

The Economic Justice Young Adult Team

Justice & Witness Ministries
United Church of Christ

A report on a training and immersion experience in
workplace justice issues, August 2006, North Carolina,
USA.



Imagine
Another World Is Possible

Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ

Justice
And
Witness
Ministries

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I don't know anything more important than having our young adults immersed in the justice work of the church. It is important for the life of the church because we need the energy, enthusiasm and vitality of our young people if we are to thrive. It is important for helping to guide their faith journeys and helping them to understand Jesus' radical call for a world of justice and wholeness. For many young adults, it is the justice work which will keep them connected to the life of our denomination.

This group of UCC young adults was transformed by their experience. They saw first-hand the injustices of this world and, I hope, will be forever changed by that experience.

I commend this report to you. Read it and re-commit yourself to doing justice, seeking peace and building community.

Otro Mundo es Posible/Another World is Possible!

Linda Jaramillo




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God is still speaking, 

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Franklinton Center at Bricks

The North Carolina offices of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee

The North Carolina offices of the United Food & Commercial Workers

Smithfield Packing Plant--Tar Heel, NC

The Southern Conference of the United Church of Christ

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We as young people need to step up and take action...If we stick together and fight for what we believe in we will be heard and things will begin to change.

The young people of the Economic Justice Young Adult Team are ready, as expressed above by team member Justin Lyman, to do justice and make this “on earth as it is in heaven.” (Matt. 6:10) Eight young adults from around the country, ranging in age from late teens through late 20s, gathered in North Carolina in August of 2006 to be trained in workplace justice. The group was African American and European American, female and male; we were fortunate, also, to have one member of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) along with seven United Church of Christ members. At Franklinton Center at Bricks, an historic location and one of the offices of Justice & Witness Ministries (JWM) of the United Church of Christ, the team discussed what it means to live our faith journeys building a community of justice, learned about injustices against factory and farm workers, and engaged in immersion visits that provided valuable insight into situations of economic and racial oppression. Under the leadership of Dr. Edith Rasell, Minister for Labor Relations and Economic Development, and Min. Kenneth R. Brown, II, Associate for Youth & Young Adult Empowerment, the group bonded and learned from one another as it sought to discern how to “establish justice in the gate.” (Amos 5:15)

Our five-day experience began with meditations and a discussion of “justice”—what that means to us as progressive people of faith, the differences between charity and justice, and why we are

called scripturally and theologically to do it. We followed with an examination of worker's rights, oppression of labor, and specific issues facing meatpackers, farm workers and immigrant laborers. Our first field visit was to the Smithfield Packing Plant in Tar Heel, NC, where workers are facing anti-union pressure, unsafe conditions, etc. After a presentation by management officials and tour of the factory, followed by a question and answer session with the officials, we visited the regional offices of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW). Union leaders and plant workers gave a different picture of what was happening at the plant than did management officials. The writings of the team members will reflect this. On the following day we visited the regional offices of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) to learn of the struggle of farm workers and immigrants. Afterward we were able to visit farm labor camps, where we spoke with the laborers and witnessed the unjust living conditions. Our time at Franklinton Center also provided the team with the opportunity to learn of the rich justice and educational heritage of the Center.

Why Workplace Justice?

We know that God loves us and cares about all aspects of our lives, including our work lives. Conditions and events at work absorb our energy, occupy our minds, and impact our psyches when we are both at work and home. Our work situations can be fulfilling and empowering, or demeaning and humiliating. Our jobs determine the size of our incomes and whether we have health insurance and a pension. Our jobs are the main determinants of whether we live in a big house or any house at all, whether we send our children to college or to bed with an empty stomach. Moreover, even at times when the economy is considered to be "strong," millions of people who want to work cannot find a job or can only find a part-time one.

Some workers confront particularly unjust situations—unsafe conditions, extremely low pay, racism, sexism, and other abuses. All workers, whatever their position in the hierarchy of jobs, may suffer from indignities, large and small, that cripple their spirit and hinder their journey to greater wholeness. Workers on farms and in packing houses are some of the most oppressed in the U.S..

