

A man in a blue sleeveless shirt is harvesting sugarcane in a field. He is holding a bundle of harvested cane stalks. The background is a dense field of sugarcane plants.

## H-2 Worker, There's H to Pay

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An important plane trip by VIPs concluding with special accommodations for a late-night arrival at the airport? A group of tourists cruising through the sparkling center of luxurious West Palm Beach? These opening scenes of the film *H-2 Worker* by producer/director Stephanie Black draw a striking contrast to what actually lies in store for the Jamaican workers imported to toil in the sugar cane fields of Southern Florida under America's H-2 visa program. In reality, these workers will be consigned to squalid living conditions in the camps at Belle Glade, Clewiston, and Moore Haven and be required to perform the backbreaking labor of cane harvesting at minimal compensation. The movie focuses primarily on the plight of these workers, and it is not unlike the dirty dealings and adversities faced by many other varied and frequently illegal groups of migrant farm workers. The real tragedy brought home to the viewer, however, is that in this case, due to the influence and lobbying of the billion dollar sugar industry in the U.S., this treatment is government sanctioned and subsidized.

Since Ms. Black was forced to work surreptitiously for the most part, the cinematography is less than breathtaking, although there are a few intriguing twilight settings. The most effective scenes occur away from possible scrutiny by U.S. Sugar management. The film gets its most basic thrust, through narration and interviews, by exploring the humanistic aspects of the laborers' psyche—their needs, desires, hopes, and dreams. Most are quite articulate, some even eloquent, and it is soon evident that, poor conditions and salaries notwithstanding, this is an opportunity that does not exist back home in Jamaica.

West Indians first appeared in the South Florida cane fields in the mid '40s after U.S. Sugar Corporation was accused of conspiracy to commit slavery. Previous to this, blacks were recruited from local and also northern areas and basically put in bondage until their transportation and equipment costs were paid back to the company. Some of these early injustices are illustrated by the conversations of an old '40s field hand who now collects aluminum cans for a living. Archival newsreel footage from this period further documents the racist attitudes of U.S. Sugar management at the time. Company policy since has precluded the use of American labor at higher wages, and this point is brought out at a union meeting of farm workers, denied by management, and then tacitly rationalized by a government regulator.

A segment featuring Jamaican Prime Minister Michael Manly expounding on economic realities mandating the migratory nature of survival for Jamaicans today helps explain their lack of ability, if not desire, to adequately improve their circumstances. The 350 or so harvesters who went on strike during filming of the movie were harassed by police then simply packed up and shipped back home, only to be replaced by a less repining bunch. Scenes of whites enjoying a sugar festival amidst reports of a record harvest interspersed with shots of the black workers responsible further contribute to the overall sense of inequity.

*H-2 Worker*, on the whole, is well-done and aptly illustrates the problem of exploitation of imported labor and the need for closer monitoring of the H-2 work visa program. If we, as Americans, indeed believe this is the land of opportunity and insist on legally protecting ourselves against discrimination in the workplace, then it's time to give the same consideration to the rest of the world, especially those less fortunate than us, and let others see our great country in the same light in which we see it.