Anybody attracted to Reagan's New Federalism should look at the sorry record of farmworker housing.

THE LIMITS OF LOCALISM

by Richard J. Margolis

Gilcrest, Colorado, some forty miles north of Denver, presents a familiar architectural style which could be called Migrant Modern: a long, grey motel-like building squatting near the highway, the paint fading and peeling in the hot sun, the screens torn, many of the doors hanging by a single hinge. At the far end of the tenement one comes upon a separate, concrete structure, which houses the showers, toilets, and washtubs. Any slight breeze instantly carries dust to the eyes and a smell of excrement to the nostrils.

Fronting all this is a "yard," brown and barren, that uncannily resembles the yards Jacob Riis discovered in his wanderings a century ago through the slums of New York: " . . . a bewildering maze of clothes-posts and lines; underfoot, a desert of brown, hard-baked, soil from which every blade of grass, every stray weed, every speck of green, had been trodden out. . . . "

Camps like Gilcrest look abandoned even when they are occupied. They show no sign of having been touched by a caring hand. The general decay and disarray resemble what one would expect to find in a ghost town. "If you stand next to my shack on a hot day," a farmworker in Texas told me, "you can hear the paint peeling."

During the day, while everyone else is working in the fields, the women and small children stay "home," but seldom venture forth from their dark rooms. There is little enough to do in the shadeless, trash-littered yard: no playground for the children, no meeting place for the women, no sense of community for anyone. So people remain behind their doors, each locked inside the same dingy scenario. A visitor strolling through one of those empty camp yards is likely to hear nothing save the flapping of torn screens in the wind.

At night, with everyone home from the fields, the boredom and sense of entrapment grow more oppressive. Quarters are cramped and walls are thin. "People can go stir crazy," says Rebecca Belew, a former migrant worker from Michigan. "Someone might start screaming at someone else. Pretty soon lots of people are screaming. You can hear every fight, every argument. There's no privacy. My husband and I, we'd be awake half the night trying not to listen."

Last summer, I had an opportunity to investigate current farmworker housing conditions, on an assignment from the National Migrant Farmworker Housing Coalition. I visited seventy-five camps and interviewed hundreds of families. The story is worth telling for two reasons. First, suffering is still widespread though widely assumed to exist only in the history books. More to the point,

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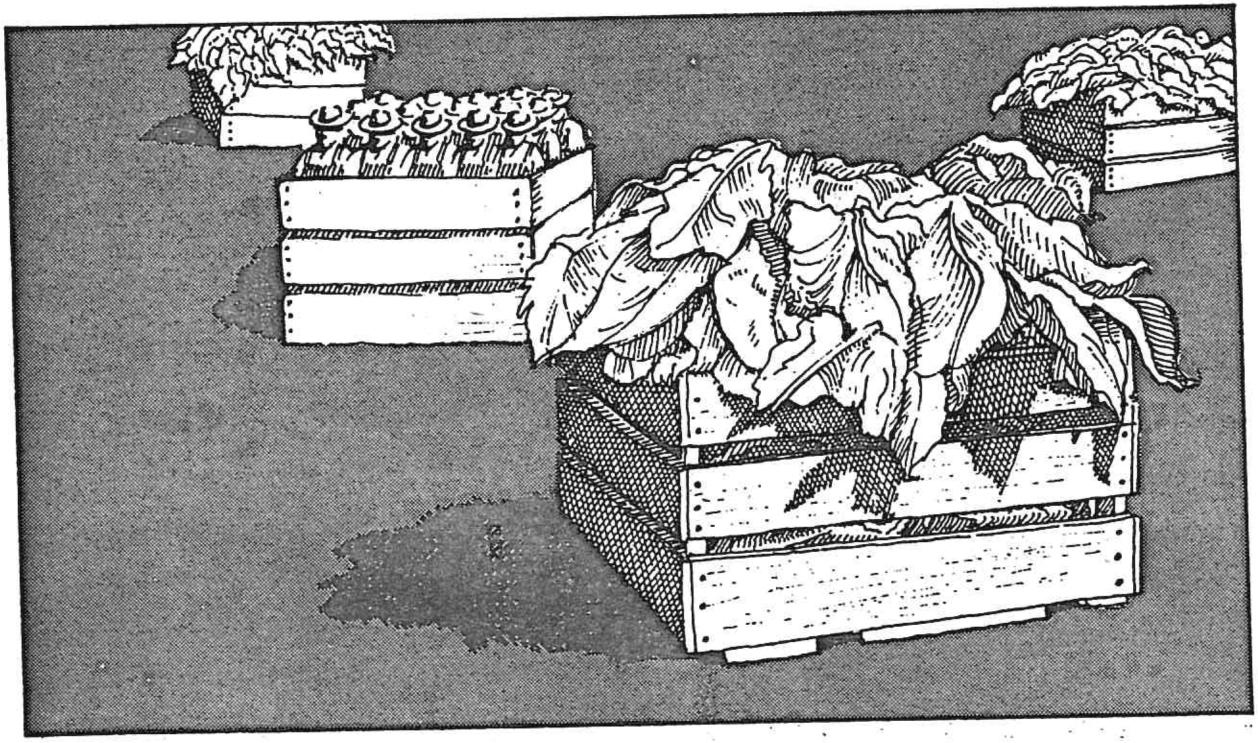
these conditions have thrived on precisely the kind of elite local control President Reagan proposes to dust off as a solution to social ills.