God's reign does not stop at the door to the workplace. The Church, the body of Christ, is called to seek out and accompany people wherever they are. So the church must also be in our offices, factories, stores, schools, and all the places where people work, especially in our farms and slaughterhouses.

Why Eastern North Carolina for an Immersion Experience?

Eastern North Carolina is a region particularly well suited for education on workplace justice issues given the extreme injustice in its work places. A heavy reliance on low-wage workers and immigrants in agriculture, the presence of low-paying factory jobs such as those at the Smithfield plant in Tar Heel, the increase in racial tension between Hispanics and African Americans (due largely to the sharp rise in the Hispanic population in recent years and perceived job competition), and the lack of unions make the area a laboratory of labor issues. What better setting for young leaders to immerse themselves into, in order to connect directly with those

affected by economic oppression?

Strengths of the Model

Justice & Witness Ministries has increasingly explored the model of convening small groups of young people for training and immersion in particular justice issues. The Environmental Justice Young Adult Team, brought together in 2004, demonstrated that the model can be effective in energizing young people in the struggle for a new community. The model has several strengths which, we believe, make it viable for the development of youth/young adult justice advocates:

Training/discussion on a particular issue area. Instead of a brief sampling of a wide variety of justice issues in a short amount of time (a method that still can be beneficial but may sometimes be under-effective), a training on a specific issue affords participants a more thorough knowledge base with which to engage in advocacy.

Immersion. It's one thing to tell someone about a situation of injustice; it's another to show someone, to allow her/him to sense it and—even for a brief moment—come a bit closer to experiencing it. The energy and the commitment to justice of youth/young adults are catalyzed by visits to areas which show the effects of injustice, demonstrating how oppression works.

Small size. Through working with a small group as opposed to a larger assembly, training can be more focused, dialogue and processing more feasible, immersion more possible and budgets more controllable. The multicultural communication generated by such a project also adds to the learning factor.

Young people taking leadership on a particular issue. By undergoing a training/immersion on a given topic, young people are better empowered to be active and take leadership on the given issue, in community, ecclesiastical/interfaith, academic and professional settings.

Cross-setting/Cross-Conference. In the context of the United Church of Christ, such a model produces cross-setting collaboration. The Economic Justice Young Adult project came about through communication and action between the national, conference and local settings of the United Church of Christ. It also afforded us the opportunity for continued interaction with our partners, the Disciples.

Young people have stressed the importance of opportunities during the gatherings for sharing of feelings and learnings—times for processing out the challenges of the things they witness, and gaining strength from each other. They have also emphasized the key role of spiritual exercises/worship in the process, to strengthen inner grounding for the event and the work beyond. In naming these needs, young leaders demonstrate the central importance of centering one's justice activities in one's faith journey.

An important challenge of the model is the follow-up period of young people being active in their

particular locations. Busy work and scholastic schedules, lack of persons in home congregations and local areas who are familiar with an issue, and other obstacles can threaten the continued action of the team members. It is important to help the young people in find persons/organizations with whom they can work on a particular issue, and to get them involved in some form of action quickly to reinforce the learning of the gathering.

Reflections

The energy of the participants and the power of the experience will be evident in their reflections; may we read and learn...

My Experience for Justice!--Before embarking on my journey to Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina with the Economic Young Adult Justice team for JWM, I barely knew what the JWM did. As far as the Taco Bell boycott is concerned, I knew nothing. But since my experience, I have grown to appreciate and take notice of the many justice issues that our brothers and sisters face everyday in our nation.

While staying at Franklinton Center, a former slave plantation, my eyes were opened to the issue of union workers and their struggle at Smithfield Packing Plant in Tar Heel, North Carolina. We visited the infamous pork processing plant and saw the atrocities that are affiliated with the plant such as overcrowding, terrible work conditions and unfair wages. Of course, the officials at the plant painted an image to us that everything was going smoothly, and told us not to believe anything about the "rumors" of the company threatening workers who would unionize. They went so far to say as to say that they support unionizing. But I made the decision that things need to change there and I will do everything that I can to see it come to pass.

