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Migrant Conditions in Pennsylvania - September, 1953

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(Report by Cyrus H. Karraker of the Pennsylvania Citizens Committee on Migrant Labor to the State Conference of N.A.A.C.P. - Ardmore, September 26, 1953)

Friends of N.A.A.C.P.:

I am glad for the opportunity given me to speak on migrant conditions in Pennsylvania for two reasons, first, because I am a life member of N.A.A.C.P., and secondly, because nearly all the 20,000 migrants in the state are colored and very emphatically the problem of N.A.A.C.P. In this report I will show you how urgent the problem is. As chairman of the Pennsylvania Citizens Committee on Migrant Labor, I took upon myself during the summer the responsibility of learning all I could about migrant people within our state.

Survey of Camps

This summer I visited migrant camps in Potter County to the north, in three counties of central Pennsylvania, and in six counties in the southern part of the state. I did not investigate camps in the eastern section but I think my research provides pretty good cross-section information on Pennsylvania's migrant camps. On several of these tours I accompanied Mr. Reuben Kolb, Executive Director of the Governor's Commission on Migratory Labor, on his invitation. His presence enabled me to visit the camps without personal inconvenience, and, what was much more important, brought together the Citizens Committee and the Governor's Commission in the common cause of reforming migrant conditions in the state. Our continued cooperation is bound to produce beneficial results for the migrants in the future.

Housing Conditions

Our chief concern on these visits were the housing conditions. In Potter County we found the migrants living in barracks-shaped structures, in made-over chicken houses and barns, and in abandoned farm houses. Some of the camps in Potter County were fit only for animals and were indecent for human beings. They swarmed with flies and stunk with garbage. Other camps met some of the minimum requirements of health and sanitation set down in the "Regulations for Labor Camps" drawn up in 1948, but not all of these. The best housing in Northern and Central Pennsylvania is provided by the large barracks camps and the worst, as a rule, by barns and farm-houses isolated far from the public view.

The best quarters for migrants are provided in camps near York. These house mainly Puerto Ricans and are operated either by canneries or farmers. Two of the best camps in the state are those owned by M.E. Knouse, and one newly built by Clarence McCleary and his seven associates for Negro migrants located near Red Lion. All the camps visited in southern Pennsylvania are of modern construction of the motel type. They are well screened and ventilated; provided with flush toilets; equipped with electric refrigeration and gas stoves, and, altogether, were a joy to see after visiting the camps to the north which were lacking in these necessities for health and comfort. The best small camp visited is that of Clyde D. Miller of Sunbury R. D. who has taken a warm personal interest in the comfort and happiness of his migrant workers. As for the Potter County camps I am glad to report to you that the State closed this summer four of the

worst of these, and promises a vigorous enforcement of housing regulations on the others during the coming year. Some progress then is being made in the Herculean task of cleaning these Augean stables.

Labor Conditions - Adult Labor

The Negro migrants are recruited in the deep South with the aid of the State Employment Office while Puerto Rican migrants are recruited on the Island with the assistance and under the supervision of the Puerto Rican government. As a consequence, the Puerto Rican laborer has the protection of his government from exploitation and neglect. He will not come to work in Pennsylvania until he has received a written contract from his prospective employer guaranteeing him a minimum number of hours of labor - 160 hours for four weeks - a minimum wage, workmen's compensation, and health insurance.

The Negro migrant, on the other hand, receives no guarantees at all. In place of a written contract like that of the Puerto Rican, he receives only oral promises of big wages, as high as \$50 a week, for harvesting the crops of Pennsylvania. However, in many cases these promises are not fulfilled. When he arrives in camp he is often as much as a week too early for harvesting the first crop and is obliged to go into debt to his crew leader to keep his family from starving, or, as at present, is forced to return to Florida six weeks early because of the drought-stricken tomato crops. If the season is good, the harvest plentiful and the harvesters few, then, with all conditions at their best, including the good health of his family and an honest crew leader, he will return South with a satisfactory profit.

Unlike the Puerto Rican who has his written guarantees, the Negro migrant's life for three months in Pennsylvania is a pure gamble with fate, and this despite the fact that the growers decalre emphatically they cannot harvest their crops without migrant labor. As it was 25 years ago so it is today that many farmers and communities of Pennsylvania keeping migrant laborers, strictly segregate them and completely ignore their welfare during the three months they are here.