The Reagan administration is proposing a wholesale deregulation and decentralization of federal programs. Both are offered in the spirit of returning power to the people. But the approach actually portends a massive redistribution of power and resources upwards, an effective shift in control from public to private and from representative to elite.

In case we have forgotten, disenfranchised economic classes and racial minorities did not look to federal power out of some arbitrary attraction to bureaucratic authority. For two generations, reformers have sought help in Washington because social change at the local level was utterly stymied by the power of local elites. Where change was accomplished thanks to federal intervention, local power balances shifted.



The left's recent romance with localism is understandable and even laudable, given bureaucratic excesses and the failure of many public agencies to accomplish much in the face of private power. But there is localism and localism. And there is ample evidence about the fate of social change programs entrusted to the care of local elites—especially when the local elite was the original obstacle.

A notoriously persistent case in point is the plight of migrant farmworkers and their families. Here is a social ill repeatedly decried by reformers, which has been dosed with precisely the sort of medicine Dr. Reagan would precribe. Since 1946, the Farmers Home Administration, which was created in part to satisfy the housing needs of 5 million farmworkers, has cheerfully relied on growers and grower-defined communities to carry out its programs—and with predictable results.

At Gilcrest, I spent time with the Cruz family—a wife, a husband, six children—who occupy two-room quarters in the "motel." Theirs is essentially a domestic tale, having to do with washtubs and soap and a need, in the grimiest of circumstances, to keep clean. But it also has to do with isolation and powerlessness. In the dust of migrant camps all the elements—the abstract as well as the homely—tend to get scrambled.

For much of the year the Cruz family lives in Brownsville, Texas, but each summer they pile into their "pickup" and ride to Colorado. There Hector Cruz works with a hoe in the sugar beet fields that surround Gilcrest, weeding and thinning for wages that amount to $35 per worked acre. In a good week Mr. Cruz and his hoe can render about seven acres of Colorado soil temporarily weedless. But it is hot, dusty work, and the rows of young beet plants can seem malignly infinite, marching in straight, parallel ranks toward a point where earth touches sky.

Sometimes the older Cruz children work in the fields, too; the extra money they earn helps keep the family supplied with two essential sources of energy: gasoline and food. But Hector's wife Estella, stays in the camp with the younger children. For four months, from June through September, the high fences of Gilcrest are the boundaries of their lives.

"What do the children do all day?" I asked Mrs. Cruz.

"They run around outside. They watch TV."

"And what do *you* do all day?"

"I clean," she said, pointing to a broom by the door. "And I wash. Mostly I wash clothes. They get very dirty in the fields. I have to wait my turn at the tub." The camp provides two small tubs for the 120 residents. All day and through part of the night the women are at the tubs.

One afternoon, working at the washboard, Estella Cruz ran out of soap. She called Roberto, her fifteen-year-old boy: "Go to the store and get a bar of soap"—a simple instruction that turned out to have complex consequences.

