

FROM THE GROUND UP

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Organizing and Resistance in the Poultry and Hog Industries

Case Farms Settles Two-Year Lawsuit with Workers

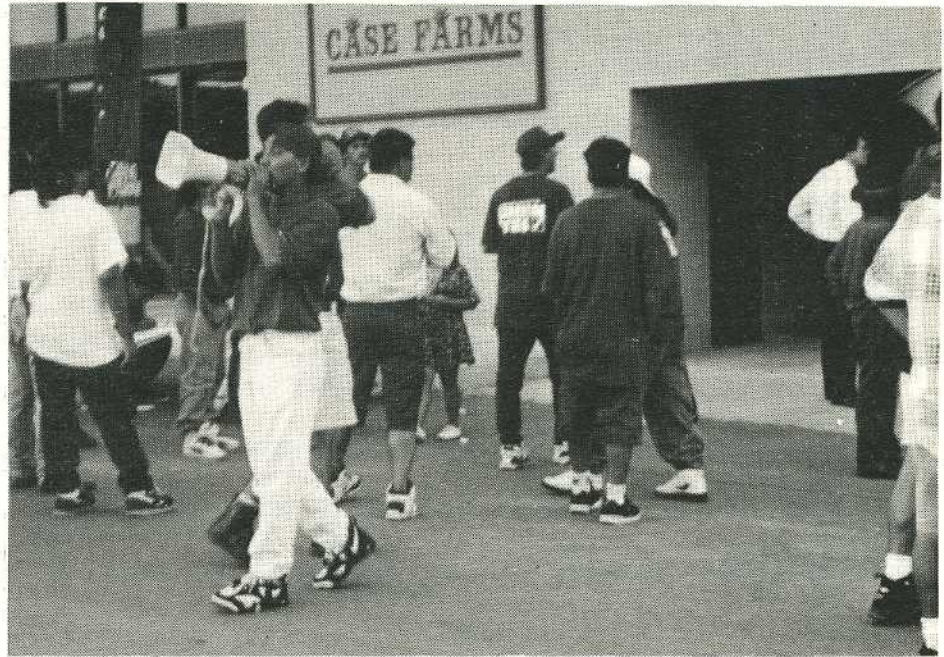
In 1996, poultry workers at the Case Farms processing plant in Morganton, NC walked off their jobs in protest of the arrest of two workers who filed grievances about their working conditions. Initially, the workers demanded that the personnel manager be fired and the arrested workers' grievances be addressed. When the company did not comply, workers requested the support of the Laborers' International Union of North America, (LIUNA) and voted in favor of unionizing that same year. The company contested the vote, prolonging the union's enactment until 1997.

Negotiations began between the workers and Case Farms in 1998, but halted in 1999 when the company called a partial lockout, cutting one day of the work week and threatening to close the plant if the union continued to operate. Case Farms then circulated a petition for workers to sign, stating that they no longer wanted to be part of the union. Felipe Lopez, LIUNA union organizer at Case Farms, says the workers, fearful for their jobs, signed the petition because they were told if they signed it the lockout would end. With the signed petitions, the company withdrew the conditions of the union; LIUNA quickly followed suit, bringing Case Farms to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) on unfair labor practice and contempt charges.

On Monday, April 2, 2001, Case Farms settled the case with the NLRB and agreed to recognize the union and negotiate with workers. The settlement, according to Lopez, can be attributed to some workers who testified as key witnesses that the company circulated the petition.

Lopez hopes that the settlement will mean positive changes for workers, starting possibly as soon as May. Since the workers have not received a raise since 1997, LIUNA expects a raise to be one of the first benefits negotiated for the workers.

Although there are no guarantees as to what Case Farms will agree, the workers' union has the strong expectation that "the company will come back to the table to negotiate in good faith." Congratulations to LIUNA and the workers at Case Farms on their success!



Case Farms workers on strike in 1996

Photo courtesy of LIUNA

Did you know?

- "Even those [hog processing] factories in full compliance with the latest laws and regulations still rely on primitive open-air waste lagoons and sprayfields to manage vast amounts of hog waste. This waste technology does not protect people or the environment when used in such high volume and concentrated in North Carolina's wet climate, sandy soils, and flat coastal region." —Hog Watch website at www.hogwatch.org
- "In 1995, research indicated that over 73 percent of poultry farmers earned a below poverty level income from their poultry operations. Many farms face bankruptcy, and families are being forced off the land." —Delmarva Poultry Justice Alliance website at www.dpja.com
- "Poultry workers prepare more birds per hour of work while hourly wages decline. On average, workers processed 190 birds per hour in 1995, up from 143 per hour in 1985. Real wages for poultry workers have fallen in the past decade, from an average of \$5.87/hr in 1987 to \$5.66/hr in 1997." —UFCW website at www.ufcw.org

