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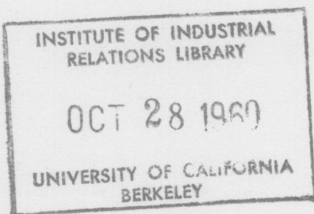
TOWARD A  
NATIONAL  
POLICY FOR  
MIGRANT  
LABOR



A REPORT

# Toward A National Policy For Migrant Labor...

By  
Ed Marciniak



A report on the National Conference to Stabilize Migrant Labor held at Loyola University in Chicago and sponsored by the Catholic Council on Working Life.

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# Introduction

**T**HE NATIONAL Conference to Stabilize Migrant Labor held November 21-22, 1959, had a national wallop. It prompted two editorials in the New York Times, "Focus on Farm Labor" and "The Excluded American;" another editorial in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, "The Excluded Americans;" a half-hour television salute by Everett Mitchell over CBS; a nationwide radio broadcast by Edward P. Morgan over ABC; and a national TV news broadcast over CBS.

There were special news columns by J. J. Gilbert for the NCWC news service; by Gordon West in the Topeka Capital Journal; by Clair Cook of the Religion and Labor Council.

Editorials were run in The Peoria Register,  Paul Catholic Bulletin, Social Order, and other publications. Feature and news stories were carried in the Milwaukee Journal, Texas Observer, Arlington Heights Herald, AFL-CIO News, Ave Maria, Federation News, Work, The New World, Illinois Farm Bureau Tab, Cooperative News Service, Associated Press, United Press, Chicago Tribune, Chicago American, Chicago Sun-Times, Chicago Daily News, the Newsletter of the California Citizens Committee For Agricultural Labor, and dozens of other publications from coast to coast.

From all sides—government officials, growers, union officials, clergymen—came tributes like this one from a federal official: "Not only was it my personal reaction but the reaction of other people from our department that this was just about the best meeting on migratory labor that we have encountered." A veteran in the field observed that the delegates "were a 'who's who' of the men and women who during the past decade have pleaded the cause of migrant workers and their families."

“DON'T THEY realize that ‘migrant’ and ‘stabilized’ are incompatible?” In these words a skeptical grower, with unwitting insight, divined the truly radical purpose of the National Conference To Stabilize Migrant Labor. The two-day conference, which brought 250 persons to Chicago during the weekend before Thanksgiving, 1959, challenged the existing system of farm employment by seeking ways and means to stabilize migrant labor.

As Catherine Daly, a Michigan fruit grower, explained: “The only way we can truly help the migrant is to convince him to cease to be a migrant. Only when he settles some place can he gain any stability in employment, income, or family life.”

Or as David W. Angevine of the Cooperative League stated: “With good wages, a migrant worker could settle in the midst of a diversified, seasonal farming area and achieve a stable family life. One week he might drive 50 miles east to prune grapes, and the next week he might drive 50 miles west to harvest lettuce. In peak weeks, his wife and children might help out. But he'd have a home. He'd be a citizen. And his children would be in school instead of contributing to the national ignorance.”

## The Challenge

As these two comments indicate, the delegates to the Conference searched for alternatives to the U.S. agricultural system which conscripts annually the services of one million migrants. In so doing many delegates raised questions that could revolutionize the present farm operation.

Why do hundreds of thousands of men have to leave their families, for months at a time, to search for employment? Why is it necessary for thousands of others to cart their families with them as they move by truck and jalopy from farm to farm, from state to state? Must the average migrant be content with only 131 days of farm and non-farm work, as was the case in 1957? To earn only \$859 for the year?

Why is it necessary to import nearly 450,000

*braceros* (Mexican nationals) to man cotton, fruit, vegetable and livestock farms in 27 states, chiefly in California, New Mexico, Arkansas, Arizona and Texas? To import another 20,000 foreign workers, from Canada to harvest potatoes in Maine, from the West Indies to pick vegetables and citrus fruit and cut sugar cane in Florida, from Spain's Basque regions to herd sheep in the Rocky Mountain states, and from Japan and the Philippine Islands to help California fruit and vegetable ranchers?

Is it necessary for a farm employer, who gambles each year with the weather and with a changing market to gamble also on an adequate supply of migrants at the right time, and in the right place?

In raising such questions the Chicago conference avoided the extreme patterns followed by other meetings on migrant labor. In the past farmers and canners would meet with representatives of the government placement agencies in one hotel to discuss ways of obtaining a plentiful supply of farm labor. Often, at the same time in the same city in another hotel, educators, social workers, union officials, religious and community leaders, and migrants would gather to discuss ways of improving the religious, family, educational and economic life of migrants and their families.

