

# Tense Spaces

## Navigating Relations between Immigrant Workers and Dairy Farmers

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### INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is big business in New York State, particularly the dairy sector, which contributed an estimated US\$14.8 billion to the state economy in 2014.<sup>1</sup> Increasingly, dairy farms rely on workers from Mexico and Guatemala, many of whom are believed to be unauthorized. While nearly all immigrant workers present social security cards upon applying for employment, these documents can be purchased for a nominal fee along the border or in any major U.S. city. Although federal law generally protects employers of undocumented immigrants from liability, farmers still worry about the possibility of an immigration audit or raid. This article focuses on the work of the Cornell Farmworker Program (CFP) to improve workplace relations within this often tense space, where employers rely on a workforce that may not be properly documented and workers are afraid to make waves for fear of reprisals.

### THE CORNELL FARMWORKER PROGRAM

The Cornell Farmworker Program (formerly Cornell Migrant Program) started nearly 50 years ago when students working side-by-side with migrant workers in apple orchards organized to create a university program (under the umbrella of Cornell's colleges of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Human Ecology and Cornell Cooperative Extension) to address the needs of farmworkers and their families through outreach, research, and education. The CFP collaborates with farmworkers to develop materials and activities that address their most pressing shared need by grounding our efforts in the realities of their living and working conditions. Cornell University students are engaged in CFP endeavors through coursework and the CFP summer internship program.

In light of heavy immigration enforcement in New York State, the CFP engages farmworkers around topics that they themselves identify as important to their well-being and success as dairy farm employees. Through Spanish-language skits and role-play activities, we share information about how to respond to police, and through bilingual workshops we

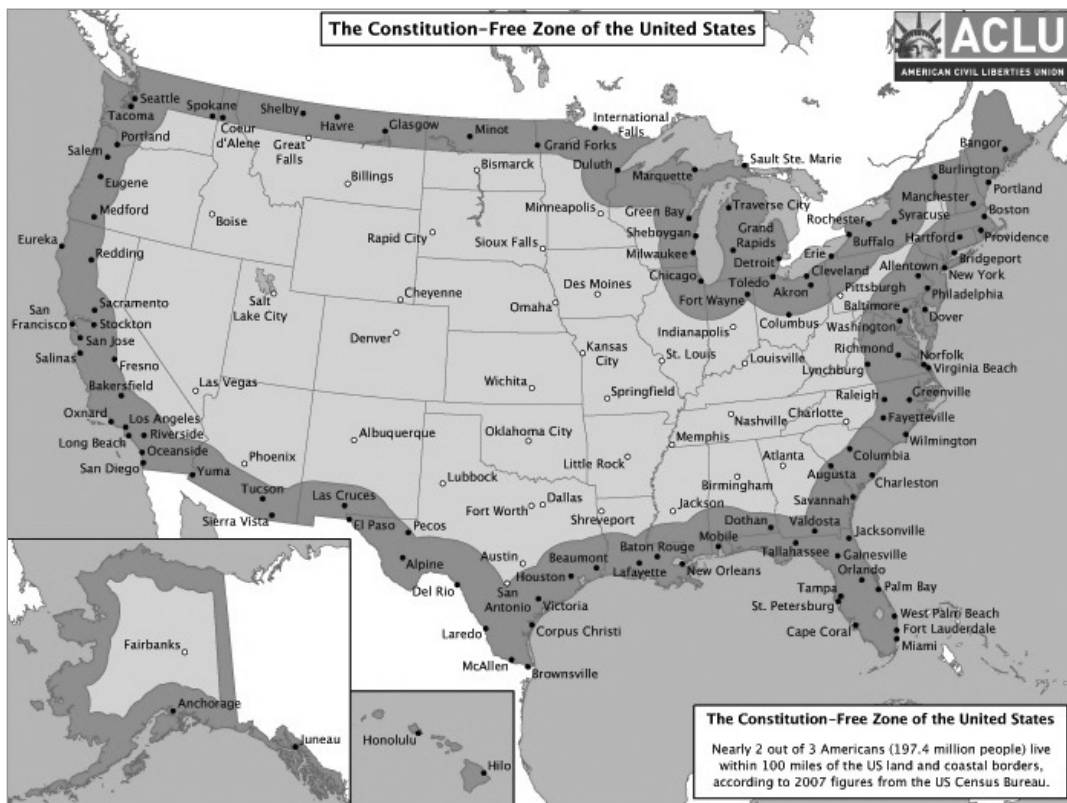
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provide guidance on assigning power of attorney and guardianship for U.S.-born children. We also provide support during Mexican and Guatemalan consular visits to rural communities, where foreign-born workers can obtain and renew photo IDs (such as passports) issued by their home countries, which are required for the completion of legal documents. While these activities may alleviate some immediate stress for farmworkers, the large-scale immigration reform required for a more profound improvement is yet to be seen in the U.S. Congress.