I was also informed about the growing issue of immigrant farm workers. I had my opinions on immigration but I gained new knowledge that made me re-evaluate some of my thoughts on the issue. We visited the FLOC office and gained more insight on the cause but the rest day was an emotional roller-coaster. We visited a immigrant workers camp and saw such horrible living conditions. I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy. We talked with some of the workers and heard their stories. Then came the hardest part of the day. We visited a family who lost a family member in a farming accident. I couldn't even imagine what the family was going through. We prayed with them and we personally gave our condolences to the family.

During our time in North Carolina, I reflected, as I am doing now, on the fact that these are serious issues that need serious answers. With the friends I have made across the country fighting these causes, I feel that it is my responsibility to spread the word about these issues. It says in Isaiah 30:18 "For the Lord is a God of justice; how blessed are those who long for Him." As long as the Lord

Jesus Christ is on our side, we cannot and shall not fail!!!
Peace and Love,

Christian Lassiter
Eastview United Church of Christ
Shaker Heights, Ohio

Flying into North Carolina, I wasn't sure what to expect. I had only met Ken before and was a little apprehensive about the trip once I heard we were going to be touring the largest hog plant in the world. This made me very uneasy.

I had worked around farm animals before and I knew what happened to animals that became our food. I knew one day we had three cows and the next we had two and a whole lot of hamburger. But the major difference is I never saw it. I also had never seen the factory style conditions that people were under, or the large farming operations with migrant workers.

Smithfield, Smithfield, Smithfield. What can I say about being taken on a tour through a food processing plant? I used to give tours at one of my old jobs, so I know all the tricks of the tour giving business. I thought that might prepare me a little for what we would encounter.

Backtrack a couple of days: Sunday night we watched a documentary on the basic union busting of the Hormel meat packing plant in Austin, MN, entitled American Dream. It sort of prepared those of us that watched the program. Every now and then the company would show the "humanely," or I should say "ritually," slaughtered and prepared animals. They would inter splice scenes of people preparing the hog carcasses for the rest of the plant, including the slicing of the throats and cutting off of heads.

I wasn't so sure that they were going to let us go that far into the process of showing exactly how they go from full hog to bacon and ham. I was only partly right.

We started in the cutting room. This is one of the middle to later parts of production. It was easy to stomach mostly because you knew that right then all there was were what you basically see in the store; pork chops, loins, bacon slabs, ribs, etc. It was "sanitized," meaning we were starting easy and working our way up into the harder-to-stomach stuff. One thing that I noticed is that all of the different lines were segregated. Almost never would you see an African-American on a Latino/a line and vice-versa.

We walked along, noticing the tour guide (who was apparently one of the higher-ups in Human Resources) waving to seemingly random workers—and,

for the most part, they were random. Then we noticed that he was mostly only waving to members of his own race. One time he did actually wave to a Latino employee who gave him this kind of “what the hell are you doing” look and went about his business. I’m not really sure how well or what this man knew, or if it was a kind of show for us “church folk.”

Continuing throughout the plant became progressively easier, up to a point. We walked through the finishing and packaging and it was ok, until we came upon the foot line. Yes--I did just say that: the foot line. It is where they take the feet of the hogs and slice them in half with a band saw machine and then package them in six halves. This is the point when I started to realize we are actually dealing with a living creature at some point.

Fast forward a little bit: we back track through the cold cutting rooms and then we head towards what should be the hardest part of the tour, the area known as the “killing floor.” Yes, we were only about three line minutes removed from the actual death of the animal that was strung up above our heads as one would expect lights to be. Thankfully they did not take us to the actual killing of the animal; however we did see almost everything else.

We saw everything after the kill. This was not the very end of our tour, but it was the end of the pig and the end of the factory part of the tour. From this part on we toured the cafeterias, laundry, and break areas.

One interesting thing we came upon was a sign that was the result of a lawsuit and union complaints that were rendered after the 1997 organizing effort and election. The NLRB, or National Labor Relations Board, ruled in favor of the workers and Smithfield had to post a sign saying all sorts of things, including that they will not try and dissuade people from joining the union. However right next to this sign was a flyer that stated how much the Union lies and that the Smithfield Packaging Company does not have 20,000 union members. When questioned later about the signs, the company became very defensive and responded that the reported number of workers that have joined in solidarity of the people trying to organize at the Tar Heel plant it is a lie. However, when questioned about the total number of union laborers that they actually have, they said they had no clue because the number fluctuates so greatly--but then they changed their collective mind and came up with around 15,000.

