

Migrant labor

THE MIGRATORY FARM WORKER,

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We are now witnessing a record-breaking expansion of economic activity in the United States and a rise to living standards never previously attained. During the past decade and a half, the total value of all goods and services produced annually rose from barely \$100 billion per year to a level of \$400 billion. Between 1939 and 1950, our total industrial production just about doubled; and since 1950, it has gone up another 25 percent. The growth in production which we have experienced during the past 15 years has resulted in high levels of employment. In October 1956, 66.2 million people were employed while less than 2 million were unemployed. The present unemployment rate--2.8 percent of the labor force--is among the lowest ever reported.

Although there has been some rise in consumer prices during the period, the gains in earnings and family income represent a significant increase in purchasing power. In 1955, the average hourly earnings in manufacturing industry was \$1.88 compared with about \$1.00 per hour at the end of World War II. The median family income was estimated at \$4,400 last year, almost double the average family income 10 years earlier, while the consumer price index rose only about one-half as much.

Address before the Cosmos Club, Washington, D. C., December 3, 1956, by Louis Levine, Assistant Director, Bureau of Employment Security, U.S. Department of Labor.

Washington, 1956?

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JUL 23 1957

Despite these attainments, there are significant groups which are not sharing in the Nation's overall economic well being. Low income groups include (a) older workers who are not able to participate fully in employment, (b) chronically unemployed persons living in depressed urban areas bypassed for various reasons during the economic advance of the country, and (c) residents of rural areas in parts of the United States where a combination of small marginal farms, high birth rates, and lack of nonfarm employment opportunities has caused underemployment.

Migratory agriculture workers are another group which has not benefited from the high levels of prosperity the rest of the Nation has enjoyed. Migrants are persons who come and go, do not have roots in the community in which they work, and have no organized way of making themselves heard. Therefore, there is a general lack of appreciation of the depressed working conditions and low levels of living that prevail among them.

Prior to the thirties, the public was relatively unconcerned with the issues and problems raised by the migration of farm workers. Migrants were thought of as workers seeking opportunities in the settlement of the open plains and the burgeoning towns of the West. With the advent of the great depression, a new type of migrant emerged as residents of the East and Great Plains poured westward in search of work, Old jalopies carrying fathers, mothers and children, displaced from the small farms in the Mid-west, provided an abundant labor supply to meet the seasonal needs of western farmers. The resulting social and economic problems, dramatized by John Steinbeck, aroused public interest

in the resettlement and welfare of hundreds of thousands of people who followed the crops.

The "Okies" and "Arkies" that Steinbeck wrote about were later absorbed into farm and nonfarm employment. Mobilization for defense during World War II created such serious labor shortages in the domestic farm labor supply that it was necessary to excuse farm workers from military service and admit temporary workers from Mexico and British West Indies to save the crops.

Since the War the farm population and farm labor supply continued to decline while production has risen in response to the needs of a growing population. Migrant workers are still needed for peak season activities on large commercial farms. Of 3 million persons who are employed as hired farm workers at some time during the year, some 450,000 are migrants. About 150,000 nonworking children, women, and other dependants accompany them on their travels. These figures do not include about 450,000 Mexican nationals and British West Indians employed as temporary farm workers in areas of acute labor shortages under arrangements supervised by the government. Most of the migratory workers today are Spanish-Americans in the Southwest or Negroes from Florida and other Southeastern States. There are also considerable numbers of Anglo-Saxon migrants, mainly in California and in some of the Appalachian Ozark areas.

Numerous investigations have been made of migratory workers by special commissions, congressional committees, and public groups. Many agencies of the federal government are concerned with one or another aspect of the conditions under which migratory farm workers

live and work. However, responsibility for the solution of the problems of the migratory worker still rests largely with local communities and States. The basic dilemma is that farmers want labor supply that will meet short-term demands but rural communities are not always willing or able to cope with the social and economic problems that result.

