduced in 1964, the year cheap labor dried up with the termination of the Bracero program that allowed Mexicans to cross the border to fill out the farm labor force.

In five years the tomato harvester displaced 32,000 pickers, but created almost as many jobs for tomato sorters working on the harvesting machine. The tomato pickers had been mostly strong men paid by the piece rate. The sorters have been nearly 80 percent women, preferred for their dexterity, and paid by the hour.

Though some have blessed the tomato harvester for ending "backbreaking" labor, others say the machine has brought the worst of the factory into the fields.

"Working conditions on the machine are horrendous," says Albert Rojas of Campesinos Progresistas, a farmworker re-training organization in Yolo County, the state's leading tomato area. "You have to scream to be heard over the noise," says Rojas, "and the dust mixed with defoliants blows directly into workers' faces."

Mechanization of lettuce is to follow in short order. However, unlike tomato workers, lettuce workers are unionized and will, according to UFW contracts, be retrained and placed in other jobs by growers.

The first workers to be replaced by the lettuce harvester will be the lettuce cutters and trimmers, mostly Mexican nationals, who are now making the highest wages in the field: \$7 to \$10 an hour by the piece rate.

As in the tomato crop new assembly-line-type jobs will be created either on the machine or at the side of the field. But growers usually prefer women for these wrapping and packing jobs, and the packer's hourly wage will be far below what the cutters and trimmers are accustomed to.

There are currently no lettuce machines in the fields, but Leslie Hub-



California growers are discovering that not only are new machines cheaper than rising labor costs, they do not strike.

Bob Fitch

bard of the Western Growers Association predicts that lettuce picking will be fully mechanized within four or five years as the machines become cheaper than people.

## Union resistance.

If workers demand higher wages in the near future, they may tip the scales even further in the machine's direction, and accelerate the mechanization process. Lettuce mechanization began, Linfield points out, when growers gave the University of California \$13,500 for development of the technology after Cesar Chavez led 8,000 Salinas Valley workers out on strike in 1970.

Increasing labor costs have also pushed wine grape and canning peach growers to mechanize about 15 percent of those crops. University of California specialists predict that trend will continue, eliminating the picking jobs and causing nearly 80 percent displacement of workers wherever the machines are adopted.

The new small labor force envisioned for the 1980s would be more stable, says viticulturist Amand Kasimatis. The huge peak harvest force of today would be eliminated, leaving a small force of harvest machine operators who would be able to get fulltime employment.

Such a small, stable workforce with "heavy technological inputs," says sociologist William Freidland, "will encourage workers to join unions."

But the UFW doesn't plan to allow mechanization to winnow its workers down to "stability," even if the survivors are easier to unionize. "You don't end up with much of a union with a couple of thousand workers scattered around the state," says the UFW's Linfield. "The problem is, what becomes of the mass of workers who are displaced?"

The UFW is preparing for future job losses by continuing to organize workers and negotiate mechanization-controlling contracts. But the union's main thrust, says Linfield, will be directed toward

halting state funded mechanization research through legislation to require "social impact reports."

Though fighting mechanization is one of the UFW's main priorities, the union is just now gearing up for the battle. The state's tomato workers, meanwhile, are nearly at the end of their rope.

When the tomato harvesters roll this month, many families will be left behind in migrant camps, without food or enough money to leave. In Yolo County, officials are desperately trying to get emergency funds from the state, but they have so far been unsuccessful—no one seems to have funds for this type of disaster.

Jim Aragon, a young Arizonian who was displaced last year, recently returned to Yolo County again because the prospects for work were even drearier at home. "If I can't get work in tomatoes," he says, "I will go to the city, any city, to find a job."

Susan Stern is a Bay Area freelance journalist.

# Mobilization for survival

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ment of the '50s and early '60s, which mushroomed into the mass anti-war movement during the Vietnam era.

According to Sidney Lens, whose book *The Day Before Doomsday* provides inspiration for the Mobilization, he and David McReynolds and several other activists "decided we had to revive the old Ban the Bomb Movement, with two additions.

"First, we had to bring in the nuclear power issue because of the question of proliferation," Lens estimates that the world spread of nuclear power plants will give 40 countries access to nuclear bombs within eight years.

"Second, we had to give people some kind of hope that money saved on the arms race would go for funding human needs."

The loose coalition, with no members, only "cooperating organizations," has attracted such groups as the Clamshell Alliance, American Friends Service Committee, War Resister's League and hundreds of grassroots peace and energy groups.