Roberto's problem was deciding how to get to the store. Migrant camps are customarily built on sites convenient to the work but inconvenient for the workers, and Gilcrest was no exception; the nearest store required a trip to LaSalle, a town six miles down the road. As Roberto saw it, he could walk the twelve miles or he could risk a quick ride in the family pickup. Being an adolescent, he made the wrong choice, and before another hour had passed he found himself in the LaSalle police station, facing charges of speeding, and of driving without a license.

The truck, a policeman told Hector Cruz that evening, had been "impounded"; in fact, it had been returned to the local used car dealer from whom Mr. Cruz had bought it the previous summer and to whom he had been making regular $15-a-month payments ever since. It is a measure of the farmworkers' status in such towns that the LaSalle police instantly assumed that Cruz's truck was ripe for repossession.

Eventually, with the help of an attorney from Rural Legal Services, the judicial knot was cut: Roberto got a suspended sentence and the family got back its truck—but not before Hector had lost several days' wages attempting to reclaim boy and wheels. For the Cruz family, then, the price of a bar of soap was about $100. If they'd had the leisure to think about it, they might have considered it part of the rent—a routine penalty imposed upon families so luckless as to be sojourning at Gilcrest.

Sad to say, the Cruz story typifies many of the hardships that regularly beset farmworker families: their segregation from the larger community; their consequent isolation from stores, clinics, and other local institutions; their perpetual (and losing) battle with the dust and dirt that pervade their lives; and their struggle in the camps to make do with the sparse, primitive amenities provided.

What finally emerges from such tales is a sense of the farmworkers' *constant vulnerability*. Unlike the rest of us, migrant families enjoy no margin for error, no rainy-day resources they can draw on to nullify mistakes or deflect the darker fates. In a farmworker's life the most routine mishap (no more soap) can quickly develop into a major misery (loss of a precious half-week's wages).

In many of the larger, company-owned camps I visited it was clear that the families had bartered their freedom for their suppers and shelters. The "No Trespassing" signs that greeted visitors at the gates and the high, hurricane fences topped with barbed wire that surrounded the camps suggested that these places were less "migrant centers"—to use a federal euphemism—than they were maximum security prisons.

Indeed, the unfortunate farmworkers who occupied such compounds were required to follow a regimen that might have been the envy of an Attica warden. Rising each day at dawn, they were transported by bus to the corporate fields, there to labor in the sun for from eight to twelve hours. When the foreman judged the day's work complete, he herded the migrants into the bus again and thence back to camp, where an early curfew was customarily imposed. Any refusal by a worker to submit to these strictures could mean instant eviction.

The farmworkers' virtual incarceration suited the needs of the growers and the sensibilities of their neighbors, the local residents. For growers, the system assured a supply of strong bodies, which could be "stored" behind fences each night and moved as necessary each day.

To make sure the bodies stayed stored, the growers invented rules. In Mesa County, Colorado, for instance, some camp owners evicted all farmworkers who had cars. "We bus them to work and we bus them back," a grower said when I asked him about the no-car rule. "What do they need cars for?"

Some camps I saw in Florida had opened company stores, which the residents—either through isolation or intimidation—felt compelled to patronize. A carton of cigarettes at one of those stores might cost as much as $10; a six-pack of beer, $5. The charges, of course, were deducted from the farmworkers' pay each week, often in ways that brooked no argument. As one farmworker explained, "The boss sits there at a table with his bookkeeper and hands out the pay. A revolver lies on the table. Nobody complains."

For citizens who lived near these camps, the segregation of farmworkers seemed ideal. That way, the migrants could contribute their labor to the local community without the community's feeling bound to contribute anything in return. Good fences made good workers.

The tyranny of migrant housing is such that it invites exploitation. In central Michigan I came upon a typically tawdry camp of seventy-four hovels and a half-dozen outdoor privies. It was owned by a grower named Hassell. "I wanted to close this camp years ago," he told me, "but the people begged me to keep it open." I believed him. In the migrant world, choices tend to be few, and all are unacceptable.

In California, according to testimony by Susanna Halpon, who works for the Rural Legal Assistance program, the shortage of housing is so painful that farmworkers get in line for shelter. Ms. Halpon has described the queueing up in San Joaquin County, where the state manages three camps of approximately 100 units apiece:

> There is such a shortage of housing that for those three migrant camps you have people lining up right before they are open—like up to four days ahead of time—hoping, since the camps are run on a first-come, first-served basis, that they can be the ones to be accommodated. . . . They literally line up for days ahead. They sleep in cars.

