

## **San Luis Obispo County Farm Workers Win Settlement on Work Conditions**

A group of two dozen San Luis Obispo County farm workers received a \$100,000 settlement in early May from a farmer who is alleged to have housed them in sub-standard conditions and paid them below minimum wage. California Rural Legal Assistance attorney Mike Blank helped to represent the workers in what is believed to be the largest cash settlement ever awarded to farm workers in the county's history. Each worker will receive between \$4,000 and \$5,000.

In a lawsuit filed in November 1989 the workers alleged that the sugar pea farmer who employed them required them to pay \$35 to \$50 per month to live in a group of small travel trailers which had no running water, heating or toilets. The suit also contended that they were paid less than the minimum wage and that the grower's son assaulted two of the workers with a wooden club when the grower insisted that they were working too slowly. Neither the grower or his son would comment on the settlement.

The workers said in a sworn statement that they were paid \$5 for each 35-pound box of sugar peas they picked and that this worked out to less than \$4.25 per hour. The two workers who alleged that they were assaulted also claimed that they were fired after the beating and that they were not paid back wages they were owed. One of the workers claimed to have killed 14 rats in one night in the trailer where he was living. The lawsuit also claimed that pesticide containers and spray equipment were illegally stored in the labor camp.

Sugar peas are the third most important crop in San Luis Obispo County. Some 4,260 acres of the crop were harvested in 1989. While no formal study of the county's labor market has been undertaken, it is believed that the labor requirement for edible pea pods is nearly as great as for strawberries. It is thought that, until very recently, much of the pea pod industry was organized around share farming. The Borello decision in early 1989 (see Rural California Report, Vol 1, No. 3, June 1989) required that the practice of share farming be abandoned and payment by piece rate was introduced.

As a result of the lawsuit, county officials issued an order in December 1989 to clean up the camp and to remove the potentially toxic chemical storage near the living quarters. In early 1991 county code enforcement inspector Chuck Stevenson toured the area and found that the farmer had complied with the order. As a consequence, no fines or criminal charges were imposed. According to Stevenson, there is more sub-standard housing in San Luis County, "...than anyone realizes."

Mike Blank of California Rural Legal Assistance believes that the lawsuit and the settlement send a clear message to farmers and labor contractors in the county. He said, "I look forward to suing the next farmer or labor contractor who treats workers so poorly for even more money."

*Special thanks to Mike Blank and the article by Jan Greene, San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune, May 9, 1991.*

## **Farm Workers Form *Alianza Campesina***

On April 28, representatives of farm worker organizations of the Central Valley voted for form an alliance, the *Alianza Campesina*, during the third Farm Worker Conference, held in Reedley, CA.

The Reedley conference represented the third occasion during which representatives of various farm worker organizations and agencies joined together to discuss the problems and concerns of the agricultural worker. The recognition of the need to form a more stable and lasting network to improve communications, strengthen ties of solidarity and provide mutual support among existing farm worker organizations has been gaining momentum since the previous two conferences held in Fresno (November 1990) and Madera (April 1991).

Now, as *Alianza Campesina*, farm worker organizations will continue to hold conferences in order to collectively deal with problems and issues affecting the farm worker community at the local and regional level and to encourage farm workers to take direct action. The next conference is slated to take place in Merced in July.

For more information, contact Proyecto Laboral Agrícola, P.O. Box 425, Modesto, CA 95353 or call (209) 575-3701.

*Translated from an article in Semilla, the Spanish language newspaper produced by Proyecto Laboral Agrícola. Names of participating organizations can be obtained from the Proyecto.*