A Valley of Strawberries and Hands without Documents
Jose Luis Rocha

The Salinas Valley was catapulted to universal fame by the pen of John Steinbeck, the Nobel Peace Prize of literature and admirers of the old Californians – original habitants of California who conserved their Spanish-Mexican traditions even after the region was annexed by the United States in 1848. In *East of Eden*, Steinbeck describes the soil layer of the Salinas Valley as deep and fertile, in need of a rainy winter to leave it full of herbs and flowers. A long time ago it used to be a forest of red wood. Today, this land is scarred by elongated grooves of strawberries, waves that mimic its neighboring sea waves and extend like large zippers juxtaposed, without a tree in which to rest the view or escape the lashes of the summer sun. In those strawberry fields work thousands of immigrants of Latin American origin. The majority are Mexican. Some are well settled in the towns of Salinas and Watsonville, districts which absorb 38% of the Californian strawberry fields and produce more than half of all the strawberries consumed in the United States. Others come for a short term to sow or to harvest the land. They are paid hourly and by boxes: $4.75 per hour and 99 cents per box. They recline on the rows, working up to ten hours a day and more. They are aware of the fact that they produce the wealth of California, a state which the National Service of Agricultural Statistics attributed in 2006 to 88% of American strawberries out of the 67% of all fields of strawberries, thanks to an annual production of 59 thousand pounds per acre. This average doubles 28 thousand pounds of its nearest rival, the state of Florida.

California has achieved this productivity thanks to the blessings of its location. Its coastal sandy soils ensure a good drainage and thus prevent the concentration of salts and moisture. Its fresh climate does not allow the fields of strawberries to be subjected to extreme temperatures. The hot summer deteriorates the quality of the fruit and the cold winter which prolongs the harvest and stimulates the greenery unproductive, in California only for short periods of time and with greater leniency than in other states. The absence of torrential rain during the crop season is a trait that ensures a more prosperous production, perhaps the largest in the world. By virtue of its climate, in California strawberries can be grown 9 to 11 months per year – from February to December – while in Florida it is only possible to cultivate for three months, in Oregon up to seven weeks and in the rest of the country, where it’s possible, at the most for four weeks.

Finally, its proximity to Mexico, gives California a continuous flow of immigrant labor, that is, cheap and docile. The cultivation of strawberries is an industry that needs plenty of hand labor because the strawberry pickers have increasingly focused on fresh strawberries: in 1970 fresh strawberries were 64% of the total; in 2006 they added up to almost 80% of all the strawberries grown in the United States. Fresh strawberries have a better price than processed ones: 72 versus 28 cents per pound. But fresh strawberries must have a very good presentation and have been very well treated, a requirements that imposes limits on mechanization which has displaced labor in the vineyards and tomato crops. Fresh strawberries are also better quality if they come from young plants, which require hiring new workers that can replant new plants annually. In the 60s plants were
replaced every four years. In the 70s they were replaced every two years. Now they are replaced each year. On the other hand, since a strawberry has to be cut at a precise time, crews are required to pass cutters and check the plants daily. A strawberry that remains one day more of the necessary time will not have the appearance and taste that is liked in the market. Continuous cuts are necessary to increase productivity: cultivated plants do not cease to flourish. Hence in peak seasons, the number of agricultural workers in the state of California will double: from 225 thousand to 450 thousand. At the time of harvest, a small farm of 14 acres of strawberries needs more than 28 workers, a medium of 32 acres hires 64 workers and a large of 100 acres requires 200 workers.

With all these great advantages -the weight of production of strawberries from California on the national total increased from 6% in 1946, 36% in 1953, 74% in 1988 and to 88% in 2006. But all these advantages mentioned have their underside: if they want to keep them, the landowners can not avoid negotiating with the workers, as they did in the 70s. Or like they have done so many times in history, they can take advantage and benefit from the wave of immigrants.

American anthropologist Miriam Wells refers to the “regime of labor market” to allude to the configuration of political constraints in a job market at any given time. Such a scheme reflects and affects the interests of class, resources and strategies at each level of production. It significantly shapes the relative merits of each class in a particular work process. Sometimes two systems can coexist in the same country, or you can go from one to another at a meteoric speed. The coexistence of different systems was documented by Eric Wolf in the Russia of the Tsars. The bonded dominated southern provinces, where the black earth guaranteed a generous and lucrative production. There the great lords preferred to control the land and to have vassals under their dominion to cultivate. In the Northern provinces, where soil fertility was depressing, a payment system in form of money for the use of the land of the feudal lords was established. In these provinces, the dedication to craft work or to the industry in the cities facilitated the performance of monetary payments. The convenience of the elites has been instrumental in defining the regime.

