

Immigrant Farmworkers In Northeast Agriculture

Life, Labor Conditions, and Organizing for Change

Dairy farming occupies a special place in the U.S. agrarian imaginary, often associated with pastoral tranquility, family values, and laboring close to nature. However, the contemporary U.S. dairy farming sector bears little resemblance to these Jeffersonian ideals. After decades of industrial consolidation, fewer and fewer small family farms with grazing cattle dot the landscape. In their wake are large-scale automated facilities operating around the clock to milk hundreds—even thousands—of cows, multiple times a day. Increasingly, undocumented migrant workers from rural areas of southern Mexico and Guatemala have been hired to fill these undesirable, underpaid, dangerous, and exhausting milking parlor jobs.



Michael Daldier/Reuters

This special section focuses on the lives of men, women, and teenagers who traveled from southern Mexico to seek better opportunities on the isolated dairy farms of Upstate New York and Vermont. The first article shows how neoliberal policies in the North American food system have driven smallholder Mexican farmers from their land and into waged dairy farm labor in *El Norte*. The second explores the daily lives of women farmworkers, who work long hours while also struggling to achieve food security for their children. The third analyzes the unique vulnerabilities of unaccompanied youth on dairy farms, who have no parental figure to help them adapt to a socially hostile environment.

A labor activist and former dairy farmworker shares in a fourth article his moving personal experience of why “unfortunately, when I got to New York, everything would be different from what I expected.” In fact, as discussed in the eye-opening fifth article, the northeastern dairy sector is no stranger to the serious crime of human trafficking; however, the political unpalatability of offering protection to undocumented migrants leads policy-makers to turn a blind eye to some of the worst forms of labor exploitation. The sixth and final piece explores in depth the fine line between support and control in paternalistic dairy farm labor systems and the work of the Cornell Farmworker Program in helping resolve tensions in these relationships.

All the contributors strive for social change through their research and outreach work in the northern borderlands of the U.S. It is a lonely landscape, but dairy farmworkers are not alone. The stories of activism and solidarity in the following pages inspire action and the belief that a better future lies ahead.

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