Rich Pollock, director of the Nader-oriented Critical Mass Energy Project, says his group decided to get involved

because fighting nuclear power can help stop the spread of weapons. "And second, the question of how we're going to feed, house and clothe people is tied to the question of making energy affordable for people. The nuclear disarmament issue and people's needs are tied up with energy and who controls it," he says.

The Mobilization's organizers are hoping for world support. Peace groups around the world are being approached to have demonstrations to coincide with the spring U.N. action.

European socialist and communist parties generally do not support disarmament, fearing the large Soviet army near at hand. However David McReynolds believes they may support the Mobilization, which opposes nuclear weapons in the U.S., the Soviet Union, and every other power. "The Mobilization is not anti-Communist. It is independent of the U.S., the U.S.S.R., and China. We think the European parties may subscribe to our position, as the Japanese Communist party has already done," he says.

The coalition has a delicate task, keeping a number of groups with very

different priorities in cooperation. "These are groups that have never worked together. We're all unclear about how we operate. This is a testing period. But it is encouraging that people see the need to merge our resources," says Pollock.

Like many of the local cooperating groups, the Clamshell Alliance stresses that it will not submerge its priorities into the Mobilization. "While we don't discount the need for disarmament, our main concern is stopping nuclear power," says Sharon Tracy of Clamshell.

Only time will tell if the wide leeway for cooperating groups will mean the Mobilization will have the unity to become the mass movement it hopes to be.

"We're educating each other," says McReynolds. "Anti-nuclear power activists have a wide range of politics. Some are very conservative. When they work with us, they'll be forced to reappraise their conservatism. If power plants are dangerous, what about weapons? It's a creative conflict for people."

"We're still exploring ways we can work to further our common concerns. It's a question of survival. Time is running out and we can't afford the luxury of fighting among ourselves," says Norie Huddle of the Mobilization staff.

"It's a sign of the times," adds Pollock. "We're learning that many issues people thought were separate aren't so separate after all."



# Random Samples

## Confessions out in Dawson case

In a surprise move August 29 Georgia Circuit Judge Leonard Farkas ruled that confessions allegedly given by five black youths on trial in South Georgia for the murder of a white man—the Dawson Five (*ITT*, Aug. 24)—would be inadmissible in their trials.

The confessions had earlier been challenged by defense attorneys as having been obtained through coercion and intimidation, including the holding of a loaded pistol to the head of one defendant and a threat to electrocute another. The judge, however, did not rule on the merits of that argument, ruling instead that because an earlier judge had failed to decide on the admissibility of the confessions before removing himself from the case for health reasons, they could not be admitted.

The prosecution has 30 days to appeal the decision. Their appeal is expected to delay the trials of the five defendants, all of whom are now out on bond, from 30 to 90 days.

## Stevens found in contempt

August 31 the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit declared that J.P. Stevens Co., a major textile company that has been the target of an intensive union organizing campaign for several years, was in flagrant violation of court orders. The court ruled the company in contempt and denounced its persistent harassment of union organizers. It ordered the company to comply with the National Labor Relations Act and court orders enforcing it.

The court indicated that it was con-

dering a fine of \$120,000 for any future violation of its orders. "The arguments in favor of a compliance fine in this case are strong," it said. "Stevens has acted in contempt of our court decrees not once but twice, involving over 30 individual violations. Its violations have been described as massive, cynical and flagrantly contemptuous."

Meanwhile, J.P. Stevens has apparently succeeded in intimidating the mayor of Atlanta, Maynard Jackson, into rescinding an executive order that the city join a nationwide boycott of Stevens' products.

The withdrawal of the city order came after Stevens filed suit in federal court complaining that the ban violated its constitutional rights.

## No rights for South African women

South Africa is now using its anti-black "riotous Assemblies Act" against women. South African police invoked the law, originally designed to prevent black riots, to stop a protest march by white women demanding equal rights with white men in mid August.

The women had gathered outside Pretoria city hall carrying banners and demanding an audience with Prime Minister John Vorster to present a women's rights charter. The women were about to start their protest when 30 armed riot police arrived and ordered them to disperse.

## States funding abortions

Health, Education and Welfare Secretary Joseph Califano ordered an immediate end to federal funding of most abortions for low-income women last month after a federal judge in New York lifted a year long injunction against an

abortion spending ban enacted last year by Congress.