In the case of Russia, there was a spatial segmentation. In the case of California, we can race a temporarily differentiation pendulum. Before the Second World War, especially during the Great Depression, the system of sharing the harvest with the workers prevailed. A change to the regime and the wages was imposed when the strawberry industry became unusually profitable and as the Braceros Program provided cheap labor, disciplined and large that is the best antidote against strikes and other forms of oppression by unions. In the mid-60s and during the 70s, at moments of peak power of unions, the regime of sharing the harvest was expanded again: the employer delegated the planting, maintenance and harvest in families who earned a share of the benefits. In this way their demands were the limit imposed by the results of the harvest and marketing. At that time, up to 50% of the producers and land were under the regime of sharing the harvest. When unions were weakened and the migration of undocumented people agitated, the salary regime regained almost their total coverage. These changes of regime have confirmed that the cultivation of strawberries is highly dependent on the
labor supply. The control of the labor force at harvest time is key to profits because labor is the main component of the costs. Its price, timing and careful execution has become the major factor of the rate of profit. To modify other factors continues to be outside the control of the landowners. The demand for strawberries and other agricultural products in general, is relatively inelastic to price and income: although it grows very little decrease in prices or increase in the income of consumers. On the other hand, product differentiation is barely accessible as a way to increase demand and producers are usually unable to control the process of inputs or to increase the price of strawberries by restricting its supply. The inability of farmers to raise prices in a highly competitive market, or to reduce the cost of some inputs whose sale is in the hands of powerful agrochemical and credit providers, will increase its interest in technological innovations that increase productivity and the manipulation of the cost of labor.

It is a fact that the U.S agro technological innovations have reduced the need for skilled labor and thus have allowed landowners to dispense workers better placed to enforce their demands. But the predilection of the people for fresh strawberries and a growing expansion of markets have meant that, unlike other crops, strawberries continue demanding more and more manual labor. The fragility of the strawberries such as the fact that they bruise easily, their point of maturity sequence, the duration of the harvest season and the difficulty of removing the layer of leaves and stems of strawberries has discouraged the adoption of mechanical harvesters destructive plant. The fresh strawberries are harvested by turning the stem and not pulling it to preserve the tips of green. They must be selected by size, firmness, shape and appropriate color. The attentions that fresh strawberries need make them demand hands of “gardeners” to manipulate them rather than the stroke of “farmers” to handle them. As a result of these traits, California is more labor-intensive agriculture than the rest of the United States combined.

**Californian Strawberries in the World and Latinos in California**

In California, any regime on the labor market has been characterized by a voracious appetite for workers. Between 2000 and 2006, the Latino population in California grew from 11 million (32% are in state) to 13 million (36%). Salinas went from 97 thousand (64%) to 100 thousand (71.3%). California currently has 30% of all Latinos living in the United States. Texas follows with 19%, Florida with 8% and New York with 7%. The 35.5% of the total population in California is Latino. Only New Mexico, with 44% of its population of Hispanic origin, surpasses California. The increase in manual labor has helped to strengthen the United States position as the largest producer of strawberries in the world. It is followed by Spain follows with an output three times lower. Italy holds the eight places. California produces more strawberries than Spain and Italy combined. Between 1970 and 2006, the production of strawberries in the United States rose from 496 million to 2 billion 404 million pounds, an increase that added a hike of 41 cents in the price per pound, this meant that the production value increased from 106.6 to 1 million 515 thousand million dollars. Over the past ten years the volume of acres used to grow strawberries increased by 10 thousand acres in California and 2 thousand 463 acres in Salinas and Watsonville. Immigrant manual labor
—predominantly undocumented—has made possible this feat. The area under cultivation has grown much more that the population in these two districts. How was this magic possible?

**The “Laborers” Program**

The story begins and ends, yet with immigrants. To achieve a better perspective, we have to go back to the 40s. To have more working hands and migrants ideals that need the system—the U.S. government resorted to one of its typical ambivalent policies: a bilateral negotiation with its southern neighbor to import Mexicans: we accepted migrants in a controlled manner; yes we need them but are careful they may stay. That negotiation resulted in a program of recruitment in the country of origin. It was named Braceros Program and was executed between 1942 and 1964. It was originally prompted by landowners and Californians by the powerful American Farm Bureau Federation in consultation with landowners from the South. When native workers left the rural work at the beginning of the 40s to enlist in the army, these agencies explicitly lobbied for a federal program of labor supply. They submitted their individual interests as a matter of “national defense” for reasons of food safety. Although it was supposed to be a program linked to the war, its entry on the scene proved so profitable that farmers secured their continuity long after war, for 23 years. During that period, the program imported almost 5 million workers at a rate of 450 thousand per year at its peak time at the end of the 50s. California came to absorb up to 90%. The “laborers” came to represent more than two thirds of the cutters of California strawberries and 100% in the central coast.

