

A Bittersweet Story From The Farm Front

or...The Strange Birth of Local 342

March 9, 1959

"Dear Sirs:

We the workers of Lakehurst Farms would like very much that an investigation should be made over this place where there are about 100 Puerto Rican people working 10 to 18 hours a day for only \$5.00. When we are sick they force us to work like a horse without any consideration, catching chickens from 5:30 P.M. until five the next morning for 65¢ an hour. We think if an investigator came over, we could at least get a day off weekly because we don't get a day off either. We work straight days and nights without stop. *Waiting for your cooperation as the workers defendants.*

The Lakehurst Farm Workers,
Lakewood, New Jersey."

The Lakehurst workers did not have to wait too long. A few days later, in the company of a Spanish-speaking associate, we drove past a sign saying, 'Lakehurst Farms, No Entry on Pain of Arrest,' knocked at a worker's cottage inside the compound, and asked some cautious questions.

Life at Lakehurst Farms

Three hours and seven interviews later, we had a vivid picture of this farm and its workers. Lakehurst Farms is one of the largest poultry raising complexes in New Jersey, employing 100 workers who work from 7:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M., with half an hour off for lunch, seven days a week. After the day shift, they check the hen houses, without pay. But in the hatching season, they work an additional 6 to 8 hours a night — at 65¢ an hour. Night work is compulsory.

Pay scales range from \$35 a week for about half the employees to \$50-\$65 for those who have been there several years. The demands of the workers were simple: A basic 8-hour day, higher pay for night work, and a 6-day week. Would WDL help them? They spoke no English, and couldn't help themselves.

Help Needed — Urgent

We went first to the New Jersey Department of Labor, where we received sympathy and information, but no help. There are no laws governing hours and working conditions in agriculture. We turned to the Puerto Rican Migration Division. Here too dedicated officials were thwarted by technicalities. They can help only workers brought here under government contract, which was not the case here.

We went back to the farm, sneaking past the sign at night, and delivered the bad news. If so, the workers said, there must be a union — there always was in Puerto Rico. We told them about the Agricultural Workers Union, to which WDL is very close — the tremendous area it must cover, its pitiful resources — now concentrated in an organizing drive in California. But we would talk to them and report back.

The Agricultural Union was truly interested, but had no organizers to spare.



Forbidden entry sign at Lakehurst Farms.

There was a last possibility: the regional director of the Meatcutters Union, a good friend of WDL, was concerned about the plight of farm workers. In one word, we pleaded him into undertaking the job, despite his misgivings about his union's jurisdiction. We, in turn, could scarcely refuse when the union asked us to handle community relations for the organizing drive.

Some Genteel Employer Tactics

In a week, Lakehurst Farms had a Union Committee, led by "Jose" and "Pedro." In a month, two-thirds of the workers had signed union cards. The union sent the employer a telegram requesting a representation election. In industry, which is governed by a labor relations law, the employer either agrees to an election or the union appeals to the NLRB. But in agriculture, which is exempt from federal labor law, the employer can thumb his nose at the union.

This employer did that and more: he fired Jose and Pedro for union activity. Again, this is an offense under the labor law, but perfectly legal in exempt agriculture. When, after all this, the employer also withheld two weeks' wages from the fired men, the Federal Wages and Hours' investigator paid a visit to the employer, just to check his exemption.

The employer promised to pay the back wages and then, in a totally uncharacteristic move, agreed to rehire the two rank-and-file leaders.

Strange Rumors

Now we began to hear disturbing rumors in the Lakewood area — that "Jose" and "Pedro" were rehired because they succumbed to pressure — that they had promised to cease all union activity and had signed a statement condemning the union. But at the next union meeting, the two leaders showed no change of heart. They seemed as loyal as ever. Quick action was now imperative, the Union Committee said. They voted to strike.

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Bittersweet Story

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A Defeat . . .

The strike meeting was called for May 21. When we arrived we found only one terrified Committee member. He said that "Jose" and "Pedro" had disappeared. They and their families had been moved away from the main farm in the dead of night, and no one knew where they were. But everyone knew that the strike was impossible without them. They were the keys to the union at Lakehurst Farms.

A frantic search along remote roads finally tracked them down. Now we could see a change. Once proud and courageous, they were now dispirited and evasive. They said they had been badgered, fired, rehired and finally bodily moved — and the union had not been able to prevent any of it. They were at the mercy of the employer, and they had lost their faith that it could be different.

Looking at their drawn, shamed faces, we remembered the rumors, and determined to make every effort to discover whether the employer had threatened or bribed them. But at this moment, we were concerned only about the organizing drive, and we knew it was finished. The leaders had surrendered — there would be no union at Lakehurst Farms.

And A Victory

Now, we thought, quiet defeat will descend again on the Lakewood area. Instead, there came an increasing volume of letters and phone calls from people in the community whom we had enlisted in the cause of the Lakewood workers. Many had relatives who worked on farms, and they had become convinced that farm workers needed a union. With the Spanish-speaking community in the lead, sentiment began to coalesce into action. Again, WDL was called out to New Jersey, and again we went. Finally, out of all this effort, outrage, and hope a positive entity has emerged — Local 342 of the National Agriculture Workers Union, organized by the people of central New Jersey, with the help of WDL.

Headquarters are at 209 Perry Street, Trenton, New Jersey. Unfortunately, this union does not *yet* include the workers of Lakehurst Farms.

After all those McClellan Committee headlines, we thought you'd be glad to be reminded that for many Americans a union still offers the only hope for a decent life and that, where this is true, people are still willing to expend the time, energy and shoe leather it takes to build one.