I’m not sure exactly what to believe then. If there are 15,000 other Smithfield employees that are sympathetic with the cause of the Tar Heel plant then why not just say that to begin with instead of saying that unions lie, instead of saying nothing else like the correct fact? In many ways it’s like the way politicians treat the country with their information, saying something is wrong, but not correcting it.

Afterwards we were served lunch by the plant. We all had been joking on the ride

down that we were going to be confronted with giant ham sandwiches . We were... not only were they ham sandwiches, they were ham sandwiches with Bacon. BACON--most certainly from the plant. Most of us just ate the sandwiches in front of us because we were polite, although there were a few that were not really hungry and I don't blame them. I ate the sandwiches, however I was very queasy afterward.

Later, after what they deemed a "working lunch" where we lobbed tough question after tough question at our willing "spinners" (after all that is what public relations people do), we were taken to the clinic. This was seemingly nice and good until we actually found out later how not so nice it actually can be.

The clinic is the company's preferred choice of doctor because it is right across the street from the plant, and they can therefore control how stuff actually gets reported. For example, they sometimes say that less visual injuries occur at home, rather than from stresses the body endures on the job. That way, they can convince people they aren't eligible for workers comp, but for short term disability and crap like that--where the company doesn't have to pay right away all of the expenses.

We left very skeptical of most of the company's claims. We have seen articles and books that counter almost every argument that the company put forward. I wasn't convinced that 100% of those were true, but I think that the way the higher-ups responded to us, tiptoed around certain words, and got frustrated and defensive at times indicates what actually goes on.

Then we traveled about an hour east of the plant to where the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union has an office and is trying to organize the workers. We were able to talk face to face with current and former workers, getting their side of the story,--most of which not only contradicts the company's story, but agrees almost totally with the reports and news articles that we read. We went home, most of us saying that we weren't going to touch meat again, let alone any pork that Smithfield produces.

On the second day of our visits we went and visited the offices of FLOC, or the Farm Labor Organizing Committee. They help migrant workers secure jobs and fight for their rights on farms when the owner/operator decides they don't want to follow the law.

We learned about the living conditions that many workers lived in. Then we actually visited them. Six people lived in a space no larger than the average office. Beds were old, just barely staying together, looking like they were older than anyone that was actually at this labor camp.

I think this is what most people, including myself, don't understand about our

food and immigration. If we were to completely close off our borders, we wouldn't eat. We couldn't eat. The reason that we actually have food is because people from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and other Latin American countries cross our borders to try and make more in a day than they could in a week in their home communities. They don't steal jobs from people looking for them. They take the jobs that we North Americans don't want and won't do.

These people were living in such wretched squalor that I can't even describe well enough what it actually looked like. This was one of the worst ones, from what we were told by FLOC; I don't see how it could get much worse. In North Carolina, when they create these camps, there is no law saying the place has to have a mattress, just a bed. So we were shown pictures of beds consisting of metal racks with no padding whatsoever. That has to change.

So now what? What can we do? Well first, allow the workers at the Tar Heel, NC Smithfield plant to unionize. The company has repeatedly fought and intimidated anyone trying to organize there. How can we as consumers encourage this? We can first avoid buying Smithfield products all together. It's hard and very deceiving because they package more than just "Smithfield" labeled products. They also sell stuff under other labels and to large companies like Mc Donald's, large supermarkets, etc. This is one action that we can take. Additionally, support other local union efforts in your areas. I think it would be easier to put pressure on the larger consumers of their goods, like McDonald's, much in the way the Taco Bell boycott worked a few years ago. With the farm workers, it's harder. Personally I've taken this as an opportunity to buy locally, to know where and from whom I get my fruits and veggies from. That way I know that people aren't being exploited for my food. If you happen to be in a largely agricultural state, then you can lobby your legislators for changes in working conditions and minimum wage laws for agricultural workers. This would have a greater impact on their lives than trying to convince the farmers to do better.

