

contract for guest workers in our Nation's history, in Mexico's history, and, indeed, in Latin America's history.

What will happen is that workers will receive a decent wage, not terrific for working in the hot sun 12 hours a day, \$8.06 an hour, for the backbreaking work they do. It has been covered in articles in the Toledo Blade which reported this front page story: "Pact to affect 8,000 migrants."

The pact was signed in North Carolina after a several-year boycott of the second-largest pickle company in our country called Mt. Olive Pickle. It talks about FLOC's 35 years of struggle to provide migrant workers with better working conditions and fair wages. Initially, the contracts were signed locally in our region of Ohio with companies like Campbell's Soup and Vlasic Pickle, but finally it has expanded to other parts of the country where workers will now be paid \$8.06 an hour, a federally set minimum wage rate for what are called H2-A workers, the workers that do come into our country. But again I say, so many are illegally trafficked by unscrupulous labor barons they call "coyotes." And workers could earn up to \$12 an hour on piecework. So it provides for people who have the ability to work harder to be paid more.

Undocumented workers who are under control of unscrupulous smugglers and farm labor contractors, this provides the ability, finally, to get rid of those terrible, terrible individuals.

Mr. Speaker, I could not be prouder than to come to this floor this evening and congratulate Baldemar Velasquez and the Farm Labor Organizing Committee for building a better world.

Mr. Speaker, I include for the RECORD the article from the Toledo Blade.

PACT TO AFFECT 8,000 MIGRANTS

(By Jon Chavez)

In what would be its first major organizing victory outside Ohio and Michigan, the Toledo-based Farm Labor Organizing Committee today is expected to sign a three-way labor agreement in North Carolina with Mt. Olive Pickle Co. Inc., which has been the subject of a FLOC boycott since 1999.

At a ceremony in Raleigh, N.C., this morning, FLOC officials said they will sign a three-year labor pact with the North Carolina Growers Association, of Vass, N.C., which represents about 1,050 farms that raise 27 different crops ranging from cucumbers to tobacco, and a related agreement with Mt. Olive.

It's a marked change in business in mostly nonunion North Carolina. The contracts will cover the most union workers in the state, and FLOC will be its largest labor organization.

Covered by the agreements will be nearly 8,000 migrant workers who travel from Mexico to North Carolina, numbers that will more than double FLOC's membership rolls.

Baldemar Velasquez, president of FLOC, was ecstatic yesterday. "I knew eventually they would have to do something. I just never knew the timing would be this soon," he told The Blade.

Lynn Williams, a spokesman for Mt. Olive, said the company would not comment until the contract is signed.

How individual farmers feel is unclear. They can choose to opt out of the association, which a party to the contract. But how those growers would be affected is uncertain.

The agreements cover migrants who harvest crops and work with visas issued under a U.S. Department of Labor program called H-2A. The growers association helps place H-2A workers at various farms as needed.

The pacts will provide the workers with specific wage rates for either hourly work or for how much is picked (depending on the crop), a formal procedure to address grievances, and third-party verification to ensure all parties are living up to the agreement.

FLOC was born in the fields of northwest Ohio nearly 35 years ago as a means to provide migrant workers with better working conditions and fair wages. Initially, it reached contracts with individual growers but became a formidable force in the industry when it reached an agreement in 1986 with Campbell Soup Co. and its subsidiary, Vlasic Pickle, and a group of growers to improve wages and working conditions.

The agreements in North Carolina follow a similar arrangement and similarly occurred after years of public boycotts and pressure tactics by the farm union.

In FLOC's agreement with Mt. Olive Pickle, the nation's second-largest pickle firm, the Mount Olive, N.C., company endorses the separate contract between the union and growers association and it provides economic incentives for the deal to occur.

Mr. Velasquez said that about 60 cucumber growers will get a 10 percent price increase for their crops they supply to Mt. Olive. That increase will be passed along in the form of wage increases for the 800 to 1,000 workers who work for those growers.

Those workers are paid \$8.06 an hour, a federally set minimum wage rate for H-2A workers. Under the new pact, which raises pay rates, workers could earn up to \$12 an hour. "It depends, but a good picker could earn that," Mr. Velasquez said.

Growers do not have to participate in the contract. However, those who remain in the association will be covered by the agreement and receive the crop price increases, said Stan Eury, director of the growers association.

