**Lesson: Farmworkers**

**Lesson Activity 2: Perspectives and Points of View**

***Read the following narratives (next page). Choose one of two questions to answer***.

1. Your task is to assume the role of a reporter writing a 150-200 word opinion piece for your local newspaper. Your editor has told you that she wants the title to read: “Bitter Harvest.” In your story you should explain to Canadians why farmworkers pick a “bitter harvest.” Suggest two or three problems faced by farmworkers and offer at least one solution.

2. On a separate sheet of paper, prepare and complete an organizer (example below) which asks you to summarize various viewpoints in farmworker struggle (point form detail).

***Farmworkers’ Viewpoints (list)***  ***Farmers’ Viewpoints (list)***

***My viewpoint:***

**Narratives:**

"Farmworkers are Canada's forgotten workers. They work in the fields and harvest the crops that feed us. They work in slave-like conditions for 12-14 hours a day and are paid piece rate. They travel in overcrowded buses to the fields or live in converted chicken coops. Many suffer chronic health problems because of exposure to pesticides during every working day." *(Canadian Farmworkers’ Union spokesman Charan Gill, June, 1994)*

"This year we harvest strawberries, raspberries, apples and peaches - in years to come our people will harvest a different kind of harvest - a bitter harvest this time, a harvest of tumors and of birth defects, a harvest of sickness, a harvest of death. We work in the fields reaping two harvests, the sweet harvest that is found on your tables and the bitter harvest that is our daily life...We immigrants who till the soil and harvest the crops of Canada came to this country because we believed it would be a land of opportunity, justice and equality. We came here with great dreams. We have seen the seeds of those dreams grow into a bitter, bitter harvest. A harvest of poverty, a harvest of sickness, a harvest of death. "(R*aj Chouhan in a speech to the Canadian Human Rights Commission, Jan. 19, 1982).*

"There’s no reason the union has to get militant or anything like that. We’re all willing to improve conditions. But at the same time, we’re not willing to lose that freedom by having a union on the farm and having one man dictate to you and having one man control all your labour. The way it works right now is a free-enterprise system where the farmers can hire whichever contractor they feel like or the contractor can go to whichever farm he wants and the people can work for any contractor they want. It’s a very happy-go-lucky thing and if you’re being mistreated some place, you can go to another one." *(Murray, a farmer who became president of the B.C Strawberry Growers' Association presents the farmers’ viewpoint in the 1982 documentary film A Time to Rise.)*

Repeated studies have identified a high percentage of farmworkers' children accompanying their parents into the fields, sometimes to work, sometimes to play. Child labour, exposure to pesticides and the lack of accessible daycare have been prime targets of the CFU *(Zindabad! a History of the Canadian Farmworkers’ Union)*

"These kids want all the protection of a working man - the compensation and the Unemployment Insurance. When I was a kid picking berries, I never got no gas allowance, no compensation, or anything like that. You don't need compensation to pick berries. I've never heard of anybody yet straining their back picking berries. It's not the best job in the world, but it's a good job for kids to learn how to work for somebody else." (*Farmer Martin Smith in the 1982 documentary A Time to Rise. Cited in Zindabad!)*

"Why is it that immigrants end up in low paying jobs on farms or in sweatshops? It is no accident. Why is it that many times these workers are excluded from even basic labour standards legislation? Why is it that even if they are covered with some legislation, it is not enforced? This is no accident. This is what I would call institutionalized forms of racism.”*(CFU Organizer Sarwan Boal in a speech to the Montreal Farmworkers' Support Committee, December 1981, cited in Zindabad!)*

"English may be my second language," Boal said, "but I know the difference between Must and Should, Will and May. Whenever the proposal protects the rights of pesticide manufacturers or agribusiness, the wording says Must and Will. Whenever the proposal safeguards farmworkers, the wording says Should or May." (*Zindabad!)*

“Accidents caused by unsafe vehicles have continued. In 1991 a converted school bus carrying 18 farmworkers lost its rear axle and four wheels and flipped on the Alex Fraser Bridge. The crash sent 11 people to hospital. In 1992, a van carrying 18 farmworkers in Abbotsford blew a tire and flipped, landing near the Sumas River Bridge. All but one of the people in the van were injured, some with serious spinal and head injuries. Police at the scene said some of the workers would probably have drowned if the van had rolled into the river. On Nov. 4, 1994, three farmworkers were killed when the van they were being taken to work in crashed north of Hope. There were 16 people jammed into the van at the time and police said the investigation was hampered by difficulties in getting even basic information like the victims' names from the grower.

During the 1994 harvest season, the RCMP and the B.C. Motor Vehicle Branch set up roadblocks to check out vans and buses carrying farmworkers headed for strawberry fields. A Vancouver Sun columnist present reported that the van she saw stopped had holes in the floorboards, exhaust fumes where the passengers sat, a horn that didn’t work and a loose battery as well as other problems. The van was towed away, leaving the farmworkers to wait by the side of the highway hoping to get picked up by the contractor. A representative from the labour ministry said that sometimes the contractors never show up. More than one third of the vehicles stopped and checked were condemned on the spot and towed away.” (Zindabad!)