Justin Lyman
North Parish Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
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The experience impacted me in several ways. Primarily, it was a first-hand look at how and why companies exploit their workers. As Christians living in the land of 'freedom' and privilege, it was important to recognize that not everyone who resides in the US enjoys equal opportunities and rights. It is imperative to know how basic human rights are being denied to people, despite some who are 'illegal.' Human beings deserve basic human rights no matter the circumstance. Second, it reinforced my desire to serve others. Third, I recognized that there is need of justice and witness in all countries.

My journey as a Master of Divinity student has led me to the belief that there is no greater cause to fight for than that of the well-being of one's neighbor. How can we sleep at night knowing that our neighbor is suffering, for not everyone enjoys the same freedoms and privileges? How can we live with ourselves, when we often support the very economic superpowers that keep some people poor and others rich? How can we be Christians if we are not doing Jesus' work regarding social justice issues? If one is not, why call oneself a Christian at all?

The experience at the Smithfield plant as well as the visits with the local farm workers solidified my passion to fight for justice in a variety of contexts. I now look at fruits and vegetables in a new way—frustrated by the complexity of the situation, yet more grateful that I know who has handled my food and what it has cost them to do so. I have superior respect for anyone who risks their life to come to the United States as an illegal—and I take the responsibility of my US citizenship more seriously and see it as my duty to use my citizenship power to advocate for others whose voice does not count in this country.

This experience has helped me to further identify my advocacy strengths. It has made me more empathetic. It also has helped me to become more educated in union organizing and what basic human rights should include. It has further developed my diplomacy skills, listening to both sides of a debate before making hasty judgments based on one side of a story.

Based on this experience, I will strive continuously to do justice and speak out against injustices when I witness them. In relation to young people, I will encourage youth to be involved in seeking justice in our world, for there is so much strength, power and energy in the voice of youth, the next generation of leaders.

Valerie Hichez

Southern California/Nevada Conference, United Church of Christ

My week with the UCC Economic Justice Youth Team was one of the most vivid experiences in my young adult life and has left a profound and long-lasting impression on me, which I pray will carry over into my future career decisions and daily-life activities.

The first blessing concerning this workshop came the first day when we all got to know each other. That evening, I realized that I was not only learning alongside talented young individuals from all over the United States, but that I was in the presence of a group of Christians who had a strong passion for confronting injustice that was present in the social structures of our economy. I

loved getting to know these individuals and throughout the entire week learned and grew so much as a result.

One important thing I realized throughout this journey was that we as Americans have become so disassociated with the food we consume. Long gone are the days when all food was bought at local specialists, such as butchers, bakers, and farmers. Primarily multi-national corporations, such as Super-Wal-Marts and K-Marts, have replaced these small and local individuals. Our group took a trip to the largest hog processing plant in the world: the Smithfield packing plant, located in Tar Heel, North Carolina, which is a large distributor to supermarkets across the U.S. I had never experienced how a meatpacking plant works, and I was struck by how much the process of modern market-bought meat resembles a sweatshop or assembly line. Not only was the method and working of the plant disturbing and revolting to watch, but the fact that hundreds of employees do the same menial task for eight hours each day, was a sad reality to observe. The task of cutting open 8,000 pigs heads, one after the other, all day every day cannot be a positive or happy job. However, these people do tasks like this day after day. After this experience, our group met with union workers and NGOs in order to learn about workers' rights and how to make working conditions better at places like Smithfield. My personal response to the situation was to become a vegetarian, making exceptions for locally and organically produced and butchered meat, and to make people aware of the awful conditions from which they get their meat. I do not think institutions like Smithfield should exist, but rather that we should respect the creatures of the earth and that the process of taking away life to sustain others' lives should be a more sincere and aware process...

After the experience at Smithfield, we went to FLOC (Farm Labor Organizing Committee) and heard about the situation of illegal immigrants' farm labor. As with Smithfield, I had no previous knowledge concerning where the vegetables I bought from super-markets came from. I was shocked to learn that 80% of fruits and vegetables are handpicked by immigrants (many of them illegal) under difficult and fearful working conditions.