The agreements do not prohibit farmers who are not part of the association from supplying Mt. Olive Pickle. At least a few suppliers now do not belong to the association.

David Rose, a sweet-potato and tobacco farmer from Nashville, N.C., said there have been rumors for months that a farm labor contract was in the works. He declined to say how many farmers might leave the association.

Still, Mr. Rose, of JB Rose Farms Inc., said the labor agreements likely will have an impact on all farmers.

The key provisions of the contracts were not necessarily wages.

Workers frequently complained of abuses by growers but were fearful to report them because they might be blacklisted and later denied a work visa, Mr. Velasquez said. The agreements provide a list of worker rights, including a hiring seniority system that the union will administer through a work office to be set up in Mexico.

"The pact goes from Mexico all the way to Ohio, so that will eliminate debate around blacklisting of workers," Mr. Velasquez said. "They'll be union members by the time they enter the U.S."

For the growers, there is a formal grievance system and third-party inspections to verify compliance, which should protect the farmers' image if they are treating their workers right, he said.

"The worst part of it for them is the terrible negative image that comes with these

issues," the Toledo labor leader said. "They don't like the publicity."

In a statement, Mr. Eury agreed that credibility is important.

"Unfortunately the lines have been blurred between the treatment of H-2A foreign guest-workers and undocumented workers who are under control of unscrupulous smugglers and farm labor contractors," the statement said. "Our industry is continually judged as a whole by the misdeeds of a few."

The three parties began negotiating about six weeks ago at the behest of Mt. Olive, Mr. Velasquez said. The first hint became publicly known last month when FLOC said a large growers' association agreed to not meddle in the union's organizing activity.

After reaching agreement on key principles, details of the pact were worked out in about a week, Mr. Velasquez said.

Both Mt. Olive and the growers researched FLOC's previous labor agreements with growers for Campbell and Vlasic.

"They studied it and told us they could live with it," Mr. Velasquez said. "They had also called some growers in Ohio to see how it had worked up there. The growers gave them some positive feedback."

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Indiana (Mr. SOUDER) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. SOUDER addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Michigan (Mr. STUPAK) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. STUPAK addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

INFLUX OF WOUNDED STRAINS VA

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. STRICKLAND) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. STRICKLAND. Mr. Speaker, I rise tonight to talk about a matter that is of very grave importance to the veterans of our country. I am referring to an article that was in The Washington Post this past Sunday. The article mentioned that thousands of U.S. troops are now returning to this country from Iraq and Afghanistan with physical injuries and mental health problems. They are encountering a VA benefit system that is already overburdened, and officials and veterans groups are concerned that the challenge could grow as this Nation remains at war.

Currently, we have had well over 1,000 of our soldiers killed in Iraq, and we have had 6,000 to 7,000 of our soldiers seriously injured. Many of those soldiers have lost limbs, they have been blinded, they have sustained brain injuries and terrible disfigurements. Many of those injuries are occurring as the result of roadside bombs which explode as these soldiers are out on patrol.

The disability benefits and health care system, as noted in The Washington Post article, this system that

provides services for about 5 million American veterans, has been overloaded for decades. We know that. The current backlog consists of more than 300,000 claims. That is 300,000 of our veterans who are waiting to get their claims adjudicated.

Mr. Speaker, because we have mobilized so many of our Reservists and National Guard persons to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan, nearly 150,000 have become eligible for health care and VA benefits as of August 1, and that number is rising. But this is the alarming information that is contained in The Washington Post article.

It says: "At the same time, President Bush's budget for 2005 calls for cutting of the Department of Veterans Affairs staff that handles benefit claims, and some veterans report long waits for benefits and confusing claims decisions."

Think of that. At a time when we are at war, when more and more of our soldiers are being terribly injured and are in need of the VA health care system, when claims are backlogged amounting to 300,000, the President sends this Congress a budget that actually calls for cuts in the number of people who are responsible for processing these claims.

The article that I am referring to makes reference to one particular soldier. "I love the military. That was my life," says this soldier, "but I don't believe they are taking care of me now."

He is Staff Sergeant Gene Westbrook, 35, of Lawton, Oklahoma. He was paralyzed in a mortar attack near Baghdad this past April, but he has received no disability benefits because they say his paperwork is missing. Now he is trying to support himself, his wife and his three children on his regular military pay of \$2,800 a month as he awaits a ruling that could provide him up to \$6,500 a month in terms of VA disability benefits.