## Representing All Groups

In Chicago all groups were well represented and had a hospitable podium from which to trade ideas on how the U.S. farm economy might provide on the one hand regular employment, steady income, and stable family life for the migrant and on the other hand an adequate labor supply for the grower.

Present were representatives from 18 states, including the states which are the largest users of migrant labor, Canada, British West Indies, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. The roster of delegates was literally a who's who of the men and women nationally regarded as experts on migrant labor.

Among those participating were Fay Bennett of the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor,

Don Fernando Sierra Berdecia, Secretary of Labor of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, Tony T. Dechant of the National Farmers Union, Dr. Cameron Hall of the National Council of Churches, Archbishop Robert E. Lucey of San Antonio, and John Zuckerman of the California Growers Farm Labor Committee.

## The Absentees

Conspicuous by their absence, though invited by the conference's sponsor, the Catholic Council on Working Life, were officials of the Mexican government and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

### II

**T**O SUCCEED in stabilizing migrant labor, as some of the less experienced delegates were quick to discover, four handicaps had to be overcome: the political impotency of agricultural migrants, the stubborn longevity of an economic prejudice, the existence of a special privilege enjoyed by employers of migrant labor, and an unfortunate defense complex displayed by many influential growers.

The Chicago conference was reminded of the first handicap by United States Senator Paul H. Douglas: "There is not the slightest bit of political moxie in defending migrant workers. They don't have any votes. They do not have residence long enough in any one place to be able to vote, and they have no political power of organization. Politicians like to have a cause which serves humanity but also collects votes in the process. The politician's dream is to be able to do both. But supporting higher standards for migrant workers may cost a politician votes instead."

Douglas, a Democrat, dramatized his point when he transcended Democratic-Republican party lines to "give the highest credit" to James P. Mitchell, a Republican, as "the first Secretary of Labor who has really tackled this question. It was a very bold move of Mitchell's to withhold the services of the U.S. Employment Service from growers who do not observe work and wage standards, since about one-

third of the domestic farm laborers are hired through these employment offices.”

Earlier in the conference, Mitchell had called attention to the political powerlessness of migrants by describing them as “excluded Americans” who are “outside the protection of most laws that protect other American working people — minimum wage laws, unemployment insurance, workmen’s compensation, state and local welfare laws. They are denied, for the most part, the use of health and educational facilities in the communities through which they pass.”

## **An Economic Prejudice**

Even some of the migrant workers’ staunchest allies are handicapped by the widely held opinion that itinerant labor is needed to satisfy the peculiar demands of agriculture. This economic prejudice was challenged by Dr. Varden Fuller, professor of agricultural economics at the University of California, Berkeley.

He stated: “Migratory laborers do not exist because the farm economy needs them; they exist because our society has a large backlog of unsolved social and economic problems. Given the continued availability of a labor force with narrowly restricted opportunities, a system of casual labor utilization was built around it. This system of labor did not initially evolve as a deliberate choice of present-day labor users. In important respects, the users are as much the victims of the system as are the workers. When the users state that domestic workers are unreliable, they are stating a truth. It is a truth that is inherent in the system. It is a consequence that temporary work in agriculture is taken mainly by persons who chronically or intermittently can get nothing better to do, and when something better appears, they leave.”

Dr. Fuller, who was executive secretary of the President’s Commission on Migratory Labor in 1950-51, went on to elaborate his thesis: “If one were to imagine the situation in which the problems of depression, of discrimination in employment, of old age, of vocational rehabilitation, of mental and physi-



cal health, and of education were all solved, he would be imagining the situation in which there would be virtually no domestic workers available for seasonal farm work. In the postwar years of full employment, the system has been under stress for this very reason.

“Had it not been for the relief supplied by the *bracero* program,” Professor Fuller argued, “considerable modification would likely have been made.” Domestic “workers enter the migratory force and remain in it out of despair rather than out of choice.” Fuller’s economic analysis had the support of Dr. Theodore W. Schultz, chairman of the department of economics at the University of Chicago. Together they helped consign into economic obsolescence the notion that the very nature of farming required a seasonal army of migrants.

## **A Special Privilege**

Further handicapping any movement to stabilize migrant workers is a special privilege enjoyed by employers, particularly those in Texas, California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Arkansas. In these states the hiring of farm workers does not operate under normal labor market conditions. Through a program begun during a World War II shortage of farm labor and continued under U.S. Public Law 78, the United States government has brought in an increasing number of foreign workers to fill the growers’ demand for labor from 200,000 in 1951 to 450,000 in 1959. The government acts as a recruiting agency and a hiring hall.

