

Minutes of WTB Program Meeting: Eastern Farm Workers Association “Migrant Stories”

Tuesday, Oct 22, 2024 5:00-7:30 pm at Jowonio School

The evening began with a potluck supper. At 5:30 when the program was scheduled to begin we were still sampling the array of tasty dishes, so we held the session at the tables. It was zoomed.

Lorraine Markley, President of WTB, welcomed everyone, directed their attention to a display of WTB literature and announced upcoming events. The WTB Mission statement and Safe Place Declaration were read. Lorraine then introduced Stacy Bautista of the Eastern Farm Workers Association.

Stacy brought two EFWA volunteers, Musa and Sabrina, to join her as surrogates for local migrant farm workers who were unable to attend. In this way, we were able to hear these truly powerful stories. (Only first names are recorded due to privacy concerns.)

Sabrina read Roberta’s story. Roberta began working at age 11—mostly in the Utica/Marcy area but as far north as the Canadian Border and as far south as S. Carolina. She travels picking the harvest—apples, cabbage, strawberries, beans. Most farms around here have worker quotas and harvest in the severe heat of summer into the hand-numbing cold of October. Roberta is most afraid of snakes and pricker-bushes as one has to get on hands and knees to pick beans. The work is long and hard—6 am to 6 pm with only an unpaid break in the fields to eat a lunch you have brought with you. A school bus will come to poor neighborhoods to bring day laborers to the fields for the day; workers have to work an hour to earn the \$8.75 they are charged for the bus ride. Roberta has seen people pass out and even older people die of heat stroke in the fields. She has seen pregnant women give birth in the fields. Her father still does this work at 93. There is no health insurance. Roberta became a volunteer with EFWA in 2000 to help her get food and school supplies for her children. EFWA will help migrant workers advocate for themselves. A current concern is the level of lead in Syracuse City drinking water.

Musa is a relatively recent volunteer with EFWA who immigrated here from Sudan. There he lived in a rural area where he was involved in breeding cattle and farm work. He had to flee Sudan because of the ongoing conflict and violence. The government was not stable and the violence made it impossible to live there anymore. He fled to a refugee camp and eventually came to our area. Musa was a teacher of English and Arabic languages in Sudan. He is invaluable to EFWA as a volunteer Arabic translator.

Stacy was the surrogate for Matea and read her story. Matea lived in Taluca, Mexico—an area with industrial plants that make automotive parts as well as many small artisanal businesses that make tourist items for local sale and export. Matea started working 17 years ago as a receptionist. She stressed that while there is a wage benefit to having a college degree, most workers in the Taluca area cannot earn enough from their jobs to support themselves. Even if you are lucky enough to have full time work, housing and food is more expensive than earnings can cover. Matea moved to Veracruz, an agricultural area with a lower cost of living. However, Veracruz suffers from flooding exacerbated by global warming and polluted water from the oil industry. Matea finished her college degree and decided to go to the USA for a better economic life. Life as an undocumented worker in the U.S. was not what she had imagined. She worked the pumpkin harvest where she got paid for only 6 hours of work. Migrant workers punch in on the farm at 7 am but are not compensated for travel time. Of 30 farm workers, 25 are contract workers and only 5 independent contractors who live on the farm. Women work along side men and are expected to produce the same amount as men. The work is physically grueling and dangerous; working

conditions are not fair. Cabbages need to be cut low with knives; Matea has seen workers seriously cut on the job with no medical care provided. Although workers harvest in intense heat, employers do not provide water or food. There is often only one dirty bathroom available. Without porta-potties, workers often relieve themselves near the fields. Undocumented workers live in fear of Immigration Officers, yet they receive no support from the government at all. Matea says, "We are human beings, we have rights and we have to fight for them."

There was a lengthy question and answer period. Some of the main points made were:

- Liz Stacy and Janet Donahue volunteer for EFWA. They meet for lunch once a week and then go shopping for EFWA donations like diapers and baby food. Anyone is welcome to join them...just reach out to Liz.
- EFWA is an independent organization. There are 23 others across the country. They do not have 501c (3) status because part of their mission is to petition the government for redress of grievances. They pay all taxes and receive no government funding.
- The U.S. does not acknowledge economic refugees so migrants have no path to documentation. They would need to also be in a protected category or prove their lives currently in danger in their home country.
- I.C.E. does remove people. They are usually sent to detention (prison labor) before being given a plane ticket home.
- NYS passed the Farm Laborers Fair Labor Protection Act which mandates that employers offer overtime after 60 hours/week. Small farmers work around the law because they can't afford to pay overtime. Small farms are being squeezed and can't compete with bigger monopoly farms or bargain effectively with clients like Wegmans and Walmart.
- Many migrant workers settle in Cayuga County as dairy work there is not seasonal. In Syracuse area many migrants find work in service areas.
- "We aren't taking jobs from other Americans." Much of the backbreaking work being done for low wages since undocumented workers are easily exploited.
- Significant concerns with lead in Syracuse City drinking water have recently been reported. EFWA will be advocating on this issue. There was a lengthy discussion of the implications for Syracuse residents and ways to test for and treat lead in our drinking water.
- Stacy stressed that most of the problems of documented and undocumented workers are "poor people problems". Many migrants wonder, "Why did we ever come here?" They have not found the economic opportunities or better quality of life they were expecting.

Stacy, Musa and Sabrina received a card and monetary honorarium from WTB with our thanks for this very impactful and powerful program.

Respectfully submitted,

Barbara Bova,

WTB Program Secretary

