



ECONOMIC TRENDS AND OUTLOOK

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Neglected and Exploited:

The American Farm Worker

Since World War II, public preoccupation with the over-all farm problem has obscured the desperate plight of our fellow citizens who work in agriculture for wages. These workers, who help produce the greatest abundance of food and fibre ever known to any nation, are the most neglected and exploited segment of the American labor force.

Despite the continuing decline in the total number of farms in the United States, agriculture remains America's number one industry. In 1959, its capital investment exceeded \$200 billion and its cash receipts from marketings alone approximated \$33 billion. Despite the "technological revolution" in agriculture, which has boosted productivity on our farms even faster than in our factories and has transformed many production units into giant enterprises, the status of those who work for wages in agriculture continues to decline.

Today, the average hired farm worker can expect to earn the lowest wage in the American economy,—less than \$1,000 a year.

Furthermore, he is likely to be employed no more than one-half of the days of the year, even taking into account those jobs he is able to pick up away from the farm.

Moreover, he is deliberately denied the benefit of almost all of the

labor and social welfare legislation which has been enacted during recent years to raise the minimum living standards of American families.

What is more, the status of the underpaid and underemployed American farm worker is being further undermined by the annual importation of nearly a half million foreign contract laborers who compete unfairly against him.

Who Are the Farm Workers?

Of the 4.2 million Americans employed for wages in agriculture during the course of a year, nearly half work less than 25 days at farm jobs. Excluding these casual workers, there are about 2.3 million who are employed on farms for more than 25 days a year, of whom only about 700,000 are regular hired farm workers,—those employed for more than 150 days a year. Of the 2.3 million total, about 400,000 are domestic migratory workers,—Americans who follow the crops from state to state, supplying farm labor when and where it is needed.

In addition, each year some 450,000 imported farm workers—largely from Mexico, Canada and the British West Indies—are employed temporarily under programs authorized by the Federal government.

The most critical aspect of the farm labor problem concerns the

1.6 million Americans, including the domestic migrants, who work on our farms for more than 25 days but for less than 150 days each year. *The earnings of this group, from both farm and non-farm employment, average about \$600 per year.*

As a result of the constant improvement in agricultural technology, more and more of our output of food and fibre now comes from enterprises that are big business in the truest sense of the word. It is these large "corporation-like" farms—still a small part of the total but accounting for more and more of our total production—that employ most of the hired workers.

For example, by 1954—the latest year for which official Census figures are available—only 5% of all our farms accounted for 70% of all expenditures for hired farm labor. And less than 2% of U. S. farms—the very largest—accounted for close to 50% of all farm wage outlays. In the ensuing years, this concentration in the use of hired farm labor has undoubtedly increased.

Thus, today's typical farm worker is not a hired hand on a family owned and operated farm. On the contrary, he is more likely to be an employee of a substantial "factory-in-the-field" engaged in the large-scale operation of planting, cultivating, harvesting, and often in the

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processing and distribution of food and fibre. These are the most profitable units in American agriculture.

The Most Un-American Wage of All

The establishment of a minimum wage to raise family incomes and thereby achieve a minimum standard of decency won the acceptance of the nation a quarter century ago. Moreover, it is now widely recognized that workers have a right to share, through higher earnings, in the productivity advances their effort helps bring about.

In American agriculture, however, this concept of a minimum standard of decency and of economic justice just doesn't apply.

In 1959, the average cash wage of farm workers was less than 80¢ per hour.

Furthermore, since the end of World War II, while output per manhour in agriculture has skyrocketed 125%, real farm wages

have increased only 6%. In the face of these facts, it is not surprising that cash wages as a percentage of total farm production costs have dropped from 18% to 9% since 1945, a reduction of 50%.

A comparison of average hourly wages of hired farm workers with those of factory workers dramatically highlights the deteriorating status of the agricultural labor force. During the years 1910-14—a base period that farm operators have widely used to measure their own well-being—the average hourly farm wage was 67% of the average factory wage. By the end of World War II, however, this ratio had dropped to 47%, and by 1959 to 36%. While most manufacturing workers rightfully have been sharing in the benefits of the productivity gains of their industries—through the spur of collective bargaining and minimum wages—the farm worker has continued to lose ground.

At the same time that hourly farm wages remain piteously low, the average number of days worked on farms has also been falling,—from 156 in 1947 to 128 in 1958, the latest figures available. Even when earnings from non-farm work are added, the average farm worker (those who worked 25 days or more) earned only \$961 in 1958.

These substandard earnings are indefensible in America.

Planned Exploitation

The deplorable status of American farm workers in contrast to the

rising standards of most other Americans is neither accidental nor the product of "natural" economic laws. On the contrary, it can be traced directly to the law of the land, and particularly our Federal laws.

Because of the potent political power of the largest agricultural producers and the deplorable indifference of the general public:

Farm workers—who need union organization and collective bargaining so badly—are excluded entirely from the protection of the National Labor Relations Act.