Because of this ready supply of cheap labor, farmers and growers possess minimum economic compulsion to improve working and living conditions or to provide steady work in order to attract workers. During a labor shortage in industry, for example, employers bid against each other for available workers by offering better working conditions and wages. But in agriculture, as long as Mexican nationals are available to labor at wages and working conditions which domestic workers are unwilling to accept, the economic pressure to raise migrant standards is practically non-existent. Farm wage

statistics support this dismal economic diagnosis.

Monsignor George G. Higgins, director of the social action department of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, said that "studies of the Bureau of Employment Security show that wage rates in crops for which Mexicans are employed do not move upward at a rate corresponding with the general trends in farm wage rates.

## **The Bracero Program**

"Between 1953 and 1958, the hourly farm wage rate in the U.S. increased 14 per cent, according to the Department of Agriculture. An examination of wage surveys made by state agencies in areas using Mexican nationals showed that the average rate paid to domestic workers in these areas remained unchanged or decreased in three-fifths of the cases.

"During the past decade the wage differential between agriculture and industry has been widening steadily, and it may be inferred that the use of foreign workers in agriculture is partly responsible." Monsignor Higgins was a member of a special four-man committee, appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Labor, to study the impact of the *bracero* program upon the U.S. economy and its workers.

Secretary of Labor Mitchell argued in the same vein: "We are told that competitive forces do not operate in an economy where an employer can create a false labor shortage by offering unacceptable wages, and then receive foreign workers to bring in his crops. . . . As long as the working of supply and demand can be nullified by artificial wage rates that induce artificial labor shortages which are remedied by the use of foreign workers, we can expect a continuation of low wage levels."

Mitchell's position was supported by a California grower, Frederick S. Van Dyke, who owns a 900-acre farm in San Joaquin County: "In the urban fringes of Stockton, I found hundreds of permanent residents of my country who had at one time picked tomatoes. How could I continue to believe 'Americans won't pick tomatoes.' I had to face the ques-

tion, 'Why are most of these people no longer picking tomatoes?' The answer came back to me very clearly: tomato picking wages are set at a level at which most *braceros* can survive but most domestic workers cannot. Upon further reflection, it seemed to me very clear that the principal reason tomato picking wages were low was that tomatoes were being overproduced; and the principal reason tomatoes were being overproduced was that we growers had an oversupply of cheap labor placed on our doorsteps by the U.S. Government, under Public Law 78."

## No Decrease In Migrants

The unbalancing effect of the foreign labor program upon the supply and demand for farm labor is evident in farm population statistics. During the last two decades, while general farm population declined about 30 per cent and the number of hired workers declined 23 per cent, the number of farm migrants, including foreign workers, remained the same at one million. However, had there been a normal farm labor market in operation during these 20 years, the size of the migrant army would have shrunk considerably. Instead, the 500,000 Americans who did leave the migrant labor stream were simply replaced by 500,000 workers from abroad.

In the big *bracero*-using states, if the present trend is left undisturbed, more foreign workers and fewer domestics, with perhaps the exception of Puerto Ricans, will be employed. And as mechanized agriculture marches forward, all of these workers will be employed for even shorter periods of the year.

In other states where *braceros* are not a major factor, and where the number of the migrant farm workers has declined over the past 20 years, more normal family and working conditions have developed. The experience of southwestern Michigan's fruit growing counties is typical. Thousands of migrant families have settled there, taking jobs as cannery or factory workers, highway and railroad maintenance men, cemetery employes, deliverymen, domestics, and seasonal farm workers. Without implying that all their problems have been solved, it

can be said that their children now attend school regularly, and their families have a stable place which they can call home.

## **Need For A New National Policy**

At the present time congressional policy toward Public Law 78 is largely determined by Washington's powerful farm lobby, which is primarily concerned with guaranteeing growers an adequate supply of labor at the right time. The farm lobby's position is dominant simply because there is no national policy which, on the one hand, would give domestic migrants the opportunity to enjoy normal family life and to obtain wages, hours, and working conditions as close as possible to those in industry and which, on the other hand, would ease the worries of growers and canners for reliable and experienced workers. If such a national policy were developed and implemented, the pressure for importing farm workers from abroad would fade.

