

THE CONDITION OF FARM WORKERS IN 1954

REPORT TO THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF NATIONAL SHARECROPPERS FUND, INC.
By Fay Bennett, Executive Secretary

Significant beginnings were made in 1954 in the recognition by the federal government of a responsibility towards the farm worker, both resident and migrant.

LEGISLATION - National

The most encouraging development was the inclusion for the first time of a large percentage of farm workers under the old age and survivors' insurance provisions of the Social Security Act. All farm workers earning as much as \$100 a year from a single employer are now included. This covers virtually all resident farm wage-workers and a large number of the migrants as well.

Farm workers still lack the protection given industrial workers through minimum wage and maximum hour legislation, unemployment insurance, and federal guarantees of their right to organize and bargain collectively.

Migrant workers achieved specific legislative recognition with the appropriation for the establishment of the Inter-departmental Committee on Migratory Labor (within the Bureau of Labor Standards of the Department of Labor) to co-ordinate the various federal departmental activities in this field. Unfortunately, the President's meagre budgetary request for this important work was halved to \$50,000. It is hoped that this new federal committee, despite its small budget, will make an effective start towards stimulating and strengthening the activities of the several agencies now dealing with some aspect of the domestic migrant problem. Such a start will point up the need for larger appropriations.

Still unprovided for is a needed federal commission on imported migrant workers. Some aspects of this problem will be dealt with in the discussion of Mexican workers.

LEGISLATION - State

A few scattered states were notable for active governmental concern with -- and some remedial legislation for -- the migrant problem. Some highlights:

New York. The prior-established Joint Legislative Committee on Migrant Labor made intensive studies of living conditions in migrant camps, goaded by newspaper revelations of horrible conditions and spurred by pressure from private organizations. Legislative authorization resulted in the adoption at year's end (January, 1955) of a new code of health and sanitary regulations. High standards of safety against fire, water pollution, food and milk spoilage, and bathing and toilet contamination are required. A minimum floor space in sleeping quarters of 30 square feet for each person over two years old is provided for. If adequate inspection renders these rules effective in the coming year, a distinct advance will have been made in this most pressing aspect of the migrant labor problem.

Pennsylvania. For the first time, state funds were appropriated for the establishment of a day-care center for migrant children. Augmented by federal and private funds, it is a notable example of practical cooperation between state agencies and citizen groups. The Pennsylvania Citizens Committee on Migratory Labor deserves prime credit for this achievement. NATIONAL SHARECROPPERS FUND is gratified that its financial aid has helped make this work possible and looks forward to continuing cooperation in the Citizens Committee's program for better health, housing, working conditions, and minimum wages.

New Jersey. The nine-year old joint governmental-public Migrant Labor Board continues to direct and stimulate the state's program administered through the Migrant Labor Division (now the Bureau of Migrant Labor) of the Department of Labor. A significant development was the operation of the recent law including farm labor contractors (crew leaders primarily) under private employment

agency regulation. The chief effect of this regulation has been to encourage payment of the worker directly and thus reduce his financial dependence on the crew leader. New Jersey has continued its experiment with a summer school for migrant children. It is hoped that out of this experience there will soon evolve a more comprehensive program which will include all, rather than a hundred or so, migrant children and that this program will be adapted by other states to their needs -- perhaps with federal aid.

In sharp contrast to these few forward steps on the state level is the more nearly typical situation existing in Maryland. Here not only has there been no official governmental recognition of the problem, despite the presence of over 10,000 migrant farm workers during the course of the year, but residency requirements ranging up to one year exclude most migrants from public welfare, hospitalization, and medical care. No provision is made for periodic inspection of farm labor camps and no special provisions are made for schooling. Like most states, Maryland fails to provide for workmen's compensation for injured farm workers. Only Ohio, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico provide for compulsory coverage of farm workers on the same basis as other workers.

PUERTO RICAN WORKERS ON THE MAINLAND

Puerto Rican workers coming to the mainland were the only group of domestic farm workers to receive federal protection in wages, housing, and working conditions. In 1954, 10,800 of them came under work agreements prepared by the Puerto Rican Department of Labor and cleared for placement by the U. S. Employment Service. Early drought and late hurricanes had reduced this work force by 4,200 under 1953.

