

BUILDING JUSTICE PODCAST



CRISJ Building Justice Podcast

Season **S2**, Episode **24**: “Why Don’t Farmworkers’ Lives matter?”

Moderator: Manuel Barajas

Guests: Dr. Ann Lopez

Please note: This transcript may be imperfect. Please contact Manuel Barajas (mbarajas@csus.edu) directly should you have questions.

Music lyrics:

Company under construction, the function, justice for the human family we demand it. Justice, true freedom, equality is a must. Thus, decolonization of the planet. So bust this. People be the power now we’re Building Justice. Pulling out divinations, now we’re Building Justice. Welcome the planet to the Podcast, “Building Justice,” “Building Justice,” “Building Justice.” Building is to add on, or to do away with.

Welcome to **Building Justice**, a podcast by Sacramento State’s [Center on Race, Immigration and Social Justice \(CRISJ\)](#) . We explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world.

My name is Manuel Barajas, a Professor of Sociology and co-founder of CRISJ, and I’m here with Dr. Ann Lopez who is the founder of the Center for Farmworker Families and who will be talking about “Why Don’t Farmworkers’ Lives matter?”

Before we begin, I would like to acknowledge the land on which Sacramento State resides. Sacramento is located on the Indigenous lands of the Miwok, Maidu, and Nisenan people. We honor their struggle for a better future in a world that has been impacted by colonialism and that has stolen, exploited, and destroyed human lives and environments. In solidarity with indigenous people across the Americas, we hope this podcast provides you knowledge and motivation to collaboratively work for social and environmental justice.

Welcome Dr. Ann Lopez! Can you share with us a little about who you are?

ANN

1:50 Thank you for inviting me to be here with you today. I am very happy to be here and to enlighten people about farmworkers and their struggles. As regard to who I am, I am the director and founder of the Center for Farmworker Families.

2:08 We incorporated in 2012 as a non-profit, and got into this business after doing a Ph.D. in environmental science at UC Santa Cruz. And I studied the impact of the North American Free Trade Agreement on farms on west central Mexico, and I learned a lot about neoliberalism capitalism, and NAFTA represents a quintessential trade agreement in the neoliberal economy, which is based on deregulation, privatization, getting rid of public services, and if people can't make it in the economy you blame them. And of course, we see that with the homeless populations and also with farmworkers.

3:00 And as far as deregulations goes, I found out very recently that 80 percent of Americans who have been tested have glyphosate or round up in their urine.

3:15 So that means most of us in this country are carrying this herbicide, which is an implicated in many cases of cancer, specifically non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in our body, and of course, farm workers are almost continually exposed to this far more workers also are blamed for coming here for wanting to seek a better life for not following immigration law. All kinds of blame, and once they get here, we think we have about around 400,000 farm workers in the State.

3:59 However, we can't know, really, because we know that 60 to 83% of them are undocumented and we're forced off their farms in Mexico by NAFTA to come here, as what I call economic refugees of NAFTA

4:21 and when they get here they live with poverty poor nutrition, unhealthy living environments. They have no health insurance. Their houses are crowded, and Rick Mines up at UC Davis, claims that they'd be much healthy if they just stayed in Mexico, that the longer they're in California, the sicker they get.

4:48 So I learning all of this, I recall very vividly typing the last page of my dissertation in 2002, and sitting at my computer and having a sort of epiphany, because I had planned to go to a 4 year institution continue teaching I have

a long teaching career at the college level and doing research. But what I realized after finishing the dissertation was that I needed to do something about this and out of that came the Center for Farmworker Families, and one of our main goals is to inform the public of the unjust circumstances of this population of people on who's lives.

5:45 Most of us are absolutely dependent on who's lives. Without farmworkers the entire industrial food system would collapse.

5:54 Yes.

MANUEL

6:00 Wow! So essentially, the people who feed the state and the nation remain in very impoverished conditions. What chains them to the fields?

ANN

6:20 There? Well, there is a concept called agricultural exceptionalism.

That keeps farm workers from having the advantages that were bestowed on workers from the National Labor Relations Act (1935).

