

Turning You on Your Ear—the Migrant Labor Debate

Sometimes you hear things that just turn you on your ear. This article is one of them—from *The Journal News* on the website: www.LoHud.com.

It begins with the obligatory observation:

"ALBANY - With the harvest season beginning, farmers around the state say crackdowns on immigrants are causing a widespread labor shortage that threatens this year's harvest of some fruits and vegetables.

"Some farmers are flat-out short of hands," said Pete Gregg, a spokesman for the state Farm Bureau. "They're worried about leaving fruits on the trees and vegetables on the ground."

"New York is home to a labor-intensive farming industry that expects this year to produce 3 billion apples, second to Washington state, as well as cabbage, corn, cherries, peaches, strawberries and blueberries. Most of those crops have to be picked by hand.

..."We've checked with a lot of day laborers, and none of them have papers," said Frost, who runs an educational farm with a range of organic produce. "And we're a not-for-profit, so we don't want to jeopardize our status with any kind of problems. So we're doing it by the book.

"They all need work. We need them. But they don't have papers," Frost said. About half of the nation's 1 million hired farmworkers do not have legal authorization to work in the United States, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. Earlier migrants have had opportunities to legalize their status, but Congress has deadlocked over a proposed legalization program. Of farmworkers who entered the United States since 2001, only 2 percent have legal status, according to the National Agricultural Workers Survey."¹

Okay. So much for the setting. It is like the song:

*"New York, New York.
If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere..."*

Only, apparently, they are not making it. The next part of the article lends itself to rounding up the experts and letting them sound off as to the cause of the problem. First up, a professor from Cornell University—Max Pfeffer:

"Some growers are tapping the H-2A visa program. Cornell University professor Max Pfeffer, who studies agriculture and other rural issues, said more aggressive enforcement of immigration laws along the Mexican border and within the state has diminished the number of immigrant workers in New York, who typically number between 15,000 and 30,000 during the harvest season.

"There's a real cause for concern here," he said. "Clearly there is the need for these farmworkers, and there are fewer of them arriving. ... There is no clear alternative to these workers."

"Gregg said the jobs typically pay from \$9 to \$20 an hour, depending on how skilled a picker is. But he said the temporary nature of the work, two months or so, and the physical demands make the jobs undesirable to most local workers.

"Pfeffer said the solution is a more formal way to recruit and transport workers from Latin America to New York - both to assure the farmers of adequate labor and the workers a safe trip paid for by their employers.

"H-2A has been helpful in doing that, Gregg and Pfeffer agreed. But it is done on a relatively small scale. Last year, 276 New York employers and just less than 4,000 workers participated."²

Now, wait a minute! This Professor Pfeffer says that, quote: "There is no clear alternative to these workers." If by that he means that there is no clear alternative to illegal workers—that is certainly debatable. However, if he means that there is no alternative to foreign workers—in fact, that is the truth. No native sons will be working in fields for unspecified times, largely unemployed much of it, and for wages of any sort under harsh summer conditions. He does admit that, "H-2A has been helpful in doing that," (that is, absorbing the labor shortages.) So my take, at least, would be that he does have a somewhat softened view of the picture.

For the total picture, this report offers a summation—the same summation we have been presenting on the H2AUSA.COM site for the last several months. It is this:

"The problem could be solved if Congress passed a bill to overhaul the country's immigration policy, but that's unlikely to happen soon, said Rep. John R. Kuhl, R-Schuyler County. Congress has deadlocked over the question of what should happen to illegal immigrants already in the country. The AgJOBS bill, which would legalize hundreds of thousands of farmworkers, has also stalled."³

That is, basically we are in a period of labor stasis—no movement and no potential for any in the foreseeable future, given the climate in the country and in Washington, D.C.

Then, there is this, from an onion farmer in Pine Island, N.R.—a Mr. Chris Pawelski:

"We need some sort of a system that will allow people to come in on a temporary basis, for maybe up to three years," he said.

Pawelski said it's essential to reform the existing guest-worker program and make it a long-term source of seasonal workers. He considers the AgJOBS bill a mere "five-year buyout" - one that would supply newly legalized farmworkers only to see those workers move on to other kinds of jobs.

"That's just the American way," he said."⁴

Whoa! This farmer is the sharpest tool in the shed! Someone call immigration and get him set up on the board right away—chairman, even. Mr. Pawelski has compressed the entire problem with foreign labor in only a few simple sentences. Maybe that is why Thomas Jefferson respected the farmer as much as he did when he coined the phrase:

"Agriculture... is the first in utility, and ought to be the first in respect."

¹ Jay Gallagher and Leah Rae, *"Farmers: Immigration raids imperil harvests,"* *The Journal News*, August 14, 2008. Website at: <http://www.lohud.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2008808140410> (accessed 8-16-08)

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.