What also upset me most about this situation was the fact that many Americans get indignant about the immigration situations here in our country, but do not even realize that the food they consume is only available to them because of the people they allege should not be here in the first place. Don't you think it's ironic--or perhaps just stupid? At FLOC we also had the opportunity to hear from immigrants and go out onto the farms in order to see firsthand the conditions and reality in which these farm laborers live. I had never experienced this kind of situation; although I come from a fairly agricultural area of the United States, I had never before come into contact with these kinds of workers and the reality of their daily struggle.

These experiences at Smithfield and the UFCW and FLOC unions, and the

company of the Economic Justice Youth Team, cultivated within me the most rich and learning-filled experiences of my college education yet. The opportunity to talk about the situations of how our American food is produced and to go and observe directly these processes was eye-opening and convictive. At my college, Bucknell University, we have a newly founded club, the Students for Fair Trade and Labor. I hope to use them as a resource for disseminating knowledge about the meatpacking industry as well as farm labor. I also want to work with them in order to start with our university the goal of obtaining food produced through fair trade and labor. As we discussed in our team, one of the best places for us as young people to start educating people about the practices of fair labor is our own college campuses. With the grace of God, people will open their minds and hearts; they will see the injustice around them, and work with each other in order to eradicate these evils which we, many times unknowingly, partake of (contributing to the system as a whole). We need to be aware of our neighbors in need, and be the voice of those who are not in a position of power. This is our duty as educated persons and our responsibility as believing Christians.

Kaley Keener
Campus Ministries--Bucknell University
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When I was first asked to participate in the Youth Justice Trip to Franklinton Center, I was not quite sure what I would be getting myself into. The thing I was worried about the most was being in the secluded back woods of North Carolina in the middle of nowhere for five days. After long consideration, I decided that this trip would be the beginning of my journey into the world of social and economic justice.

After arriving at the Raleigh-Durham airport and meeting the other members of the group, I instantly became comfortable in my surroundings. The hour and a half ride to Franklinton Center definitely helped us get to know one another. On our first field assignment we went to the Smithfield meat packaging plant. Smithfield is the largest pork producer in the United States and its plant in Tar Heel, North Carolina, is the largest hog killing facility in the country, killing over thirty-thousand hogs a day. Although Smithfield employs over thirty thousand employees in the United States, about seventeen thousand employees are not represented by a union. After touring the meat packing plant and getting what some would call "answers" from the representatives of the company, it was clear that meatpacking was not the only thing going on in this plant. We questioned them about the real issues facing the workers such as illnesses caused as a result of repetitive motion syndromes and whether or not the employees were free to unionize or organize with out being abused or threatened in any way. I must admit that the answers we got were definitely well

put together, but somehow they did not seem completely true.

When leaving the plant I felt a little uneasy because I felt that something in that plant was not right. When we got to the UFCW (United Food & Commercial Workers) office we were able to meet with some people who worked for Smithfield in the past and some workers who were currently working at the plant. As you could imagine, their stories were completely different from those of the administrators of the plant. The workers and union organizers reported stories of verbal abuse, abuses of power by management and various other dangerous behaviors and environments at the plant. Workers told us they were denied breaks, and were specifically told not to organize or there would be consequences. The work place described by them was a dangerous place to be. These workers were working so closely to each other day in and day out with ridiculously high line speeds. In a situation like that it's not uncommon for workers to accidentally cut the person next to them. Many of the workers also acquired repetitive motion disorders from having to work with dull knives as the day went on, putting more strain on their wrists to do the actual cutting instead of the knives because the department was trying to cut back on expenses. To make matters even worse, practices by the company are so bad that employees are afraid to even report work related injuries for fear of being terminated, which has happened to many workers in the past. The practices of the Tar Heel, North Carolina Smithfield meat packing plant are absurdly dangerous to their employees. I know that one thing I will do from now on is to check my meat products to make sure that it does not come from this specific plant. If enough people do this, maybe Smithfield will get the message that what they are doing is unjust.