## **The Role Of Growers**

A fourth handicap resides in the public attitude adopted by growers. By and large, growers do not regard themselves as proud architects of the migrant labor system; rather they see themselves as its captives, satisfied that there is no better alternative. Except for rare conferences similar to this one, they have been left on the outside, listening to charges of exploitation and injustice.

Their isolation has been aggravated by the insularity of some liberals who, while active in the leadership of movements aimed at improving the migrant's lot, have refused to consider the serious labor problems burdening growers and have instead been content to lambaste growers. At the Chicago conference, one such liberal, after hearing some growers express a real concern for lifting the standards of migrants, observed with honest amazement: "We didn't know such growers existed. Where did you uncover them?"

When presented with proposals aimed at removing abuses of migrant labor, many growers tend to react in a fashion similar to that adopted by some honest,

but hard-shelled labor leaders when presented with evidence of skulduggery in a union. Fearful of playing into the hands of anti-union elements, these union officials refuse to acknowledge its existence by clamming up or hurling countercharges. In their own way, growers suffer from the same kind of defensive, apprehensive affliction.

By inviting farmers, growers, and canners to participate in the program as speakers and chairmen, the National Conference to Stabilize Migrant Labor hoped to remove any objective basis for their defense complex. The conference recognized that any successful effort to make farm labor less mobile would demand the active collaboration of growers and canners. The closer their cooperation, the faster changes might be introduced into the farm economy.

Unfortunately, not even at the Chicago conference did the growers fully take advantage of the situation. However, their occasional contribution to the discussion did much to relax defense mechanisms. Thus a start was made to find a common meeting ground where growers and canners would be present.

### III

**I**N THEIR pursuit of a national policy for migrant labor, delegates to the Chicago conference had cause for optimism. Two long-term trends were on their side, multiple job holding and farm mechanization, and possibly a third, vertical integration in agriculture.

## Second Jobs

As cities have spilled into farm regions, employment opportunities for rural residents have multiplied tremendously. As the distance between town and country has been closed up, millions have come to hold jobs in both industry and agriculture. Offered a dual opportunity for employment, many migrants have found it possible to settle down on the fringes of cities by supporting their families with seasonal work on the farm and, for the rest of the year, in town. Since cities will increasingly overflow into farm areas during the 1960's, mi-

grant families yearning for stability will continue to benefit from the trend.

While the industrialization of agriculture has created a demand for large numbers of workers for short periods, it has decidedly cut down the over-all need for farm labor. Also it has made necessary a skilled labor force capable of handling and maintaining farm machinery and of using fertilizers and chemicals.

## **Farm Mechanization**

In recent years industrialization has been accelerated by a radical revision in the concept of mechanical planting, cultivating, and harvesting. An inventor's natural bent is to imitate the human hand, for example, in picking tomatoes and cherries, but lately farm inventors have spent more time on ways of adapting vegetables and fruits to meet the requirements of mechanical picking. The problem is not only to get a machine to pick, for example, a tomato, but also to get a tomato that can be picked.

It was reported at the Chicago conference that within a five year period a substantial portion of California's giant tomato crop would be mechanically picked. Plant breeders have been working on a new variety of tomato, with all desirable food and taste characteristics, which will be firm, ripen at a uniform rate, and grow in bushes that lend themselves to picking and growing in rows.

Similar progress was reported on the mechanical harvesting of grapes and asparagus. In the Midwest the development of pea harvesting combines will remove the need for thousands of migrants as did the mechanization of snap bean harvesting. The same trend is evident in pickle harvesting and possibly in cherry picking through an experimental tree-shaker. Thanks to mechanization, there is no doubt that the next decade will see a further decline in the need for domestic migrants.

## **Vertical Integration**

Through vertical integration, feed companies, food chains, canners, meat packers, and sugar refineries

are now engaged in agriculture. An "integrated" chicken farmer may sign a contract with a chain store to raise broilers. The chain provides him with chicks and feed, supplies any extra labor that may be needed, builds chicken houses if necessary, and from time to time supervises the growing process.

Without passing judgment on this latest farm development, it is important to note that vertical integration has brought into agriculture companies with well-established employment practices. These firms are used to paying social security premiums, operating under minimum wage and workmen's compensation laws, and dealing with unions. As a result of this experience, many canners react more favorably toward measures promoting stability in farm labor. Canners' associations have often been willing to go much farther than farm organizations in supporting legislation which would extend to farm workers some of the benefits now enjoyed by industrial workers.

#### IV

**T**HE MAJOR GOAL of any national policy aimed at stabilizing migrant labor should be, in the words of Professor Fuller, "the establishment and maintenance of an employment environment that offers positive inducements to a resident core labor force that will have attachment to and identification with seasonal agriculture, and that will constitute an employment category in which workers will have a reasonably good chance of making a living."