6:40 Also the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938), and what I've observed over my years of study is that just about everything is done to keep farm workers in these slave-like conditions, a case in point is the 50 mile regulation in the States 24 Migrant camps. It was policy and a regulation in the past that when farm workers came to the camp, usually in April, they could get a unit to live in.

7:16 It's the only decent affordable housing available to them that I know of, at least in the area of Santa Cruz County, and then they would have to leave by the end of November. But the key is that they would have to move at least 50 miles away.

7:34 Now, what by doing this and taking their families, their children would have to go to at least 2 different schools, and over time, of course, the children would fall further and further behind, and their studies, and then eventually drop out and in Santa Cruz County that meant that they themselves would become farm workers or they would join the gangs in Watsonville, and I and a couple full of attorneys and other people, decided this was unacceptable.

8:11 We worked 9 years to get rid of the fifty-mile regulation, and finally got rid of it about 3 years ago. I have asked in Sacramento, on numerous occasions and trips, what is the purpose of the 50 Mile Regulation, and no one to date has given me an answer, and I learned recently that they're going to rescind this this this regulation pause basically in January 2024, so we're working with Anna Caballero in Salinas to get it reinstated.

8:52 So this is one example of keeping farm workers quote in their place and

keeping their children from becoming educated, and almost every farm worker I've ever talked to wants nothing more than their kids to become educated and out of farm work so basically we're stealing this opportunity from them with the fifty-mile Regulation associated with the migrant camps.

9:21 And there's many more of these types of regulations.
and I think it all stems back to the South and slavery.

9:33 When California was destined to become a slave State, and then, with the Emancipation Proclamation, it was no longer legal to own human beings, like the plantation owners did so rather than have to own human beings, you create all these laws, policies, regulations and exceptions, etc. to keep them in their place, and from which escape is nearly impossible.

10:02 And so you ask why farm workers, farm workers are in the bad situation they're in. We need them in that situation in order to maintain a farming system that it's in itself is unjust, unsustainable, and has basically a failed system.

10:29 If you look at the players in the current farming system, industrial farming system, starting... with farm workers, I mean, they are at the bottom of the heap. They're they're getting the worst end of the deal but even the grower in the neoliberal economy if they start growing strawberries in Taiwan and they're cheaper than the ones that are grown, say in Santa Cruz County, where we have a huge strawberry industry. Then Taiwan can send their strawberries over to Watsonville and undermine the growers source of income and put the grower out of business.

11:13 So even the growers are, would have a hard time in this economy, and if you look at the consumers, none of us know what we're eating on our food, even if we eat organic produce, if there's a field, nearby, in which they're using agrochemicals that drift 7 miles, say, the food you're eating that's quote organic may have those chemicals, and when you eat the food you have no idea what they're going to do to your body.

11:44 Hence we have 80% of Americans tested with glyphosate in their urine in their body. And then, if you look at the environment, it's absolutely disgraceful.

11:56 We are poisoning the world, we have lost two-thirds of all the wild animals on this planet since 1970.

12:07 This is completely unsustainable, and beyond that, excuse me, the industrial farming system produces 30 to 40% of greenhouse gases.

Again, it's a failed system. It needs transformation both in the way and manners of that the farming process is done and also in the way it treats its workers.

MANUEL

12:34 Seems like... it is a very pathological system that produces food.
Why is it so difficult to change it? What are the factors? It's hurting everybody,
including the growers, especially the farm workers?

12:52 Why is it so difficult to transform this pathological system?

ANN

12:59 I think the main reason is because the agrochemical companies are making huge profits, and to give you an example, ... Now catch this, the Environmental Protection Agency has an agency under it called the Department of Pesticide Regulation, and this entity is supposed to regulate pesticides so that they're not harmful to people or the environment.

13:34 However, their funding comes from the agro-chemical companies, so the incentive, then, is to promote the sale of agro-chemicals to fund the department of Pesticide Regulation.

13:50 It's a huge conflict of interest, and I'm just shocked and surprised.
Still today that this is even legal in this State.

