



“What a stay-at-home order means for migrant dairy workers”

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Like farms across the United States, Vermont’s farms have been deemed “essential businesses” as the COVID-19 pandemic ravages the nation’s health and economy. By extension, those working on these farms—including the 1000–1200 Latinx immigrant farmworkers laboring in Vermont’s dairy economy—are classified as “essential workers.” The cruel irony of immigrant farmworkers being seen as essential while simultaneously facing further repression and exploitation is perhaps most blatant in Trump’s recent proposition (crafted by Chief of Staff Mark Meadows and Agriculture Secretary Perdue) to lower the pay for an estimated 250,000 guest workers in the food system as a supposed solution to the economic consequences of the pandemic. Indeed, as many labor advocates have postulated, perhaps a better classifier for these essential workers in the food systems during these harrowing times is “sacrificial.”

In my 2019 book, *Life on the Other Border*, I described the forces—political, economic, and social—that have pushed Vermont’s farmworkers deep into the state’s shadow economy:

Throughout my years of researching food access issues within Vermont’s farmworker community, there is one term farmworkers use more than any other to characterize their experience in Vermont: *encerrado*. This term translates into a number of English descriptors: confined... trapped... bounded... enclosed. In all cases, this term is laden with sadness, frustration, and pain. It is used to describe the isolation that farmworkers and their families experience in Vermont, an assumed agricultural utopia. This sense of being *encerrado* is amplified by the hegemonic whiteness of rural Ver-

mont and is perpetuated by the ever-present fears and anxieties of residing in a border region where their livelihood is in the hands of Border Patrol” (Mares 2019: pp. 43–44).

For years, Vermont’s farmworkers have faced an unfortunate, and often violent reality where any attempt to travel off the farms where they live and work puts them at risk of detention and deportation by the Border Patrol and ICE personnel who patrol the northern U.S. border. By virtue of where they fit into what anthropologist Seth Holmes calls the “ethnicity-citizenship hierarchy”, of rural Vermont, immigrant dairy workers are hypervisible in public spaces and trips off the farm and few and far between. On March 24th, Vermont Governor issued a stay-at-home order for the entire state, which has since been extended until May 15th. For essential workers who are already used to staying at home/work, a governor’s order to “stay-at-home” clearly means something very different.

Through my ethnographic research that has focused on food security within Vermont’s immigrant farmworker community, I have borne witness to the creative and resilient ways that farmworkers access basic needs in a particularly unforgiving environment. Whether it is shopping every 2 weeks, having items delivered directly to the farm, or minimizing the time spent in grocery stores, Vermont’s farmworkers are experts at what the COVID-19 pandemic is requiring us all to do to minimize contact with the outside world as we attempt to flatten the curve. The fact that these strategies are borne out of the criminalization of immigrant workers and the structural violence that pervades our food system reminds us of the precarity of this system and those who depend on it as laborers and consumers.

Exactly how Vermont’s farmworkers will fare during and after the pandemic is still unclear. In a sense, their isolation in rural areas has delayed the spread of the virus, but with the overcrowded housing conditions that pervade the dairy industry and the significant barriers in accessing health-care that all undocumented workers face, it is not looking optimistic. Social distancing in these conditions is nearly

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impossible, and the impacts of the federal stimulus relief will not trickle down to those who need it most.

In the broadest, most globalized sense, COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the vulnerability in our political-economic systems, and the vulnerability in our food system more specifically. While restaurants are going out of business and plexi-glass enclosures for grocery workers are being constructed, Vermont's dairy farmers have dumped hundreds of thousands of gallons of milk due to an unprecedented oversupply of the state's key commodity and milk prices far below the cost of production. What this means for the farmworkers who depend on this industry remains to be seen, but it's not looking optimistic.

Reference

Mares, Teresa. 2019. *Life on the other border: farmworkers and food justice in Vermont*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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