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TESTIMONY
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON MIGRATORY LABOR
OF THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON LABOR AND PUBLIC WELFARE
IN SUPPORT OF
S.8 - TO AMEND THE NATIONAL LABOR RELATIONS ACT, AS AMENDED,
SO AS TO MAKE ITS PROVISIONS APPLICABLE TO AGRICULTURE
JULY 12, 1967

My name is Reverend John McCarthy. I am field representative of the National Bishops' Committee for the Spanish Speaking and I am appearing on behalf of the Bishops' Committee, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference and the Social Action Department, U. S. Catholic Conference. I am here to reiterate the deep concern of American Catholic bishops regarding the present plight of farm laborers in this country and the hope of the bishops that the inequities that face these workers may be at least partially eliminated by passage of S. 8.

In any discussion of agriculture and farm laborers, two states most naturally have great prominence, namely, California and Texas. These states are first and second respectively in the total value of agriculture, in the total number of hired farm laborers, in the number of Spanish-speaking citizens. Finally, it was first in California and secondly in Texas that the farm worker began his most recent efforts to achieve justice and equality within the American economic system. If one is interested in the Roman Catholic bishops' evaluation of the need to bring farm workers under NLRA coverage it is important to examine the position of the bishops of these two states.

Senators, 18 months ago in the midst of the controversy and strife of the California grape strike, Bishop Hugh Donohoe of Stockton, California, spoke to you on behalf of Cardinal McIntyre of Los Angeles, Archbishop Joseph McGucken in San Francisco and for all the other bishops of California. He said:

"1. Any group in society has the right to form an association to foster its own well-being. It is understood that this association act within law and therefore is concerned with the general welfare as well as with its own.

"2. Applied to farmers, this principle justifies their membership in any legitimate organization of their own choosing. Those who seek to promote the organization of farmers are not to be looked upon as outside agitators.

"3. Applied to farm laborers, this principle justifies their membership in any legitimate organization of their own choosing. Those who seek to organize farm laborers are not to be looked upon as outside agitators.

"4. Such organizations must be protected by law, and where necessary, criteria and procedures established to determine the legitimacy of particular efforts to organize such associations."

On March 28th of this year the Catholic bishops of Texas, after reviewing the farm labor strike in the Rio Grande Valley, unanimously stated:

"The American economy in general is prosperous, producing both good profits for investors and high wages for workers. For the most part the economy operates within a framework of beneficial legislation and enjoys a high degree of organization at every level among employees and employers alike. The same cannot be said of agriculture, however.

"We, the Catholic bishops of Texas, would remind farm workers that among the basic rights of a human person is the right of freely founding associations or unions for working people. These unions should be able to truly represent them and to contribute to the organizing of economic life in the right way. Included is the right of freely taking part in the activities of these unions without risk or reprisal.

"In view of the present depressed state of farm workers and the need for organization in order to bargain effectively in economy and to rear their families in frugal and decent comfort we say that they have a duty to form and join unions or associations of the type mentioned....

"We would urge that governmental bodies, especially the national Congress, be more attuned to the needs of both of these groups and recognize the essential contributions they make to the common good of our nation. It would seem reasonable that legislation similar to the National Labor Relations Act, which has proven beneficial to the economy

as a whole, would also be appropriate in the field of agriculture with modifications taking into account the special characteristics of this segment of the economy."

These excerpts reflect not only the view of the bishops of California and Texas but also are the consistent social teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Every pope in this century from Leo XIII to Paul VI has reiterated over and over that society must allow, safeguard and protect the right of any group to organize for its own protection and economic betterment. This natural right of the farm workers to organize has been frustrated for 33 years and will continue to be frustrated unless legislative machinery is put into motion to bring it to an end.

I would like to refer to a document that has twice been introduced into the record of these hearings, that is, the report of the Social Action Department of the Texas Catholic Conference. This report was first presented during your hearings in Hidalgo County, Texas, on June 30, 1967, and again yesterday by Mr. George Meany of the AFL-CIO. The Texas Social Action Department after documenting the extreme poverty of the farm workers in South Texas went on to point out the rapidly changing structure of American agriculture. These points have been detailed too many times before the Subcommittee to necessitate any repetition now.

One of the strongest points of the Committee's report was the need of the farm workers to organize. The report stated that "one of the most unfortunate aspects of poverty in an affluent society is the degrading and abrasive effect that it has on the human spirit. The culture of poverty develops into a system of powerlessness which completely deprives its victims of any appreciation or hope of self-improvement."

"For these reasons many students of the poverty problem believe that self-organization is the only meaningful way to move toward a solution. Of course the whole philosophy of the community action aspect of the Economic Opportunity Act was aimed at enabling the poor to develop organizational power in order that they might have some impact on the decision-making process of the community and through such participation be able to influence the allocation of the resources necessary to meet their needs.

"The whole point of a farm workers' union is that it would be a vehicle for providing the workers with the type of organizational voice and power that will enable them to participate in the decision-making arena of the work place. In such a manner it has been possible for most industrial workers to obtain increased benefits for themselves and their families, especially after the passage of the National Labor Relations Act in 1935. The United Farm Workers Organizing Committee is now trying to obtain the same sort of coverage for agricultural workers." They then went on to decry "that farm workers have traditionally been excluded from most of the social legislation that so many of us take for granted, such as unemployment compensation, industrial safety, and protection under child labor laws."

In referring to the Church's role in this problem, the Social Action Committee urged that: "The church be willing (1) to speak out in the face of impending social chaos; (2) that the Church actively assist self-help organizations for the poor; (3) that it aid the many dedicated civic and business leaders of the Valley; (4) that the Churches encourage dialogue; (5) that they work to promote family stability among migrants and that they launch social projects for the social betterment of the poor.

On the point of assisting self-help projects among the poor, the Department stated: "We would reiterate the unanimous stand taken by the ten Bishops of Texas in March 1967 when they stressed the need for increased organization in American agriculture, and especially the unionization of farm workers. Given the reality of the existing situation of the Rio Grande Valley, there can be no effective dialogue between a large agricultural corporation and a poor Mexican-American farm worker. It is not likely that the worker will be treated as a dignified human being unless he himself has that self-conscious dignity that comes with a sense of at least partial control over his economic destiny. Power is important, especially the power that makes us aware that there are courses of action that can be taken to alter or change the conditions that inhibit personal growth and development.

The absence of such power produces apathy and frustration as well as fatalism that so often has been cited as a characteristic of the poor across the United States.

In concluding, the Social Action Department urged the enactment of legislation especially extending NLRA coverage to the farm workers, resolving "that the Congress of the United States extend the coverage and protection of the National Labor Relations Act to include farm workers at this session of Congress.

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