Why Migrants

The basic reason for having migratory workers may be traced to the seasonality of agriculture production. With modern tractors and scientific methods of weed and insect control, a farm operator and members of his family can manage a very large commercial farm during most of the year. For short periods of cultivation or harvest, however, the farmer needs a large labor supply. Since local workers cannot earn enough from a few weeks of agricultural employment, there may not be enough workers available locally to meet the seasonal needs. Growers have become dependent on migratory crews who arrive at a critical time when demand for labor is highest and the success or failure of an entire season's operation is in balance.

Eventually, machines will be used for some of the activities which are now done largely by hand. The production of small grain, which formerly required large numbers of seasonal workers, is now almost entirely mechanized. During recent years there has been a great advance in the harvesting of sugar beets, and some progress is being made in mechanizing sugar beet cultivation. In 1955, almost one-fourth of the cotton produced in the United States was picked or stripped mechanically compared with less than 1 percent harvested by

machine 10 years ago. Although no one has invented a machine for picking fruit, the use of stages, lifts, and trucks cuts down part of the labor requirements for this tedious work. Since mechanization has affected some farm production processes more than others, the result is that seasons of agricultural employment are shortened making agricultural work unattractive as a full time job, and therefore restricting the labor supply.

Forces outside of agriculture are partly responsible for changes in the migratory labor supply. Workers are usually in the migratory stream mainly because of lack of better employment opportunities. Studies show that migratory workers tend to be younger than nonmigratory agricultural workers, which indicates that they include new entrants in the labor market who have not yet found permanent jobs. During periods of economic reversal we have large influxes of people into the migratory stream and, on the other hand, in times of high economic activity, migrants settle down in better jobs.

Patterns of Migration

The majority of migratory workers have established themselves in the southern parts of California, Arizona, Texas and Florida where weather permits some farm activities during the winter. During the spring and summer, crews leave the base areas for employment in many different localities. Looking at a map of migratory movements one would have the impression that migration patterns are helter-skelter and disorganized. Actually most migratory crews travel the same routes year after year. They know where they are going, and frequently crew leaders have definite pre-season work commitments. A majority of

migrants go to one or two locations for summer employment and then return to their home base where they spend 7 to 9 months of the year.

Several major patterns of migration have been identified. One stream begins in Florida, traveling up the East Coast to the Carolinas, the eastern shore of Virginia and Maryland, and the Middle Atlantic States for vegetable and fruit harvest work. Another stream branches off from this for employment in the Great Lake States on a variety of fruit and vegetable crops. A typical Florida migrant would be a Negro who winters in a public camp near Belle Glade, where he works in winter vegetable production. About May, he and his family travel by truck with a crew to New York for the potato and bean harvest, returning to the home base in the fall. Recently Puerto Ricans have begun to appear in the Eastern Seaboard migratory stream.

The central migration pattern begins in Texas and follows the cotton harvest northward through Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Missouri. A branch of this stream works in sugar beets and vegetables in the Mountain and Great Plain States and another branch extends to the Great Lakes. A typical Texas migrant would be a Spanish-American employed in the winter in vegetable and citrus harvests of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. During the late summer and fall he may travel with his family in a stake truck to the Coastal Bend and High Rolling Plains areas of Texas as the cotton season progresses.

A third major pattern starts in the winter vegetable and citrus areas of California and Arizona, moving northward for cotton, tomato, grape, peach and pear harvest work in California. Some of these push on to harvest fruits and hops in the Northwest. A typical Western

pattern migrant might be a Spanish-American alternating between the citrus groves of Los Angeles County and the melon and cotton fields in the San Joaquin Valley.

There are many smaller movements in various parts of the country. Formerly migrants followed the wheat harvest in the Great Plains. Since this harvest is now completely mechanized, field workers have been replaced by mobile custom combine crews who work their way in phases from Oklahoma to Canada. New migratory routes are constantly being developed with changing patterns of production. For example, in the last several seasons an important movement of workers from Mississippi and other southeastern States to Florida takes place every winter. The employment service agencies of the States involved organized this exchange of workers.