Those who agreed to participate in this program were transferred to huge enclosures at the border, where they waited to be assigned jobs. They hung huge banners around their necks, they made them undress and sprinkled and them with a liquid to get rid of parasites before allowing them entry to the United States. Like this they were certified to work for at a certain time and place. They were granted a permit of 6 weeks to 2 months and were assigned work less attractive to U.S. citizens. They were designated to apples, if not to strawberries, where they worked leaning for long hours. Once inside the country, workers were at the mercy of their boss. Many complained of mistreatment and were deported. All those who joined in union activities or tried to negotiate wages were de-certified and deported immediately. The “Programa Braceros” involved the government directly in managing the workforce, making it possible for the farmers to outsource most of the costs and headaches of recruitment.

**César Chávez and United Farm Workers**

Everything was going well until United Farm Workers came into scene, the strongest agricultural union throughout U.S. history. Founded by legendary César Chávez and Dolores Huerta in 1962 can be credited to victories in wage increases and improvements in working conditions. César Chávez was born in 1927 and died in 1993 in his native Arizona. At the time of his death, he was struggling against the application of toxic pesticides, a flag that now has been retaken by United Farm Workers, Líderes
Campesinas and other organizations. From his childhood, Chávez recalled many racist comments and notices saying, “Only for Whites”. He attended thirty-seven schools while he felt that education had nothing to do with his way of life as a farm worker. In 1962 he founded the National Association of Farm workers, that later became Campesinos Unidos or United Farm Workers (UFW). In the past, very few members complied with their contributing to the union and it was very difficult to fund the activities of the organization. After an arduous job, UFW got grape growers to accept collective agreements and certain labor improvements, and thus won the sympathy and affiliation of the majority of workers in that industry. In the 70s UFW had more than 50 thousand workers covered by their contracts. The grape strike in Delano, the farm workers’ march from Delano to Sacramento of 340 miles and the fasts of Chávez inspired by Gandhi – in 1968 and 1972 included fasts of 25 days with only water and another of 36 days in 1988-, focused national attention on the problems of the farm worker and managed to adopt unusual laws that the government passed in the agricultural sector.

Different organizational efforts had preceded UFW. They were blocked by the manipulation of the laborers by part of the cultivators. But Chávez fought in different arenas: the churches, the senate, consumers, and made an alliance with the civil rights movement. In 1964 he brought a lot of pressure to end the Braceros Program, arguing that depressed wages displaced U.S. workers and used public funds to benefit private interests. UFW won a law according to which no-one worker temporary imported from Mexico, could replace a worker in the country. UFW achieved a law that no laborer-which is to say a worker imported temporarily from Mexico- can replace a domestic laborer. He also managed to establish laws for substantial improvements for workers. In the fields there were no portable toilets and the peasants had to drink water from the same cup, a beer can. On a farm they were sold a “cup” of water for 25 cents. Temporary shelters of the workers were targeted by “race” and had to pay up more than two dollars a day for a metal shack, often infested with mosquitoes and no water and sewerage services and no means to cook. Moreover, many workers resulted injured or killed by avoidable accidents.

Each time UFW called for a strike, the landowners brought the scabs from the surrounding areas. The laborers fulfilled that role. But the work in the Catholic Church, especially in the temple of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Delano, was creating an ethnic solidarity and Chicanos began to present a common front in support of UFW. Thousands of farm worker abandoned farms in the twilight of the 60s and the dawn of the 70s. 15 or 20 cars filled with the UFW picketers walked the farms and persuaded or faced the strike and the police. Schenley Industries responded by spraying the farmers on strike with highly toxic pesticides. As a counterattack, UFW organized a march. Seventy strikers in 1996 walked from Delano to Sacramento: nearly 340 miles in 25 days. Many employers caved in and signed collective contracts with UFW. The key to their success was to present discrimination against farmers as similar to racism experienced by African Americans. The farmers of California finally created a union that has survived over time.
The landowners discovered with dismay that on this occasion, the strikers did not conform to small wage concessions. They aspired to more, and went to another battlefield: Chávez called on consumers to boycott grapes that did not carry the label of UFW. Groups of volunteers roamed the big cities to organize a group of supporters, unions, churches, community organizations, which joined the boycott. Millions of consumers refrained from buying grapes. UFW punctured where it hurt the most. In 1969 the boycott amounted to 20 million dollars for the cause. Their struggles were expanded to crops of tomatoes, lettuce and strawberries. The strike in 1970 cost the strawberry industry 2.2 million dollars. This resulted in a new awareness of rights and opportunities for workers. They began to believe that change was possible.