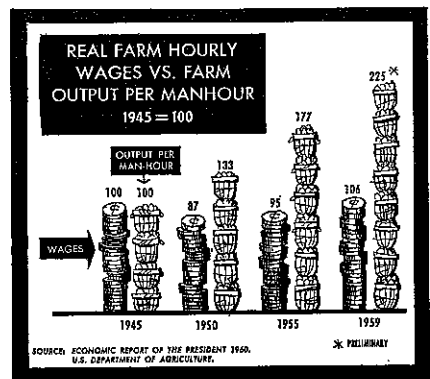
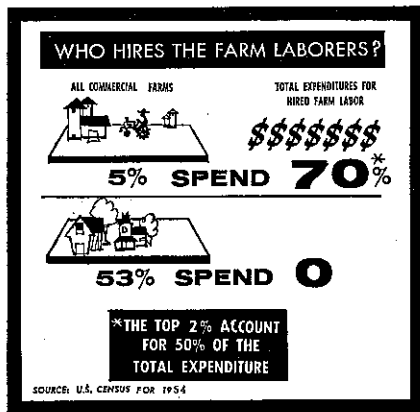
Farm workers—the most exploited group of Americans—are excluded from coverage under the Federal Fair Labor Standards Act.

Farm workers—so tragically the victims of insecurity—are forced to bear the entire burden of their own joblessness because they are excluded from almost all unemployment compensation laws.

Farm workers — employed in America's third most hazardous industry—are almost universally denied coverage under our Workmen's Compensation Acts.

Over the years, by one means or another—but usually by specific discriminatory language—the Federal Congress and the state legislatures have denied these Americans the protection and benefits made available to almost all other employees.

Worst of all is the plight of our 400,000 domestic migratory farm workers. Often exploited at the outset by unscrupulous and unregulated labor contractors who move them in



trucks and jalopies from one workplace to another, their lodgings are likely to be foul and unsanitary shanties. Their wages are the lowest paid to any American worker. Because of local residence requirements, they are generally denied critically needed health and welfare services. Frequently, their children are forced by economic necessity to work beside them in the fields and, thus, are deprived of a chance to obtain even a minimum education. Most migrants are not even covered by the Federal old-age and survivors insurance law.

One migratory worker has said, "It seems like of all the forgotten men, we are the most forgottenest." On the contrary, they have not been "forgotten." At the behest of the powerful American Farm Bureau, the National Association of Manufacturers, and their allies, these people have been singled out and deliberately discriminated against by a whole range of laws and administrative procedures.

Unfair Foreign Labor Competition

As though these misfortunes were not sufficient, Congress also has seen fit to further undermine the opportunity of farm workers to get adequate work at decent pay by subjecting them to the competition of close to a half million foreign workers. Each year, these imported laborers—mostly from Mexico—pour into our southwestern states under the terms of an old and outdated piece of Federal legislation called Public Law 78.

This program was inaugurated as an emergency measure during World War II when 13 million Americans were in uniform and additional manpower was urgently needed. Nonetheless, American farms were able to break all production records then with only 84,000 imported foreign workers at the peak. In 1959, however,—14 years after the last shot of World War II was fired—438,000 Mexican nationals were imported to

work on our farms under this "emergency" wartime program.

Today, with labor shortages a myth, why does this law remain on the books?

It remains because about 50,000 large agricultural producers—less than 2% of the nation's farms—have become adjusted to enjoying the benefit of an assured adult male work force at cut-rate prices in preference to the employment of their own fellow citizens. Not only do these specially favored, high income farm operators want to continue this program indefinitely, they also want to strip the Secretary of Labor of his already inadequate authority to minimize the exploitation of American and Mexican farm workers alike.

Enactment of the Gathings Bill (H.R. 12176) already reported out by the House Committee on Agriculture, would do just that! As the Committee Minority points out:

"The moral implications of H.R. 12176 are shocking. It would literally increase the destitution, the underemployment and the exploitation of 2.3 million domestic farm workers, who are the poorest of the poor in our nation. It would put the family farm at a further competitive disadvantage. It would increase the stain which Public Law 78 has already placed upon our national values and prestige."

A year ago, Secretary of Labor Mitchell—responding to a growing demand for a thorough reappraisal of P.L. 78—appointed four distinguished Americans with back-

grounds in agriculture, social service, education and religion, to evaluate the effect of this outdated law.

Following an exhaustive study, these four Consultants found that despite P.L. 78's provision that Mexican nationals shall not be employed if it has an "adverse effect" on domestic workers:

American farm workers are suffering a shorter duration of employment because of imported foreign workers.

American farm wages—tragically low by any standard—lag even more in areas where employment of foreign workers predominates.

Although Mexican nationals are supposed to be hired *only* to meet *emergency* shortages on *essential* crops, thousands of these imported workers are placed on skilled and semi-skilled agricultural jobs and thousands more are being employed on a year-round basis. In addition, more than 60% of all Mexican nationals are working on crops—like cotton—which are already in surplus supply.

Although prevailing wages are supposed to be paid, growers who use Mexican labor tend to pay even less than those who do not.

While it is provided in the law that the growers shall make a reasonable effort to obtain domestic workers, generally the effort is only a token gesture.

