

Farmworker unions: status and wage impacts

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Effects on wages have been significant but limited

California's Agricultural Labor Relations Act was adopted in 1975 to provide organizing and bargaining rights for farmworkers and to promote peace and stability in agriculture. After 10 years under the Act, seven unions represent 80,000 to 90,000 farmworkers sometime during the year on 400 farms. Unions have contracts covering about one-seventh of California's farm jobs.

The largest fieldworker union — the United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO (UFW) — has had significant but limited effects on farmworker wages. United Farm Workers wages rose more slowly than those of all farmworkers between 1975 and 1979, but since 1980, UFW wage increases have increased twice as fast as all farmworker wages. However, UFW wage increases vary by commodity and area. Wages in vegetable crops increased almost 50 percent between 1980 and 1984, compared with 25 to 35 percent increases in nurseries, tree fruits, and citrus.

This article reviews the structure of farm employment in California and then examines wage trends since 1975. We have drawn data on farm employment from the 1982 Census of Agriculture, on farm wages from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) *Farm Labor* employer survey, and on union wages from the University of California, Davis, collection of UFW contracts. This collection includes about 250 contracts and appears to be the most complete agricultural contract information in the state.

Farm employment

The mainstay of California agriculture is the commercial production of labor-intensive fruits and vegetables. The state produces 35 percent of the nation's fruits, vegetables, and specialty commodities, which accounted for 72 percent of California crop sales in 1983.

Half of California's 82,500 farms hire workers, who do approximately 75 percent of the state's farm work. California farmers paid wages of \$2.2 billion in 1982, of which over 80 percent was paid to workers hired directly and 18 percent to farm labor contractors and their employees. Farmers reported to the Census of Agriculture that they employed 810,000

workers in 1982. Since Census statistics count a worker twice if he or she works on two farms, a better estimate of the actual number of farmworkers in California is the 616,280 farmworker Social Security numbers in the state's unemployment insurance files. Farmers reported that one-fifth of those hired were regular workers employed at least six months on one farm, and four-fifths were seasonal workers.

Even though 40,000 California farms hire workers, employment and wages are concentrated on the largest farms. The 5,800 large employers that paid at least \$50,000 to farmworkers in 1982 paid 85

percent of the farm wage bill. A second measure of size — annual farm sales over \$500,000 — indicates that 4,700 large farms paid 75 percent of the wage bill. Finally, the 28,000 fruit, vegetable, and horticulture farm employers paid over two-thirds of all farm wages, accounted for 69 percent of the regular farm jobs, and made up almost 60 percent of the farms that paid more than \$50,000 in wages.

Farm employment data from the Census of Agriculture must be interpreted carefully because of the changing definition of a farm. The large employers (those

TABLE 1. California farmworker unions

Union	Members*	Number of elections certified	Commodities	Contracts	Jobs†	Regions
UFW Keene, CA 93531	60,000– 70,000	342	Vegetables Horticulture Grapes and tree fruit Citrus Total	22 36 40 17 115	5,800 3,270‡ 7,850 4,100 21,020§	Statewide
Teamsters 890 207 Sanborn Road Salinas, CA 93901	11,000	4	Lettuce and mixed vegetables	3	3,700	Salinas
Independent Union of Agricultural Workers Box 5519 Salinas, CA 93905	3,500	16	Mixed vegetables	11	1,200	Salinas Central Valley Imperial Valley
International Union of Agricultural Workers* 1206 W. Cook Santa Maria, CA 93454	3,600	32	Lettuce Strawberries Vegetables	28	1,400	Southern Coast So. California
Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Workers Local 78B** 471 Main Street El Centro, CA 92243	1,800	16	Lettuce coolers Vegetable and melon packing sheds	16	1,200	Imperial Valley So. California
Christian Labor Association Local 17 14997 Euclid Avenue Chino, CA 91710	700	200	Dairy	200	700	Central Valley So. California
Teamsters Local 63 1616 W. 9th Street Los Angeles, CA 90015	250	35	Dairy	35	250	Chino Central Valley
Total	80,100– 90,100	645	—	408	29,450	—

SOURCE: The unions (from telephone interviews, after which we sent written confirmation).