Through their efforts they won benefits of which workers can enjoy today. Agricultural workers were excluded from the benefits of many laws that strengthened urban workers. The landowners had been very successful in arguing before the legislators that the protections were unjust and unnecessary in agricultural work because labor relations in this sector were habitually harmonious and ranchers were already too vulnerable to the demands of workers due to the perishing of their products. Moreover, these laws were redundant, said the landowners- because labor relations in the estates were like family relationships.

Californian farmers had to wait until 1975 to obtain rights that workers of the city had obtained 40 years ago. The Californian Labor Relations Act gave agricultural workers the right to organize, to have union elections and bargain collectively without interference from the employer. Collective contracts that ended up restricting the law endorsed the control of the landowners over the price and management of labor, standards of working conditions, health and safety, including pesticide- imposed registration of a record labor and a health plan at the expense of the employer, stipulated handling of pesticides, they imposed the registry of a labor file and a medical plan at the cost of the employer, stipulated procedures for hiring and firing, and the payment of minimum wages, holidays and overtime.

From Invited Workers to Undocumented

Even before the death of Chávez, UFW had lost many militants because they were historical dissatisfied with the abandonment of the original forms of struggle, strikes and workers’ organization, to emphasize consumer boycotts. Today, some of the gains of UFW have eroded. Others take up the fight, no less enthusiastic, but less numerous: UFW had 27,000 members in 2003. The heel of Achilles in the new era, if not the most vulnerable, at least one of the heels is the migratory flow, coupled with the rights of the pyramid system. According to anthropologist, Miriam Wells, “ironically, the success of the movement for civil rights and against poverty in recognition of rights to U.S. citizens also had the effect of strengthening the relative vulnerability of non citizens and
increased their usefulness to employers.” Only a very small fraction of farm workers are U.S. citizens.

As in many other countries, agriculture is the oldest industry in the United States. The National Census of 1790 reported that 90% of the 4 million residents in the United States were located in rural areas. That figure and its ethnic composition changed over the past 200 years. In 2002 the Pew Hispanic Center found that 1.2 million, or 47% of the 2.5 million employees who earn wages in U.S. farms are undocumented workers. The majority of these workers “not authorized” or “not certified” - as they are called in many official and academic documents – increases in periods of peak harvest. The Pew Hispanic Center estimated in 2004 that of the 35.7% foreign-born immigrants, 10.3 million (29%) are undocumented. Of these, 2.4 million (24%) live in California, 8.4 million (81%) come from Latin America and 6.7 million (65%) came to the United States between 1995 and 2004. According to Santos Quintero, whom I interviewed in the offices of UFW in Watsonville, which was bombed by the industrialists in 1970, the year in which bombs and bomb threats became a daily event for unionists, 90% of agricultural workers of the Californian field of strawberries are undocumented.

Today the labor regime is characterized by an incessant flow of undocumented workers. Entrepreneurs no longer have to shape the system of recruitment and other aspects of labor policy. They can focus on migration policies, knowing that this will have an oblique but immediate effect over the vulnerability and malleability of workers. In California, as in other states and countries, the recruitment of immigrants helps the employers to retain and increase the profit rate. Undocumented immigrants can be employed more flexibly than braceros, residents or citizens. They are less likely to make claims. They can be manipulated because their alternatives are more limited and because the threat of arrest and deportation deflates their resistance to the impositions of landowners. Wells insists that the government no longer manages manual labor directly: their immigration policies to manage and classify employees in an indirect way by the creating of different citizenship status, instituting an unequal access to political and economic resources.

The immigrant wave has an effect similar to that which had the Braceros Program that UFW fought to eliminate. The workers have fewer opportunities provided to exert pressure when there is a continuous supply of labor force, whose deteriorated citizenship concedes the employers the benefit of avoiding certain obligations. UFW has handled the issue of migration with great delicacy. During their opposition to the Braceros Program they called for more control on the border with Mexico. However, it did not exclude undocumented workers or objected to their presence in the areas of cultivation. Many of their friends and family members were undocumented. UFW remained silent before the issue of citizenship and intended to involve all workers. At times, the divisions on the issue of citizenship and documents were so great a burden for their efforts that UFW had to take a position. In 1974 and 1979, during the renewal of contracts with the lettuce workers, UFW launched a vigorous campaign against undocumented of the central coast. UFW emphasized the job losses of undocumented
immigrants and domestic workers, but their main concern was the use of illegal strikes. Partly as a result of their pressure, the border patrol increased their captures and duplicated deportations until reaching 9,652 in the month of May of 1979. Currently UFW does not ask for the immigration status of workers who join their ranks. But the danger continues and threatens more than the “Programa Braceros”. This program and its successor, fumigating and certifying temporary workers – tip the balance so that temporary “certified” workers are more than the undocumented: 37 versus 8% in 1989 and 30 versus 17% in 1990. But in the early 90s proportions were reversed: (23 versus 33% in 1992) and reached 15 versus 52% in 1998. The farm owners depend heavily on undocumented labor. A continuous supply of undocumented immigrants is the guarantee that the pressures of UFW doesn’t get to the point of 1970 and does not have substantial effects.