Earnings of Migrants

There is considerable variation in the duration of employment and annual earnings of migratory workers. One hears stories of individual workers who are able to earn as much as \$20 a day. This is highly unusual, however. Migratory workers are specialists who time their arrival to coincide with the peak labor demand, and sometime they average higher piece-work earnings than nonmigratory seasonal farm workers. Studies made by the Department of Agriculture and the Bureau of the Census, based on a national sample, show that the average daily cash farm wage of migratory agricultural workers was \$6.40 in 1954 compared with \$5.50 for other seasonal farm workers. Cotton picking wages, for example, range from an average of \$2.30 per hundredweight in New Mexico to \$3.40 in North Carolina. At these rates,

the average worker could earn about \$3.50 to \$5.00 a day.

Migrants frequently pick up nonfarm jobs to supplement farm earnings during off-seasons. The average adult male worked 166 days in 1954, earning \$1,160 from a combination of farm and nonfarm work. Considering the fact that his wife and children worked part-time in field jobs, packing house, or food processing work, the average family earnings were probably in the neighborhood of \$1,700 to \$1,800 for the year.

Problems of Migrants

In addition to low earnings and irregular employment, migratory workers suffer disadvantages not easily measured in monetary terms. Conditions of housing and sanitation are often substandard. They travel long distances in unsafe vehicles. They do not enjoy the job protection and security that go with other types of employment. Because of differences in religion, language, race, customs, and background, they are often not accepted in the communities in which they work. Sometimes they are excluded from health and public welfare services because of residence requirements.

Children of migrant workers are frequently found in the fields helping their parents. Traveling from place to place they receive irregular schooling and are harmed by premature employment. The conditions under which these children work are similar to the conditions which resulted in legislation forbidding or regulating the employment of children in so many industries other than agriculture. Youngsters are employed at jobs such as lifting and dragging baskets, hampers, bags, or boxes of vegetables, fruits or cotton. Small children

sometimes are found working with sharp instruments in such activities as topping onions.

The Fair Labor Standards Act prohibits the employment of children under 16 in agriculture during school hours, and many States have child labor laws that go beyond the Federal law and prohibit child labor in and out of school. Thousands of cases of violations are reported every year, but enforcement is often hampered by the attitude of the migratory worker parents who are forced by circumstances to count on the earnings of the children. Enforcement is also weakened by the practice in some localities of closing schools for crop vacations, which, in effect, removes the children from protection of the federal law.

When migrant children appear in a small rural community, which may itself have very limited and inadequate school facilities, lack of teachers, and too few school buses, there is a real problem in fitting them into the school pattern. If parents enroll the migrant children, they are forced on overcrowded classrooms and often cannot be properly classified because of sporadic prior schooling. In the case of Spanish-American children, there is an added language difficulty. Many of the States with large migrant worker populations, such as California, Wisconsin, Florida, New York, Pennsylvania and Maryland are continually striving to enforce school attendance laws and make some special provision to accommodate migrant children in the school system. There are some interesting pilot projects to provide summer schools for migrant worker children with special programs to help overcome deficiencies in their backgrounds. There is increasing evidence that parents of

migratory children are beginning to be more concerned with the education of their children.

Some communities have also established child care centers for preschool-age children. This group is often the most neglected as both parents are likely to be working.

The housing of migratory workers is often below minimum standards of health and decency. First, in the home base areas they often are found in shack towns or in slum neighborhoods of cities, or in public or private labor camps where they are assigned small, overcrowded quarters. During seasons when migrant workers are on the move, housing is even more rudimentary. Stories of workers living in ditch-banks and sleeping in the fields without any protection whatsoever are not exaggerations. In most cases, however, housing of some kind is provided by employers.