Improving workplace relations between farm owners and hired workers is another CFP priority. Plagued by chronic labor instability and shortages, over the last ten years New York State dairy farmers have transitioned from hiring local labor to a primarily Mexican and Guatemalan workforce. This transition has presented new challenges to farm employers and to the Cornell University extension professionals who aim to help them. Farmers' allegiance to the university, many as alumni, creates a unique opening for the CFP to work with them to improve workplace and living conditions for their hired immigrant workers. While the CFP works in all commodity sectors, these observations draw primarily from my research on dairy farms as CFP director, including the contributions of my student research team.

IMPACTS OF IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT ON FARMWORKERS' WELL-BEING

New York dramatically increased its immigration enforcement capacity after 9/11. The state's northern border with Canada is strictly controlled by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP). According to the CBP, the number of its officers patrolling the northern border has increased ten-fold since 9/11.<sup>2</sup> Most of New York State falls within the Border Patrol's jurisdiction of 100 miles into the interior from international borders and coasts (see the ACLU map); therefore, a significant number of foreign-born farmworkers live under CBP jurisdiction. CFP research has found that when a Latino/a is stopped by local law enforcement on roadways, it is common practice for police, sheriffs, and state troopers to call ICE for "translation" support, often resulting in a detention. As a result of the state's heavy immigration enforcement environment, any time an unauthorized worker leaves the farm (even as a passenger in a car), s/he runs the risk of deportation. The fear of leaving home, combined with long working hours and residence in remote rural locations, means that many do not leave their place of employment for weeks at a time.



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Consequently, social, geographic, and linguistic isolation are common challenges for farmworkers and their families.

The deportation threat also raises significant economic concerns. Workers typically come to the U.S. to seek employment to support family members in their communities of origin, given the lack of meaningful economic opportunities at home. Farmworkers often use their families' assets (homes, animals, and land) as collateral for loans of several thousand dollars to travel to the U.S. The threat of deportation before loans are repaid or before workers are able to save enough to invest in a home or business for their return is a constant source of stress. For farmworkers with school-aged children, their undocumented status makes leaving home to attend routine meetings with teachers, tutors, and administrators a source of anxiety and fear. Parents sometimes fear that advocating for their children—or simply leaving home to pick them up from school—may dangerously draw attention to them. Unauthorized parents live in constant fear of being detained and consequently separated from their children. This stress on family life can be devastating for all involved.

Workers depend on farmers not only for employment but also for housing and transportation off the farm, a source of great concern. Most farmworkers are not able to drive legally and live outside the range of bus services. Travel to town is frequently coordinated by employers on a bi-weekly basis: those workers who organize their own transportation often hire out a ride, which can cost US\$50 to US\$100 per round trip.<sup>3</sup> Because an immigration detention would interrupt the workplace, some farmers limit their workers' movement off the farm to avoid encounters with law enforcement officials, and many outright prohibit them from owning vehicles.

Employers' involvement in both their workplace and personal lives creates a power hierarchy that results in a loss of personal autonomy that is difficult for farmworkers to manage. Their reliance on their employers for their livelihood and housing exacerbates their sense of extreme vulnerability. Their undocumented status contributes to their sense that any misstep in their workplace could lead to their dismissal, and they are at risk of being reported to immigration officials at any time. As one farmworker noted, "If the boss-

es or [U.S.] American workers get angry with us, they could call immigration and that would be the end of us working here, right?"