MANUEL

14:00 Wow! So it is legalized oppression.

ANN

14:04 Yes! Yes, it's legalized to oppression under the agro-chemical companies.
That's exactly what it is.

MANUEL

14:11 The harm is affecting everybody consumers
ANN everybody.

MANUEL

The environment... Species of all kinds.

ANN

14:20 Everybody, everybody. Yes, and you know pardon me, yes, that's why we're losing species. We're poisoning the planet. Yeah? And then you know, the most of the most impacted are farm workers.

14:33 They are the most exposed to these horrible pesticides, and quite frankly, I can't even talk about it without getting angry, but I have met too many farm worker families with children, with at least one child, if not more of anomalies related to pesticide exposure in the Watsonville area: cancer, leukemia, adhd, autism spectrum syndrome, birth defects, learning disabilities when their parents want them to become educated.

15:11 All of these factors are increased in the children. So basically, we're stealing

their future and throwing them under the bus. They're not treated. This would never happen in a wealthy white community. This is environmental racism.

MANUEL

15:30 The systemic, institutional exploitation of these people is very obvious. They're experiencing extreme poverty levels. They create tremendous amounts of wealth, yet they get very little to nothing. [Yet] they get a lot of health illnesses like you said, cancer, disabilities of all types. So why are they not getting the attention from the larger public?

ANN

16:03 I think that attention is beginning to grow. I remember when I had my epiphany, I realized that I had been teaching at the college level for many years, and I was equipped to be a speaker and go out and inform the public which I have been doing, and as I have spread the word more and more people are spreading, the word, and there's more demands being made. And I notice in the Legislature there's more bills being passed that potentially can benefit farm workers.

16:37 However, I think the ultimate solution has to be the transformation of industrial agriculture to organic regenerative, agricultural practices, and more of a cooperative employment situation where farm workers have a chance to actually improve their lives rather than being kept in horrendous poverty, and when I say horrendous poverty, I'm talking about 19 people living in less than a 1,000 square feet, I've seen, and they tell me that they have to line up in the morning to use the one bathroom in the facility. So when you ask the question, why don't farm workers lives matter? For all these reasons, this is no way to treat human beings.

MANUEL

17:01 Ann, can you tell us a little bit about the demographics of these farm workers? Who are they? Where do they come from? Are they replacing other people from farm labor historically, or these people who have historically been defined as just, you know, sources of, sources of exploitable labor.

ANN

17:24 Well, yes, basically. And there has been a historical replacement of one ethnic group after the other. We had Chinese labors for a period of time.

17:41 They were replaced by Japanese laborers. Those Japanese labors brought their knowledge of farming from Japan, and many of them have become very successful growers.

17:51 There's been a group there's been a Hindu community of farm workers. There's the Filipinos, and now we have the Mexican workers, and I think they probably been around for one of the longer periods of time.

18:09 In the central coastal California area where I work; many of the farm workers are from Oaxaca. I have met, I mean there are hundreds of them.

18:27 They're all hiding. They're either hiding where they're living or they're hiding on the farm wherever they're working. You don't see them in groups in in the plaza, for instance, and they live with this onus of constant fear of deportation and having their families deported.

18:46 So the Oaxacan population is huge, and then we have earlier arrivals mostly from Michoacán, Jalisco, and some from Colima West Central Mexico. Of the Oaxacan population, we have... Mixteco, Zapoteco, and some Triqui,... So at least where I live that's the demographics.

19:23 We do monthly distributions of food, household goods, clothing.

We have an acupuncturist. We have a masseuse, we have a chiropractor, we have various services, and we do this work in an alleyway, so farm workers who are not documented can more or less hide. They're not on a Major street, in other words, so.

MANUEL

19:53 ANN I'm sorry to interrupt you. I want to get to your center in a little bit.

But before that we were talking about the ethnic replacement of various ethnicities working in the fields originating from colonized labor, forced migrants from Africa for centuries across the Americas. And then you bring attention to the end of the Civil War, how there were recruitments of Chinese brought to work in the fields and rail roads, later Japanese, Filipinos, Asian Indians, and so on. But you mentioned Mexicans as being continuous across time.

