MIGRANT LABOR—THE PROBLEMS INVOLVED

Migrant Labor Essential

Our economy today demands the migration of large numbers of people to meet seasonal production needs in agriculture, industry, and transportation. Migrant workers have always created wealth for the Nation, the States, and the communities which they serve. In agriculure, without their labor during peak seasons, many of the crops would be lost, much of the investment and effort of food producers and processors would be sacrificed and, as a result, prices of perishable commodities would rise. Due to the seasonal type of employment, a considerable number of workers and their families habitually migrate with the seasons from State to State, thus becoming permanent armies of nomads, not from choice, but because the nature of their work demands it. Unorganized to a large extent and frequently entrusting to labor contractors their negotiations with employers regarding wages and employment conditions, migrant workers are afforded little opportunity to become articulate or bargain for themselves.

Peoples have always moved in search of better opportunities. Their right to do so is a principle upon which our country was founded. Migrant workers ask no special privileges. They are, however, entitled to the opportunities and protections afforded other workers and to the benefits due them as American citizens. "Employers, organized laborers, and people of civic spirit are coming to recognize as a principle of sound economy and politics—not simply as a dictate of humanity—that no person who by choice or force of circumstances moves from place to place in order to gain livelihood should lose his human rights as a consequence of migration."[1] Basic defects in this mode of life are difficult to overcome. Adequate planning is needed for recruiting and transferring migrant workers to communities where their services are required and where working and living conditions are at least as good as those provided local workers doing a similar type of labor.

The Problems During the Thirties

During the 1930's one of the chief characteristics of the migratory labor force in the United States was its abundance. The problems arising in connection with migrant workers were made more critical by widespread unemployment. This resulted in an exhaustive study by a Select Committee of the House of Representatives under the chairmanship of John H. Tolan of California, appointed to investigate the interstate migration of destitute citizens. Basing its judgment upon figures obtained from unemployment compensation and old-age insurance programs, the Committee gave as a conservative estimate for the year 1937 approximately 4,000,000[2] individuals moving from city to city and crossing State lines in search of nonagricultural employment. The number of farm laborers and their dependents who were in migratory status during the same year was placed at approximately 1,000,000.[3] Especially significant was the Committee's statement that "of these millions of Americans who have wandered in search of a liv

[1] Paul S. Taylor, professor of economics, University of California, in an address Institute of Migratory Labor Problems, Princeton, N. J., June 1945.

[2] Estimates not to be confused with those for "Migrant Labor" as defined by t Federal Interagency Committee. See p. V.

[3] Estimates not to be confused with those for "Migrant Labor" as defined by t Federal Interagency Committee. See p. V.

ing, the large majority in all focal areas studied were responding unmistakably to the 'push' of poverty or complete destitution at home, rather than to the 'pull' of greater opportunity elsewhere."

The Problems During World War II

The outbreak of World War II brought about considerable change. Mobilization of war workers and military inductions created a serious labor shortage in many areas. In the fall of 1942 and spring of 1943 the supply of domestic labor became so critical that railroads found it impossible to maintain their trackage, essential industries lacked manpower, and in many agricultural areas there was danger of losing crops so imperative in time of war. The Federal Government consequently developed a program to transport workers from areas of supply and from foreign countries to areas of critical need. As a result of negotiations undertaken by the State Department, Mexico and the British West Indies agreed to supply workers. These foreign governments, however, demanded certain guarantees to protect their citizens. Agreements were, therefore, entered into between the governments, between the worker and the Government of the United States, and between the employer and the Government of the United States. These agreements included provisions regarding wages, continuity of employment, transportation, housing, placement, health and medical services, and repatriation.

Because of rationing, it was necessary for the Government placement agencies to certify to the Office of Price Administration the occupational need of migrants for the gasoline and tires for travel to areas of employment and for war ration books. Hundreds of thousands of workers were mobilized for seasonal or temporary employment. Two hundred thousand foreign workers brought in for the emergency, including the 30,000 remaining in this country on January 1, 1947, have enjoyed guarantees far more liberal than those provided domestic workers (See Appendix I). In addition, Italian and Germa oners of war were utilized under contracts between the and employers in areas where other workers were not av