The National Abortion Rights Action League now reports that the District of Columbia and 13 states have indicated that they will find funds in their state treasuries to pay for the abortions.

Among those states are New York, California, Washington, Maryland, Ohio, Kentucky, Wisconsin, Hawaii, Alabama, West Virginia, and Michigan.

Idaho has said that the state will pay for an abortion if two attending physicians say that it is medically necessary.

## No gays in Burgerland?

Frowns hit Burgerland this spring when a man who once worked as Ronald McDonald in Boston announced he was gay.

The controversy started when Bob Brandon told a gay rally in Daytona Beach, Fla. that he at one time was Ronald McDonald—the clown nationally known for promoting McDonald's hamburgers.

The McDonald Corporation promptly went to court and got Florida Circuit Judge Robert Miller to order Brandon never to make himself up as anything resembling the advertising clown and enjoined Brandon from stating that "Ronald McDonald is gay or a homosexual."

## Default now or wait five years

A wave of student defaults on government backed loans has prompted Congress to pass a law that makes it substantially more difficult for a student to declare bankruptcy right after graduation and thus avoid loan repayment.

Adopted in October 1976 the law goes into effect September 30, 1977 and provides that a person cannot discharge his or her responsibility for loan repayment by bankruptcy for five years after the loan falls due. After five years the person would be free to file bankruptcy and be free of the loan obligation.

Apparently, Congress assumed that a person would be more integrated into jobs and family situations after five years and would be more reluctant to file for bankruptcy, which affects all personal finances and has a negative affect on the ability to get future credit.

A wave of last minute filings for bankruptcy is expected before the September 30 deadline.

## Kentucky group opens mine

Unable to find anyone to sell them home heating coal, residents of Knotts County, Kentucky decided to start their own mine. Many residents had been unable to purchase coal and when they could find it had to pay \$25-35 per ton—a sizeable expense for people whose family income averages under \$5,000 a year.

Using money from churches, Knotts County residents formed Citizens for Social and Economic Justice in July 1976. CSEJ created the Knotts County Benevolent Coal Co. and opened a small mine that produces 125-300 tons a day. The mine also employs between five and nine full-time workers at

\$6.25 an hour (about union wages).

KCB coal provides customers with furnace coal at \$12 a ton. The organization has also launched a food co-op and a farm and garden co-op.

(Self Reliance Newsletter)

## Union membership down

A September 2 Labor department report revealed that union membership declined by 767,000 or 3.8 percent, over the last two years. This was the first drop in membership in 15 years, although the percentage of union membership in the total work force has been dropping for several years—from 21.7 percent in 1974 to 20.1 percent in 1976, for instance.

There was some growth, however, in bargaining groups representing white collar and service workers, although many of these workers are in professional associations outside of the traditional labor movement. Such associations grew by 400,000 members.

Although only about 20 percent of union members are women, they made up a majority of the membership loss. Analysts attributed the disproportionate loss in women union membership to heavy layoffs in the garment trades, electronics and other industries that hire more women, as well as to the last-hired-first-fired effects of seniority systems.

## UN sidesteps on Puerto Rico

A United Nations committee sidestepped a controversial Cuban resolution demanding independence for Puerto Rico September 2 when it voted to adjourn for a year. The decision by the Special Committee on Decolonization represented a victory for the U.S., which, while not a member of the committee, had lobbied heavily for the adjournment.

The U.S. maintains that despite changing attitudes in Puerto Rico, that island's status is not a concern of the UN. UN observers, however, believe that had the resolution come to a vote, it would have passed. The one year adjournment only gives the U.S. more time to reassess the island's present commonwealth status.

Hearings on the Cuban resolution this year drew the widest response ever; the committee heard representatives from almost every political perspective in Puerto Rico. Despite disagreements on almost all other issues, Puerto Ricans testifying before the committee agreed that the island's present status is intolerable and that it contains "vestiges" of colonialism.

## Flush at own risk

Finally, UPI reported on August 19 that the toilet at the nuclear reactor at the University of Florida has a sign on the door that reads "Please don't flush the toilet while the reactor is running." The reason is simple—when the toilet is flushed one of the reactor's cooling systems malfunctions.

Just to reassure you, a spokesman for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission says that there is no safety violation involved and that "the situation is merely a nuisance."

Reassured?

**I dreamed I lost  
20 pounds in my ITT-shirt.  
You can too...**