20:34 And one thing that I want to bring attention to is the at the term Mexican is a nationality, and that a 100 years ago, Manuel Gamio, Paul Taylor, and many other scholars of that historical period of the thirties would refer to these Mexican migrants as largely Indigenous people and mestizos; and so these are communities that like now they're being displaced by neoliberalism as you mentioned earlier.

21:10 That is, their ability to produce for themselves has been squashed by the global economy that suppresses their diversified crops—chiles, tomatoes, calabacitas, squash, corn, etc.—to the [large scale] mono production of one crop. And so that forces them into migration, so we've seen these historical dislocations. And so, in a way, the ethnic replacement thesis seems like it's been happening, but there's, you know, there's specific racialized people who appear to have continued to be the main

source of labor, Caribbeans of Afro Latino [descent] in the East of the United States, Dominicans, Haitians, and in the Southwest they remain very Indo American or indigenous... So I wanted to bring up attention to that. And I want us to go to that topic of your center for farmworker families.

But let's take a little pause.

22:21

MUSIC PAUSE

22:53

Delete 22:54-23:26:97

MANUEL

23:25:88 Ann can you tell us about the Center for Farmworker families?

ANN

23:34 Okay, we basically the main thing. The main purpose is to inform the public. And I saw to whoever will listen about these issues, and I'm speaking generally, at least once a week, if not more, in various capacities, and then beyond that, we do whatever we can for farm workers, I got a call on my way up here to visit my daughter in the car about a farm worker who has children and no refrigerator, and she's wondering how she can get a refrigerator.

24:11 I found out recently from an attorney that the owners of rental units are not required to provide either a stove or a refrigerator for the unit, only heat. So one has to ask how a farm worker family raises a family in a unit with no stove and no refrigerator.

24:36 So we end up buying a lot of those, stoves and refrigerators when people donate. I decided early on that. I would do the center for farm worker families as a volunteer as long as the community supported us, financially and up to today they have more than supported us. In fact, during the pandemic, the community foundation of Santa Cruz County literally gave us thousands and thousands of dollars to give farm workers rental assistance. So they would not be removed from their units for lack of pay, because they couldn't work.

25:20 Beyond that we I, when I visited a Oaxacan family about 3 or 4 years ago, I was talking with the parents, and they had 2 young girls who were crying for food, and they kept crying, and the parents did nothing, and I finally was so disturbed by this. I said, give them, stop the conversation, and say, give them some food, and the

farm workers looked down at the ground like they were ashamed, and I walked over to their refrigerator and opened it, and I will never forget.

They had one head of lettuce, a third a gallon of milk, and 2 jello cups, and I said, Where is your food?

26:07 And they said, We don't have. We're not working.

We don't. We don't have money to buy food, so everyone's hungry.

26:15 We're all hungry, and I told him I said, Well, we don't do that here, so we call the Food bank, and that afternoon they brought out food for 144 families.

So since then, that gave rise to the distributions and we're partnered now with the second Harvest Food Bank, and they bring us enough food for however families are signed up to come to the distributions, and the distributions have grown, we even have 3 Covid clinics, one flu vaccine clinic, we had a group of optometrists come and check eye quality or vision for farm workers, and even provided them glasses for free if they needed lenses.

27:09 We have the food we have household goods, the thing that goes the fastest are diapers in size 5 and 6, and baby wipes. That's what we need the most of. So that's one thing we do is the monthly distribution on the second Friday of the month.

Then I do farmworker reality tours and I take groups of people, usually school groups or writing groups to actually meet farm workers in 3 different locations and to hear the stories I've been hearing for many, many years, and I think that that has to be one of the most impactful things, because it is one thing to read about it, or to hear about it, but to actually meet the farm workers and hear their stories is very impactful.

