



**Farm
Labor
Organizing
Committee, AFL-CIO**

1221 Broadway Street ♦ Toledo, Ohio 43609 ♦ Phone: 419-243-3456 ♦ Fax: 419-243-5655 ♦ www.floc.com
4354 US Hwy 117 Alt. S ♦ Dudley, NC 28333 ♦ Phone: 919-731-4433 ♦ Fax: 919-731-4441 ♦ www.floc.com

April 14, 2020

From: Baldemar Velasquez, President of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO
RE: H2A Wage Rates

The Administration proposal to discuss cutting the Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR) would set a precedent in creating a regressive double standard for agricultural workers. While the nation is negotiating such things as premium pay for “essential workers” along with sick pay, payroll protections, etc., farm workers are left out of consideration. This leaves the essential worker status as meaningless, except that they are allowed into the country to fill jobs that are now under more vulnerable conditions, that the millions of now un-employed US workers will not do. This is not acceptable and we will oppose this measure with all our ability to do so! We insist that agricultural workers be considered equal to other “essential workers” and that direct attention be paid to the protections and supporting benefits being given to others.

In 2019, we were coming off the heels of numerous severe storms that damaged the tobacco, vegetable, and fruit crops, when a trade war was initiated by the Trump administration that gutted agriculture and global tobacco demand. This gave global tobacco leaf purchasers such as Alliance One and Universal Leaf a perfect opportunity to slash tobacco prices. This squeezed growers to match the low cost of tobacco from other countries with no labor protections. In this corporate drive for higher profits, family farms in the South were squeezed from both ends, leading to losing about three hundred union jobs in North Carolina and intense fights over lowered hours and employer requirements. We remain concerned that, if this trend continues, this downward spiral will accelerate in 2020 and beyond and risk thousands of agricultural jobs in North Carolina many of which are union jobs. It is important to remember that desired wage increases must be matched with a countering force to make sure that growers of tobacco, sweet potato, and other commodities receive increase prices from their buyers.

Few conversations among trade unions and worker advocacy organizations have considered regional differences from nearly year-round huge enterprises with thousands of employees that dominate the West Coast and the small family farmers that employ less than fifty workers during peak season which close for months each year in the off-season in the Midwest and South. This is an important distinction and we would welcome discussion of how public policy can recognize this.

For this reason, our union has taken the position that the first priority of worker advocacy has to be to push for more organizing and real freedom of association in agriculture throughout the country. This would ensure that workers on the front lines have a vehicle and a collective/unified voice to make sure that any legislative effort actually reaps benefits for workers, not just standards that are randomly if at all enforced. Secondly, we believe that through worker/public pressure or through legislation, there must be some reigning in of agricultural purchasers, to include them in the economic analysis, impacting and compelling them to be part of solutions to worker exploitation on the wage front. If we know that a minimum wage in agriculture is crucial to support workers, there needs to be a parallel effort for minimum price structures and procurement policies among global corporations, such as manufacturers, grocery chains, giant retailers, restaurant chains, food production, and

tobacco manufacturers. If farm workers deserve a sustainable wage, then small farmers with labor intensive crops that are suppliers to large companies deserve a sustainable price.

For decades, our union has sought to bring purchasers of agricultural commodities to the table, understanding that agricultural growers who are suppliers have exactly zero influence over the pricing of their commodities and hence the profit margins available to split with workers through pay and benefits. While we often have serious differences on day-to-day operations, we believe that in order to both guarantee good fair working conditions and job security, agricultural employers need to receive fair treatment from both government policy and multi-national procurement systems to avoid a win-lose political battle that whipsaws back and forth depending on which politician controls the White House. Any discussion of changes in the AEW must include this aspect as a more far-reaching solution

It is for these reasons that we encourage a global view of agriculture and an advocacy that takes into account the different realities throughout geographical regions and seeks to find compromise through leveraging everything we can, including direct support to growers during a trying time.

We can't go back to the old double standards of the 50's when there was a different minimum wage for farm workers and the rest of the nation and as a fallback, the old Bracero Program. At this moment, when few workers have an ability to protect their union jobs, conditions and wages, the rest are left to the mercy of those in power to dictate their fate. We must find a way to engage the wealthy corporations that control our food supply. We have to stop asking for just the scraps of food from global food systems while they continue to reap all the benefits of farmworkers' blood sweat and tears that we leave on the soil.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Baldemar Velasquez", followed by a horizontal line.

Baldemar Velasquez, President