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For more information or to submit articles, contact:

Student Action with Farmworkers
1317 W. Pettigrew St., Durham, NC 27705
919-660-3652; 919-681-7600 (fax)
<http://cds.aas.duke.edu/saf>
mwiggins@duke.edu

From the Ground Up Editor:

Alison Blaine
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God's Work: Educating and Mobilizing the Faith Community Around Worker Justice Issues

The mission of the North Carolina Interfaith Alliance for Worker Justice, according to Director Deborah Young, is "to educate and mobilize the faith community around worker justice issues." Formed two years ago as the North Carolina Poultry Justice Alliance, the organization has since changed its name and extended its outreach to encompass a broad range of pressing worker justice issues in North Carolina, including hog worker issues.

"In any situation where [working conditions] are not fair, just, safe and healthy is where we will organize community support through the faith community," Young affirms.

According to Young, North Carolina is more "hostile to labor organizing than any other state in the country." In addition to being a Right-to-Work state, where unions suffer because members are not required to pay dues, state laws discourage labor organizing by prohibiting public sector workers from negotiating contracts.

With a structure insufficient to safeguard workers' rights and well beings in North Carolina, the North Carolina Interfaith Alliance for Worker Justice educates, organizes and mobilizes the faith community to get involved in worker justice issues. Young holds that the responsibility faith leaders have in looking after their congregants makes them an important group to support and advance workers' rights and to cooperate with workers to obtain justice.

Currently, the NC Interfaith Alliance for Worker Justice works on four major projects, one of which focuses on educating and mobilizing faith leaders around worker justice issues in North Carolina's hog industry. According to Young, hog company "policies and actions have promoted racial discord and a lack of community harmony" among workers, farmers, plant owners and community members. Racism against migrant workers, wage and hour violations, ergonomic and worker safety concerns on hog farms and in processing plants are among the issues which faith leaders learn about through the project. Young affirms that because of such a

large and unified resistance on the part of the companies in the poultry and hog industries to address pressing worker issues, community support—both within the faith community and in the community at large—needs to be enhanced.

The Alliance also forms interfaith groups to address local worker justice issues, and coordinates the "Labor in the Pulpit" program, where workers volunteer to speak in churches on Labor Day Sunday to talk about the relationship between faith and work. Young relates that the Labor in the Pulpit is a resounding success because "whole congregations get educated" about real-life experiences of workers and about the importance of faith community involvement in labor justice issues.

Young and others are forming a statewide workers' rights alliance, which would provide a mechanism for addressing problems and issues important to workers in North Carolina. The project will create a body to serve as a sounding board for workers in places where workers' voices are not presently heard, especially in the fields and in poultry and hog processing plants. A statewide workers' rights alliance would pull together seemingly disparate groups in North Carolina, Young relates, such as factory, processing plant workers and farmworkers.

The Alliance seeks to unite worker voices through a statewide alliance and educate, organize and mobilize faith community leaders around worker justice issues. Despite existing challenges and difficulties that discourage labor organizing in North Carolina, the NC Interfaith Alliance for Worker Justice provides evidence that the worker justice movement in the state—especially in the hog and poultry industries—is gaining ground, as workers, faith leaders and community members are coming together to seek change.

For more information on the NC Alliance, contact Deb Young, Director • NC Interfaith Alliance for Worker Justice • 1556 Lamont Norwood Rd., Pittsboro, NC 27312 • P/F (919) 929-6104 • debyoungnc@aol.com

For information about Interfaith Alliances Nationwide, visit the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice's website at <http://www.nicwj.org>

North Carolina Sierra Club Pushes for Hog Industry Clean-Up

The North Carolina Sierra Club, a grassroots environmental advocacy organization and chapter of the national Sierra Club, calls for new legislation reforming the waste-management practices of the industrialized hog industry in North Carolina. Tripp Pittman, Clean Water Campaign Coordinator for the chapter and Presbyterian minister in Scotland Neck, NC explains that the practices of the hog industry are not just issues for environmentalists, but must also be addressed by worker advocates.

According to Pittman, in addition to wage and hour violations and the inability to convey grievances, workers suffer from hog companies' "bare minimum of performance standards." Workers are exposed daily to harmful pathogens, toxic fumes from open-air waste lagoons and "obnoxious odors" from the plants that often cause respiratory ailments and psychological disorders.

Although company performance standards directly affect workers, farmworker concerns were not raised at all in North Carolina's 2000 political campaigns. The NC Sierra Club endorsed now-Governor Mike Easley in the election because he devised a plan to phase-out hog waste lagoons and sprayfields, making it an important plank in his campaign platform. However, the platform neither included farmworkers in its vocabulary nor raised the issue of labor abuses by the hog industry.