28:04 And then a third program. We've recently developed is called Bridging the Digital Divide. And we have computers donated. And we educate 6 farm workers at a time. And show how to use a computer in my office, and then, as they practice in the office, then at the end of the session, we give them the computers to take home, and also a phone number where they can call and get Internet for free. So these are some of our programs. But anytime we're starting at, we're gonna start a tutoring program in the library... Watsonville Library, where we'll have tutors available on the weekends, and any farmworkers can come, or children can come and get assistance with their assignments, so these are some of the things that we're doing.

[29:02] And then beyond that, we're advocates. We're very strong advocates for justice, and that's why I wrote this article about, "Why don't farm workers lives matter?" Because in Santa Cruz County, in the last 6 months we had a Black Lives Matter sign in the middle of town, and 2 people came along and destroyed it, and they were taken to court. They got penalties. They were gonna have to pay a fine. They would have to do commitment work, sensitivity, training, etc.

29:40 And then within a week of that incident, and their accountability hearing, I got a call from a woman in the field who was hysterical, absolutely hysterical, sobbing. She had just been raped in the fields, and UC Davis and Southern Poverty Law Center claims that 60 to 80% of farm worker women are sexually harassed, groped, or outright raped in the field and she was one of them.

30:13 Then within 2 or 3 days during that heat wave we had. I got other calls from farm workers about the fact that people were fainting in the field because it was a 101 to 108 degrees, and the supervisor would not let them go and it's like I tell people the laws are on the books against these things: you can't rape farm workers. Legally, you can't. You're not supposed to keep them in the field past a reasonable temperature. And yet the laws are not upheld so why don't farm workers matter?

30:53 That's if these kids are not upheld. So why don't farm workers matter? That's if these kids that destroyed the Black Lives Matter banner could be brought to account, Why can't people that rape farm workers or keep them in the field to the point where they're fainting? Why aren't they brought to account? And I get calls all the time about farm workers calling me saying they're spraying pesticides near us, and people are feeling dizzy, feigning, vomiting, etc. And then I call the Agricultural Commissioner who then sends a team out to investigate.

31:29 But unfortunately the farm workers won't talk because they're worried about being blacklisted or deported. And until we take this onus of deportation off their shoulders, I don't think we're gonna get justice for farm workers. That's all anyone needs to do is threaten them with that.

MANUEL

31:49 Wow and yeah, the historical systemic dehumanization of colonized people [such as] forced migrants from Africa who remain unfree, and then the colonized indigenous people who remain in the fields are continuously seen as outsiders to the nation. Within the US nation, they were the last ones to attain citizenship in 1924, and Mexicans were seeing at that time, as generally indigenous people.

32:29

Therefore, even if legally classified as white, they were not treated as such, and they were also segregated on the basis of their indigeneity. So it's, you know, historical systemic oppressions that require dehumanizing people, and like you said, an effective way [of marginalizing them] has been a viewing them as outsiders, as illegal, as less than human.

And so, yeah, it is a big struggle to combat those top down depictions of these people who are foundational to the making of this nation.

ANN

[33:10] That's right. That's exactly right. And I have a personal story that can go along with that, and that is that I grew up in Southern California at a time when it was illegal for races to marry. And so my father is Mexican. My mother is white, and when I tried to go to school in a white school it was absolutely horrific.

33:33 I mean I didn't have friends. People would call me names. The teachers were cruel to me. It was terrible.

33:41 And this is one reason I became a biologist. I have 2 degrees in biology because I could run in the hills above my home in Altadena and make friends with all the animals there, and got very close to the plants and really the natural world living world was my only solace in the at that time, and luckily I'm glad those laws have finally changed.

34:09 But at the time what you did with a person like me was try to make them white, so I was not allowed to learn Spanish I was not allowed to stay out in the sun too long I couldn't wear braids because I looked to quote too Indian etc., etc.

34:27 And it was like a form of abuse where a major part of my identity was stolen, and it wasn't until I actually went to Columbia, South America, when I was in my twenty's that I felt like I finally got that piece back I was whole again but I'm hoping that that's not still going on where people are raising kids that are mixed races and denying a whole part of their ethnicity.

35:00 It's cruel!