Another Achilles heel was and remains that many workers can benefit from the struggles of UFW without paying the price. Even at the peak of their struggles, UFW barely managed to recruit 10% of agricultural workers. But many others benefited from their sacrifices and risks without paying the fee or participating in strikes or marches. Even without participating in collective contracts. The companies located in areas where operating UFW increased wages and benefits increased to prevent their workers from unionizing. UFW had a cannon effect in those who were not their militants. Currently, workers in unionized UFW have to pay a fee of 2% of their wages, a policy unattractive in the world where “everyone tries to benefit themselves”.

The particularity of the workers at the farms was to unionize block imposes certain limits on the progress of unionization. Those affiliated with United Farm Workers, visit the plantations, performing work of awareness and then calling for elections. If more than 50% of the workers of a farm vote for unionization and join, the UFW signs a collective agreement with the property owner. Workers under the agreement are able to substantially reduce their vulnerability: they can not be dismissed or abused. The union intervenes and defends them. United Farm Workers recently achieved a new victory: the law obliges the owner to have water for workers under the shade as well as a tent for the workers to rest from the sun. It is a further step that shows that UFW has a past, present and future.

An Actor that Gains Strength: the Contractor

In the current labor market regime, there is a character who, although is not new, now appears with glittering colors and with great authority: the contractor. According to Santos Quintero, the contractor tends to be a relatively young person, with experience working in the fields and is typically of Latino origin. Are they Latino? Yes. Once more the Latino proverbs are proven right “out of the same leather you can make a belt for the oxen” and “there is no better splint than that of the same tree”. There are male and female contractors. In order to be a contractor, the most important thing is to have connections and a vehicle to transport the people they recruit. They are the magicians of the system, in charge of recruiting temporary manual labor, undocumented, cheap, and frequently indigenous. They are hands that work and leave.
The contractors are the point of unison between the farmer owners and the migrants. They offer several services: representation in front of the farm owners, food, hospitality of 10 migrants per room, change of currency, and other bank transactions. They receive the payment of the farm owner and like the commissioners of the ancient Latin-American haciendas; they deduce the high costs of their numerous services and take advantage to reduce the number of hours and days of work recognized as valid. Many times they keep salaries and call the police to denounce their guests who are caught off guard, that are deported before receiving a single dollar for their arduous journeys.

The contractor is the key figure in the externalization of costs. They do their job better and more heartless, like the government did before with the “Laborers Program”. They recruit people at no cost to the employer. Some of the authoritative functions and stigmas of the farm owner is transferred to the contractor, a hybrid of capitalistic relations. This role goes in hand with capitalism because it facilitates the impersonal relationship with the property owner. But he himself establishes personal relationships that although ephemeral- remind of those of the foreman of the pre-capitalistic farm. The role of the employer seems to be double sided and like this it is convenient for the system to work: two different persons and only one real employer. In the legal field, the contractor is a diffused figure. In the informal field, he is the key figure. For the immigrants, he is the most realistic figure: the door to the American labor market. He is the boss and commissary: he recruits, does financial transactions, hospitality, food and transportation. The contractor is one of those social-political institutions that determine the balance of power between workers and owners. In this particular case, it guarantees the advantage of the employers. It is at the same time a symptom, a result and a cause. It is a symptom, among other things, of the deterioration of relationships between immigrants and diversity. It is an effect of the actual flow of migrants, because the constant affluence of immigrants makes possible the existence of the contractor. And it is a factor that facilitates the evasion of the obligations of the employer and state.

And the Wages?

The actual migratory flow and proliferation of the contractors are helping the agricultural laborers to conserve their place among the worst paid workers in the nation. In 1998 they received a weekly salary of 202 dollars. Towards 2000, their average salary increased to 304 dollars weekly. It was only slightly superior to that of the waitresses who earned 286, and the domestic workers who earned 296 and the cooks who made 302. It was a little beneath the 324 dollars of the house keeping staff. But it was less than the 400 of the butchers, the $414 of the construction workers, the $ 467 of the roof installers and the $507 of the carpet installers.

The massive presence of Latinos – a marginalized group in the American labor market – contributes to this situation. Latinos are more likely to accept jobs that are not well paid because they are the most affected by the rate of unemployment. The traditional methods of pondering unemployment reached a rate of 8% for Latinos in 2004. According to an alternative mean to unemployment, used by the Pew Hispanic Center to consider, not only unemployed included in the international method, if not also the part
time workers for economic workers and the workers in marginal occupations who have recently been in search of a job, the rate of unemployment elevates to 15.5%, barely inferior to the 17.1% of African Americans, but very superior to the 9% of whites, non-Latinos. The difficulty of entering the labor market, united to its massive condition of undocumented people, explains that Latinos are the worst paid group, as shown in the table to follow.

