

## Farmworkers: the new slavery

Carmen Alarcón/ EDLP | 2009-08-31 | El Diario NY



Carmen Gonzales (Foto: ALEX)

New York - Just 90 miles from the Statue of Liberty, in Sullivan County in a town called Liberty, Hispanic workers are living under similar conditions as the slaves did in the South almost 100 years ago.

About 50 immigrants who work seven days a week, live among the stench of the processing plant of Hudson Valley Foie Gras pate. Their lives pass between incubators, feeders and the slaughter of ducks cultivated to extract the liver to produce pate.

"We work 60 hours to 65 hours a week, I feed 350 ducks per month," said Carmen Gonzales, a Mexican who worked 10 years at the farm.

At Liberty, the farm-workers at the Hudson Valley Foie Gras are not entitled to a day of rest, overtime and much less to unionize. The farm produces 80% of the country's pate market.

It was not until 1994 when that then State Senator Olga Mendez, achieved passage of legislation recognizing the right to a bathrooms and potable water for these workers.

But in 2009 they are not the only ones working under these conditions. Today, 40 years after César Chávez achieved the right to organize for farmers in California.

"There are 40,000 farm-workers and nearly 40,000 permanent migrants," said Jordan Wells, campaign coordinator with Justice for Farmworkers. According to this organization, the New York State distributes five billion dollars a year in tax incentives to this industry, whose backbone are these agricultural workers.

Since 2000 the dairy industry received \$300,000,000 in federal subsidies, said Wells. However, not a penny of these incentives goes to workers who pick the fruits and vegetables, milk the cows and feed ducks or chickens we consume.

"Not giving job protection to farm-workers is a moral failure that can be remedied by passing the Farmworkers Fair Labor Practices Act (Bill of protection for agricultural workers)," said the Rev. Richard Witt, director of the Rural and Migrant Ministry, which has one million parishioners of different denominations in upstate New York.

The Farmworkers Fair Labor Practices Act, which was not approved by the Senate before the summer recess, it's been stuck for more than 15 years and has a colossal opponent: the lobby of the New York

Farm Bureau, made up of 30,000 landowners.

Justice for Farmworkers activists expect that this legislation will pass in September, when the Senate returns to session.

Wells said the bill has 28 co-sponsors in the state Senate and 17 state lawmakers are supporting legislation, which makes a total of 45 votes. The law requires 31 votes to pass.

For Carmen Gonzales, who worked 10 years at Hudson Valley Foie Gras, the biggest humiliation, on top of the poor working conditions, was the constant harassment by the plant's supervisor.

"The worst humiliation was seeing how our boss, Alfonso, made constant indecent proposals to us in exchange for more hours of work," complained Carmen, a single mother of two who came from Puebla, Mexico, when she was 15 years old.

Maura Gonzales, who spent 13 years at the same farm, said she, along with many others, endured the same harassment.

"We told the owner, Izzy, what was happening but he did not believe us. He believe him, Alfonso," said Maura.

Izzy Yanay and Michael Ginor are the owners of Hudson Valley Foie Gras.

Today their farm processes between 4,000 and 6,000 ducks and sells 7,500 tons of duck liver (pate) a week. The Foie Gras represents 42% of the meat industry in the state and generates \$250,000 annually in taxes for the IRS, according to research conducted by Shepstone Management Company for Sullivan County.

Activists denounced the industry and condemned the mistreatment of employees and the torture duck are subjected during the process force-feeding.

Ducks are fed through a tube for a period of 21 days to a month. The process ends at the slaughterhouse with the extraction of the livers.

In February 2007 the state fined New York Hudson Valley Foie Gras \$30,000 for violating environmental laws 800 times, according to the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS).

In November 2006, HSUS sued the state of New York to ban the production and sale of Foie Gras, following due in part to the fact that the state gave a grant of \$420,000 to Hudson Valley Foie Gras for expansion that same year.

Still, Hudson Valley Farm does business as usual and is part of the industry that opposes the Farmworkers Fair Labor Practices Act.

Izzy Yanay, whom Sen. Pedro Espada, D. from the Bronx, and Sate Senate Majority Leader, called to ask for a tour of the facilities, was denied access to their property. Yanay also denied the sexual harassment allegations that the senator had heard from Carmen Gonzales.

Senator Espada visited the farm, invited by members of Justice for Farmworkers, but along with reporters, was evicted from the property by the supervisor under Yanay's orders.

"The Senate will take up the Fair Labor Practices Act legislation as soon as we go into session in September and will investigate complaints of sexual harassment," said Espada.

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