Ms. Halpon said the lines got so long that at least one of the camps changed its admission rules by displaying a new sign. "The migrant center will open April 11," the sign said. "Families forming a line before the opening date will be the last in line to get a number."

Almost from the beginning American agriculture has depended for production and profit upon the hands of the landless, nomadic proletariat. Neither the legendary self-reliance of the nineteenth-century farmer nor the prodigious, petro-powered miracle of the twentieth-century mechanization has ever been sufficient to the harvest-time challenge: wherever crops have ripened, workers have been summoned. As long ago as the 1830s, according to the historian David E. Schob, the summer harvesting cycle "set in motion a vast army of men from diverse backgrounds: skilled and unskilled, immigrant and free black, as well as thousands of common laborers. . . . Men followed the ripening tide of grain."

Then as now, moreover, farmers fretted over their annual obligation to provide shelter for that vast army, but with a major difference: their common concern for the workers' welfare ran relatively strong, in part because the line between classes in those formative years was still blurred and tenuous, in part, too, because a chronic shortage of workers made housing a useful lure in the farmer's annual hunt for helping hands.

Many of the ideas and forces that would determine modern farmworker conditions were already in place a century ago. These included a tendency among farmers to muster help from the lowest, most impoverished ranks of workers; a hiring preference for aliens and the foreign-born; a conviction that such workers were fundamentally inferior to everyone else, and therefore less in need of "a common access to the blessings of life"; and a consequent inclination to isolate workers from the community-at-large, making of them a pariah proletariat deprived of civil protection and vulnerable to exploitation.

As agriculture approached the twentieth century—as it ramified, consolidated, and became an instrument of corporate ambitions—those tendencies hardened into a set scenario, to be repeated again and again in such far-flung locales as Florida, Texas, Michigan, and California. Especially in California did agriculture take on familiar corporate characteristics: large, monopolistic holdings; absentee control; aggressive mechanization; and specialization of crops (shifting from wheat to fruits, vegetables, and cotton). Those innovations were widely imitated in other sections of the country, eventually transforming much of American agriculture from small farms to "factories in the field"—from Jefferson to DiGiorgio.

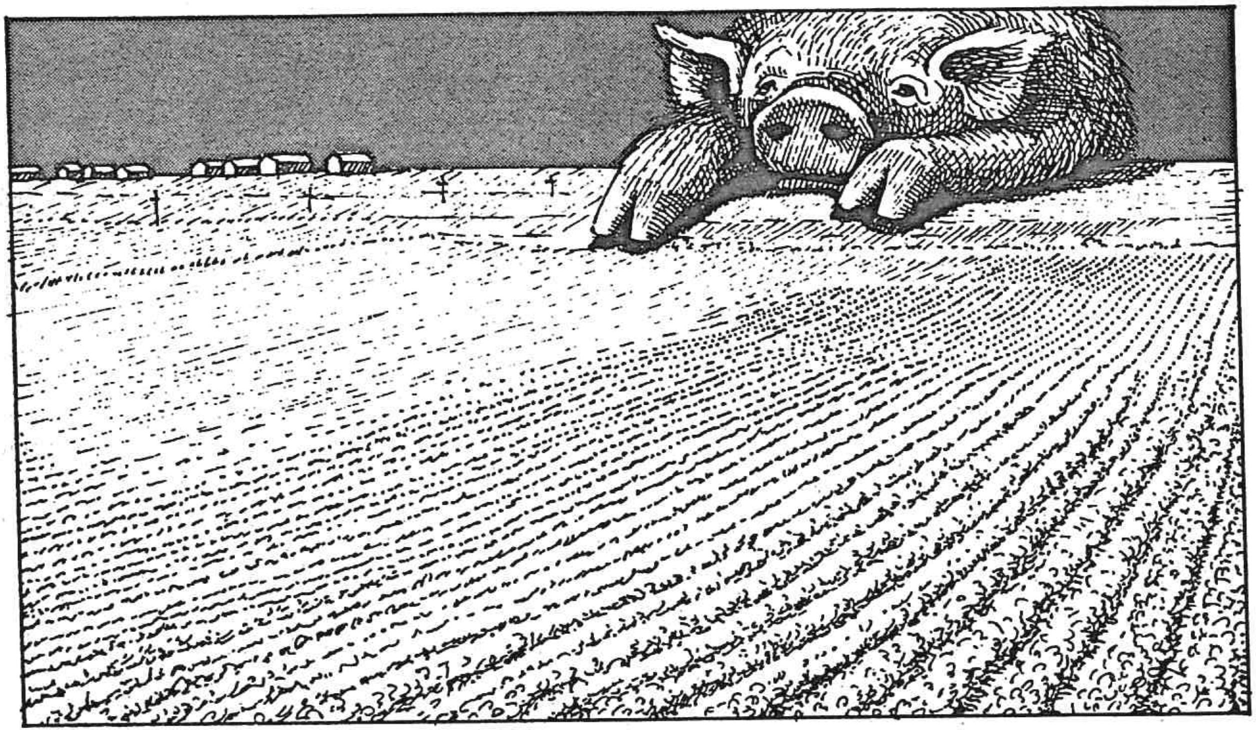
With the changes in structure came parallel changes in labor practices, which now followed the logic of industrialism rather than the dictates of humanism. What the growers now sought was a work-force so desperate for sustenance it would accept the least in proffered wages and housing. As the scholar Paul Taylor has observed, "The lower the customary standard of living of the migrant—i.e., the less demanding they are— the poorer the housing usually provided them. This is one reason why agricultural employers have welcomed a long succession of low-standard immigrant nationalities. . . . "

