

Farm Labor Organizing: Trends & Prospects

Maralyn Edid, ILR Press, Ithaca, New York, 1994, 125 pp.

Ms. Edid has written a wide-ranging and readable account of union organizing among today's agricultural employees. Bringing a journalist's eye to this daunting task, she has produced the most up-to-date account of farm worker organizing available.

Ms. Edid, who has a background in business journalism, is a member of the Extension faculty of the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University. Unabashedly pro-labor, she also served on a New York State Task Force that assessed the adequacy of the statutes governing labor relations in New York agriculture.

Farm Labor Organizing attempts to provide the reader with a summary of the activities of eight active farm labor organizations in the United States, ranging from the small Comité de Apoyo a los Trabajadores Agrícolas (CATA) in New Jersey to the United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO (UFW).

Ironically, by treating each organization as more or less equivalent, *Farm Labor Organizing* will strike some as biased. Partisans of one organization or another undoubtedly will assert that their organization has been given short shrift. Certain to be controversial is the statement that, "As of late 1993, the UFW was comparatively quiet and ineffective." Today, just one year later, a reinvigorated UFW has won a number of impressive victories in union representation elections and has signed several new contracts with California farm operators (see "UFW scores eighth straight victory", page 5). Such are the pitfalls of the journalist's craft: like a news story, a simple narrative description becomes quickly outdated in the absence of an analytical framework.

The main strength of Ms. Edid's book is that she is one of the very few contemporary observers of farm labor

unions who has invested the time and energy required to find out what the most important organizations are doing now. She found and interviewed more than 150 knowledgeable individuals, mostly in California, New York, and Ohio. The roster of interviewees (listed at the end of the book, along with a bibliography of sources) is impressive and reflects a major effort to solicit a wide range of viewpoints.

RESOURCES

By Don Villarejo

"Bringing a journalist's eye to this daunting task, Edid has produced the most up-to-date account of farm worker organizing available."

An important contribution of Ms. Edid's work is the thoughtful case she presents for eliminating the exclusion of farm workers from the federal National Labor Relations Act, which protects the right of workers to form labor unions and engage in collective bargaining. This might prove to be a positive first step toward better conditions for farm laborers, especially if the revised law were to be based on California's Agricultural Labor Relations Act. The California act, passed two decades ago, was the first piece of legislation in the country to extend collective bargaining rights to agricultural workers, setting the stage for subsequent union victories.

Farm Labor Organizing also has some major shortcomings. By taking a broad, comprehensive approach, Ms. Edid pro-

vides a good overview. However, for both the UFW and Teamsters, Local 890 (Salinas), critical details are missing leaving the reader without a full grasp of their strengths, weaknesses, and strategies. Descriptive reporting is substituted for analysis leaving the reader with only a limited appreciation of the current tactics of these organizations.

For example, Teamsters, Local 890, is framed solely as a rival of the UFW, one that colluded with growers in signing sweetheart contracts in the 1960s and 1970s in an effort to force the UFW out of the fields. Nowhere is mentioned the decade-old transformation of this union under the leadership of Frank Gallegos, now president of the local. The UFW, and Cesar Chavez personally, provided key assistance in Gallegos's successful rank-and-file campaign to throw out the old guard Anglo leadership. Today, Local 890 is the largest all-Latino led local union in the entire International Brotherhood of Teamsters organization. Not only does Local 890 hold the largest single contract in U.S. agriculture (7,000 workers at Bud Antle, Inc., the nation's largest fresh vegetable packer-shipper), it also conducted the largest strike by U.S. farm workers in the 1980s (October–November 1989 strike against Bud Antle, Inc.). As a result, the union was named as a major defendant in a lawsuit brought by growers seeking tens of millions of dollars in damages for crop losses that they claimed resulted from the strike.