The quality of housing varies widely from area to area. Some of the larger employers and employer associations may provide fairly decent camps with small, clean cabins, water obtainable from centrally located faucets, central cooking facilities, some kind of shower and laundry facilities, arrangements for removing garbage and keeping camps clean. More commonly, workers are variously housed in barracks, cabins, trailers, tents, rooming houses, auto-courts, converted farm dwellings, or even barns. One of the problems involved in providing decent housing is that farmers must bear the cost of construction themselves. Since the housing will be used only a few weeks during the year and is provided rent-free to workers, the farmer can see little advantage in large capital outlays for this purpose. About

half of the States have now adopted labor camp codes, but the codes themselves do not go far enough in setting forth minimum standards, and there are many problems in enforcement. The Farm Placement Service of the Bureau of Employment Security in the Department of Labor is trying to encourage better housing by insisting on decent accommodations in aiding States to recruit and place migrant workers. The President's Committee of Migratory Labor is exerting influence both in increasing the supply of housing available and raising standards.

Migratory farm workers--and indeed most agricultural laborers--do not enjoy the many job rights that go with nonfarm employment. Workers in industry take for granted such things as a fixed number of hours of employment and premium pay for overtime work, due notice before termination of employment, sick leave, vacations with pay, seniority, health insurance and pensions, sometimes subsidized by the employer, workmen's compensation, reasonable standards of safety in employment, and the right to bargain collectively, not to mention old-age and survivors' insurance, and unemployment insurance. Farm workers do not have most of these forms of security.

The Federal Wage-Hour law has a specific exemption for any worker employed in agriculture, but some of the State laws are broad enough to cover farm workers. The laws governing unemployment insurance exclude farm workers. Workmen's compensation laws in Ohio, Hawaii and Puerto Rico require compulsory coverage of agricultural workers. In several other States farmers may voluntarily bring their employees under the law, but are not required to do so.

Since 1954 some measure of old-age and survivors insurance protection has been extended to farm laborers. Beginning next January, a worker is covered if he earns \$150 in cash wages from a single employer in a year or if he works 20 days or more for an employer on a time basis (rather than piece-rate). Under some conditions the crew leader or labor contractor, rather than the farmer, is held accountable for the social security tax.

Thousands of migrant workers are transported long distances between jobs in trucks lacking adequate seating accommodations and frequently overcrowded beyond the point of safety. Vehicles used are often old and not equipped with safety devices. Drivers are sometimes unqualified and do not have financial responsibility to pay for damage to passengers or other vehicles.

A few States—including California—now have laws or regulations setting safety standards specifically for vehicles used in the transportation of farm workers. The Farm Placement Service has been making safe transportation a part of requirements for a job order. The President's Committee on Migratory Labor has issued suggested transportation regulations for consideration of States. But this problem is far from settled. Serious accidents, reported in the press, arouse public attention from time to time. An accident of this type occurred in Colorado when a truckload of 54 migrant workers overturned. One child was killed and 20 persons injured in that disaster. In 1954 there was a crash involving a trailer-truck in Del Rio, Texas, resulting in the death of 11 men and injury of 56 people. The 17-year-old

boy driving the truck said that he fell asleep at the wheel. The Interstate Commerce Commission has recently been authorized to step into the picture. The Commission is working on requirements for the passengers' comfort, operators' qualifications, maximum hours of service, and safety of operation and equipment.

The farm labor market has many special characteristics that are different from the labor market conditions in other industries. The uncertainty of demand, intermittent nature of employment, need to obtain workers from long distances and provide them with housing, food, transportation, and other facilities, the difficulty of finding a labor supply willing to accept these conditions of employment are some of the most obvious distinguishing characteristics. As a result, a labor contractor system has grown up. The labor contractor helps to organize the market. He is often a person who belongs to the minority group from which the labor is drawn who is in a position to assure the employer with a labor supply when needed. On the other hand, he can recruit workers by arranging for some continuity of employment and taking care of the many special needs of the migrants. There are many variations in types of labor contractors from area to area and crop to crop. Some are merely crew leaders who are essentially foremen with limited responsibilities for recruitment, transportation, and supervision while others are independent agents who contract to perform a stipulated task, such as picking all the fruit in an orchard, for a flat sum or a stipulated piece rate per unit of output, or a percentage of the workers' earnings. In many cases the farmer deals

only with a crew leader, and the migrant does not actually know the employer even in a casual way.