It is estimated that at least 10,000 more Puerto Rican farm workers came to the mainland without formal contracts and that in recent years five to six thousand of them have become part of the year-round migratory stream. Despite some serious drawbacks to the Puerto Rican program, such as denial of union representation or of worker participation in the determination of the "prevailing" wage, it has demonstrated the feasibility of direct remedial action by the government in the field of domestic farm labor.

MEXICAN WORKERS IN THE UNITED STATES

The Southwest farm-operators' claimed dependency upon Mexican workers which has encouraged over one million illegal entries a year continued unabated during the first half of the year. By that time a large part of the crops of California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas had been planted and cultivated by illegal (wetback) Mexican labor, often at pay as low as 25¢ an hour. The domestic labor-force had been driven out to swell the size, and depress the conditions, of migrant labor in other parts of the country.

By June public opinion forced Attorney General Brownell to take action. With an augmented border patrol, the Justice Department cracked down on wetbacks. In a four-month period, 300,000 Mexican illegals were arrested and deported, or frightened back across the border.

The operators' outcry against this loss of cheap labor was met by a quick step-up of the legal Mexican contract labor system. A preliminary screening station was established at Monterey, 150 miles south of the border. From there, the certified bracero (farm worker) went to border recruiting centers where, after physical examination, chest x-ray, and finger-printing, he was hired by corporation farmers or farmer associations for work in government-certified labor shortage areas. Under the work contract, Mexicans received guarantees of 50¢ an hour minimum wage, at least three weeks work out of four, workmen's compensation, adequate food and housing at reasonable prices. No such guarantees were available to any domestic worker except the Puerto Rican.

309,033 Mexican Nationals were legally imported under contract in 1954, a 54% increase over 1953's 201,380 total.

The growing magnitude of this problem cannot be solved by an annual "crisis" deportation drive against the illegals nor by legalized Mexicans working at 50¢ an hour. This minimum becomes the maximum and creates the domestic shortage that is the excuse for the importation. NATIONAL SHARECROPPERS FUND favors last year's Senate Judiciary Committee proposals for more stringent penalties on those who participate in the traffic in illegal entry. NSF believes that the alleged domestic labor shortage in the area is artificially created by pay rates too low for decent living. NSF favors legal importation, only if the contracts are enforced* and the minimum raised to a wage where a domestic worker can support his family without putting his wife and children to toil in the fields. Finally, NSF believes that the domestic farm worker is entitled to the same federal protection that the imported worker enjoys, and which has long been taken for granted by the city worker.

THE SOUTH

While the sharecropper system is on the decline with increased mechanization and diversification throwing the 'cropper into the day labor and migrant stream, it continues to be the prime producer of the crop in many areas. NATIONAL SHARECROPPERS FUND, concerned with the problems of all farm labor, has always done what it can to help the efforts of this group to help itself. NSF is particularly happy to report that at least one group of sharecroppers in Alabama, barely eking out subsistence, is seeking to meet this problem of mechanization by banding together for the joint purchase of a tractor and other equipment. NSF hopes to help in this and other such projects which might well be one solution to the problem of keeping the landless from becoming the homeless.

Closely akin to the sharecroppers are the farm workers who, while primarily needed for day labor at peak seasons, live on the plantations in planter-owned shacks and trade on credit in planter-owned stores. Typical of this group are the sugarcane and rice workers of Louisiana.

In the fall of 1953, 2000 sugarcane workers, organized by the National Agricultural Workers Union - AFL, went on strike (after exhausting all other means) to better their miserable living and working conditions. (Average yearly family earnings: \$700 - \$1200.) Despite the help of NATIONAL SHARECROPPERS FUND and other organizations, the strike was broken through anti-labor injunctions, a type of court interference that long has been a thing of the past in industry. The injunctions were appealed and, after almost a year, the Louisiana Supreme Court ruled that the injunctions were valid because the strike during the harvest season jeopardized a vital segment of the economy of the state. Chief Justice Fournet said in his decision, "...The guarantees of freedom of speech, even if picketing and speech are held to be identical, cannot be maintained in the face of such irreparable injury to property..." If this doctrine is permitted to stand, the workers in a major industry of any state may be enjoined from striking at a crucial production period. The union attorneys are preparing an appeal to the U. S. Supreme Court.