Migrant Children and Child Labor

Most Negro migrants to the north came in family units. You undoubtedly have seen them being hauled in trucks over the highways like cattle. The only difference would favor the cattle because a Federal law requires the resting of cattle at intervals on a long haul, but not of Negro migrants on their long haul of two days and a night from Florida. American people can get terribly wrought up over poverty and disease in far away Asia and Africa but fail to be disturbed in the least by this most inhuman practice which happens before their very eyes in America every summer. So often persons to whom I describe the neglect and mistreatment of migrants profess themselves to be shocked, but their shock must result in paralysis for I hear no more of them.

After their arrival in camp we soon see very young children working in the bean fields beside their parents. We have seen children as young as five years in the fields at seven in the morning and still there at six in the evening-eleven hours in the broiling sun. Can you recall some hot days last summer? If it was hot in your house, what was it like in the field? Have you thought of the torture to children in 100° temperature all day? Well, some of our illustrious citizens have not! When the Citizens Committee was fighting for the

passage of its migrant child labor prohibiting the employment of migrant children under 12, I heard a legislator oppose the bill on the ground that migrant children were happy to be out in the field in God's pure air and sunshine. After resisting the impulse to throw anything available at him, I wondered whether he had ever heard of God's Golden Rule. Would this gentleman, he with such a kind Christian face, have been willing for a child of his to be out in the field all day under that insufferable heat of last summer? I think not, but I'm afraid this legislator's attitude is typical of a lot of comfortably placed people who shield their consciences from human suffering, and thereby are able to contemplate a little migrant child as proper material for the production of more dollars for the farmer.

The Child Labor Bill

Now, since I have referred to the Child Labor Bill we introduced in the House this summer, I must give you its particulars. Our bill, introduced by representatives Needham and Wargo, prohibited the labor of children under 12, and only of migrant children, so we thought it pretty mild in view of the fact that the New York Child Labor Law applies to all children under 14. Some of us, who were inexperienced in the ways of self-seeking politicians and farmers' lobbies, were so naive as to think that only an occasional moron or a political blackguard would vote against a bill whose sole purpose was to protect the health and happiness of helpless children, but we were quite wrong. Sixty-eight assemblymen, whatever may be said of their mentality or moral disabilities, without giving any reason to the public, voted to kill the bill. Ninety-eight voted for the bill, but it still lacked 7 votes of a constitutional majority. Thirty-nine legislators couldn't find the time to be present to vote. This was the same legislature, you will remember, which killed all the child welfare bills introduced the past session except the adoption bill.

After our defeat, the question remains, what to do? For one thing, we intend to perfect our organization and strategy for a victorious effort in 1955, and right now I am calling upon you, members of N.A.A.C.P., for crusading support of our next migrant child labor bill. As for the 18 months preceding the next session of the legislature, we propose to do the following things for migrant children.

Child Care Centers

Our first objective will be the setting up of a child care center. The neglect of migrant children, as if they were nothing better than dogs running around the camps, must not continue. We want to teach employers and communities what can be done for the health and happiness of these little ones. The State needs teaching, too, because I have observed recently that \$125,000 was allocated for the eradication of oak wilt - a worthy cause, to be sure - but nothing was allocated for migrant child care. In other words, our government is spending this year \$125,000 to fight oak blight, but not one cent to fight child blight.

Our model for an enlightened policy with migrant children is found in the child care centers of New York State. There are 14 child care centers in New York serving about 500 children from babyhood up to nine years of age. These centers are staffed by trained workers who supervise the play, training and health of the children throughout the 12-hour day while their parents are at work in the fields. (In one center visited were 62 children.) The State pays 70% of

the cost of the centers while the sponsoring Federation of Farmers' Cooperatives pays 30%. The parents pay \$1.50 per week for the first child and \$1.00 for each additional child. The cost per child per day is \$3.00. This service is purely voluntary on the part of the parents but the majority take advantage of it.

Education

Child care centers on the New York model for infants and those of nursery and kindergarten ages are in prospect for next summer. What is being done by our schools for migrant children now? The President's Commission on Migratory Labor in its Report of 1951 found that the average education of the one million migrants in the United States is not beyond the fifth grade. Migrants, wherever they are found, are educationally starved. This is not so much their fault as it is of the lax school laws of their home states and the non-enforcement of the laws of the state in which they work. Another great obstacle to migrant schooling is that kind of public opinion which assumes that Negroes, and especially those who are transients are predestined to toil for the exclusive benefit of others.