### Not A Commodity

In the typical case the farm migrant is merely a "hand." He has none of the status, none of the rights and privileges of an employe, as that concept now operates in industry.

"The man who picks or chops cotton or does similar work in fruits and vegetables typically enjoys none of the features that stabilize employment relations or give the worker any sense of identification with the employer, with the industry, or with the work force," said Professor Fuller.

“Very frequently, seasonal farm workers do not know the names of the farmers on whose places they have worked; not always do they know the real name of the labor contractor who brought them there. The worker frequently does not know whether the farmer or the labor contractor is the actual employer . . . With the work being done at piece rates, neither the farmer nor the contractor is much concerned whether a hundred boxes of tomatoes are picked by two workers or by ten, so long as they get picked. In a similar way, there is little concern whether those who pick today are the same as those who picked yesterday or last week or last year, so long as there are enough hands to get today’s job done on time.”

By establishing an employer-employee relationship between grower and migrant, the human dignity of migrants would be acknowledged. Migrants would have the rights and responsibilities of employees; growers, the rights and duties of employers. The result would be a resident reserve of experienced, skilled, and available farm workers.

## **Joint Planning**

In setting such a national goal, the delegates to the Chicago conference realized that the attainment of a stabilized farm labor population would require joint planning by growers and representatives of farm workers, the cooperation of local communities, a virgin appraisal of the role of collective bargaining in agriculture, and the resumption by government, at all levels, of neglected responsibilities.

By himself, the individual farmer and grower would find this an almost impossible objective. “Their difficulty,” Professor Fuller stated, “is greatly diminished if the labor needs of farmers in a district are pooled and approached as an aggregate. The pooling of the labor needs of individual farms makes it possible to employ workers more fully and effectively. There are very few areas in the United States that are so highly specialized to a particular crop (cotton, for example) and in which the seasonal labor demands of all farms occur simultaneously.



“Generally, throughout the United States, you have got enough diversification within a fifty mile or so radius that by pooling work you could have a longer work season and a more effective use of the work force if you had a stabilized set of employer-worker relations . . . This type of arrangement should appeal to workers who live in the many villages that are spotted through the farming areas. These families try to maintain fixed domiciles and to obtain work within the commuting periphery of their homes.”

## Diversification

What Professor Fuller advocated is already established practice in many farm areas throughout the land, notably in south central Minnesota. What is being done near Benton Harbor, Michigan, was described by Catherine Daly, manager of a 1000-acre farm.

“Work in the fruit-growing industry in southwestern Michigan is considered seasonal. This is true of harvesting, but when we look at the over-all job we will find that the cultivation, replacement of trees and plants, and the care of equipment covers the entire year. Few of our growers are engaged in one crop farming. This diversification extends the harvest season from May until November. On our farm this means asparagus to apples. When extra workers are needed during the peak harvest season, the families of full time workers supply the extra help needed. The men or heads of households often continue in the cultivation of later crops rather than work in the harvest itself.

“There are gaps on every farm between harvests or because of weather conditions,” said Miss Daly, who is a former social worker and college teacher. “Very satisfactory schedules can be worked out by the growers to provide steady employment. For instance, in the asparagus season growers cut asparagus on alternate days or have alternate morning and afternoon schedules. In this way workers have full time work. On our farm we have a gap between asparagus and blackberries. Our neighbors employ our extra workers in the strawberry and gooseberry

harvest. In blackberry time we absorb the workers who for some reason cannot work in the cherry harvest. (Those, for example, who cannot climb ladders, the fat lady, children, or someone who gets dizzy.) Throughout an entire season a family can live on the same farm and have full time employment, barring very adverse weather conditions, and work within a radius of several miles."

## **Cooperation**

A plea for diversification through cooperation among growers also came from the Stockton, California grower, Frederick S. Van Dyke: "It is almost incredible to me that my neighbor should plant fifty acres of new peaches while the man across the road is pulling out his trees because he cannot make a living on the price he receives for peaches. That happened this year. It cannot be permitted to continue to happen. Planning is going to have to govern the plantings within each area. I hope this planning is done by growers themselves, rather than by someone in a bureau in Sacramento or in Washington, D.C.

"Growers consider themselves staunch friends of the free enterprise system, but nothing is more destructive to this system than anarchy of the type which prevails in California agriculture. One of the most needed changes in current planting practices is greater diversification. This would stabilize the farm labor force to a very great extent. It would also stabilize the entire farm economy within each region.