The rice workers of the same area have appealed to the National Agricultural Workers Union for help in organizing. These Cajun-speaking workers, about equally divided between Negro and white, earn 35¢ to 40¢ an hour during the season. They work 10 to 12 hours a day, irrigating the canals essential to rice production. Louisiana is the second largest rice producing area in the world. There should be significant developments soon in this effort of the workers to gain a decent measure of return for their work.

SMALL FARMER COOPERATION

The small farmer, squeezed between the large operators and the distributors of the farm product, has long tried to better his bargaining position through

* On November 1, 1954, the U. S. Department of Labor and the Texas Employment Service had less than a dozen compliance officers to enforce the Mexican workers contract. At that time, there were 16,570 employers hiring 96,532 Mexicans in the state.

marketing cooperatives in many areas. Only recently, however, has he begun to recognize that his interests are more nearly those of the worker than of the corporation farmer.

The attempt of 3000 small Louisiana strawberry growers to market their product in 1952 and 1953 through the Fruit and Vegetable Producers Union - AFL was thwarted by the institution of a Sherman Anti-Trust Act prosecution against them. It is ironical that these farmers, whose average yearly earnings from strawberries were less than \$400, were convicted of being a strawberry trust and their union leader was given the maximum sentence under the law -- \$5000 fine and a one year (suspended) prison sentence. A recent report from the Attorney General indicates that rarely is such a sentence imposed in cases involving corporations.

Partly out of this bitter experience, the National Agricultural Workers Union has established a Department of Cooperative Unions. This department will accept into affiliation cooperative marketing associations of small farmers set up in compliance with federal and state law. Thus the ability and strength of union organization and cooperative marketing will be pooled to raise the living standards of the small farmer.

First result of this program was the organization of 300 small dairy farmers in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Other dairy groups have been formed in Maryland, Minnesota, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. In the offing is the reorganization of the Louisiana Fruit and Vegetable Producers Union.

EDUCATION OF MIGRANT CHILDREN

A major emphasis of NATIONAL SHARECROPPERS FUND in the last year has been education of migrant children. NSF has joined with six other organizations in launching a demonstration project in Florida and Virginia. It will attempt to alleviate the educational disruption of the child who when school opens in the fall finds himself on the Eastern Shore of Virginia where his parents harvest the late crop, returns to Florida to enter class late in November, and starts North again in April. Such a schedule results in little education and early drop-outs. The project has established, in cooperation with the local boards of education, a Supervisor of Migrant Education, who will work with the local schools and travel with the migrants. She will see that the children get to school and that they have their proper records. She will work with the teachers to coordinate the curricula and see that the migrant child gets the special help he needs to integrate him with his non-migrating classmate.

To continue this work, NSF has helped organize the Migrant Children's Fund, whose main aim is to develop and promote educational opportunities for migrant children who, studies show, become retarded through constant migration though their native abilities measure up to those of children not constantly on the move.

NATIONAL COUNCIL ON AGRICULTURAL LIFE AND LABOR

Now in its fifth year of operation, this National Council serves its large number of affiliated organizations with up-to-the-minute news of the Washington scene affecting farm labor and the small family farmer. NATIONAL SHARECROPPERS FUND is an active participant in the Council's program and supplies financial support as well.

* * * * *

Over the years, NATIONAL SHARECROPPERS FUND, conscientious news reporters, and concerned groups of citizens have been gradually educating the American public concerning the plight of the sharecropper, tenant farmer, and migrant farm worker. As this report shows, advances are being made in some areas. It is to be hoped that the Fund's supporters will renew and expand their generous support of our work in 1955.

NATIONAL SHARECROPPERS FUND, INC. - 112 East 19th Street - New York 3, N. Y.