Under these conditions, an occasional unscrupulous labor contractor or crew leader will find ways of taking advantage of workers. Crew leaders, as a rule, keep no records, preferring to carry their business "in their heads". An unprincipled leader may systematically overcharge crew members for transportation, food, and housing. There are cases of crew leaders absconding with the payroll, leaving their crew stranded without funds away from home.

Four States and Puerto Rico have laws on the books covering labor contractors who recruit farm workers. A fifth State--New York--requires all crew leaders and labor contractors bringing migrant laborers into the State to register annually with the Industrial Commission, and submit information on wages, housing, and working conditions. The Commission may suspend or refuse to renew the registration of a crew leader for giving false information to workers or for other abuses. The new social security amendments requiring crew leaders who are actually employers to pay taxes and file reports with the Bureau of Internal Revenue may help to compel crew leaders to become responsible.

Time does not permit a full discussion of all problems of migrant workers. One of the most distressing is the health problem, and this is related to substandard housing, unsafe transportation, and poor working conditions. During active seasons when cash comes into the family, migrants, like every one else, seek private medical care. In slack seasons, however, the cost of medical care is prohibitive. Taxpayers

are reluctant to foot the medical bills for what they regard as a floating population. Very often migrants on the move are not eligible for public health care or public welfare because of residence requirements in the area where they work. There is need for more understanding on the part of communities on the importance of migrants who come to town, and the danger that they may spread disease unless measures are taken to assure reasonable standards of sanitation and health care. Even where the problem is clearly identified there is simply too little public nursing, sanitation, and medical officer time available to cope with it adequately.

Farm Placement Service

Of the many Federal government agencies concerned with some aspects of the life of migratory workers, the one that has the most direct impact is the Farm Placement Service, which operates through a network of affiliated State employment service agencies. Before the seasons of agricultural work begin, Farm Placement officers attempt to estimate the approximate farm labor needs in their particular areas. Pre-season contacts are made with local workers to find out how many expect to be available for various activities. If the local labor supply is short, the employment offices in other areas are contacted to tap the possible labor supply there. Each year, for example, Farm Placement representatives from States along the Eastern Seaboard come to Florida in early spring to complete arrangements with migratory worker crews. Definite commitments are made for the crews to stop at specific areas for specified periods of time. Crew leaders are informed beforehand of the condition of housing and the wages they can expect. Many crews have built up regular routes returning to the same farmers year after year.

This Farm Placement Program--known as the Annual Worker Plan--attempts to take the guess-work out of migration. It helps to avoid loss of worker-time seeking employment, and helps to increase the continuity of work and earnings of migrant workers. Although a substantial number of migratory workers now benefit from the annual worker plan, this phase of the employment service work is still being expanded in the central and Western pattern.

The network of employment offices also provides labor market information to guide workers. There are route maps showing the areas where migrants can find employment with data on the crops in each area and length of seasons. During active seasons temporary offices are set up on well-traveled migrant pathways to help guide passing crews to places where they are needed and steer them away from localities where labor is over-abundant.

In some States the employment service provides rest camps where truckloads of migrants can spend the night and incidentally get labor market guidance.

The employment service offices also have a key role in community efforts to improve living and working conditions. They participate in setting up and arranging for the financing of migratory labor camps; helping to arrange for child-care, religious services, sanitary inspections, and health facilities for migratory workers. They try to get the communities to accept the idea that a small investment in providing essential services for migrants will actually benefit the community.