"At the present time, an area which specializes heavily in one or two crops is at the mercy of market fluctuations, particularly if the crop in question is a luxury item, such as asparagus in my home county. With diversification, an area would be protected from boom and bust cycles to a large extent, since it is unlikely that a sharp downward trend would affect all crops at once."

## **Making Migrants Welcome**

Helped by the insistent prodding of farmer organizations, urban centers of farm regions have made

a double contribution toward stabilizing the labor supply. In the first place, new residents, whether from Texas or Tennessee, have been welcomed and made part of the community. In this integration, the church, the school board, the chamber of commerce, builders, unions, and public and private employment agencies play their parts.

Secondly, should supplementary farm help still be needed in peak seasons, the neighboring community mobilizes local residents to help in the harvesting—high school and college students during the summer vacation and adults during the school year.

While supporting such a program, a warning against “crop vacations” was strongly made by Mary M. Condon, of the rural education department of the National Education Association.

In one way or another, efforts to involve local residents are being made in scattered local communities throughout the nation. But it is not, by any means, a nation-wide pattern.

A plea for community support came from John Zuckerman, a Stockton, California grower: “Our migrants today, excluding foreign contract workers are, for the most part, the least talented, least capable, least employable members of our society. These people are driven to migrant work because you and your fellow citizens in the communities in which you reside have not permitted them to be educated and motivated to become an integral part of the permanent industrial or agricultural work force.

“You—or perhaps I should say we—have not taken the necessary action, even where education and motivation prevail, to provide gainful, vocational opportunities that will permit these people to sink their roots in the community of their choice, to realize the ideal and goal of every American—a permanent home, a place in the community for themselves and their family.”

## **Self-Organization**

In many branches of industry the self-organization of workers into unions and the resulting col-

lective bargaining contract have enabled city workers to achieve a measure of human dignity, providing them with economic stability and a voice in determining conditions of employment.

Except for occasional pockets of union organization, migrant workers are unorganized. John Livingston, director of organization for the AFL-CIO, pointed out some of the reasons: literacy and language barriers, short-term employment, high mobility, fierce opposition of farmers, the competition of *braceros*, and a potential membership composed of rootless and marginal workers. In addition, he pointed out that there has been "no legal affirmation of their natural right to organize" by the federal or by the state governments (though state labor relations acts in Kansas, Wisconsin, and Puerto Rico may be broad enough to protect agricultural workers).

Such obstacles, at most, are only half the problem. The organization of farm workers would also require reorganization of the present system of recruitment, hiring and tenure. Unless the union becomes a hiring hall, to which would come employees in search of work and employers seeking workers, collective bargaining will remain a lonely and ineffectual institution in agriculture. In other seasonal industries, logging, maritime, and construction, for example, the hiring hall became the cornerstone upon which workers firmly established their unions.

## Hiring Halls

Two rare examples of how the hiring hall had already operated were cited at the Chicago conference. A California rancher described how he went to the headquarters of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee in September and October to obtain a crew of experienced grape cutters to harvest his 90-acre crop. He was furnished the workers he needed and paid a minimum of \$1.25 an hour and a bonus of \$1 a ton.

William L. Batt, Jr., secretary of labor and industry for Pennsylvania, told how Pennsylvania growers had brought in trained field workers from Arkansas. Their crew leader was a representative of

the National Agricultural Workers Union. The contract with the growers provided for a minimum wage of not less than 75 cents an hour and a guarantee of regular work for 160 hours in each four-week period.

## **Some Obstacles**

But to extend the hiring hall to most of the factory farms in the nation will be no simple task. It might be a project as monumental as the peaceful harnessing of atomic energy for industrial purposes. Under the present system, some or most of the functions of a union hiring hall are being performed—but by three other institutions.

- Many farm employer organizations, which in prewar years had devoted most of their time to resisting unionization, simply shifted their energies to obtaining imported foreign laborers.

- The crew leader is also an important cog in present hiring system. He provides the necessary transportation. He recruits workers. He persuades farmers to advance money to cover expenses of bringing migrants to the farm. He may serve as business agent, personnel director, paymaster, foreman, and all-around middleman between the grower and worker. Trying to represent both the grower and migrant, crew leaders develop real conflicts of interest. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that there are about 10,000 migrant crew leaders of various kinds in the United States. They have become an important part of the hiring and recruitment system in agriculture.