MANUEL

35:05 Yes, thank you for sharing that traumatic story and yes, my heart goes to you, and sadly this oppression of identities that have been historically stigmatized are so widespread, and continue. And we see how indigenous groups right now are being Mexicanized or Latinized... You know, in like in those areas where you work, the central coast there are many indigenous communities, and in schools the more Mexicanized kids sometimes put down the more indigenous children, who then feel pressured to assimilate into more mainstream cultures whether Mexican or Americanized.

ANN

[35:51] Right, right.

MANUEL

35:54 Yeah, it is a tragic. We need more education at all levels to be inclusive and to be affirming for the beautiful diversity that we have in this world.

36:07 Let me ask you... it seems that it's been historical, structural acts/policies that are the new forms of enslavement denying people access to health coverage, workers compensation, you know; even if you [as a farmworker] were legal you were denied unemployment insurance, minimum wage or extra time pay. And there's been struggles to access those benefits that every other worker had; because these farm workers are in occupations that have been historically racialized. And so what are the policies that you feel that can help us combat these unequal treatments that remain so unfair?

37:04 Are there any policies that you recommend for us to support?

Are there any policies or programs that you encourage us to combat?

Like, for example, the guest worker program is one that is formal in our times, and it was combated aggressively when it was enacted during World War II up to the sixties. It was ended because it was seen as a system too close to slavery.

Well, actually, we now have formalized it again. Any thoughts about that?

ANN

37: 40 Yeah, yes, I do have thoughts. Number one. We must...have comprehensive immigration reform, I don't care who's in Congress: Republicans, Democrats, whoever. We must take this burden off the shoulders of far-workers. Anyone who has worked weeks, months, and years in the field should not be worried about deportation. We're lucky to have them here, and they need to be recognized so that's number one.

38:13 Number 2, they need a living wage, we should not have to give them charity when they're working so hard and feeding the nation. They should be able to earn a decent wage. If it means the State kicks in some money, or it means we pay higher food prices whatever it takes. We need a living wage for all farm workers.

And finally, we need a contract with the growers right now, 22% of farm workers have their wages stolen.

38:50 So they go to work, work a week, or up to a season even, and the grower won't pay them, and if the farm worker goes and tries to find an attorney who'll take the case, the first thing the attorney asks, for is a contract to view, a contract and if there's no contract. Then there's nothing that can be done. So they're essentially victimized on a horrific level.

39:15 So I think those 3 things would transform far workers lives right away and give them some power in their situation. As long as there are undocumented as long as they're impoverished, and have no no contract, then basically, they're just a fodder for the growers to use for their own greed and benefit.

39:44 And that's what growers have always looked for is a docile workforce that won't rebel, won't unionize, etc. And that's what they have with these policies not rectified.

MANUEL

40:00 Ann wow, thank you! These are great recommendations for policies. Comprehensive immigration reform, living wages and then enforced contracts, [from] the beginning enforced contracts, promises.

ANN

40:18 That's what everybody else has. I have. I'm quote legal.

I get a decent wage. I have if I work for someone I sign a contract, why can't farm workers do that? Why is it that we view them as such? An underclass?

They're not even worthy of a contract or a living wage. I just it makes me furious. I'm sorry, I can't talk about it without getting angry.

MANUEL

40:45 Well, I share your anger, this has been a great presentation! I'm sure that we're gonna have more more discussions on this very important topic; until we see change, we will continue this topic.

ANN

11:58:41 Yes.

MANUEL

41:02 I want to thank you. Dr. Lopez. Thank you greatly for your work, your mind, your heart, and may your spirit of human rights touch everyone listening to this talk. Thank you for listening. We hope our ongoing conversation is mark understandings, empathies and motivations to join the struggle for a better future for all.

41:25 You just listened to the building justice podcast. The information contained in this podcast represents the views and the opinions of the host and guests, and does

not necessarily represent the views or opinions of Sacramento, State, or CRISJ.

ANN

42:42 Thank you for inviting me.

MANUEL

42:44 Thank you.

Outro Music Lyrics

No more penalties and no more wars. Based on the actions. Now, time for "Building Justice,"
"Building Justice." Time for building justice, justice.