In Pennsylvania the state law and the Federal law require that children under 16 must be in school. These laws do not except migrant children. However, many school boards and communities have shown their prejudice against accepting the children of persons who are transients and Negroes. The usual reason given is that their schools are already overcrowded. However valid this reason may seem to be, some schools have accepted migrant children notwithstanding. For example, a school in Potter County where two teachers already had 79 resident children gladly accepted in addition 19 migrant children, and teachers of an overcrowded school in Columbia County petitioned their school board to admit migrant children of a nearby camp. This was immediately done with the best of results.

Potter County, whose housing of migrants I have condemned as the very worst, appears to surpass other counties in caring for migrant children in its schools. This promising situation seems due to the active interest in their problem on the part of the Superintendent of Schools, his Assistant, the Principal of the Ulysses School, and the cooperation of the State Department of Public Instruction. The Department this fall is increasing its efforts for the education of migrant children, and reports that wherever they are enrolled in school it is the judgment of the teachers that their intelligence is equal to that of the resident children. The brightest side of the migrant picture in Pennsylvania is the increased efforts being made for the enrollment of the children in schools, and next year for their care in centers; the darkest side of the picture is child labor.

Health

The good health of migrant laborers is desirable in itself, but it is also a matter of self protection on the part of the community that epidemics in nearby camps can be prevented. Respiratory diseases and even smallpox still have high incidence among people whose health is neglected. People who cannot present vaccination certificates or show scars should be vaccinated. Migrant laborers should also be inoculated against typhoid and diphtheria. Chest x-rays

should be made to detect tuberculosis, and venereal disease treatments should be given. County nurses under state employ should be sent periodically by the Department of Health to check on the health of the camps. This is done in New York and other states. In all such matters of health the operator of the camp, the County Medical Officer, and the State Department of Health should cooperate systematically for the common good.

What is being done this year for the health of the 20,000 migrants in Pennsylvania? I cannot discover what is being done because the Health Department had not replied to my letter requesting light on the vital statistics listed above. All that I have learned is that in 1952 X-ray tuberculosis tests were made of migrants in some of the larger camps with satisfactory results of only 2% positive. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, and if the health of the migrant population is to be treated casually, and only when disease breaks out, then not only will the migrants suffer, but also the neighboring communities.

The Committee's Program

This report reaffirms the conviction of the Citizens Committee that migrant laborers are first class American citizens and must be accorded in Pennsylvania all the rights and privileges of American citizens. The citizen Committee demands five basic reforms of migrant conditions.

(1) Housing

Many migrant families are housed in camps wholly unfit for human beings. Nevertheless, many of these chicken houses, barns, and rat warrens have passed inspection. Something then must be wrong with the state regulations for labor camps, or their enforcement, or both. The Citizens' Committee finds the housing requirements far too low, and calls for either radical improvement of the building code by administrative amendments, or for the passage of a law dealing specifically with migrant housing, which will raise to a standard of comfort the present minimum requirements. The Committee also demands a larger inspection force and more energetic supervision of that force. Are we not obliged to question the inspection set-up, when, for example, we read the law requiring complete screening of the camps and yet found on our tours throughout Northern and Central Pennsylvania that most camps remain unscreened.

(2) Licensing of Labor Contractors

Many labor contractors of migrants (called crew men) victimize the laborers in their camps in a number of ways. They take excessive commissions for themselves from their wages (as high as 25 cents on 75 cents); they charge excessive prices for necessities at their company store; and they operate gambling devices and sell liquor in camp in defiance of the law. One crew leader is well known to have victimized his crews in these several ways for years and still operates unpunished. Our Committee demands the state licensing of Crew Leaders to screen the honest from the dishonest. On the day that crew leaders are brought under state regulation and control some of the worst evils of the migrant set-up will disappear.

(3) State Contractual Forms

The Citizens' Committee demands that the state put into use con-

tractor.

(4) Child Labor

Our Committee will continue its crusade to abolish child labor and the sweatshops in the sun with even greater energy because we have seen their inhumanity, and we realize that each summer the health and happiness of some 2,000 children depend upon our efforts.

(5) Child Care and Education

At the same time, we shall set up child care centers and summer schools for migrant children modelled after those operated in New York State. When children are kept out of the field by law then these centers and schools become a necessity. We have asked for and we believe we have obtained the cooperation of the Governor's Commission in our projects for child care and education. We also expect the cooperation of the Department of Welfare and the Department of Public Instruction.