Similarly, Ms. Edid's book neglects to mention the UFW's efforts to maintain a relationship with thousands of farm workers under its La Union del Pueblo Entero (LUPE) membership program. Under this program, participants who are Mexican nationals gain access to the Mexican social security system while living and working in the United States, and also become associate members of the UFW. Missing as well is the UFW's formal agreement (*acuerdo*) to co-

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CENSUS, cont. from page 4

Census data, the most recent figures show both an increase in the number of directly hired workers who were employed for at least 150 days that year, and a sharp decline in the number hired for less than 150 days. The latter trend probably reflects farm operators' growing reliance on labor contractors (please see chart, right). Combined hired and contract labor expenses reached \$3.9 billion in 1992, an increase of \$891 million, or 29 percent, over the total reported in 1987.

The Census Bureau also added a question regarding the number of occupational injuries or deaths on the farm, both for hired workers and for farm operators and family members. While farm operators and their families experienced 705 injuries in 1992, direct-hire employees reported 11,568 injuries—*sixteen times more* than farmers and family members. This gap underlines the need for a more concerted effort to promote occupational safety among California's hired farm labor.

Agricultural chemicals

California farms spent \$694.5 million on agricultural chemicals in 1992, an

**FARM LABOR CONTRACT EXPENSE
IN CALIFORNIA**

(AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL LABOR EXPENSES)

1978	17.5%
1982	18.5%
1987	20.5%
1992	24.9%

In the past 15 years, farm labor contractors have gained control over an increasing share of the farm labor market.

increase of about 28 percent over 1987 costs. Though the total number of harvested cropland acres remained relatively stable between 1987 and 1992, the aggregate number of acres treated with insecticides, nematicides, and crop disease chemicals grew slightly, from 6.8 million to 7.1 million acres. Only in the case of herbicides, or defoliant, was there a reported decrease in treated acres.

The number of farms reporting any chemical or fertilizer use declined by 4,662, or 8 percent, during the five-year

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operate with the numerous self-help associations formed by indigenous immigrants from Mexico.

One disquieting defect of this book is that Ms. Edid overlooks some of the most valuable information currently available. For example, she does not cite the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS), the largest interview-based survey of farm workers ever undertaken in this country. Begun in 1988, NAWS is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor, and interviews about 2,500 workers each year. Despite Ms. Edid's categorical statement that "(a)ccurate and credible data on the farm worker population is non-existent, . . ." NAWS has provided a remarkably detailed por-

trait of demographic and economic data.

Another oversight is the neglect of important scholarly contributions, such as Cletus Daniel's *Bitter Harvest*. Published in 1981 by Cornell University Press, it remains one of the very best histories of farm labor organizing in the period prior to World War II. Ms. Edid's narrative of the early years of farm worker unions would have been strengthened by reference to this work.

In summary, *Farm Labor Organizing* provides the only contemporary overview of the status of its subject. The work's main strength lies in its breadth of coverage, but this comes at the cost of depth of analysis and understanding. ♦

period, for a total of 52,917 in 1992. By this measure, some progress, however small, is being made toward reduced chemical use. ♦

Source: 1992 Census of Agriculture. Volume 1. Geographic Area Series. Part 5. California. State and County Data, Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce, September 1994, 443 pp. plus appendices. For further information, call the Agriculture Division Information Office at 1-800-523-3215.

UFW scores another election victory

After weeks of demonstrations and accusations, employees of the nation's largest rose bush stock farm won the right to be represented by the United Farm Workers of America/AFL-CIO (UFW).

By a vote of 648 to 433, union supporters prevailed in the December 16 election, marking the first time in Bear Creek Production Company's 127-year history that employees have been represented by a labor union. The Wasco-based firm, which employs 1,400 workers, pledged to comply with the election results and enter into good faith negotiations with the UFW.

UFW officials and their supporters were jubilant after officials from the Agricultural Labor Relations Board tallied the final votes, giving the union a decisive majority. The Bear Creek victory is the union's eighth straight electoral win since UFW President Arturo Rodriguez announced last spring that the union would focus most of its resources on field organizing. As a result of this renewed effort, the UFW now represents an additional 2,700 farm workers. ♦