*Members refers to total number of farmworkers employed on farms with union contracts sometime during the year.

†Jobs refers to average employment on farms with union contracts.

‡Includes nursery, mushroom, and egg employees.

§Excludes cotton and grain contracts. Another UFW document claims 151 active contracts covering 27,000 jobs and 161 certifications on farms with 29,000 jobs where no agreement has been reached.

^{||}Western Conference of Teamsters (WCT) was certified in a number of additional elections but withdrew from them after the 1977 WCT/UFW pact.

*Formed by ex-Teamsters from Local 946 when the Teamsters agreed to refrain from organizing fieldworkers in 1977.

**Locals 78A and 78B each have about 1,800 members, with perhaps half in jobs covered by the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA).

TABLE 2. Farm wage trends, 1975-85

Item	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	Percent change		
												1975-79	1976-79	1980-84
UNITED STATES						\$							%	
Private non-ag. earnings*	4.53	4.86	5.25	5.69	6.16	6.66	7.25	7.68	8.02	8.33		36.0	26.7	25.1
Farm†														
All workers	2.29	2.53	2.77	2.93	3.23	3.52	3.92	4.00	4.11	4.16	4.52	41.0	27.7	18.2
Piece rate	2.68	2.94	3.12	3.38	3.75	4.04	5.09	4.74	4.52	4.60	5.61	39.9	27.6	13.9
Hourly	2.28	2.50	2.76	2.95	3.25	3.53	3.86	3.91	4.07	4.12	4.37	42.5	30.0	16.7
Fieldworkers‡	2.14	2.37	2.56	2.74	3.05	3.36	3.78	3.83	3.91	3.93	4.53	42.5	28.7	17.0
CALIFORNIA														
Farm†														
All workers	2.80	3.08	3.50	3.61	3.87	4.35	4.70	4.89	4.85	5.16	5.57§	38.2	25.6	18.6
Piece rate	3.22	3.55	4.40	4.68	5.14	4.59	6.43	6.20	6.20	6.79	6.92§	59.6	44.8	47.9
Hourly	2.62	2.92	3.26	3.34	3.59	4.00	4.29	4.48	4.58	4.83	4.91	37.0	22.9	20.8
Fieldworkers‡	2.59	2.88	3.20	3.28	3.60	4.01	4.37	4.69	4.58	4.88	5.31	39.0	25.0	21.7
UFW¶ AND AVERAGE# WAGES														
Statewide union average		24/3.14**	59/3.25	101/3.40	77/3.68	80/4.33	86/4.77	55/5.30	29/5.45	21/5.85	11/6.31		17.2	35.1
Mushrooms (Union)			2/3.35	2/3.58	3/3.92	4/4.21	3/4.51	3/5.10	1/5.78	1/6.00	1/6.30			42.5
Nurseries (U)		2/3.10	3/3.23	14/3.37	15/3.58	11/3.97	14/4.40	11/4.79	10/5.17	4/5.05	3/5.11		15.5	27.0
South Coast (U)		1/3.10	1/3.23	2/3.40	5/3.75	4/4.19	6/4.53	7/4.90	6/5.31	1/4.68			21.0	11.7
Ventura County (Average)		2.48	2.80	3.00	3.20	3.45	3.68			4.25	4.25		29.0	23.2
Southern California (U)				5/3.28	4/3.39	4/3.58	4/4.10	2/4.52	2/4.89	2/5.32	1/5.68			48.6
Vegetables (U)		14/3.10	21/3.20	35/3.36	17/3.43	28/4.60	32/5.04	27/5.51	8/6.04	5/6.83	3/7.13		10.6	48.5
Central Coast (U)		6/3.10	6/3.25	9/3.39		14/5.05	16/5.46	15/5.70	3/6.65	3/7.00	3/7.13			38.6
Monterey County (A)§		3.03	3.48	3.48	3.88	4.20	5.75	5.68	6.03	6.33	6.33		28.1	50.7
South Coast (U)		2/3.10	3/3.23	5/3.39	5/3.64	3/4.05	4/5.05	5/5.50	1/4.50	1/5.00			17.4	23.5
Southern California (U)		1/3.10	8/3.15	15/3.31	11/3.35	5/3.81	6/4.14	2/4.35					8.1	
Citrus (U)				2/3.38	3/3.55	3/3.71	2/3.98	1/4.50	1/4.50	1/5.00				34.8
Southern California (U)				2/3.38	2/3.58	1/3.60								
South Coast (U)					1/3.50	1/3.68	1/3.86	1/4.50	1/4.50	1/5.00				35.9
Santa Barbara (A)††				3.25	3.25	3.38	3.93	3.93	4.50	4.55	4.73			34.6
Vineyards (U)		6/3.28	7/3.43	19/3.53	16/3.73	12/4.17	8/4.71	8/5.41	6/5.25	7/5.74	3/6.81		13.7	37.6
San Joaquin (U)		2/3.40	2/3.43	12/3.45	9/3.66	6/3.93	5/4.24	3/4.47	4/4.89	4/5.08			7.6	29.3
Kern County (A)		2.65	2.88	3.50	3.50	3.30††	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.15††	4.00		32.1	25.8
Tree fruits (U)		1/2.95	25/3.22	25/3.35	23/3.88	20/4.33	22/4.65	1/5.05	1/5.30	2/5.71	1/5.95		31.5	31.9
Central Coast (U)			19/3.23	19/3.35	16/3.97	15/4.40	16/4.78	1/5.05	2/5.30	1/5.75	5.00		30.7	30.7
Santa Cruz (A)§§		2.88	3.10	3.20	3.83	4.50	4.84	5.13	4.50	5.00			33.0	11.1

