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At an orchard outside of Yakima, in the heart of Washington state's apple country, Jaime Rodriguez, a 28-year-old Mexican immigrant, picks Red Delicious apples.

## Labor crunch on the farm

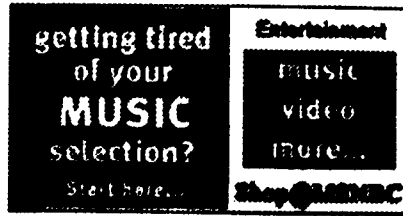
Are undocumented immigrants benefitting from the "New Economy?"

By Gary A. Seidman  
MSNBC

YAKIMA, WA., Oct. 16 — For a moment, the two farmworkers standing under the warm October sun here must have felt unusually empowered by America's "New Economy." They had driven their beat-up Ford down a dusty road to the Valicoff Fruit Co.'s apple orchard, and after a brief conversation in Spanish, landed jobs that would pay them more than twice the minimum wage. Within minutes, the two were perched atop ladders, filling shoulder sacks heavy with fruit as part of a workforce of mostly Mexican, mostly undocumented day-laborers who — for the first time in years — are a commodity in their own right.

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**APPLE PICKING** is not easy work. The pay is determined by how much and how quickly a worker can pluck fruit from trees. Because the harvest is concentrated into a few weeks, pickers work through all sorts of weather. Over the course of a day, a strong picker might handle as much as 9,000 pounds of fruit, one apple at a time. The apples are deposited in a shoulder sack and when the sack gets too heavy the worker descends the ladder and dumps the lot into a bin. Dozens of times a day the picker repeats the process. For that effort, a picker this season could earn \$100-to-\$150 a day.

This kind of farm work is among the lowest wrung of labor in the United States — the purview, with few exceptions, of immigrant workers. Rob Lynch, who owns Nature's Daughter Organics, and whose family has been growing apples in this fertile central Washington valley for generations, says he can't remember the last time he hired a non-Hispanic to harvest his orchard.

The General Accounting Office, Congress' investigative arm, recently estimated that 52 percent of the 1.6 million farm workers in the United States are here illegally, though agricultural organizations in this state say the percentage is probably closer to 70.

#### A HIRING HEADACHE

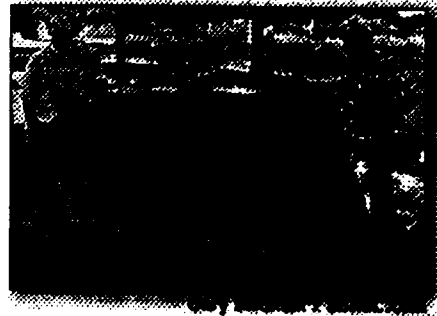
This season, Lynch and Rob Valicoff, of Valicoff Fruit Co., say hiring enough pickers — legal or not — to harvest their crops is a problem. "One day we have 60 workers in the field, the next day we have 40," says Valicoff, who dates his family's apple business back to the 1920s. Both growers complain that a scarcity of workers in the Yakima valley — the most productive

"There are help-wanted signs going up like dandelions around here,"  
— **ROB LYNCH**  
Apple grower

## Apple grower

Rob Lynch (left) and Rob Valicoff, show off one of the help wanted signs outside of Valicoff's orchard. Valicoff is offering pickers as much as \$16 per bin of apples. He says workers typically pick eight to 10 bins a day.

apple growing region in the country — is leading to an upward spiral in pickers' wages, aggressive competition for workers and a likelihood that acres of apples will go unharvested. What's more, they say, the competition has made the workforce less reliable, with workers skipping around to the highest bidder.



The refrain is heard from growers throughout Washington state's \$1.2 billion tree-fruit industry. With the economy booming, the competition to attract workers has

tightened this year. Farmers here say that pickers who had been regulars for years have moved the 150 miles west towards Seattle and King County where high-tech wealth has encouraged a building boom that is generating thousands of year-round construction jobs. And, with a sophisticated document forging trade, and the Immigration and Naturalization Services' decision last year to abandon old-style workplace raids, some observers say that illegal immigrants have become bolder about seeking out more permanent jobs.

#### HELP WANTED

"We need 35,000 workers in this state to get the apples off the trees," says Lynch, whose own orchards spread across 400 acres of this valley. "There are help-wanted signs going up like dandelions around here."

At the gate to the Valicoff Fruit Co.'s orchard, a sign says workers could earn \$14 for each bin of Red Delicious apples that they pick. If they stay through the end of the harvest the pickers will get a bonus that will kick their pay up to \$16 per bin.

Jaime Rodriguez, a 26 year-old Mexican who immigrated up to Yakima in 1992, and has graduated from picker to crew foreman at the Valicoff orchard, says picker pay is up from last year when Valicoff was paying \$12 per bin. Pickers, he says, could fill as much as 10 bins a day, each bin holding between 850 pounds and 900 pounds of apples.

Still, the economics of the apple business are confusing at best. Valicoff and Lynch both drive up in late-model, top of the line pick-ups, yet both say the finances of their farms are shaky. Two years ago, Lynch says his business lost between \$100,000 and \$200,000, but he's optimistic about this year. "We're doing far better than 80 or 90 percent of growers around here,"

**“The only reason they want guest workers is so that they can exploit them and pay them less than the workers who are already here,”**

**— GUADELUPE GAMBOA**  
United Farm Workers

Lynch says. “But now I have a bank loan that scares me to death.”

### **GLOBALIZATION: A TWO EDGED SWORD**

Indeed, over the past several years, apples imported from Latin America and even more importantly, China, have driven world prices down. Labor costs in those countries are just a fraction of the costs in the United States, severely pressuring U.S. growers, the farmers say. That argument has driven the Washington Growers League to campaign for a revision to U.S. immigration policy, an issue that is supported by Republican lawmakers, as well as by Mexico’s president-elect, Vicente Fox. The league wants the government to allow guest workers to enter the country on temporary visas.

“The only reason they want guest workers is so that they can exploit them and pay them less than the workers who are already here,” says Guadalupe Gamboa, who directs the United Farm Workers union in Yakima.

Gamboa is fervently against the guest visa proposal, saying the program would hurt the livelihoods of immigrant workers who are already in the country. Instead, he argues for an amnesty program like the one that afforded legal residency to 1.1 million undocumented Mexicans in 1986, a program that critics say will cost the United States hundreds of millions of dollars because of the social services that the new immigrants will seek.

What’s more, Gamboa argues that the farmers’ financial problems are of their own making. He says they overplanted when there was an abundance of cheap immigrant workers, and that now growers don’t want to pay the wages it will take to harvest all their land.

Still, Mike Gempler of the Washington Growers League says this year’s crop throughout the state will likely be just shy of the record 1998 crop of 98 million packed boxes. Washington produces about 60 percent of the nation’s apples. About 30 percent of the crop is exported. But Gempler says the Washington state industry is going to shrink unless the labor situation is addressed soon. “I anticipate we are going to lose a lot of growers this year because they won’t be able to get the financing.”

