Machines Pick On U.F.W.

By Susan Stern
Pacific News Service

California's farmworkers, riding the crest of political success, ironically may have won themselves right out of their jobs.

Though they have triumphed in the long and often bloody battle for unionization, defeated the mighty Teamsters in contract disputes, and reaped major workers' benefits from the government, a new and more formidable opponent has entered the fray; the mechanical harvester.

California growers are discovering that the new machines not only are cheaper than the union wage demands, but also that they don't go on strike.

As the tomato harvest begins this month, some 11,300 California farmworkers will be replaced by electronic tomato sorters, according to the state Assembly Office of Research.

In the next 10 years, mechanical harvesters will replace 80,000 farmworkers - nearly a third of the state's current agricultural labor force - predicts United Farm Workers (UFW) lobbyist Michael Linfield.

In five major California crops, mechanization is already underway, eliminating jobs and drastically changing the face of farm labor from that of men in the fields to one of women on assembly lines.

In some crops, such as wine grapes and cling peaches, mechanization (where adopted) has eliminated virtually all harvest workers but the machine operators. In other crops, the machines have taken over in stages.

The mechanization of Califronia agriculture began when the mechanical tomato harvester was introduced in 1964, the year cheap labor dried up with the termination of the Bracero program that allowed Mexicans to cross the border to fill out the farm labor force.

In five years the tomato harvester displaced 32,000 pickers but created almost as many jobs for tomato sorters working on the machine. The tomato pickers had been mostly strong men paid by the piece rate. The sorters have been nearly 80 percent women, preferred for their dexterity and paid by the hour.

Though the California Canning Tomato Association predicts that the new electronic sorters will sweep the state within 4 to 5 years, human and electronic sorters will share the harvesting this year.

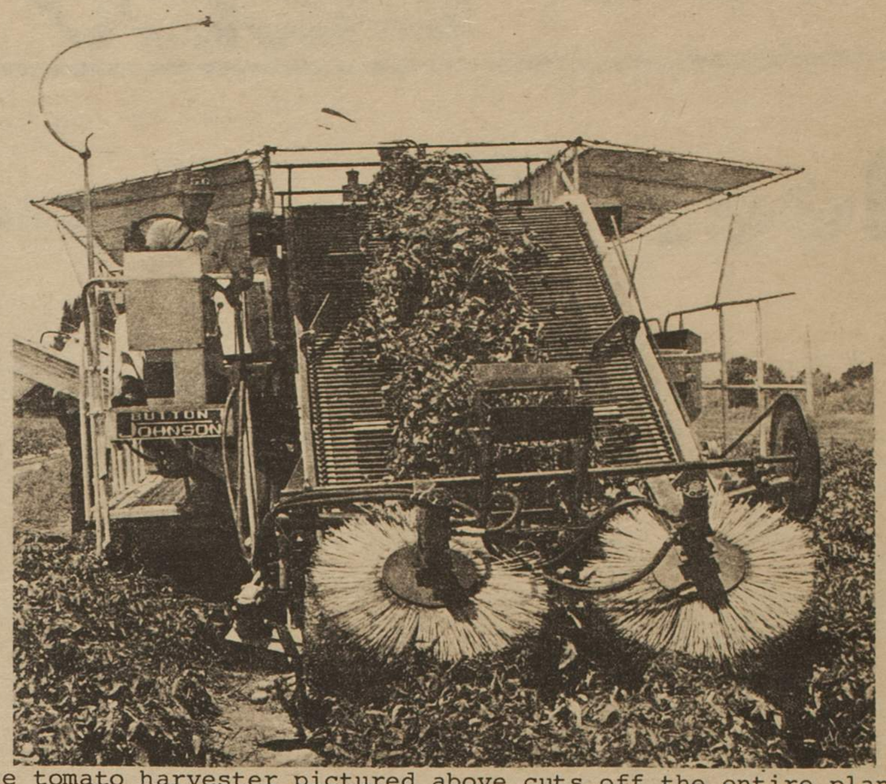
About half the harvesters, those still not equipped with electronic sorters, will roll into the fields this month with 20 human sorters standing immobile on the narrow catwalks for 14 hours at a time, day and night, separating the green and rotten fruit from the canning product.

Though some have blessed the tomato harvester for ending "back-breaking" labor, others say the machine has brought the worst of the factory into the fields.