*Economic Report of the President, February 1985, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., p. 276.

†Farm Labor, Crop Reporting Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, various years.

‡In 1975, 1976, and 1977, this included field and livestock workers. After 1977, it included only fieldworkers.

§Wages for lettuce preharvest.

||These are the wages for the "general labor" category. Wages are those prevailing in July of each year.

#California Employment Development Department, Form 8861-A. The form gives a range of wages; the midpoint is printed here.

**Number of contracts and average wage; e.g., in 1976, the 24 UFW contracts had an average wage of \$3.17 for general labor.

††Wages are the midpoint of the range for lemon harvesting.

§§Fresno County data in 1980, 1984.

||Wages are the midpoint of the range for apple thinning.

paying \$50,000 or more in farm wages) who are likely to be counted in the Census, however, are paying an increasing fraction of farm wages: the share they paid increased from 76 to 85 percent between 1974 and 1982, and similar increases were recorded for large farms (those with \$500,000 or more in annual gross sales), fruit and vegetable farms, and contract labor farms.

With employment increasingly concentrated on the largest California farms, these are logically the major targets of union organizers. Since most of the large farm employers produce fruit, vegetables, or horticultural specialties, farmworker union activity has focused on such farms.

Unions

A telephone survey of farmworker unions, which we conducted in 1984, indicates that seven unions represent 80,000 to 90,000 farmworkers sometime during the year (table 1). These unions had won elections on 645 farms, resulting in 408 union contracts covering about 30,000 farm jobs. If the 80,000 to 90,000 union members are compared with the total farm work force of 616,280, then about one-seventh, or 14 percent, of California's farmworkers are union members. The 30,000 farm jobs can be similarly compared with the average 220,000 jobs for hired workers, also indicating that about one-seventh of the state's farm jobs are covered by union contracts.

The United Farm Workers has the most members and the most farm jobs covered by union contracts, but the Christian Labor Association has almost twice as many contracts. The Christian Labor Association and Teamsters Local 63 have 235 contracts with southern California dairies, and these dairy contracts, each covering an average of four farm jobs, account for almost three-fifths of all union contracts.

The United Farm Workers has two-thirds of the 173 fieldworker contracts throughout the state. The union is divided into four commodity divisions and reported in 1984 that it had 40 contracts in grapes and tree fruits, 36 in horticultural specialties such as nurseries and mushrooms, 22 in vegetables, and 17 in citrus. Its reported contracts include farms with a decertification vote or expired contracts, if the union alleges improper voting or unlawful bargaining, as per the Agricultural Labor Relations Act.