Average weekly salaries in 2004

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<th></th>
<th>Latinos</th>
<th>Whites</th>
<th>Blacks</th>
<th>Others</th>
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<td>Midpoint Wages</td>
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<td>562</td>
<td>738</td>
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<td>Average Wages</td>
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<td>593</td>
<td>474</td>
<td>581</td>
<td>550</td>
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Source: Pew Hispanic Center

According to the statistics of the Department of Labor, the average weekly salary of Latinos is of 504 dollars. It is the lowest salary of all the categories of the population in the United States. And as all the averages, this figure hides more affected groups: that of the first generation of migrants, that earn on average 465 dollars; that of women, whose salary is barely 436 dollars; that of those who entered the United States after the year 2000 and who earn 381 dollars; and that of those who did not go to high school who earn 369 dollars. The agricultural salary is in a deeper basement. The full weekly salary on average in the agricultural sector is 200 dollars under the average salary of Latinos. The Latinos who work in agriculture –are a majority in this sector- they are found among the worst-paid in a country that measures success by income, they cherish the accumulation of wealth and count on a film industry that conventionally warps fairytales on social mobility.

**The Most Exploited: Mixtecs, Triquis, and Zapotecs**

Not only in the general labor market, but also in the labor market of the American farms, and especially that of the Californian farms, are very subdivided by regions and industries, and the workers are stratified by lines of citizenship. There are white citizens, citizens of Asian origin, Latin American citizens, Afro-American citizens... There are residents of those same groups. There are undocumented people. And, in the last step, there are undocumented indigenous people. The most desired in the labor market full of lies are the Mixtec civilization, Triquis and Zapotec, natives of the West of Oaxaca. The Mixtec family is one of the largest and most diverse families in Otomangue and is divided into three groups: the Mixtec civilization (Mixtec), the cuicateco (Cuicatec) and the triqui (or Trique). Many of them do not speak English or Spanish, and thus they remain more exposed to the knacks of the most unscrupulous contractors. Some militants of the group Lideres Campesinas tell of the case of a Triqui girl that received barely 40 dollars for two days of work from 6 in the morning to 6 in the afternoon. The contractor assured her that the salary was within reason. Graciela fertile
plain -hard-working in the fields of strawberries- knows about that danger: Some of the new employees do not know how much they are going to earn and come upon contractors that pay them only two dollars for hour.

The Mixtec civilization -and still better, the Mixtec- is the ideal worker: does not have documents, does not protest, does not speak, earns little and pays a lot. It is manual labor in the strictest sense of the term. He has a mouth and does not use it. He has hands that sow and cut strawberries, that then receive a bad salary and finally they pay well for bad services. They are in the last level of citizenship. Their rights are not listened to nor pronounced. In the American system they are cast as the inaudible. Also in the land of the unionization the most omitted are the natives. Upon lacking union experience and being terrified by the threats of repressive bosses, they resist being part of a union and are more exposed to abuses. Keeping in mind this situation, UFW has among its developers a Mixtec civilization, focused on helping its compatriots that do not dominate another language.

The Authentic Pest of Pesticides

The low salaries are not the only plague that suffers the immigrants that work in agriculture. They also suffer that of the pesticides. Due to its toxicity, the sale and application of certain pesticides is controlled in the United States. The bromide of methyl, diazinon and abamectin are insecticides used with restriction, but are currently applied to the strawberry beds. The protocol of Montreal, subscribed to by 182 countries, declared in 1992 that the bromide of methyl destroys the ozone layer. Despite a severe reduction, 35 million methyl bromide pounds were disseminated in 1999 in the American fields. The government has not supplied more recent data. The 50% was poured in California and 27% in its strawberry beds. Many farm owners refuse to abandon their use to avoid losses that, in the assembly of the cultivators of strawberries, they would be able to arrive at the 150-200 million dollars. The workers are suffering from this resistance. Often the farmers do not respect the margins of times legally stipulated among fumigation and the income workers produce for a plantation. Worse still: since many strawberry beds are next to schools, the children end up being affected by the fumigation. Rural leaders of Salinas are working actively in the accusation of this disrespect to the law, which prohibits fumigating less than 500 feet from homes and educational centers. According to their inquiries, boys and girls are suffering respiratory illnesses, allergy, loss of memory and irritation of the eyes and skin. “At times it seems that the children come stoned”, Lupita Miranda tells me.