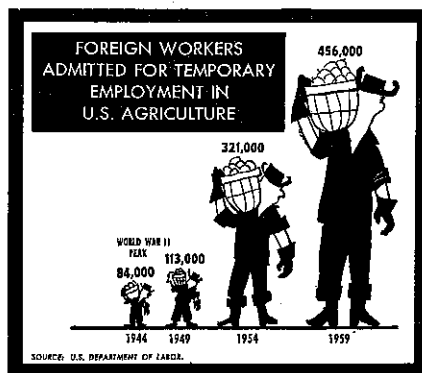
For these and other reasons, the Consultants unanimously recommended that P.L. 78 be extended only on a *temporary* basis and then only if substantially *reformed*.

Farm Workers and the Family Farm

Every effort to raise the standards of American farm workers is met with the anguished outcry that the American farmer will be destroyed.

This is hypocritical nonsense.

According to the latest available figures, 53% of all farms use *no* hired workers at all and on another 33% the farmer and his family perform nearly all of the work them-



selves. Clearly, the shocking economic status of the farm laborer is neither attributable to this 86% of all American farm enterprises, nor could an improvement in the farm laborers' lot be viewed as a menacing addition to their costs.

Even more significant, this 86% of all our farms is in direct competition with the 5% at the top that account for 70% of the total farm wage bill. To the extent that this small group of corporation type growers continue to maintain sweatshop conditions of wages and work, they continue to enjoy an unfair advantage over family-type farms by getting one of the elements of their production costs at bargain rates.

Thus, the degradation of the hired farm laborer is having the inevitable effect of lowering the value of the labor of the family farmer and, hence, his family income.

Testifying at a Senate Committee hearing on P.L. 78, a representative of the National Farmers Union—an organization devoted to the welfare of small and moderate-sized farms—had this to say:

“ . . . It has never and does not intend now to weaken in its resolve that agricultural workers, whether domestic or foreign, regular farm hands or migrants, be assured the same rights and opportunities for themselves and their families as are all other people living in this country.

“This concern has a basis in self-interest as well as fair play. Farmers have learned that it is the existence of a ready supply of cheap labor which has contributed so greatly to the growth and vaunted efficiency of the corporation farm. The presence of a plentiful and docile supply of itinerant labor which can be turned on or off, as the need develops, by regional Government officials sympathetic and attentive to the demands of large growers, canners, packers and processors, represents a threat to the well-being of all family farmers. It cheapens the

value of their labor and that of their families. And when one considers that many small farmers work as farm labor during certain seasons, the added damage to their already insecure economic position becomes obvious.”

Time to Act

In a nation which prides itself on being both humane and the wealthiest in the world, the continued degradation of Americans who work for wages in agriculture is neither morally nor economically justifiable.

Recently, the AFL-CIO, testifying on the over-all farm problem, said:

“The American Labor Movement, which represents the largest organization of consumers in the country, does not want low prices at the grocery store based upon the exploitation of farm proprietors, tenants, sharecroppers, or hired farm laborers and we are confident most consumers share this view.”

Surely, the time is long overdue when the facts regarding the plight of the American farm laborer should have reached the public, touched its conscience, and impelled it to act.

In 1960, there is no argument that can justify the continued denial of a minimum wage to farm workers, their exclusion from federal protection of the right to organize, their lack of coverage under unemployment and workmen's compensation laws, and the exclusion of many even from coverage under the federal old-age and survivors insurance law.

How long can we speak glibly about an “American” standard of living and still deprive our neediest of these basic protections?

How long can we ignore the obvious need for compulsory licensing and regulation of labor contractors who recruit migrant workers and transport them across state lines? The abuses by contractors is an old and ugly story, yet little has been done to end them.

How long will this most affluent of all nations continue to tolerate the employment of children *under 16* in commercial agriculture when they should be attending school?

The AFL-CIO is actively supporting efforts to meet these problems by legislative action both in the Federal Congress and in the legislatures of the states. Furthermore, the AFL-CIO and its affiliated unions are now seeking to organize farm workers despite the great difficulties that beset this undertaking.

Finally, we wholeheartedly support the recommendations of the Consultants to the Secretary of Labor that P.L. 78 be extended *only* temporarily and then *only* if substantial reforms are made. We have no doubt that the enactment of these proposed reforms, plus inclusion of American farm workers under existing federal and state welfare and labor legislation, will result in attracting more than sufficient American workers to meet American agricultural needs.

Our objection to the “imported colonialism” which our foreign labor programs truly are, cannot be construed as unfriendliness to the Mexican people. On the contrary, the termination of P.L. 78 will create greater opportunities in agriculture for thousands of Americans of Mexican descent. Furthermore, the five year period which we propose for its gradual termination will provide time for Mexican nationals to adjust to the inevitable change, and for their government to take further steps—with the expanded American aid which we recommend—to further increase useful and self-respecting employment within the economy of Mexico itself.

It is high time that we act forcefully to eradicate every vestige of the native colonialism which has already fastened itself on our own American agricultural system.

The deepening concern of more and more men and women of good will is evidence that this belated effort can succeed.