Stranded in a foreign land

Often without work, Mexican laborers struggle in Basile

Cindy Urrea
Staff Writer

BASILE — A few miles west of Eunice, crawfish farms spread out over the vast prairie and pickup trucks dot man-made levees and fields, marking the places where generations of country people have wrestled the land into submission, seeking to make a living.

Gradually, the scattered houses and farm lands grow closer together, knitting themselves into the cozy downtown streets of Basile, where residents gather to shop for essentials, check the local newspaper, or grab the plate lunch special at the tiny diner in the Exxon station, the town's unofficial meeting place.

It's the kind of small town where very little happens in secret. So when a local businessman decided to establish a trailer park less than a mile from the Exxon station, everyone in town knew who was going to live there.

"We all thought, now what the heck does Basile need a trailer park for? This isn't the kind of town where you see a trailer park," said one longtime resident.

But word got around pretty quickly that the project was going to house Mexican workers and they were going to be living there.

"They needed someone to work the crawfish plant and they were gonna bring in a bunch of Mexican workers. They were all gonna live in these trailers,"

Longtime Basile resident

It would be impossible to live in Basile and not know about the planned trailer park for the immigrant workers. The Agua Farms Crawfish processing plant was arranging to hire from a small town in Mexico. But that was only expected to be a temporary arrangement.

Police chief would play mediator between the workers and the employer.

And the proud residents of Basile, deeply embarrassed and gravely concerned for the plight of the Mexican workers, would organize food drives and struggle to communicate with the desperate immigrants.

Above, Evangelina Elizalde Valdez, a crawfish peeler hired from Mexico, sits on the steps of a trailer she shares with 14 other women. At left, a chain blocks access to — and out of — a Basile trailer park set up to house seasonal workers from Mexico.

P.C. Pizzano/The Advertiser
Fifteen women sleep across three sets of metal bunk beds. 

until July 1, when their temporary work visas expire. 

Even if they could leave, the Mexicans do not know how to find a way back to their small town that is more than a week away by bus. 

“They say that is the prison for men,” said Rafaela Lozoya Felix, who turned up at the Basile prison. “This is the prison for women. I don’t want to be here. I want to be working and making money. You think we only come here for money, but we come here for our famil- 
ies. How can we now return to our homes?” 

Even worse, many of the workers say they have been threatened by a third party, a non- 

involvement agent, according to the Basile Weekly. 

The work is grueling and difficult, the hours are long and the pay is low. To average a minimum wage of $8.50 an hour, a worker has to work 38 hours a week. Without it, there is no food or work. In many cases, it is not enough. 

According to the Louisiana Department of Employment, one in five households lives below the poverty line. 

The second week, the conditions were more difficult, and the workers were no longer free to visit friends or family. 

In search of labor, money 

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Interpreted Luis Urrea, who was born in Mexico, explains to Maria Elena Rojo Leal how to prepare macaroni and cheese donated to the Mexican workers by residents of Basel.

for the border cross and bring her home. After eight frustrating days, he begged an American missionary to drive him into Louisiana and bring his wife home.

Earlier this week, John White of Mission, Texas, showed up in a pickup truck to bring his wife home. Her husband was frantic when he heard she had to borow $5 after being here for two weeks," White said. "I knew she was hungry and scared. I just don't seem right that people can be treated this way. We'll get this one home and hopefully there will be a way to get everyone else home who's been here.

Rodríguez, who left her small community and worked as one of the women who organized the protest, said, "It is a very important step in the workers' perceived exploitation.

We can see that there are many people who know that this is one of the kinds of people in their town," Rodríguez said. "This kind of thing does happen to workers here and even in a small town like this. The people here should know that this can happen to them as they can make sure it doesn't happen again.

When I get home, I will stall everyone. Never again will I come here like this. I have no more trust in them anymore."

"If you know what the difference is between the two types of work," White said. "If you know what the difference is between the two types of work, you know what it is that the women are doing."

POF Inc., Johnson claims, has already spent close to $1,000 to set up the temporary housing and will not see this as a profit. This, despite the city of Basel agreeing to pay the cost of installing sewer and gas lines to the site. In addition, the $32,000 for a site of about 12 weeks of rent is 88 per cent of the $40,000. POF will receive a maximum of 4,000.

Both Johnson and Siring said they have been deeply involved in the farming and labor situation involving the Mexican workers.

The residents of Basel and the nearby towns of Riehen and Illikon have rallied to aid the Mexicans, organizing food drives and delivering clothes and supplies.

The local Catholic priest has offered lessons in his parts of the Mass in Spanish. The police chief had let the workers know she is the 20th out for them — and is keeping his eye on Anisa Pears to make sure there are no further violations of their rights.

One local supervisor is working with an attorney in Texas who specializes in immigration and migrant worker issues to help the workers navigate the situation.

"This is all new on the farm," the attorney said. "This is all new on the farm."

There are several workers helping the others, getting them as far as we can."

"I think a lot of this is coming about because of the work of the women," White said. "I think a lot of this is coming about because of the work of the women.

But I also think a lot of it is just the community of people who are working together. We know, and we are watching them in this project and what they have done in it. They have been creating and staat and they are doing a great job with the work and canard and phone and everything that has been.

"I think there is probably at least 30 of them who don't want to do the work. They're tyrant and get paid and get what they can get away with and they feel gross. These are the best of them that we're looking at now, hopefully without it all coming to one of our people.

This kind of thing has happen."

When Rodríguez's husband found out she was in such dire circumstances, he headed straight