In the twentieth century, landowners turned to a new despised minority to augment their labor reservoir. The newcomers were Mexicans. They had begun trickling across the border as early as 1900; by 1920 they were flooding into Texas, Arizona, and California, some of them, even then, finding work as far east as the Carolinas and as far north as Illinois and Wisconsin. In the ensuing decade 460,000 Mexicans were legally admitted to this country, to say nothing of the thousands who entered without permission. It was the beginning of the Hispanic Diaspora, which would turn out to be the largest single ethnic migration in U.S. history. From that point on, the saga of farm labor in America would be increasingly written in Brown ink.

Neither nineteenth-century self-reliance nor twentieth-century mechanization has been sufficient at harvest time. Ripening crops require extra workers.

Migratory miseries have been a repeated target of reformist indignation. In the 1920s, the U.S. Department of Agriculture repeated studies documenting deplorable conditions, but to little result. It wasn't until the 1930s that the nation, catalyzed by a chemistry of Depression despair and New Deal hope, took an active interest in the welfare of migrant workers. The first housing programs of that era, which built federally owned migrant camps, were too small and scattered to solve the problem—but they pointed for the first time in the right direction.

What the camps accomplished was to transfer control of some migrant housing from growers to workers, or at least to workers' temporary ally, the U.S. government. Anyone who doubted the significance of such power transfers and the threat they posed to corporate agriculture, needed only to observe the opposition they inspired among growers. It was loud, persistent, and ultimately successful.



This noble experiment began, naturally enough, in the Central Valley of California, where two camps for migrants were established in 1935 by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Their purpose was to make a start at housing the "Okies" and "Arkies" who had been pouring into the state, having been driven off their own farms by dust, drought, and Depression. Between 1935 and 1938 more than 250,000 Dust Bowl refugees came to California in search of agricultural work.

By 1937 the newly created Farm Security Administration (FSA) in Washington was already using emergency funds to build similar camps in a half-dozen states. Congress endorsed the idea two years later and appropriated a considerable sum for construction and operation of the camps. There were essentially two types: standard permanent camps and mobile temporary camps. The latter consisted of tents for workers, along with central wash and shower facilities, and trailers for offices and makeshift clinics.

The permanent camps were more elaborate; they featured individual cabins around central units that provided showers, flush toilets, and common laundry facilities, and occasionally even clinics and co-op stores. Growers' associations in California kept registering strong objections to the camps—not because they were a form of public assistance, notes Paul Taylor, but because the housing "was under public control and not under employer control." The existence of federal camps as alternatives to company housing thus dramatized the larger struggle, the one between worker autonomy and peonage. The U.S. Senate Civil Liberties subcommittee, after investigating farm labor conditions in California, concluded, "All workers in an employer's camp are more or less isolated, and as the employer can decide who is to live in his camp, a large measure of control can be exercised over the activities of laborers thus situated."