"Working conditions on the machine are horrendous," says Albert Rojas of Campesinos Progresistas, a farmworker re-training organization in Yolo County, the state's leading tomato area. "You have to scream to be heard over the noise," says Rojas, "and the dust mixed with defoliants blows directly into workers' faces."

However unpleasant, the sorting job will soon fade into memory. The only person on the harvester will be the driver.

Mechanization of lettuce is to follow in short order. However, unlike tomato workers, lettuce workers are unionized and will, according to UFW contracts ,be re-trained and placed in other jobs by growers.



The tomato harvester pictured above cuts off the entire plant and lifts it onto a rubber-covered shaker bed where the fruit is shaken off the plant. Its use requires the development of tomato varieties that mature evenly, separate easily from the vine, and are resistant to bruising. But what about flavor?

There are currently no lettuce machines in the fields, but Leslie Hubbard of the Western Growers Association predicts that lettuce picking will be fully mechanized within 4 or 5 years as the machines become cheaper than people.

If workers demand higher wages in the near future, they may tip the scales even further in the machine's direction, and accelerate the mechanization process.

Lettuce mechanization began, Linfield points out, when growers gave the University of California $13,500 for development of the technology after Cesar Chavez led 8,000 Salinas Valley workers out on strike in 1970.

But the UFW doesn't plan to allow mechanization to winnow its workers down to "stability" even if the survivors are easier to unionize. "you don't end up with much of a union with a couple of thousand workers scattered around the state," says the UFW's Linfield. "The problem is, what becomes of the mass of workers who are displaced?"

The UFW is preparing for future job losses by continuing to organize workers and negotiate mechanization-controlling contracts.

But the union's main thrust, says Linfield, will be directed toward halting state funded mechanization research through legislation to require "social impact reports."

Though fighting mechanization is one of the UFW's main priorities, the union is just gearing up for the battle. The state's tomato workers, meanwhile, are nearly at the end of their rope.

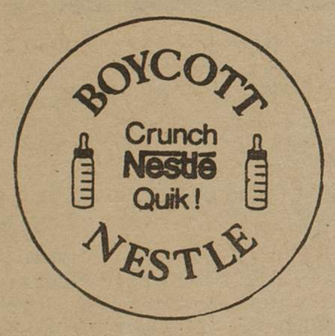
When the tomato harvesters roll this month, many families will be left behind in migrant camps, without food or enough money to leave.

In Yolo County, officials are desperately trying to get emergency funds from the state, but they have so far been unsuccessful - no one seems to have funds for this type of disaster.

Jime Aragon, a young Arizonian who was displaced last year, recently returned to Yolo County again because the prospects for work were even drearier at home. "If I can't get work in tomatoes," he says, "I will go to the city, any city, to find a job."

PERO JOINS BLACKLIST

We have recently learned that Pero coffee substitute is imported solely by the Nestle company. Many people are now aware that Nestle is the object of a nationwide boycott. The boycott was prompted by the discovery that Nestle marketing of infant formula is directly responsible for widespread malnutrition and death among infants in underdeveloped countries. (Public Notice, January 1978)



Due to results of a survey conducted earlier this year, the Community Mercantile has stopped carrying Jarlsburg cheese, and Kavli crackers in compliance with the boycott. Pero will now be added to that list. We have found Fjordland cheese to be an excellent substitute for Jarlsburg and will now look for a replacement for Pero on our shelves. (A coffee substitute substitute?)

HERBS TO THE RESCUE

by Kate Duffy

Chiggers love me, not to mention mosquitos and fleas. In the summer, my legs and arms usually look like a battleground and I'm on the losing side.

One night I couldn't stand the itching anymore. I boiled some water and grabbed a handful of various herbs I had in the house and steeped them (just like making tea). Pouring them into some cool bath water, I saved a handful of the herbs and put them in my washcloth. I put a rubber band around the cloth to hold the herbs in. After soaking for ten minutes, my skin not only stopped itching, but smelled like a garden too. Try it and see. Here's a list of herbs I tried:

Lemon grass
Chamomile
Comfrey
Peppermint

Taking an herbal bath daily will probably speed your healing process. Try your own recipes and send them to Public Notice.

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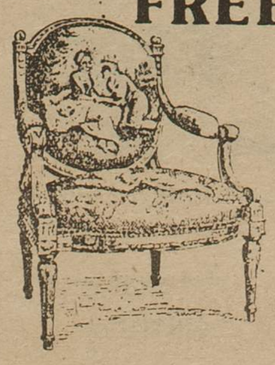
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