## **Government Action**

- Considerably more important is the function performed by federal and state governments which operate their own “hiring hall” staffed by more than 1,500 paid farm placement representatives whose job it is to find workers for farmers and work for migrants.

That is not all. In areas where there is no local public employment service office, a volunteer corps of 3,000 unpaid farm placement representatives working in 25 states, together filled nearly 150,000 farm job

openings in 1958. To succeed, unions would not just have to organize farm employes; they would have to reorganize the present system of hiring!

## Quasi Monopoly

Thus, major decisions concerning union and government policy are required. Should the state and federal governments continue their quasi monopoly over the placement of farm employes or should farm workers be encouraged to establish their own unions and thus their own hiring halls?

Are unions able and, if able, willing to provide the tremendous amount of money and manpower needed to staff a string of hiring halls in those areas where large-scale farm employers hire large numbers of workers?

Is some compromise arrangement possible between the present tax-supported placement agency and a worker-operated hiring hall?

Is some other form of contract feasible, for example, one similar to the agreement under which Puerto Ricans come to work on the mainland, or to a growers' association contract which provides some employment guarantee?

Government action conducive to a stabilized force of farm employes has its paradoxical side. In some areas it may have to draw back, as in the *bracero* program under Public Law 78 and in the broad range of responsibilities now exercised by U.S. and state employment agencies. In other areas it will have to advance by the stricter enforcement of existing social legislation where it now applies to farm migrants and by its extension to migrants where it now does not.

Tighter reins by the federal government in the administration of the *bracero* program would give growers some inducement to become more self-reliant and to revamp present hiring practices. As long as growers can get migrant help from Mexico simply by calling a government placement officer, they will have little incentive to cooperate for the purpose of creating a core group of resident farm workers.

## **Under Present Laws**

Toward this end the federal government could take further measures;

(1) to prevent Mexicans from being employed in skilled occupations and the year around—contrary to the original intent of the legislation;

(2) to confine Mexicans only to necessary crops and not allow them to work on olives, mushrooms, avocados, cut flowers, etc.;

(3) to make certain that farm employers actually attempt to recruit U.S. workers at wages no less than those paid Mexicans, thus preventing use of foreign workers to depress wages in any locality and relieving local unemployment among farm workers;

(4) to restrict the use of the services of federal and state employment offices to growers who meet certain minimum standards in wages, transportation, housing and conditions of work; and

(5) to double check compliance with the provisions of federal Old Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance so that all workers who earn \$150 from a single employer have premiums paid on their behalf (thus ending the scandalous buckpassing between growers and crew leaders as to the actual employer).

## **Farm Labor Contractors**

Furthermore, most state governments could help regularize the employer-employee relationship of grower and migrant by requiring farm labor contractors to observe the provisions of state laws regulating private employment agencies.

When Congress in 1955 widened the provisions of the social security law to reach some farm workers, it took the first step to give farm workers parity with industrial employees. Many other steps will need to be taken.

The U.S. Department of Labor is now studying ways and means of extending the federal minimum wage law to agricultural employment and has announced it will make recommendations during the present session of Congress.

Although workmen's compensation legislation was the first type of social insurance to be widely adopted in the United States, most employes in agriculture, the nation's third most hazardous occupation, are not protected.

Only a few state workmen's compensation laws (California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Ohio, and Vermont) protect farm workers in the same fashion as other workers.

As already noted, the rights of farm employes to join a union and bargain collectively are not yet guaranteed under federal law.

## **Federal Protection**

While the application of unemployment insurance benefits to migrant workers would be exceedingly difficult, their haphazard employment only serves to underline the urgency of finding some way to protect them.

Of course, not all delegates to the Chicago conference were of one mind on these proposals. But as they searched together for ways of providing regular employment, steady income, and stable family life for migrants and an adequate labor supply for farmers, most delegates left for home persuaded that the goal was not utopian; in fact, that it was attainable in their lifetime.

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*See following pages for the program of the  
National Conference to Stabilize Migrant Labor  
and for acknowledgments.*



## **PROGRAM**

# **NATIONAL CONFERENCE TO STABILIZE MIGRANT LABOR**

**Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois**

**Saturday, November 21**

**10:00 A.M. ECONOMICS OF MIGRANT LABOR:**  
Its Relation to the National Economy  
and to Farm Economy in Particular

**Chairman:** Dr. Paul Mundy, Professor of Sociology,  
Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois

**Speaker:** Dr. Varden Fuller, Professor of Agri-  
cultural Economics, University of Cali-  
fornia, Berkeley, California