In the ensuing debate over FSA housing programs, growers seldom troubled to disguise their true motives. For example, a representative of the agricommunity in Kern County, California, told a state legislative commission, "Families residing on property of the operators and subject to the selection of an experienced foreman are usually dependable and loyal. They will behave themselves, take the thin with the thick, the poor picking with the good, with minimum complaint. . . . " On the

Growers attacked the short-lived Farm Security Administration's migrant housing because it was under public control rather than employer control.

other hand, "Occupants of government controlled camps owe no alligiance to any growers." (Quoted by Ernesto Galarza in *Farm Workers and Agri-Business in California, 1947–1960.*)

As if growers weren't having enough trouble with workers no longer eager to "take the thin with the thick," the FSA, by establishing democratically elected camp councils, was now encouraging migrants to manage their own affairs. The councils, reports Ernesto Galarza, "were intended to give the residents a voice in management and operation. . . . They voted on rules concerning sanitation, recreation, education, safety, and other matters of self-government."

Self-government was indefinitely delayed by the onset of World War II and its urgent requirements for food and fibre. Overnight the chronic farm labor surplus turned into a critical farm labor shortage, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture became a vast manpower center, recruiting farmworkers from places as distant as The Barbados and Newfoundland. More camps were established to accommodate 150,000 new harvesters, but the FSA no longer managed the housing. The agency had been replaced by a new component within the USDA's War Food Administration, the Office of Labor. Even the official language was altered by the demands of mobilization: now the old "migratory labor camps" were called "farm labor supply centers."

By war's end the government was operating 191 "labor supply centers" in twenty-six states, mainly in California, Florida, and Texas. Two years later, the number of centers had fallen to 118, with fewer than 70,000 migrants in residence. The emergency was over, and so was the party. In fact, the Farm Security Administration was already dead, a victim of pressures from commercial farmers on Congress to "get out of the housing business," and of a postwar reactionary wave sweeping the country.

The act that liquidated the FSA less than a decade after its birth had simultaneously replaced it with an agency more suitable to the times. Harold D. Cooley, a "tobacco Democrat" from North Carolina and sponsor of the bill that President Truman signed into law on August 14, 1946, was promptly christened "father of the Farmers Home Administration." Unlike its more daring predecessor, which had dreamed of promoting empowerment among the rural poor, the FHA (or FmHA, as it came to be called) dreamed hardly at all, and seldom about the poor. At that early juncture in the agency's career, the provision of migrant farmworker housing was a very low-priority item; and when new housing projects were eventually financed, they developed along pre-FSA lines, with the growers again the landlords and in firm control. Indeed, Title V of the 1949 Housing Act authorized financial assistance only to "owners of farms" to provide "them, their tenants, lessees, sharecroppers, and laborers with decent, safe and sanitary living conditions. . . . "

There remained, however, the matter of disposing of old FSA camps, of transfering their national title to some other auspices. At first this was done, under instructions from Congress, in accord with prevailing postwar sentiment, which held that private was preferable to public and local was better than national. But as Taylor has approvingly observed, the Department of Agriculture dragged its heels, being "reluctant to take the easier course of disposing of [the camps] to employers' associations until Congress could be brought to face squarely the issue of public versus employer ownership. . . . " In the end (1950) Congress did make an oblique turn, providing for the camps' takeover and management by local Public Housing Authorities—a compromise meant to preserve localism while expunging privatism. But from the migrants' standpoint that middle road spelled trouble, since most Public Housing Authorities in rural America were controlled by the growers, and they tended from the start to run the public camps like private fiefdoms. As we shall see, they still do.

With the FSA dead and a more friendly agency a-borning, the growers now saw a chance to clinch their triumph by getting Congress to restore the huge farm-labor surpluses they had enjoyed before Pearl Harbor. In a booming economy, heated up by the Korean War, this was no easy task, but in 1951 Congress obliged by passing Public Law 78, which empowered the Secretary of Labor to contract for as many Mexican temporary workers as the Secretary of Agriculture deemed necessary. This was the start of the notorious *braceros* program (*braceros* means "strong-armed men"), which lasted through 1964. In fourteen years it supplied American growers with more than 5 million skilled, low wage, seasonal workers from Mexico—a "well-nigh perfect" work-force that broke the heart of many a labor organizer in the fields.

