**Lesson Activity 1: Historical Context Lesson: Farmworkers**

Reading: **The Farmworker in Historical Context**

The modern farmworker is unique not only when taking into account the importance of their work, the nature of their labour, and wage and working conditions but when we also consider the totality of their lifestyle. Their labour and the product of their labour (our food) are both arguably undervalued in Canada. What product could be more important in our lives? What labour could be more significant? Yet farmworkers labour for historically low pay, and often abysmal working and living conditions. Yet what do we know about them? Who or what is a “farmworker?” Exactly what work does he or she do? How do they make a living in the winter? Are farmworkers truly “Canada’s forgotten workers?”

Legally, a farmworker is someone who works in a farming, ranching, orchard, or agricultural operation. They are hired to help grow or pick crops, cultivate land, or raise animals, or do general work on a farm. They clean, size, grade, box, or package fruits, vegetables, or other crops. Farmworkers do not process food products, breed pets, work in forestry, aquaculture, or in a retail nursery, or work as a landscape gardener.

The modern farmworker movement (the attempt to organize themselves into unions) began in 1965 in California among Mexican-American workers. Thousands of these workers were arrested and many injured in the California Grape Strike of 1973 when grape growers attempted to crush the orchard workers attempts to unionize. The struggle is documented in the classic film, *Children in the Fields*, freely available online.

In British Columbia, many of farmworkers in Fraser Valley farms are Indo-Canadian. Their numbers grew from fewer than 500 in 1970 to 5,000 in 1978, and 28,000 workers in 1994. For much of this time, BC farmworkers laboured without most major laws that covered other forms of work. For example, they were not protected from by the Annual and General Holidays Act, Hours of Work Act, Employment Agencies Act., Factories Act, Maternity Protection Act, Payment of Wages Act, Truck Act, nor the Minimum Wage Act.

From the 1960s through the 1980s farmworkers in British Columbia struggled with poor wages and working conditions. They were paid “piece work”, for example, by weight (“by the pound or kilogram”), or by the crate, and without the safety net of a guaranteed Minimum Wage under the Employment Standards Act of BC. They toiled at back-breaking “unskilled” work in tough outdoor environment, sometimes without access to toilets or drinking water, characteristically labouring well beyond the eight hour day to come home to sometimes inadequate or shabby housing with poor sanitation. There were also complaints of unsafe transportation conditions. In 1997, a poorly equipped and overloaded vehicle commonly used to transporting farmworkers crashed near Abbotsford killing three workers. Add to that the historical fact most of the farmworkers of the Fraser Valley were Sikh immigrants from India, particularly from the Punjab region, and we can understand them as largely excluded from much of the mainstream society they continue to serve. Throughout the 1970s farmworkers joined together to fight for the rights other BC workers enjoyed. The Canadian Farmworkers’ Union was formed on April 6, 1980. Keep in mind most farmworkers were Sikhs who have a long history of resistance and fighting for rights.

Hearing of “migrant workers”, non-Indigenous British Columbians might recall their own immigrant pasts when Italians, Greeks, and Portuguese, for example, sojourned to Canada as a “mission”: to make money and return to the homeland. British Columbians might call to mind hundreds of thousands of Mexicans migrating routinely into California fields. Quite likely, we have heard the controversy of Chinese coal miners migrating into northern British Columbia because a mining company was unable to recruit Canadian miners. But how many of us consider the fact that Mexican workers migrate seasonally, not only into the United States, but into our own province? In 2011, for example, half of approximately 500 seasonal workers hired by a single employer, Coral Beach Farms, in Kelowna, B.C were from Mexico. Because of the number of injuries sustained by these workers, WorkSafe BC has initiated an awareness, injury claims, and safety program which is currently in place in twenty-nine Mexican provinces.

Despite gaining greater protection as workers, farmworker labour remains difficult. In 1993, occupational health and safety legislation began to protect farmworkers against the spraying of pesticides. For example, new regulations meant the law now demanded machinery be operated in a safe manner and that an adequate supply of drinking water is always available. A year later, the Canadian Farmworkers’ Union Survey of 500 farmworkers illustrated the traditional dimensions of their labour. In 1994, of the 340 individuals who responded to the Survey, 88% worked in the Abbotsford area, 90% spoke Punjabi as their first language; and,

50% worked 9-10 hours on average

20% worked 13-14 hours on average

36% were not paid every two weeks in accordance with the law but at end of season

23% had no washroom facilities at their workplace

34% had no drinking water available

58% did not know where the First Aid kit was located

42% did not have a “basic knowledge of pesticides”

26% reported being sent into fields that had just been sprayed

64% were not aware of the Workers Compensation Board (now WorkSafe BC) which ensured workers were paid if injured in workplace accidents

*Compiled by Tony Aruda*

The Farmworker in Historical Context

Name: Class:

Answer the questions after viewing the Farmworkers vignette and reading the article provided.

1. Who are the “farmworkers?” Include any observations you have made.

2. What is distinctive about their work? (for example, compare it to work in a store, restaurant, or factory)

3. List and explain any two negative aspects (ideas or facts) you encountered in the reading.

(aspect)

(explanation)

(aspect)

(explanation)

4. Why have farmworkers found it difficult to organize into unions?

According to the ***sources*** (refer to a specific source)...

In **my *opinion*** farmworkers have found it difficult to organize because…

5. Based on the reading and the viewing of the vignette; here is a question we could discuss further in class:

6. For further investigation: Individually, or as a class, go online to the Employment Standards Act of British Columbia and make a list of three regulations governing farm or agricultural workers in B.C. Then provide a short 100-150 word paragraph summing up on what you have discovered on this topic.

7. Vocabulary. You should be familiar with the following terms. Explain each in point form.

Farmworker

Working conditions

Piece work

Union movement

Migrant worker