A Light in the Valley of Tears and Strawberries: Rural Leaders

In the United States there exist many organizations that work with farm workers. United Farm Workers is the most powerful one, but is not the only one. Organizations headed by women also exist, and they work predominantly with women – such as: Dolores Huerta Foundation, Lideres Campesinas, Esperanza: The Farm Workers Women’s Legal Initiative, Farm Worker Women’s Institute, Latinas Unidades por un
Nuevo Amanecer y Las Amigas. Among the women that work in the strawberry fields and in the valley of Salinas, Lideres campesinas is the organization of greater dragging. It was born towards the end of the 80s as a movement of Mexican workers and formally was founded in 1992 by Mily Treviño-Sauceda with a donation of eight thousand dollars offered by Ms. Foundation. Its permanent team is composed of 30 women that were agricultural workers and that now work in construction, making democratic decisions, training in pairs, -with the style of Programa de Campesinos y Campesinas and develop leadership with a traditional and innovative mixture of education and organizing methods, like meeting in homes and theatrical presentations at common events.

I met with them in one of their homes, between children and toys. My contact, Paula Placencia -26 years in the United States- called to eight sparkling members of Lideres Campesinas to converse about the organization’s impressive work. There they told us -accompanying the talk with juice, coffee and crackers- how the components of their work is focused on trying to respond to the needs and recommendations of the farm workers and their families: labor conditions (sexual harassment in the labor center, pesticides, health and employment security, salaries and working day, organic agriculture), family violence (domestic violence, sexual attacks and abuse of children and the elderly), health of women (HIV/AIDS, breast or cervical cancer, nutrition, diabetes and hypertension), development of youth leadership (pregnancy of adolescents, sexual harassment, violence and violations during an appointment, family violence, child labor and labor conditions), programs for the third age (abuse, development of leadership, health and other), institute for the hard-working women (training of farmers to receive credit as professionals and for professionals) and the program of economic development that coaches farm workers about their work.

Upon maturing and to becoming more inclusive, the group approached native Triquis and Mixtecs, Central Americans and migrants of other nationalities and extended the presence of its committees to the valley of Coachella, to the counties of Santa Cruz, Fresno, Ventura, Kern, Tulare, Madera and Merced. At present, they extend their support to organizations and immigrant women located in Texas, Arizona, Iowa, Washington and Mexico so that they can go back to their work and thus establish a binational network in the Southwest. They have more than 550 members, more than 300 women and around 200 girls between the ages of 10 and 18 years.

The battle against sexual harassment has been ongoing since the beginning and is one of their main causes. Many supervisors demand sexual favors in exchange for easy tasks or simply in exchange for conserving the job. “We thought that in the United States it was normal to have sex to save ones job”, said a group of rural women to their lawyer. The workers of Salinas refer to one of the fields of strawberries as "the field of the calzón" as it alludes to the great number of violations that take place there. For the same reason, the women in Florida have baptized the plantations as "the green motel". The immigrants lacking identity papers are object to a more terrifying threat: deportation. Before that threat and the possibility to lose employment for the second time and with four children to raise, Virginia Baptista had to face harassments that resulted in a depression, until she established contact with Lideres campesinas and became one of the
three thousand women that yearly qualify to become part of the organization in which they have meetings in their homes or among the strawberries that they harvest or pack. In one of those home meetings in 1999, among burritos, nopales and tacos, they discovered the case of a worker who was abused by her supervisor in the county of Fresno. In 2005, the jury emitted a condemnatory verdict of 994,000 dollars against Harris Farms, one of the largest agricultural companies of the country. That same year a law was approved that obligated all Californian farms with 50 employees or more to provide preventive training against sexual harassment.

As an effect of these legal battles, the forms of sexual harassment are characterized with refinement by the Californian laws and include, among others, sexual advances not desired; the offering of labor benefits in exchange for sexual favors; the exhibition of sexual gestures; the unfolding of objects, paintings, drawings or sexually alluring posters; the use of comments, jokes or epithets that are ignominious and defamatory; sexual comments, including graphic comments about the body of a person, degrading sexual comments to describe an individual or letters, notes and alluring or obscene invitations; and touching and physical attack, as well as the blockade of movements.

Nevertheless the fervor with which they have embarked upon this fight, the active advertisers of Líderes Campesinas do not see the things, neither do they explain them in simple terms or see it in black or white, although the role of the "antagonist" always corresponds to men with power. Law made, trap made. Mrs. Ramona Barajas -with 35 years of residence in the United States- tells that her husband – a supervisor in a farm- was harassed by a female worker. Before his brave resistance, she sued him, but he demonstrated his innocence after an arduous process.