As one travels through the land of the migrants, the overwhelming impression is of a captive people isolated in space and trapped in time. Both the entrapment and the isolation are contrivances of the local communities as well as the employers—

ways of simultaneously shunning and manipulating the farmworkers, of keeping them down while using them up. Very little has changed since the President's Commission on Farm Labor observed in 1951 that the workers "pass through community after community, but they neither claim the community as home, nor does the community claim them. . . . "

A small incident that occurred in Florida last summer typified for me the subtle habits of hatred and its conscience-numbing ways. My companion that day was a farmworker specialist with the U.S. Employment Service, who had lived in the area most of his life. He took me to a camp that he'd described in advance as "really pretty good—the owners are friends of mine." In fact, the camp turned out to be really pretty vile, even by Florida's carefree standards. For one thing, the floors in both public bathrooms were slick with raw sewage; for another, it appeared likely that no one had collected the trash in several weeks. The grounds were piled high with garbage and the air was thick with flies.

My guide seemed shocked. "Animals!" he exclaimed, kicking an orange peel. "They're just animals!"

"Who?" I asked. "The owners?"

"No," he said, surprised. "I mean the *tenants.*"

If the rule in such communities is to blame victims and absolve victimizers, then the corollary is to suspect anyone who suggests there may be another way of viewing matters. The suspicion that hangs heavy over Main Street acts as a shield against reform, for it fends off precisely those elements in town who are attempting to promote migrant-centered institutions—the clinics, schools, legal services, and housing programs that dot rural landscapes but hardly dent rural society.

"We're not at all trusted by the 'respectable people' in town," I was told by a migrant council coordinator in Michigan. "They accuse us of being a charity at the taxpayers' expense. Their favorite question is, 'What are you giving away today?' "

The more headway local crusaders make in their pro-migrant efforts, the more mistrust they seem to inspire. The organizer of a housing project in Federalsburg, Maryland, for example—a town the organizer lived near and her parents lived *in*—was refused service at a local restaurant because, the proprietor said, her project was "controversial." Indeed it was. For by helping farmworkers find decent housing she was conferring upon them a freedom they had never before enjoyed—the freedom to change jobs without fear of eviction.

Along with the interest of commercial agriculture in recruiting its workers from the poorest and most despised minorities—the groups least likely to drive a hard labor bargain or to inspire a soft feeling of empathy among local citizens—is the use of shelter as a regulating force in the uneven bargains struck between growers and migrants. From the growers' standpoint, migrant housing is most practically viewed as a farmworker warehouse, a human storage bin from which workers can be withdrawn each day for assigned tasks and to which they can be returned each night for safekeeping.

The resulting objectification of migrant workers—the tendency by all to see them as so many "hands" and arms ("braceros")—has, locally speaking, sealed the migrants' fate. Few communities have mustered the political resources necessary to overcome their social and ideological handicaps. Most, it appears, suffer from a paralysis of ethical will, an inability to enlist their political institutions in the cause of decency. In our search for solutions to the farmworkers' housing crisis, these lessons must be taken into strict account. What they teach us, sadly, are the limits of localism.

In the 1930s we responded to the farmworker housing emergency in a *national* manner, through the Farm Security Administration and its ingenious network of migratory labor camps. By placing responsibility for those camps, and for the welfare of their residents, in federal hands, we were expressing our belief in the primacy of national, public interests over local, private ones. Since 1946, however, we have been off on a local tangent, and the few migrant housing dollars that have trickled down from Washington, in grants and low interest loans, have arrived in rural America essentially free of federal strings. We have been practicing "Reagonomics" long before we invented President Ronald Reagan; the upshot is that growers everywhere have been free to use public funds in pursuit of private ends, one of which has been to keep a tight rein on their workers.

Anyone who doubts the limits of localism need only examine the thirty-five-year record of cynical housing subsidies broadcast in the name of migrant

To live in this federally subsidized housing you had to work at below minimum wage, and face summary eviction on 24 hours notice.

welfare but applied in promotion of grower profits. The price that farmworkers have paid for this policy, in tears and terror, was amply demonstrated at the Texas Coalition hearing, where a lawyer from west Texas, William H. Beardall, described a benighted housing project known as Dimmitt Labor Camp, located near Lubbock. Its story, said Beardall, "illustrates how a federally financed Public Housing facility, if put in the wrong hands, . . . can become a tool for the oppression of farmworkers." What follow are selected excerpts from Beardall's testimony.