Mr. Westbrook was deployed to Iraq in January where he served as a drill sergeant. He was sent to train Iraqi Army recruits. While on duty on April 28, south of Sadr City in Baghdad, he was hit by a mortar shell and the shrapnel severed his spine. He is now paralyzed from the chest down. He has limited movement in his right arm and he battles constant infections. His wife takes care of him full time.

Sergeant Westbrook praises the Army for the medical care he has received, but is it not shameful that this veteran would be waiting for benefits, and that we would have a President who would cut the budget for those who are charged with processing these claims?

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The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. MURPHY). Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Oregon (Mr. DEFAZIO) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. DEFAZIO addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from New York (Mr. HINCHEY) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. HINCHEY addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Washington (Mr. MCDERMOTT) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. MCDERMOTT addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from the District of Columbia (Ms. NORTON) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Ms. NORTON addressed the House. Her remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Oregon (Mr. BLUMENAUER) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. BLUMENAUER addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

U.S. FOREIGN POLICY PLAGUED WITH ATTENTION DEFICIT DISORDER

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. RYAN) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. RYAN of Ohio. Mr. Speaker, it has been a very interesting time in the past couple of years. I have come to this floor on many occasions to talk about what is happening in Afghanistan. The truth and the reality I think is becoming more apparent to all of us as American citizens; and as the Presidential debates and the Presidential contest and the election of this year coming up in the next few weeks is coming to a close, this issue is becoming more and more relevant.

I think it is becoming more and more relevant, Mr. Speaker, because it illustrates that the foreign policy of the United States of America has attention deficit disorder.

After 9/11, in which we were attacked by Osama bin Laden, al Qaeda, housed by the Taliban in Afghanistan, an international coalition went to Afghanistan and said to the world that we are together in the fight against terrorism. Unfortunately, several months after that, the United States, pretty much by itself, even though the President said the other night, well, we have Poland with us; well, now Poland is withdrawing its troops and its support from the battle in Iraq.

So we shift our focus from the battle in Afghanistan, and the international coalition that we had, to Iraq. The sat-

ellites that were focused on Afghanistan trying to find Osama bin Laden, trying to find exactly what was going on with the drug trade and opium production in Afghanistan, the satellites turned and began to face Iraq. Troops that we had in Afghanistan went to Iraq. Interrogators that we had in Afghanistan went to Iraq. Funding that should have gone to Afghanistan went to Iraq.

Now, the President said several weeks ago that the Taliban is gone, that the Taliban does not exist anymore. That is completely and utterly false. The Taliban is still in existence. They are still fomenting problems in Afghanistan. They are still controlling some of the attacks that are going on in Afghanistan. And the quotes in today's paper were saying, a quote from a high-ranking official in the Taliban, the quote was, we are going to kill anyone who goes and tries to vote in Afghanistan elections, anyone who wants to run for office in Afghanistan, and anyone who would otherwise participate in the elections in Afghanistan. Why? Because Karzai is a puppet to the United States of America.

We have 17,000 troops in Afghanistan. We have 130,000 troops in Iraq. We cannot find Osama bin Laden. And today in the newspapers all over the country, stated from Afghanistan officials who are working with the United States, United States officials, that the trail to Osama bin Laden is cold. Cold. We have nowhere to go, we have nowhere to look; we do not know where he is. We dropped the ball, we outsourced the project to people in Afghanistan instead of giving it to the best, most highly trained, highly skilled units in the world, because we have attention deficit disorder, because we had to go to Iraq, we had to drop \$200 billion, and everything this administration said to us before the war has proven not to be true.

We are going to be able to use the oil in Iraq for reconstruction: not true. We have spent \$200 billion; the taxpayer has spent funding this debacle in Iraq. We were told we were going to be greeted as liberators. Now we are greeted as occupiers. It has gotten so bad in Iraq, the Italians are now paying \$1 million to get hostages back. So the Italians are paying \$1 million to the insurgents in Iraq to fund the insurgents against us. It is ridiculous. This has been a debacle from the get-go, and it is time we square things around before we have a narco-state in Afghanistan on our hands.

THE TRUTH ABOUT THE MEDICARE MODERNIZATION ACT

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 7, 2003, the gentleman from Georgia (Mr. GINGREY) is recognized for 60 minutes as the designee of the majority leader.

Mr. GINGREY. Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to come before my colleagues