During the second part of our trip in North Carolina, we focused on the rights of migrant workers. After spending part of the day at FLOC (Farm Labor Organizing Committee), we went to visit three labor camps. Labor camps are places where migrant workers are housed during their employment. At the FLOC office we watched a video about the standards employers base the accommodations on at their labor camps. From the video we found out that mattresses and phones are not required by law to be in the labor camps. Without mattresses, workers cannot be comfortable and will have problems being on their feet all day in the fields. If there are no phones what are workers supposed to do in emergencies? Workers are exposed to all types of chemical pesticides and though most reactions happen rather quickly some effects take longer to occur. Other disturbing information we learned was that for every ten people there only had to be one shower, for every fifteen people there only had to be one toilet, and for every twenty seven people there only needed to be one refrigerator.

When we arrived at the first labor camp it looked as though it had been deserted. There were just a few trailers in rows but no people. The next labor camp we went to was filled with boys (the age to start farm work is twelve), men

and very few women. The conditions of this camp would seem degrading and unimaginable to the average person. The workers were forced to stay in tiny rooms with four or five people and these rooms hardly had space for all the beds. The bathrooms were just as bad. When we walked in we saw that it just had a row of toilets and a row of showers, with--no dividers, no privacy. It is ridiculous that human beings can let other human beings live like that. At the last labor camp we visited the workers were going through a very rough time. The day before our visit, one of the workers was killed in the field while operating one of the tobacco picking machines. When we got there his family welcomed us into their trailer where we prayed with them and other workers. It broke my heart to see a wife without her husband and young children without their father. Sadly, this family would have to return to Mexico because they could no longer afford to stay there anymore, but they did not have enough money to send the body of their loved one back to Mexico. I think spending time with that family and grieving with them was the hardest part of the trip for me because up until this point, we only knew what we were told. We could sympathize with the workers, but we could never really fully understand what was going on in that place day in and day out. Loss is something everyone goes through and at that moment we were all connected because we all knew what it was like to lose someone you love.

The experiences I had on this trip impacted me in a very strong way. Before going on this trip I knew very little about farm workers, plant workers, and the injustices they faced everyday. I did not know, nor could I imagine personally, how awful these conditions could get until I heard it from the workers themselves and saw it with my own eyes. We as young people need to step up and take action because, as John Mayer says in his song "Waiting on the World to Change," "One day our generation is gonna rule the population..." If we stick together and fight for what we believe in we will be heard and things will begin to change. As a witness to these injustices, I plan to inform and educate all who will listen, starting with my friends and my church and eventually local groups on my campus at Kent State University.

Jasmine Jefferson
Eastview United Church of Christ
Shaker Heights, Ohio

This past August, I had the opportunity to travel to North Carolina as part of the United Church of Christ's Young Adult Economic Justice Team. Over the five days we spent in North Carolina my mind and heart were heavy with just how far we are from doing God's will "on earth as it is in Heaven."

At the Smithfield hog processing plant we experienced, first-hand, the animal and human sacrifice that gives us ham with our sandwiches and bacon with

our eggs. In one building 32,000 hogs a day are killed, stored, sawed, scissored, packaged, and sent to off to the shelves of our grocery stores and kitchens of our restaurants. While it is worthwhile to question whether such a place should exist, whether a system that treats animal lives as raw materials should persist, or whether we should even be eating meat at all, I would like to draw attention, for now, to the human cost which meat packing plants in general--and Smithfield's Tar Heel location in particular--levy. Perhaps it is the inevitable outcome of market forces, economies of scale, and divisions of labor that the Tar Heel plant kills 32,000 hogs a day. Perhaps it makes obvious managerial sense to have a worker make one cut with one knife on countless slabs of pork eight hours a day. Perhaps fierce competition and consumer demands leave meat packers no choice but to single-mindedly pursue efficiency and low prices at all costs. After all, have we come so far since the days and conditions of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*? Perhaps Smithfield is not *evil*, but instead simply a product, or even victim, of the system. Why then should we, as Christians, care that our meat is produced in factory whose size, existence, and working conditions logically follow from our economic system? We should care, it became increasingly clear over my time with the Economic Justice Young Adult Team, because, as Christians, we are called to live lives which follow from a faith in God and not a faith in our economic system. We should care because we believe we are saved by a Gospel that brings good news to the poor and declares that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the meek, humble, and lowly--not to the efficient, profitable, and sensible. We are called by the gospel to believe that God is bigger than "the way things are" and to *imagine another world is possible*.