**12:30 P.M. MIGRANT LABOR, A MORAL PROBLEM**

**Chairman:** Willis Jensen, President, Opportunity  
Council, Arlington Heights, Illinois

**Speaker:** Archbishop Robert E. Lucey, San An-  
tonio, Texas, Former Member, Presi-  
dent's Commission on Migratory Labor

**2:30 P.M. RESPONSIBILITY OF GROWERS**

**Chairman:** Robert C. Leitner, Supervisor of Indus-  
trial Relations, Libby, McNeill & Libby,  
Chicago, Illinois

**Speakers:** Frederick Van Dyke, Stockton, Cali-  
fornia  
Catherine Daly, Daly Farms, Benton  
Harbor, Michigan

**4:30 P.M. THE IMPACT OF PUBLIC LAW 78  
ON MIGRANT LABOR**

**Chairman:** Louis Levine, Deputy Director, Bureau  
of Employment Security, United States  
Department of Labor, Washington, D.C.

**Speakers:** Tony T. Dechant, Secretary-Treasurer,  
National Farmers Union, Denver, Colo-  
rado

John Zuckerman, California Growers  
Farm Labor Committee, Stockton, Cali-  
fornia

Very Reverend Monsignor George G.  
Higgins, Director, Social Action De-  
partment, National Catholic Welfare  
Conference, Washington, D.C.

**Sunday, November 22**

**10:30 A.M. RESPONSIBILITY OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS**

**Chairman:** Dr. Cameron Hall, Executive Director, Department of Church and Economic Life, National Council of Churches, Division of Christian Life and Work, New York, New York

**Speakers:** John R. Fleming, Public Health Administrator of Van Buren County, Paw Paw, Michigan

John Livingston, Director of Organization, AFL-CIO, Washington, D.C.

**12:30 P.M. MIGRANT LABOR, THE NATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY**

**Chairman:** Don Fernando Sierra Berdecia, Secretary of Labor, Commonwealth of Puerto Rico

**Invocation and Welcome:** Right Reverend Monsignor Edward M. Burke, Chancellor, Archdiocese of Chicago

**Speaker:** James P. Mitchell, U.S. Secretary of Labor, Washington, D.C.

**2:30 P.M. RESPONSIBILITY OF GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES**

**Chairman:** Representative Paul Simon, Troy, Illinois

**Speakers:** William L. Batt, Jr., Secretary, Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

Paul H. Douglas, U.S. Senator from Illinois

## . . . Our Thanks

Many persons and organizations volunteered time, talent, advice, or money to ensure the success of the conference and the publication of this report. Without making them responsible for its contents, we take this opportunity to thank them for their help by listing them here:

Marion Andert, Rosemary Bilo, Emery Biro, Msgr. Edward Burke, James B. Carey, Michael Coleman, Patrick F. Crowley, Luis Delgado, Varden Fuller, Patrick E. Gorman, Frank Graham, Father Edward Grzeskowiak, Dr. Cameron A. Hall, Hilton E. Hanna, Emerita Hernandez, Msgr. George G. Higgins, Willis Jensen, John Kearney, Mildred Kearney, Katherine Kelley, John Lennon, John Livingston, Bernard Lyons, Lucia Moyado, Frank L. Noakes, Father Robert A. Reicher, Marie C. Roth, Mildred Schaefer, Jerome A. Schmitt, Father Francis Schweitzer, Bob Senser, and Rita Troupe.

American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations; Amalgamated Meat Cutters & Butcher Workmen; British West Indies Central Labor Organization; Catholic Center, Toppenish, Washington; Christian Family Movement, Lafayette, Indiana; Commonwealth of Puerto Rico; Illinois Agricultural Association; Illinois Department of Labor; Industrial Union Department, American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations; Loyola University; Michigan Migrant Ministry; Missionary Apostolate, Buffalo, New York; National Farmers Union; Priests of the Sacred Heart, Hales Corners, Wisconsin; United Church Women of Ohio; United Mine Workers of America; United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Employment Security.

The sponsoring organization for the National Conference to Stabilize Migrant Labor was the Catholic Council on Working Life. From all walks of life, the Council brings together men and women who want to serve

God by applying the gospel of Christ to the day-to-day problems that arise at work, in the union hall, across the counter, in trade and professional associations, and in government. In Chicago the Council has a seventeen-year history and a full-time staff strengthened by a board of directors of 29 persons actively engaged in business, labor, the professions and government. Further information about the Council, and its publication, WORK, can be obtained from its headquarters at 21 West Superior Street, Chicago 10, Illinois.