President's Committee on Migratory Labor

In addition to the Federal-State employment service agencies, migratory worker problems are the concern of the Public Health Service, Office of Education, Children's Bureau, Bureau of Labor Standards, Wage and Hour and Public Contracts Division, the Agricultural Research Service, the Agricultural Marketing Service, the Housing and Home Financing Agency, the Public Housing Agency, the Interstate Commerce Commission, and the Census Bureau. Probably some other agencies are involved less directly. The need has long been felt for centralizing responsibility in a single agency. The creation of the President's Committee on Migratory Labor in 1954 to help to coordinate the work of all Federal agencies and to key it in with similar efforts on State and local levels is therefore a most encouraging move. The President's Committee is not an administrative agency. Its chief contribution is to bring to bear the authority of the President and cabinet officers in providing the leadership necessary for effective public action.

For example, the President's Committee, with the help of experts in various government departments, has recommended standards for the construction, equipment, sanitation, operation, and maintenance of agricultural labor camps. A copy of the regulations and a draft bill is being sent the governors of all States and is being disseminated to agricultural organizations, religious and civic groups, and individuals. The President's Committee also drew up suggested regulations for transportation of migratory workers by motor vehicles as a practical way to stimulate improvement in standards.

Counterparts of the President's Committee on the federal level are governors' committees, inter-agency committees, and citizen advisory groups in a number of States where migrant problems exist. These groups investigate local problems, recommend legislation, and provide leadership in local efforts to attack this many-sided problem.

In addition to public agencies, the contribution of church groups and private welfare agencies have been very significant. Quite often migrant workers, who are not eligible for public welfare because of residence requirements, become the special concern of private groups of various denominations. The Catholic Rural Life Conference and the Division of Home Missions of the National Council of Churches of Christ, representing 23 Protestant denominations, have for a number of years ministered to the needs of migrants. They provide religious services, Sunday Schools, pastoral services, day-care centers for children, and private social work. Many of the activities by private groups were later taken over by public agencies, for example, child care centers in New York and public health nursing program in California.

Conclusion

Characteristically in the United States there has been one wave after another of groups who have supplied the needs for seasonal farm workers for a period of time and who have later risen to higher economic status to be replaced by newer groups.

We have had immigrant Italians, Poles and others from Southern and Eastern Europe who filled this need on the Eastern Seaboard during the early part of this century. On the West Coast there have been waves of Chinese, Japanese, Hindus, and Filipino, who for many years

provided a ready labor supply. In the Southwest, a steady influx of workers from Mexico has been available.

As many of these groups moved on to become farm operators or to enter nonfarm occupations, we now have Southern Negroes, Puerto Ricans, a continued immigration of workers from Mexico, and a supply of white, Anglo-Saxon labor from low-producing farms in depressed rural areas, particularly the Appalachians, to draw on. (Incidentally, referring to Mexico, we have an organized program to bring in seasonal hands for temporary work under an international agreement with Mexico. But in addition there has been a very sharp increase in permanent immigration from Mexico to the United States in the last year or so since the border control has been tightened.)

The outlook for the future of migratory workers depends on trends in agricultural production, mechanization, productivity, methods of farm tenure, and trends in farm population and the workforce. In 1956 the output of crops is almost 25 percent above 1940 and about two-fifths more livestock are being produced. Moreover, the output per man-hour of farm labor has about doubled since 1940 owing to the tremendous upsurge in farm technology. If we can continue to replace human labor by machines, and if there is a shift from high labor-using crops, such as cotton, to livestock production, the requirements for migratory farm labor may be lessened.

On the other hand, the trend toward bigger and more commercialized farms has the effect of forcing sharecroppers and small farm operators into the hired labor supply. The amount of capital now required to farm

successfully is so high that it becomes more and more difficult for farm workers to move up the ladder to farm ownership.

In the final analysis, the outlook for migratory workers depends in large measure on nonfarm employment conditions. If we can maintain the present high level of economic activity, migratory workers who acquire the necessary skills may find employment in growing industries such as food processing and construction. Efforts to improve the education of migrant children and provide better living conditions will facilitate this adjustment.