Teamsters Local 890 has three Salinas-area contracts, of which the major contract is with Bud Antle. The Salinas-based Independent Union of Agricultural Workers has 11 contracts covering about

1,200 jobs, and the International Union of Agricultural Workers, based in Santa Maria, has 28 contracts covering 1,400 jobs. The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Workers Union Local 78B, in the Imperial Valley, has 16 contracts, which cover both fieldworkers and packing shed workers.

Union organizing and bargaining activity has slowed since 1975-76. During the first six months of the Act, the Agricultural Labor Relations Board conducted 430 elections and unions were certified in 96 percent of the valid elections. In 1984-85, there were 31 elections; 16 have been resolved, and unions were certified as bargaining agents in 8. Unions were decertified on two farms, and expiring union contracts have not been renegotiated at several other farms.

Wages

The UC Davis collection includes 250 union contracts signed after 1975. We compared general laborer wages from each contract. The general farm laborer wage is usually the lowest offered; farmworkers are guaranteed the general laborer wage even if they work under a piece-rate wage system.

The number of contracts in the collection that included the general laborer classification rose from 24 in 1976 to 101 in 1978, and then fell to 86 in 1981, 29 in 1983, and 11 in 1985. UFW wages for general farm labor increased from an average of \$3.14 in 1976 to \$6.31 in 1985 (table 2). There is no comparable state or federal wage series for general farm labor. The USDA *Farm Labor* wages reported in the top half of the table include union and nonunion workers and both skilled and unskilled farmworkers, thus overstating the wages a typical general farmworker could expect to earn.

Wage changes have been divided into two periods: 1976-79 and 1980-84. During the first period, all farm wages increased faster than most union wages, and during the second period, union wages generally rose faster than all farm wages.

California farm wages increased at about the same rate as U.S. farm wages between 1976 and 1985; they were 22 percent higher than U.S. farm wages in 1976 and 23 percent higher in 1985. The California premium for piece-rate wages was 21 percent in 1976 and 23 percent in 1985 but had decreased to 14 percent in 1980.

If the United Farm Worker general laborer wage is compared with those of California's hourly farmworkers, the union wage premium was 8 percent in 1976 and 1980 and then jumped to 28 percent in 1985. Union wages jumped in 1979-80 after a lengthy strike in vegetable crops. Union vegetable wages rose 47 per-

cent in two years, from \$3.43 in 1979 (4 percent less than the average hourly wage and 7 percent less than the average union wage) to \$5.04 in 1981 (17 percent above the average hourly wage and 6 percent above the union average). Union wages in other commodities also increased — general laborer wages rose 26 percent in vineyards and 23 percent in nurseries — but the jump in vegetable wages explains much of the surge in piece-rate wages in California and in Monterey vegetable wages. The union wage premium continued to increase after 1981, reaching 45 percent in vegetables in 1985, 39 percent in vineyards, 21 percent in tree fruits, and 4 percent in nurseries.

Union wages have increased unevenly. In 1977, the average union wage in 59 contracts for "general labor" was \$3.25, and the range was \$3.00 to \$3.70. By 1985, the average wage in 11 contracts was \$6.31, and the range was \$4.61 to \$7.68. This increased variance could reflect a change in union strategy and different levels of bargaining power.

Conclusions

About 10 percent of California's 5,800 major farm employers have been affected directly by union activity since 1975. After a decade of farmworker organizing and bargaining under the Agricultural Labor Relations Act, seven farmworker unions represent about 14 percent of California's farmworkers. Union contracts on 400 farms cover about one-seventh of California's farm jobs.

Unions have had significant but limited effects on farm wages. The union wage premium for all commodities increased from roughly 8 percent in 1976 to 28 percent in 1985. Until 1979, union wages for general laborers were relatively uniform across commodities and areas. A 1979 strike increased union wages in vegetable crops almost 50 percent in two years. By 1985, the average union vegetable wage of \$7.13 was 45 percent above the statewide average hourly wage and 13 percent higher than the average hourly wage in United Farm Worker contracts for general laborers, reflecting union strategy and bargaining strength.

These wage comparisons must be interpreted with caution. First, some union contracts were omitted (there is no complete collection of union contracts). Second, fringe benefits were not included in these comparisons. Finally, it is difficult to determine if nonunion wages were increased because farm employers feared union activity.

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