> Dimmitt Labor Camp consists of fifteen concrete block buildings laid out in barrack style with a total of 200 dwelling units. The entire facility is surrounded by an eight-foot high cyclone fence topped with barbed wire.
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> Originally constructed in 1968, with Farmers Home Administration financing, the camp is owned and operated by the Castro County Housing Authority, a public agency created for the sole purpose of operating the labor camp.
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> . . . During the summer agricultural season, the population of the camp swells to well over 2,000 persons. . . . this is an average of over ten persons per unit, even though units of such a small size are restricted by Federal law to no more than four occupants.
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> But chronic overcrowding is only the beginning of the problems plaguing the Dimmitt Labor Camp. For instance, maintenance and repair are infrequent to nonexistent. On November 15, 1979, an inspector from the Texas Department of Health conducted a full-scale inspection of the labor camp. . . . Among the violations . . . he documented were holes in the walls of dwelling units, missing cement blocks; refrigerators in vacant apartments which contained rotten meat and other food, faulty door construction which let cold air and rain water into the units, inadequate heating, uncovered electrical outlets and light switches, clogged toilets, leaking showers, inadequate control of roaches and rats. . . .
>
> In the eighty units he inspected, this health inspector found 62 broken windows and 153 torn or completely missing screens. . . . He found the grounds around the camp—which are the only playground for the children—strewn with garbage, debris and broken glass.

Until Beardall and his Rural Legal Aid office entered the picture, the County Housing Authority was running Dimmitt exclusively for the convenience of local growers and vegetable packing companies, each of whom had been assigned its own block of buildings within the camp, with total control over the units therein. The result, as Beardall noted, "was that in order to live in this Public Housing, a worker had to agree to work for a particular grower; he had to agree to work at the wages that grower was paying—even though these were routinely below the minimum wage—and if the worker complained . . . or was injured on the job, or took a better paying job . . . , he and his family could be summarily evicted on 24 hours' notice."

In at least one case, said Beardall, a family did refuse to work for the grower who controlled their unit, with predictable consequences:

> The very next day, they came home from work to find that their unit had been hosed down with all their belongings still in it. They were thus not only forced to leave, but all their belongings were ruined in the process.
>
> Another family . . . was told that the grower required a minimum of five working adults per unit. Having no other choice, this family got together with two other families so that they would have the required minimum number of adults. . . . They ended up with a total of 21 people in a unit designed for four.

I spent a day and a night at Dimmitt and can attest to the accuracy of Beardall's gloomy report. If anything, conditions had grown worse. Certainly the rats and roaches had gotten bolder: now they were daring to be seen, strutting around the apartments like first-class tenants. The day before I arrived the "resident manager" had moved out of the camp, announcing as she went that she no longer wished "to live among pigs."

"The little pigs are feeding the big pig," replied a tenant. It was a fair summation of Dimmitt's reigning ecology, a system in which the workers nourished the growers and the weak carried the strong.

In ways that are hard to understand and harder still to accept, Dimmitt is a national problem. All of us partake of its tormented ecology. For whatever the merits of community control and local autonomy, it seems clear that the migrant ordeal lies beyond their ministrations. Much of the suffering, in fact, can be attributed to a failure by local leaders to clean up their noisome act, and to a federal retreat from responsibility in the face of local interests. The U.S. government's *major* migrant housing program—a low interest loan operation run by the Farmers Home Administration—has spent only $55 million since 1962, and those dollars have gone directly to growers or to grower-controlled associations. The figure seems the more astonishing when one learns how little might be required to ensure decent housing for all farmworkers and their families: less than $3.5 billion, according to a just-released study that Congress mandated last year.

In the last analysis, if we hope to improve migrant housing conditions we must look not to the growers but to the workers and their families. Surely we can find ways to strengthen their hand and to amplify their voice—with public funds, of course, but also with national, FSA-style guarantees that will shift power and resources downward rather than upward. Only then, one guesses, will the possibility arise of civilizing the camps. That is the real lesson of Dimmitt, and the limits of localism.■