

Migrant labor

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RELEASE AT WILL

FLIGHT OF MIGRANT LABOR IS
"UNBELIEVABLE"--GEN. ERSKINE

Coordinated governmental and citizen action to improve the substandard working and living conditions among the Nation's migrant laborers in both industry and agriculture is urged in a report by the Federal Interagency Committee on Migrant Labor.

The Committee's report, titled "Migrant Labor--A Human Problem", was released by the Department of Labor for Marine Major General Graves B. Erskine, who retired on April 1 as Retraining and Reemployment Administrator in the Department.

Stressing the need for unified action to protect the human rights of migrants, the report advocates enactment of Federal, State and local legislation in their behalf. It proposes improved procedures for recruitment, transportation and utilization of seasonal laborers, and for furnishing them adequate housing, health, education and welfare services. It particularly urges local communities and employers to accept greater responsibility for migrant workers and their families.

In a Foreword to the report, General Erskine declares that through "community and State neglect" migrant workers have been "robbed of so many normal and human rights that it is almost unbelievable." The General described them as "America's forgotten people of 1947."

The Committee's report, according to the General, asks "justice for Americans equal to that afforded foreign workers in the United States." While the social changes necessary to correct existing conditions among migrants will call for an "additional portion of the already overtaxed dollar," the alternative is a "continuance of unconcern for human values," he said.

"The information and the ways to get results are clearly stated (in the report); the burden of future success rests on far-sighted citizens willing to work for the elimination of suffering, poverty and insecurity among America's migrant millions."

The Committee report asks for legislation to regulate the employment of migrant children and also to require their attendance at school. It urges States to remove restrictive residence requirements so that migrants may receive health, educational, recreational and similar services extended to other citizens. It further recommends that Federal grants-in-aid be established to assist States and communities in meeting such welfare needs of migrants.

In addition, the Committee believes that States workmen's compensation laws should be extended to migrant workers and the Interstate Commerce Act should safeguard transportation.

Other legislative action suggested by the Committee would result in extending minimum wage legislation in licensing and regulating labor camps; and in licensing and regulating private employment agencies, including labor contractors.

Pointing out that in seasonal migration "family organization and parental care are sacrificed," the Committee urgently recommends positive citizens action, especially in communities dependent on migrant labor, to protect the rights of children and the integrity of family life.

Such voluntary action, the Committee said, would enable migrant workers and their families to take a place in normal community life by providing them with permanent housing facilities, establishing religious and recreational facilities, extending education, health and medical services, including adequate nutrition and feeding programs for children, and in general absorbing migrants into all community group activities.

Acknowledging the need for gathering and distributing exact information in regard to migrant labor supply and demand, the Committee requests that employers furnish specific job information to workers, that the Government extend and improve its recruiting services through permanent or temporary employment offices and information stations set up in labor market areas, and key points along customary routes of travel.

The Committee states that in areas of demand all available local labor should be utilized fully before recruiting migrant labor, and that no foreign workers should be imported until a maximum effort has been made, both locally and nationally, to recruit domestic workers.

While recognizing the importance of the migrant workers in the Nation's economic system, the Committee also said that everything possible should be done to reduce to a minimum the number of workers required to meet seasonal labor needs in agricultural and other industries. Admitting that such a reduction will not be easy to accomplish, the Committee suggests that it may be done, in part, by adjustments in farm and industrial production programs to minimize seasonal peaks, by an increase in mechanization, by the fullest utilization of local workers, and by the creation of new job opportunities.

One of the greatest needs at present, according to the report, is that of securing comprehensive factual information concerning migratory workers and their children. Accordingly, the Committee recommends the establishment of a joint research committee of representatives from Federal and State agencies to assemble and analyze information about the numbers and characteristics of migrant workers, their working and living conditions, areas of employment, patterns of migratory movement, and trends in agriculture and industry which affect their seasonal employment and resulting problems of health, education and welfare. The Committee urges that these detailed studies be started at once and that funds be made available to carry out the program.

The Federal Interagency Committee on Migrant Labor, set up in May 1946, by General Erskine, includes representatives from the Department of Labor, Department of Agriculture, Federal Security Agency, National Housing Agency, and the Railroad Retirement Board. In compiling its report, the Committee was aided by consultants from other Government agencies and from private organizations.