#### THE CORNELL FARMWORKER PROGRAM WORKPLACE RELATIONS PROJECT

The CFP engages workers and employers in efforts to improve workplace relations through a multipronged research and education program. To improve farmworkers' job satisfaction and safety, we conduct farmworker interviews and focus groups without farm employers or managers being present. Topics in these discussions include job contracts, salaries, raises, training, equipment and chemical safety, treatment by superiors and co-workers, and housing issues. Uninhibited by fear of employer reprisal, workers are able to verbalize the pros and cons of their working environments and to generate ideas about improvements. We meet separately with farm owners and managers to discuss similar topics, as well as future employment and business plans. On larger farms, local and Hispanic managers are hired to manage, train, and supervise workers and thus play important roles in addressing conflicts. The information gathered is organized to protect the anonymity of all involved. The owners, managers, and workers are then brought together in a facilitated meeting to address the "hot spot" issues identified in the discussion groups and to share examples of best practices from other farms. Through this bi-lingual forum, we are able to openly address challenges, paying special attention to keeping responses anonymous from employers, and develop action plans tailored to the specific needs of each individual farm. This process allows us to explore innovative approaches that benefit both farmworkers and farm owners.

#### PROJECT OUTCOMES: ESTABLISHING PRINCIPLES OF MUTUAL RESPECT

This process has given us important insights into relationships between farmers, farm managers, and farmworkers. Participating farmers expressed their tremendous appreciation for a workforce that is dedicated, hardworking, always shows up for work, has a good attitude, is willing to learn new things, and takes good care of the animals. Farmers view these as important indicators of respect for the farmer and his business.

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Meanwhile, farmworkers think that much of the feedback they get from employers is negative, so they are unsure if their employers appreciate them. Workers express frustrations when they feel that they are being yelled at, receive no positive feedback, their concerns go unheard, or that farmers give greater priority to the cows than to their employees. As one worker noted, “The farmer always tells us what we do wrong, but they hardly ever tell us what we do well.”

Thus, CFP efforts to build positive workplace relations begin with a joint discussion of principles of mutual respect between workers and employers. Common topics in these discussions include daily greetings, tone, and attitude, opportunities for training and advancement, availability of supplies, equipment functioning, quality of housing, and transportation off the farm. Responsiveness is another important topic. As one farmer noted, “Regardless of how big or small you may think it is, for a worker to bring it to your attention, you need to respond.”

Once all perspectives are expressed, we develop a strategy through an iterative process to build greater mutual respect in the workplace. These negotiations often engage workers and farmers in clarifying the roles of all those working on the farms, discussing criteria for raises and promotions, sharing preferred methods of communications, and establishing forums through which all parties can suggest agenda items, share concerns, set goals, and assess progress.

**PROJECT OUTCOMES: CAREFUL ATTENTION BY EMPLOYERS TO HOUSING**

Most dairy employers provide on-farm housing to their non-local workforce, so they have a dual role as employer and landlord. For employers as well as workers, housing is a significant area of contention. It is common for farmers to provide older housing, which needs constant repairs and maintenance, a responsibility farmers sometimes do not meet. At the same time, workers’ commitment to housing cleanliness and maintenance varies greatly depending on the relationship between worker and housemates. Workers with family ties to each

other typically establish guidelines for household care and cleaning. On other farms where workers are unrelated, they might not enjoy sharing housing, and there is little or no cooperation around domestic responsibilities. On farms with significant worker turnover, wear and tear on household items and infrastructure is exacerbated. In any of these contexts, living conditions are made worse when housing is overcrowded and when workers hesitate to point out needed repairs for fear they will be held responsible for costs.

Most farmworkers consider decent housing a high priority when looking for (or deciding whether to stay at) a job, since these units are their primary social space (especially during the harsh winter). They often convey a sense of futility about asking for housing improvements and interpret inaction as an indication of how little they are valued on the farm. When asked why a critical housing repair that was requested was not made, one farmworker explained, “It’s obvious to me that the farmer cares much more about his cows than about his workers.” Even though they expressed frustration over housing quality, they felt that complaining to an outside agency would lead to grave repercussions rather than improvements due to their undocumented status. However, some farmworkers are fed up enough that the benefits of making a complaint outweigh the risks. As one said, “This housing isn’t fit for an animal, much less a human being. Sometimes I think that I should call the authorities so they can see that this housing is infested with cockroaches and bed bugs. It would be worth it even if I was deported because no one should have to live like this.”