As Lt. Governor, Easley secured an agreement with Smithfield Foods, owner of the world's largest hog processing plant located in Tarheel, NC. Smithfield consented to invest money in new waste-management technology and to ultimately phase-out the hog lagoons in the 250 operations it directly owns. According to Pittman, however, there are still 1800 operations with which Smithfield contracts that are not required to incorporate the new technology.

The NC Sierra Club is part of the Hog Round Table, a council of approximately 20 grassroots organizations concerned about the NC hog industry. Of all the organizations, however, there is none that focuses on worker issues related to the industry.

All individuals interested in improving conditions for workers in North Carolina's hog industry are urged to write local and state representatives and tell them how they feel. Phone calls and emails are also good, but not as effective as letters, which "make a tremendous difference," Pittman affirms.

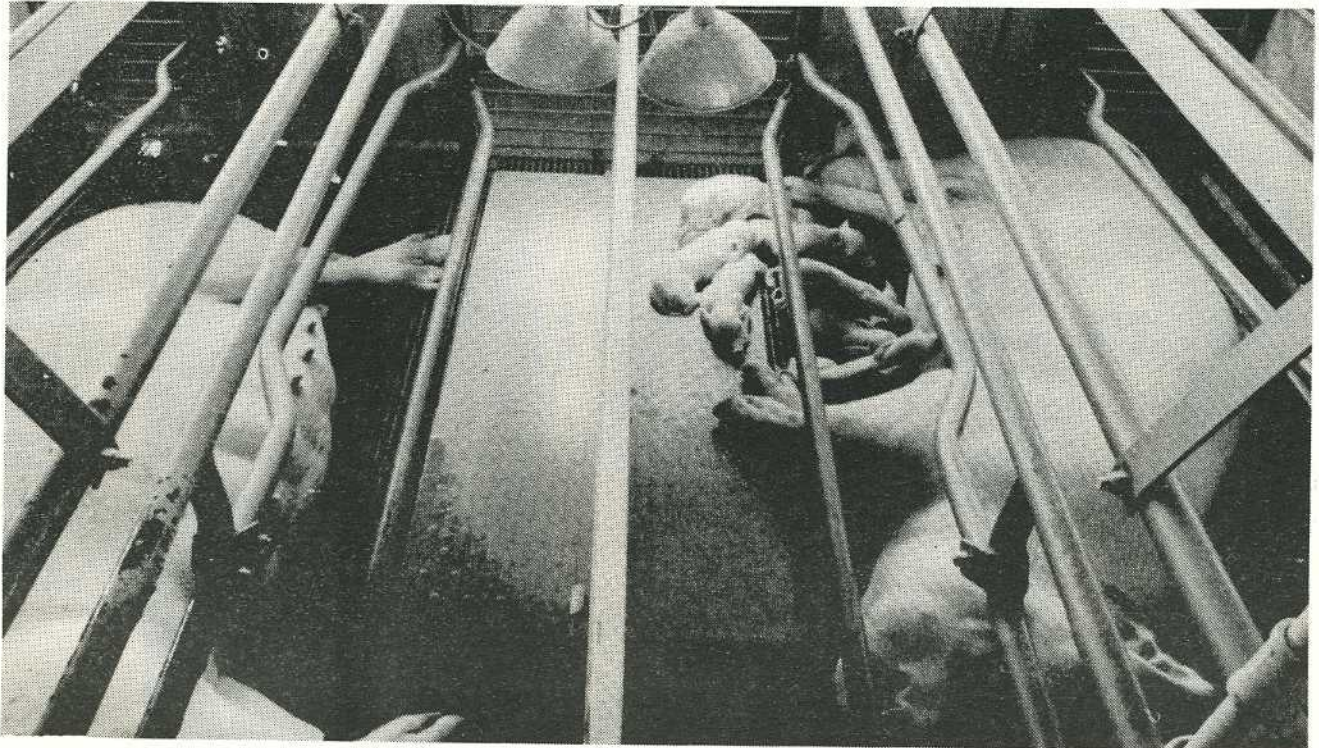
The NC General Assembly is in session until the beginning of May. Use this critical time to relate to state representatives and Governor Easley that "keeping things the way they are is not enough" to protect workers. Get involved and help influence legislation by asking legislators to ensure that the administration is vigilant in making hog companies comply with state environmental and worker safety performance standards.

Get Involved!

- ❖ **Write Governor Easley!** Contact: Governor Michael F. Easley • Office of the Governor • 20301 Mail Service Center, Raleigh, NC 27699-0301 • Fax (919) 715-3175 or (919) 733-2120

"I'm busy! What can I do?"

- ❖ **Request a draft letter** to Governor Easley. Contact: Tripp Pittman • NC Sierra Club • (252) 215-5609 • Tripp.Pittman@sierraclub-nc.org



Hog processing plant, Sampson County, North Carolina

Photo by: Chris Sims, 1994 SAF intern

