

## ***Dairy laborers who sought back pay find work in county***

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**By ANDREA SUOZZO**

CHARLOTTE — Three Mexican farm workers who earlier this month complained to the Vermont Department of Labor that a Charlotte dairy farm hadn't paid them have found new jobs at an Addison County farm.

Cheryl Connor, co-convener of the Addison County Migrant Farm Worker Coalition, said that there has been an outpouring of community support for the three workers, who filed a claim for \$4,494 in unpaid wages in recent months from their former employer, dairy farmers Robert Jr. and David Mack of Charlotte.

The support from Addison County residents meant that a 27-year-old woman from Chiapas, Mexico, along with her father and boyfriend, were settled into their new home and had food supplies to get them through their first days, since they lack transportation to get to a grocery store.

"As far as I know, they're all in safe situations right now," said Connor last Wednesday.

Brendan O'Neill, co-coordinator of the community organizing project at the Chittenden County-based Vermont Migrant Farmworker Solidarity Project, discovered earlier this month that the Department of Labor was willing to pursue an unpaid wage complaint without questioning legal residency. Initially, he said, the three workers were fearful of turning to the government to get their wages.

By the Solidarity Project's count, the Macks owe the workers \$8,344, which has built up since they began work there in January. The Mack brothers did not return phone calls before press time, but Vermont Public Radio reported that Robert Mack did not dispute the amount of money owed the workers and planned to pay the workers.

"They want their pay — they've worked hard. We're talking about 80- or 90-hour workweeks," said O'Neill.

After a three day strike on the farm elicited no results, the workers decided to go ahead and file the claim.

"Everybody has a right to be paid for any work that they do, regardless of what their status is," said Connor.

By O'Neill's approximation, there are about 1,200 migrant workers in the state, primarily on dairy farms. Connor estimated that about 500 of them are in Addison County.

While the numbers are always changing, Connor said that by working with ministers, community members and college students who are trying to bring basic services to these migrant laborers, the Addison Coalition has an estimate of how many are working in the county.

O'Neill said that refusal to pay wages is not widespread in Vermont.

"It's not a general practice," he said. "There are four or five farms (in the state) that are similar to Mack farm."

Still, if the Department of Labor follows through on the claim, it could set a precedent for labor rights in the state. O'Neill said that he has already spoken with a group in Franklin County hoping to use the same filing process for a case in that area.

In Addison County, Connor said that come payday, most employers in the area do compensate their workers.

"I would say 95 percent of the time it's not a problem," she said.

But she said that having the backing of the attorney general's office would serve as a safety net for migrant workers with unpaid wage claims.

O'Neill said that despite the struggling dairy industry, this move will provide a legal recourse against those farmers who repeatedly refuse to pay their workers — it is not an attack on farmers who simply fall behind on wage payment.

"Dairy farmers are in such dire straits right now trying to survive," said Connor.

But this, she said, is the very reason why the Addison Coalition and other organizations continue to fight for the rights of migrant farm workers.

"Nobody wants to break the law," she said. "But if we put an ad in the paper, there aren't a whole lot of people who want to wake up at 5 a.m. to milk cows. They arrive because they know they're needed."

The survival of dairy in the state, she said, depends on the continued availability of people willing to do the labor-intensive work.

"Vermont would not look like Vermont without its dairy farms," she said.

*Reporter Andrea Suozzo is at [andreas@addisonindependent.com](mailto:andreas@addisonindependent.com).*