Taking Care of the Future: the Children and their Baby-Sitters

These women go beyond the traditional agenda of social movements, another challenge appears to be childcare. Diabetes appears, related to the Coca-Cola drank each day. Hypertension appears and is associated with the excessive consumption of cheap food. Gangs appear due to the carelessness of childhood, put in the hands of baby-sitters that at times mistreated them. Investigating the location and interests of class and on the structural dynamics of capitalism are not enough to grasp all the changes that are occurring. Day by day many breaks occur: communities, family ties, of religious conception. Taking care of children is a great challenge, a service that is done by people whom they may not know well. The new situation is source of tensions in the community. The labor rhythm and the absorption of the market by all the exchanges have changed the situation that they had in their countries of origin. The full-time job has transformed all aspects of their way of life. Although more urban and less superstitious, the imagination of the migrant continues to be in need of incarnations of evil that help him/her understand the new world and its designs. The new devils are secular: the contractor and the baby-sitter. The two are situated in the breaks with the traditional world. The contractor embodies a separation between the bosses and employed. His
greatest depravity consists of being interposed in a relation and to disguise his mechanisms of domination. His figure expresses the impersonal character of capitalistic relations: there is no contract with the boss, sometimes not even contact with his money – he pays with a check - and an intermediary appears and sells you everything that before, in the great estate, was part of the salary: bed, food, transportation. The baby-sitter embodies the mercantilism of human relations and of the cohort associated with services to them. The baby-sitter charges for a service that before used to be a non monetary exchange. She has usurped the functions of the absent aunts, grandmothers, nieces and daughters, now distant or busy in earning a living. Her existence proclaims the disappearance of a bank of supportive exchanges -although not necessarily reciprocal- through which the family services can be paid immediately or differed. Therefore their apparition and the abuses inflicted on the children are associated with the emergence of youthful gangs and to drug addictions. The two basic demonizations express a common point: the community is threatened. The contractors and the malevolent baby-sitters represent the struggle of Latinos against Latinos. To restore or rebuild a community is difficult. To redesign it, reweave it or imagine it takes time, creativity and sweat. How to strip a society of a market value that pushes hard in that direction? How to avoid opportunism in a culture that legitimizes the provision of all kinds of services?

*Líderes Campesinas* has a great challenge there. But as an agency with a social movement, school and informal community organization it is the ideal combination to assume it. *Líderes Campesinas* are present in many different areas: working conditions, pesticides, sexual harassment, abuse and domestic violence in the streets. Its psychodrama has become famous throughout the country and its appearance in the media is common. Its affiliates are aware that there is still a long way to go. In a region where only after ten hours do you start counting over time for agricultural work and where harvesters of strawberries just take an upright position when carrying a box of fresh strawberries along 25 meters to continue bend over to the next box, there are many struggles ahead.

**Steinbeck with the Fumigated and Underpaid**

To meet the huge appetite of strawberries from the Americans in 2006, 248 million pounds of Mexican strawberries were imported, an amount that exceeds the total exports of U.S. strawberries. However, for the U.S. strawberry market it remains more profitable to import from Latin America. Why not legalize those who are already here? It is argued that legalization programs only retain workers in farming occupations for a while: as soon as they get legalization is very likely that new workers must supplant them following their abandonment of agriculture. Once happy and documented they would migrate to other activities and better-paid as experts in the field as argued in this case, between 500,000 and 180,000 thousand workers will be needed annually to replace those who leave the industry. The solution is to maintain the current system: one that keeps undocumented captivity in the least paid and where undocumented immigrants are less likely to be detected. To avoid the avalanche, the governments of Mexico and the United States try to re-edit programs of well behaved, commuting migrants: who come, work and returning without complaining.
Such a position would forget the growing dependence of the social security system in respect to Latino workers. Today, Latinos account for 14% of the population and 13% of the workforce in the United States. Latinos are a young and growing population. More than one third of the 40 million Latinos are under 18 years.

The Pew Hispanic Center estimates that by 2050 Latinos would have doubled their demographic weight and in the labor force and will represent one fourth of the labor force across the country, even if the migration flow is reduced. The growth of the Latino population will increase its role in the economy and the financing of social security. Between 2005 and 2050, the U.S. labor force will grow from an estimated 143 to 182 million: 39 million more. During that time the Latino labor force will grow to 27 million: an increase from 19 to 46 million. As the older population will grow from 35 to 77 million, the dependency ratio will rise. The 4.1 workers for every elder may become 2.7 in 2025 and 2.4 in 2050. The number of Latino workers supporting a growing elderly population is increasing and the social security system, unless it suffers a severe reform, will need them even more. Why fear them and close doors on them?

Fumigated, poorly paid, migrant workers live on the margins of citizenship, but with a growing awareness of their rights and ways to enforce them. Xochitl Martinez of Líderes Campesinas, gave advice to her peers at the end of our interview: Know that Red Pony was written by John Steinbeck. His museum is at the entrance of the town. His books deal with our rights as workers. Now I'm reading The Grapes of Wrath. I recommend that you read it, if you want to know how the struggles of the workers here in California have been.

Translated by Karina Campos