Some employers are confused about why their workers do not inform them of housing-related concerns. One farmer noted, “You have to go into their house on a periodic basis because they won’t tell you when a cabinet that holds a bathroom sink has completely fallen apart. You know they won’t tell you any of that stuff. They don’t tell you the tub shower just runs constantly.” While workers are worrying about reprisals, employers perceive their silence on needed repairs as irresponsible behavior. Some express disparaging opinions that immigrants are more tolerant of household pests, lack of cleanliness, and disrepair. As one noted, “They come from a place where cockroaches are common. I think they bring them in their suitcases.”

Other farmers, however, invest in good housing, arguing that they want their workers to be well-rested and to have a nice space to spend their time off so that they will be content and continue to work on the farm. Many are aware that a

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primary motivation for workers to leave a farm is to find employment on another that offers better housing. One farmer said, “If someone has nicer housing than us, that’s when we build new housing. I am not going to be second or third when it comes to housing.”




In response to this disconnect over housing quality complaints, the CFP developed a highly visual “housing checklist” that uses icons and a simple ranking system that allows employees to anonymously alert farmers of housing problems without needing to worry about being held responsible. Space is provided for employers to indicate when repairs will be made, so workers know that they are aware of and plan to address the concern. During a discussion about housing, a frustrated worker explained, “In the room where I sleep, water is always dripping from the ceiling. We have to wait two hours for hot water to bathe.” Using the checklist, the worker was able to anonymously report necessary repairs. In the all-farm meeting, we reviewed the checklist and the farmer stated when the repairs would be made. During a subsequent visit, both the farmer and the workers pointed to the checklist as the farmer jokingly reported, “I did my homework. The bathroom and the ceiling have been repaired on time too.” This illustrates how the housing checklist has been used as a catalyst for engaging farm owners in recognizing needed repairs and taking action to address housing concerns.

#### CONCLUSIONS: CHALLENGES OF ACTING AS A FARMWORKER-FARMER INTERMEDIARY

This research highlights shared interests among workers, employers, and managers to create positive changes in the work-

#### MONTHLY HOUSING QUALITY CHECK LIST LISTA DE VERIFICACIÓN MENSUAL PARA LA VIVIENDA

Date/ Dia: \_\_\_\_\_ Checked by/ Revisado por: \_\_\_\_\_

Kitchen		Cocina	Date/Time to Fix Dia/ Tiempo para reparar
<b>Stove</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Excellent <input type="checkbox"/> Adequate <input type="checkbox"/> Inadequate		<b>Estufa</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Excelente <input type="checkbox"/> Suficiente <input type="checkbox"/> Insuficiente	
<b>Refrigerator</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Excellent <input type="checkbox"/> Adequate <input type="checkbox"/> Inadequate		<b>Refrigeradora</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Excelente <input type="checkbox"/> Suficiente <input type="checkbox"/> Insuficiente	
<b>Microwave</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Excellent <input type="checkbox"/> Adequate <input type="checkbox"/> Inadequate		<b>Microondas</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Excelente <input type="checkbox"/> Suficiente <input type="checkbox"/> Insuficiente	

place, a win-win approach for all parties involved. However, our role as mediator situates us in a tenuous, often challenging, space. The success of these efforts depends on the extent to which workers and employers are willing and able to change the *statu quo* and invest in workplace and housing improvements. Furthermore, there tends to be a hard divide between those who advocate either for workers or for farmers. Worker advocates sometimes do not trust those who engage with farmers, while many farmers consider labor advocates to be working against their interests. Farmers often ask how we relate to and differ from advocate organizations. Since the CFP occupies a unique space as an intermediary working to bridge this divide, we must pay special attention to cultivating relationships with both farmers and farmworkers. In light of the many pressing challenges farmworkers and the CFP both face, this approach, while complicated and sometimes tense, contributes to farmworkers’ success and well-being at home and in the workplace. ■■■

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets 2014 Annual Report, [http://www.agriculture.ny.gov/annual\\_report.pdf](http://www.agriculture.ny.gov/annual_report.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> This was stated in a meeting with CBP representatives in April 2011. These figures align with national trends.

<sup>3</sup> Estimated from CFP research.