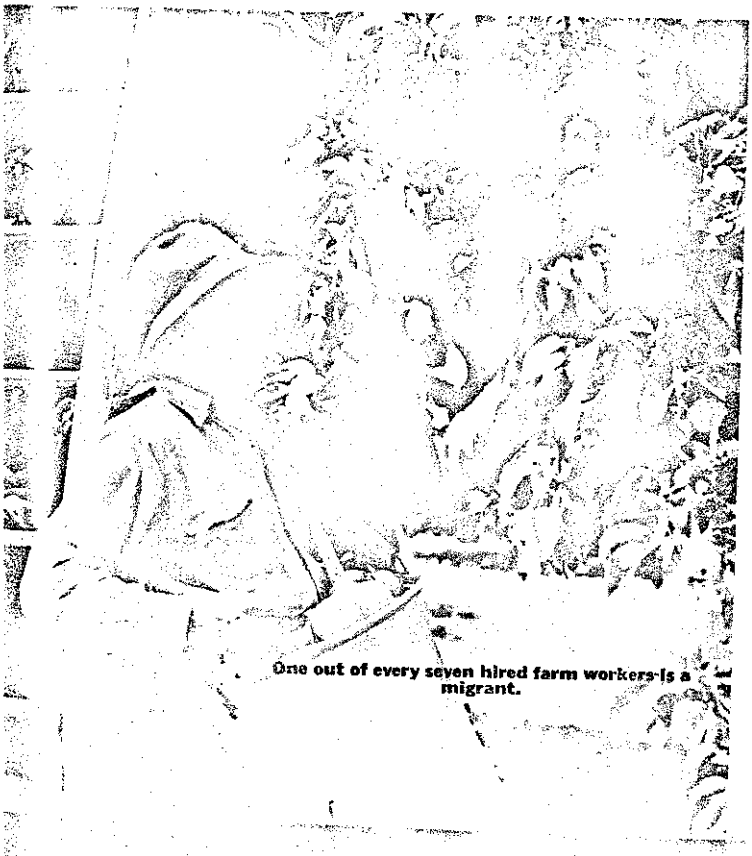
In recent years, much has been learned about recru utilization, and training of workers. It has been founc ble for employers to analyze their labor requirements anc mine accurately the period when workers are needed a number required. Smaller employers have organized selves into cooperatives, have pooled their needs, an entered into worker agreements thereby utilizing worke effectively. Where centralized housing has been needed of these cooperatives have obtained and operated labor During the war, to meet the requirements of foreign ments, or Army regulations, or to make possible recru in areas remote from the area of need, employers and emp cooperatives determined in advance the wages to be p sumed responsibility for providing adequate housing an ing, made appropriate guarantees regarding continuity ployment and provided accurate advance information ing these conditions. Training programs were conduc inexperienced workers which increased their output an ings.

This wartime experience with foreign workers, priso war, domestic transported workers, inexperienced worke towns and cities, and migrant workers who moved on allocations of rationed gasoline and tires, indicates that can be done to prevent the unorganized and wasteful tion prevalent during the depression. However, the de for seasonal laborers and the migration of workers a peculiar to periods of depression or war. They arise the definite need for a greater number of workers at seasons of the year than at others, which must be met by migrants. Serious consideration, therefore, must b to what is required by way of legislation, local, State ar eral; administrative action by local, State, and Federal ag

ıd to voluntary standards and agreements which can be de-
:loped to improve the income and security of migrant workers
ıd their families.

Igration Today

Today, very little factual information exists with respect to
dustrial migratory workers. The Committee recognizes the
ed for more specific information and has requested govern-
ental agencies such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the
nited States Employment Service to obtain such data through
e development of analysis of operating reports and sample
rveys of industries employing migrant labor. Although defi-
te data as to the total number of migrant workers are not



One out of every seven hired farm workers is a migrant.

available, the Department of Agriculture estimates that there were approximately one million agricultural migrants during the calendar year 1946. This total includes single workers who migrated for farm labor, household heads and members of their families who migrated and worked, also dependent members of their families who migrated but did not work.