Today it is more complicated than ever to put the Bible's lessons on justice into practice. Our actions and choices touch more people in more places than we can fathom. We eat food picked by hands attached to people that we do not acknowledge feed our country; we buy products made in factories that we don't know exist; and we choose, politicians, laws, and values which impact the entire world. In an age of globalization, however, ignorance is not an option for concerned believers. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus turned the comfortable worldview of his contemporaries upside down. He told of people turned away from heaven for neglecting God but who had no idea that they had. "Lord", they asked, "When did we see you hungry and not feed you?" believing that they would never neglect God. But Jesus continues, in his revolutionary theology of justice, by saying that what they had not done for the "least of these" they had not done for God. As a Christian in a society where my meals help promote massive scale meat packing and inhumane farm labor, Jesus' words fill me with a holy fear. If we can neglect God and not know that we are, and if we can neglect God by neglecting others, and if our food is produced by a system of unchecked neglect for human lives, then we cannot afford to sit by silently at our kitchen tables or in our church pews and let things remain as they are. For otherwise, it is not unreasonable to fear that we will one day stand before the throne of God and protest "But Lord, when did we see

you exploited and support your exploiter with our business? And when did we see you worked until injured and fired without with our compensation and do nothing? And Lord, when did we see you working far from home and living in squalor, but did nothing to aid you or protest your mistreatment?" For me, the image is haunting, convicting, and needed; the world and the injustice it contains can seem complicated to the point of hopelessness. However, thanks be to God, there is another part to the story, and people who did more--not less--than they knew for God. So for my part, I will do the justice I can, share the things I have seen, and have faith that God will open my eyes to the "least of these" that I can touch with my life, because I just want to be a sheep...*bah, bah, bah, bah.*

*Dustin Schroeder
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What Next?

The members of the Economic Justice Young Adult Team are ready to engage individuals, congregations and other bodies of faith, communities and organizations to mobilize for workplace justice! Are you? Here are some points for discussion and discernment:

- Have you or anyone you know been a farm worker or factory worker? What was the experience like? What were some of its positive and negatives?
- How do your faith journey and spiritual values affect your understanding of workplace justice?
- Have you witnessed or heard of situations of injustice toward workers? If so, how did it make you feel?
- What is the role of young people in your group or community? Are they empowered to do justice? How can you, as a young person, mobilize others (both young and older) to do justice? How can you, as an older person, empower and partner with young people in their efforts to do justice?
- How can your group(s) mobilize to combat oppression of workers in your own community or elsewhere? What learning/research will need to be done? What plans of action devised? What resources will be needed? Who will do what, with what, by when? What allies do you have in your efforts? What detractors?
- Consider the model of training/immersion presented in this report. Would this be an effective approach for your group? What issues--workplace justice or others--can you focus on in your area and build a team of action on?

- How can Justice & Witness Ministries support you and partner with you in your justice efforts, on whatever issue? How can the Economic Justice Young Adult Team help in your efforts to combat oppression of workers?

May the Creator continue to empower us “to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke!” (Isaiah. 58:6)

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It has to start somewhere; it has to start sometime.
What better place than here? What better time than now!
----Rage Against the Machine

Appendix: Web Resources

The Environmental Justice Young Adult Team
<http://www.ucc.org/youngadults/EJYoungAdultTeamv2.pdf>

Farm Labor Organizing Committee
<http://www.floc.com>

Franklinton Center at Bricks
<http://www.ucc.org/justice/franklinton.htm>

Justice at Smithfield
<http://www.smithfieldjustice.com/>

National Farm Worker Ministry
<http://nfwm.org/index/index.shtml>

Smithfield Foods
<http://www.smithfieldfoods.com/splash.asp>

United Church of Christ farm workers page
<http://www.ucc.org/justice/farmworkers.htm>

United Church of Christ justice page
<http://www.ucc.org/justice/index.html>

United Church of Christ page on low wage work
<http://www.ucc.org/justice/lowwagework.htm>

United Church of Christ young adult justice page
<http://www.ucc.org/youngadults/justice>

United Food and Commercial Workers
<http://www.ufcw.org/>