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Research Project Part II: Opinion Summary

Working for Workers’ Rights

The issue of workers’ rights is one that has been ever-present since the dawn of our great nation in one form or another. There are those that argue that the issue of workers’ rights connects with the Revolutionary War cry, ‘No taxation without representation!’ Centuries later a new leaf turned and workers’ rights issues took on new meaning during the Industrial Revolution. Factory workers unionized in an attempt to protect life and limb. In the 1960’s Caesar Chavez led and created the National Farm Workers Association, where he and others fought to reform the agricultural industry in which they worked and lived.

Each step taken to improve working conditions was a hard won battle. It’s an issue that many Americans see as a problem of the past, a problem that no longer effects the farm workers of today, but is it? It is easy to assume that in a nation such as the United States where advancement and equality are said to exist, child labor, dangerous working conditions and unfair pay are no longer a problem faced by the people of this country. In this paper we will test the validity of this assumption by exploring how the working conditions and quality of life for migrant farm workers and their families, working within the United States, has changed from the 1960’s to today.

There are several different ways to look at this issue, much like how there’s always more than one side to a story. Each person who analyzes an issue is able to see it in the context of their own beliefs, experiences, and knowledge; the views on the quality of life and working conditions experienced by migrant farm workers is no exception. Some would say that working conditions and quality of life, though lacking, are not the primary issue in this discussion. Instead, they counter that because over half the people working in the migrant farm industry are doing so illegally, it shouldn’t be an issue that tax payers and their representatives address in any other way than how to go about deporting such individuals. Similarly, there are those that say that the primary issue is the illegal status of the workers, and then also claim that the conditions under which they work are more than adequate. Then there are others, like myself, who see the issue of migrant workers and their families’ quality of life and working conditions as one that is in dire need of improvement. We see little improvement since farm workers’ reform of the 1960’s and find it obvious that a large number of people are suffering. All of these views on the issue at hand will be examined in hopes of gaining a better understanding and more comprehensive view how Americans veiw the quality of life and working conditions faced by United States migrant farm workers and their families, and whether or not those conditions have improved since the 1960’s.

One major point of interest to many Republicans and Conservatives regarding migrant workers is the legality of the people working within the migrant farming industry. A study published by FAIRUS, “Illegal Immigration and Agribusiness: The Effect on the Agriculture Industry of Converting to a Legal Workforce” states that, “presently half of all crop farm workers are unauthorized” (FAIRUS). This statistic makes obvious the connection between migrant farm workers and immigration. And although the quality of life a person experiences and the working conditions they face should have nothing to do with whether they have legal status in a country, in the eyes of many Americans, it does. For many, the two issues are interconnected so strongly that morals and ethics have a habit of flying out the window.

Conservatives argue that because migrant farm workers are here illegally, the problem of inadequate working conditions and poor quality of life is a secondary issue. They argue that until the primary issue of legality is addressed and resolved, the secondary issue cannot even be considered. Further, some conservatives with more extreme opinions argue that the mere presence of illegal immigrants is a drain on America and a burden to its people. To back their claim, they cite the study, “The Impact of Migrant Workers on the Human Development Index,” which measures, within any given country, the peoples’ overall education, health and income of to determine its true wealth. They found when they “plotted the educational component of the Human Development Index against the percentage of migrants in these countries [and] when the percentage of migrant workers in the population reached 30%... there was a robust negative correlation between the educational component of the HDI and percentage of migrant workers” (Mamtani et al.). In layman’s terms, if the percentage illegal immigrants of a nation’s population reaches 30%, education suffers. Conservatives then point out that, according to the article, *Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States*, “immigrants in the United States and their U.S.-born children now number approximately 81 million people, or 26 percent of the overall U.S. population,” (Zong and Batalov). This means that within the United States’ population, the percent of illegal immigrants is nearing the dreaded 30% by which education suffers. This gives us something to think about.

Undoubtedly, illegal immigration is something to consider. However, as I and nearly all human rights groups would argue, a person’s status in a country, legal or otherwise, shouldn’t be the determining factor as to whether they should receive fair and humane treatment. Whether migrant farmers and their families are receiving said treatment is debatable. One such example of questionable conditions can be found in an Aljazeera interview, “For Children of Migrant Workers, Choice Can Be the Field or the Car,” by Tammy Kim. Kim describes her encounter with migrant farmer, Cornelio Ramirez and his four-year-old daughter, Rosa Iselda, “[she] painted her nails pink in the cluttered one-room cabin that she shared with eight to 13 others since June,” (Kim). With the standard by which most Americans live, the thought of sharing a single bedroom with half the number that this family is accustomed would make most scream “injustice!” But this isn’t the worst of the treatment; treatment that most migrant workers would describe as an everyday occurrence. As described in the first-hand account, “Fields of Peril,” a then child farm worker recounts,“I’m pretty sure we entered many fields with recently applied pesticides… There were people who got sick but probably thought it was the heat. They never told us they were spraying, they would just say ‘watering,’” (Maria M.). This demonstrates the deplorable conditions that most migrant farm workers face, and it also goes to show that not much has changed since the 1960’s.

As accounted in Caesar Ramirez’s biography by History.com, *Caesar Chavez*, “During this period Chavez encountered the conditions that he would dedicate his life to changing: wretched migrant camps, corrupt labor contractors, meager wages for backbreaking work, bitter racism,” (History). This type of depraved treatment is not what I would describe as humane nor fair treatment, and it’s not very different from what we see today. Whether we compare treatment, such as forcing workers to spend 12, 13, and 14 hour days in the burning sun, or we look at wages of migrant workers, as quoted by FAIRUS, that have “annual incomes that are $5,600 less than that of authorized workers working in the same sector” (FAIRUS), the conditions haven’t improved.

The quality of life and working conditions experienced by migrant workers and their families the United States today have remained stagnantly constant. One might even say, that in comparison to the standards set by the peoples of the times, they have worsened. We can’t dismiss the serious, unhealthy and unacceptable conditions faced by migrant workers and their families. It isn’t a legal dispute about whether or not they’re authorized to live and work within the United States. And the obvious reality that the conditions in which migrant workers live and work are deplorable and unfit for anyone can’t be argued, even though there are those that would like to believe the contrary. Instead, it is a problem of morals and ethics. The quality of life and working conditions have not improved since the 1960’s, and that is unlikely to change unless another great step is taken and history is made again in a fight to improve the lives of all those working in the fields. That is why it is important to talk about this dark, secret life that only those living in the corners of rural areas experience. A secret that we, as Americans living in a free and great nation, would like to ignore. We need to bring this reality to light, expose it for what it is, so that we might improve it and ignore it no more.