Through the efforts of individual growers, companies, local communities and States, some progress is being made in behalf of migrant workers. Improvement, however, has been the exception rather than the rule. Although the migrant worker usually receives the prevailing wage rate for his type of labor, he is dependent upon a series of jobs. The availability of such jobs is affected by the labor supply and by crop and climatic conditions. Hourly earnings for the time he is employed may therefore be satisfactory, but his actual income figured on a yearly basis may still be inadequate to maintain a family at the lowest accepted level of living. Workers are often subjected to serious hazards by being transported long distances in overloaded and unsafe trucks or cars. Housing is too frequently inadequate or substandard. Much of the migration is unplanned and during poor seasons workers may spend as much time seeking employment as in actually working. To make sure that they will have an adequate number of workers, employers often advertise their need extensively, thereby bringing into their area many more workers than are required. Job duration is short. Far too many children of migrant families receive little or no education. Medical care and welfare services available to local residents are seldom available to migrants. All these hardships are intensified by community resistance to outsiders.

The Committee's Recommendations

The Committee's recommendations are made, therefore, in behalf of these migrant workers who by force of circumstances move from place to place to gain a livelihood. Their rights as

human beings should not be overlooked. By abandoning a fixed place of residence they lose the rights and privileges that are a matter of course for residents of a community. Usually unorganized, migrant workers are at a disadvantage in bargaining on wages, hours, and other working conditions. Although the occupational accident and death rates in agriculture are probably the highest for any major industry, few State workmen's compensation laws cover agricultural workers, even to a limited degree. Migrant farm workers consequently suffer from this lack of protection.

Safe transportation, adequate housing, provision for medical and hospital care, elimination of child labor, child-care services, education for the thousands of migrant children who either do not attend school at all or attend only between crops—these are some of the goals for achievement. Progress will be made as more employers recognize that improved housing, steadier employment, health protection, and community facilities attract a higher grade of worker who, because of satisfactory working conditions, returns year after year.

Child labor, especially detrimental to younger children, and too frequently an integral part of migrant labor, exists because in general child-labor laws do not cover agriculture and where they do or are so interpreted, they are largely disregarded. This is indicative of community indifference to the abuses which accompany this type of employment. However, in a recent study [4] of children and youths used in harvesting the fruit and vegetable crops in New York, the State Department of Labor found that "illegal child labor is not a necessary concomitant of industrial agriculture." For example, in one area where the highest proportion of legally employed children were on "day-hauls"—transported daily by truck or bus from cities to the farms—the 14-year minimum-age requirement was maintained by insisting that children 14 and 15 years of age obtain work permits before being allowed on trucks.

Federal assistance through grants-in-aid proportio financial need, should be made available to States for provement of health, education, welfare, and related These grants should be so administered as to stimu development of better housing and living conditions, nutrition, child-care, education, and welfare serv migrants.

Consideration has been given to some of the specific p of migrants, i. e., recruitment, transportation, housin labor, education, health, and welfare and to means of ing working and living conditions. Attention is cal to the need for reducing the size of the problem by r to a minimum the number of workers required for seasonal labor needs in agriculture and other industrie a reduction will not be easy and will be accomplished the extent that adjustments in farm and industrial pr programs can minimize seasonal peaks in labor requ through better planning, alteration of enterprise pa mechanization of processes now performed by hand l will not be accomplished by the continued import foreign labor.

The depression of the thirties, the droughts of the d area, and the displacement of workers by technologic opments in industry and on farms were the importar augmenting the supply of migrant workers in the deca World War II. In contrast, the manpower demands tion at war afforded ample employment opportuni more continuous nature, drew men into the armed and greatly reduced the number of migrant workers. The supply of migratory workers is variable, depei economic and employment conditions in the econc whole and on technological and other conditions in and agriculture. The supply of agricultural worke

[4] Seasonal Labor on Fruit and Vegetable Farms, New York State, 1945. Surveyed by New York State Department of Labor, Division of Industrial Relations, Women in Industry and Minimum Wage, March 1946.

:ted by the high rate of natural increase of population in y rural areas without a corresponding increase in employ- t opportunities.

ıis report calls attention to the possibility of reducing the for large numbeis of seasonal workers by adjustment of uction patterns. Such adjustments are not likely to be ısive until the public has a thorough understanding of the lems involved in the movement of labor from one area to her and until employers and communities, dependent upon these workers, assume a greater share of responsibility for their welfare.

The problem of migrant labor is one of concern to local communities, to the States, and to the Federal Government. While recognizing this labor as an essential factor in our present economy, the Committee's primary concern is for the workers involved—the men, women, and children whose services are indispensable. The human rights of these workers must be protected.