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THE MIGRANTS: EVERGLADES LABOR CAMP IN TURMOIL

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Just before Thanksgiving 1982, Donato Garcia burst into Trailer 3-6 at Everglades Migrant Labor Camp, joyous with news of "the elections" that would at last bring power to the farmworker. His wife Matilda remained silent -- gazing at the unpaid rent bill and the barren refrigerator. "Please, Donato," she remembers saying. "Don't get into it. You'll only get your heart broken." Last Sunday, Garcia stared down at his old work boots and said he should have listened to his wife. Garcia and the four other migrants elected to the 14-member board of directors of the Everglades Community Association said they will resign at the April 4 board meeting.

They complain other board members ignore or belittle their opinions. They are angry it took a man's death to get a much-needed police patrol on weekends. They feel left out because board meetings are conducted in English. The migrant directors speak only Spanish. "We are nothings; they sit and talk in English and we sit there looking like idiots," Garcia said through an interpreter. "When we ask them questions, they say, 'Just approve, approve, just vote yes; we know what's going on.'" Board member Jack Campbell disagreed: "The migrants on the board have as much say as anyone else; I don't know what more they want." The meetings are conducted in English, added Campbell, manager of Florida Tomato Packers: "This isn't Mexico, you know." Board member Rev. William Chambers of the Church of the Nazarene said he tries to translate, but "I'm no master of the language and a lot of the financial subtleties are lost on them, I'm afraid."

The association, a nonprofit corporation of growers, migrant leaders and businessmen, took over the Everglades camp from Metro Dec. 1. The county had run the migrant camp of 325 trailers five miles south of Florida City since it opened in 1974. Metro commissioners voted last year to close the camp, saying it was too expensive to operate. The association kept the camp open and the migrants should be grateful for that, said Cipriano Garza, community association board chairman and migrant education coordinator for the Dade County Public Schools.

Maintenance has improved; repairs are swifter; rent collection is stricter, said camp manager Enrique Vazquez. "We've been able to keep the camp going because we have a firm policy on rent," Garza said. "The bottom line is the camp is still open." To some migrants, strict rent collection translates into eviction notices if they don't pick enough tomatoes to pay the \$50-a-week rent for a two-bedroom trailer or \$52 for a three-bedroom. This season, bad weather and a poor harvest have worsened migrants' financial troubles. Many have little money for food or clothing, much less rent, said Yolanda Wohl, a Florida City Elementary teacher who works closely with migrant families. About 325 trailers are open. Of those, 108 are leased to growers; the rest are rented directly to families.

Last month, 65 families living at the camp got eviction notices, according to camp records. At least 10 families are being sued to collect back rent, said manager Vazquez. A family must be two months in arrears before court action is taken, he added. When Metro ran the camp, rent collection was

more flexible, but Metro also had a \$325,000 subsidy from Dade tax revenues to cover the difference, Garza said.

The association has no subsidy and it must meet quarterly payments on the \$2-million federal loan Metro took out to buy 200 new trailers two years ago. The association made its first \$58,834 payment, due March 1, on time. The money is in the bank for June's payment, said Bill Hampton, assistant Metro manager. But few residents stay in the camp during the summer months and another payment is due in September. That is why the board must be strict collecting rent now, Garza said.

Ezequiel Loredó, another migrant director who met at Garcia's trailer Sunday, worries more about crime than rent collections. "Crime is our most critical problem here," Loredó said through an interpreter. On weekends, fights erupt, people are hurt and trailers are burglarized, he said. Migrant families don't like the growing number of single men at the camp, brought in by farmers who lease trailers and pack them with single Haitians, Mexicans and Cubans. Police said the single men are responsible for a disproportionate amount of the crime, but the men haven't brought an overall increase in crime to the camp, police said. Metro permitted only families in the camp and hired security guards to patrol the area.

"We asked for police protection for the three worst times: Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights, but they just kept telling us, 'No, no, no, we can't possibly afford that.' " Loredó said. "We think people can handle security by themselves and we told them to set up a Crime Watch," said Campbell. The migrants say a Crime Watch is absurd. "Migrants are out in the field all day and they expect us to come home and patrol all night; it's crazy," said Matilda Garcia.

The Everglades camp is so isolated it is hard to patrol. "It's at a remote end of our district and you usually just aren't in a position where you just happen to be passing by and can swing in," said Detective Bill Pryor, of Metro Station Four in Cutler Ridge. On Christmas Eve, two men and a 15-year-old boy broke into several trailers in search of women. The 15-year-old broke into a home, raped one woman repeatedly and attempted to assault her seven-year-old daughter, police said. A neighbor, hearing the mother's screams, captured the youth, who lived in the camp with his parents, and held him until police came. The teenager was arrested, charged with sexual battery and is now in Dade County Jail, awaiting trial as an adult.

The camp directors still refused to pay \$16 an hour for a weekend patrol, Garcia said. On Sunday afternoon, Feb. 6, two men sat inside a trailer playing a game of dice. Eduardo Martinez won the game. According to police, his opponent, Roberto Llanes, took out a four-inch folding knife and slit Martinez's throat. By the time police arrived, Martinez was dead and Llanes was gone. A warrant for Llanes' arrest remains unserved. The murder convinced the board to hire two off-duty policemen to patrol the camp from 6 p.m. to 2 a.m. Friday and Saturday.

The migrant directors wanted a Sunday patrol, too, but didn't get it. That's one reason they say they will resign. Another is frustration. Donato Garcia stared at his massive, calloused hands holding the eviction notice he got last week -- his first in the five years his family has lived at the camp. "These are my people; I didn't go in for this for the business deal or the ego trip," he said. "I did it because I thought I could help my people. But I see there's no hope for that now." From his bag, he untangled a foot-long cardboard box wound in masking tape. "This is Rafael," he announced, rattling a box of

ashes stamped "Van Ordsel Cemetery" on the side. "They even took my brother away from me." Rafael was murdered in downtown Miami last July by a man who tried to steal his car, Serrat said.

For some families who rent their own trailers at Everglades, the situation is no better. Sandra Trejo sat on the front stoop of her trailer with her two babies and wondered aloud where she will find \$250 to pay five weeks of back rent. She wondered how long she can go without milk or Pampers for the children. "It has been a week already," she said. She wondered why she quit "a real good job" in Ohio, making car armrests in a plastic factory to come to "this disgusting place." Her not quite two-year-old son Rosendo Jr., his nearly transparent skin mottled with heat rash, squalled uncontrollably from his stroller. He has had a high fever for two days, Trejo said. Last week, she added, she called police to come and take her baby to the hospital. "They told me, 'Lady, call a taxi.'" She screwed her face up in a sneer. "A taxi. Think of it. Who do they think I am?" She pressed six-month-old Frances to her breast and whispered, "This is a terrible year, 1983. Sometimes, I just want to crawl in a corner and kill myself. Frances, why don't you and Mommy go into a corner and die?" Trejo rose slowly and excused herself. She had the family wash to do, she explained. With no ride to the laundromat and no quarters for the washing machines, she would do it by hand.