

Revolution in the "Blue-Sky Sweatshop"

SUPPOSE, just suppose, that the employees of mighty General Motors had no union and the rest of the auto industry was virtually unorganized. Suppose that the right of GM workers to organize and bargain collectively was not guaranteed by law. Suppose that workers at GM had no Social Security, or minimum wage standards, or unemployment insurance or workmen's compensation.

Suppose further that GM had the advantage of a plentiful, cheap labor supply and that the company's efforts to fight off unions and maintain unconditional control of its workers and their families was supported by Chambers of Commerce, other employers, big utilities, and most recognized power groups.

Impossible, you say?

Change the locale from Detroit to California or Florida or Mississippi or Arizona; change the industry from autos to farming, and you have a picture of the plight of farm workers today.

FARMING is big business; the day of the small family farm is over. In the United States, the word used to describe the revolutionary change in farming is "agribusiness."

"Agribusiness" is farming on a huge scale, with complex machinery and assembly-line techniques. Successful "agribusiness" depends for its growth and productivity on heavy capital investment in machinery and the availability of a large supply of cheap labor.

The resulting labor situation has been labeled the "blue-sky sweatshop." Men, women and children work inhumanly long hours at back-breaking tasks for little pay and less security. The squalor and misery of their lives as they move from place to place with the seasons and the ripening crops is as sharp as a pen-and-ink portrait of poverty.

Migrant and seasonal workers provide the cheap labor on which agribusiness thrives. Till now, these have been the forgotten people. They live in unspeakable conditions. Their children go hungry for food and education. They, themselves, are sapped of life and hope by a system they have had no strength to fight.

Vanishing family farm

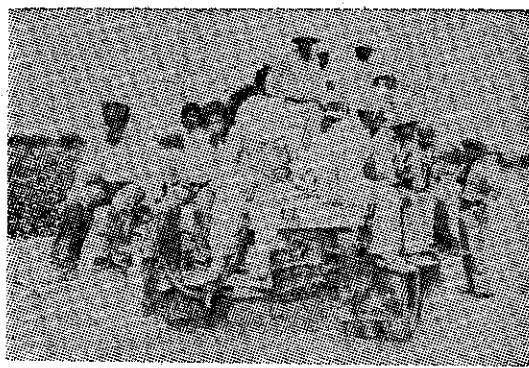
The "family farmer" is just one notch above them. He barely manages to feed and clothe his children. Sometimes he can offer them a rudimentary education. In the U. S. today, there are about 1.5 million "family" farms left. Between 1939 and 1964, 2.4 million farms were wiped out—and 95 percent of them were small farms earning less than \$2,500 a year in gross income.

Half, at least, of this country's farm-operator families earn less per year than the poverty cutoff line of \$3,000 drawn by President Lyndon Johnson. Migrant workers make even less. If they earn more than \$1,000 a year, they are considered lucky.

But there is a ray of hope. The change that has come to farming has also touched the farm worker. In fact, 1965 might be called the year of transition for farm labor.

Large-scale militant union activity among farm workers developed in 1965 in widely separated parts of the country.

The movement started among the cotton choppers and pickers in Mississippi in 1965. They joined the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union and started picketing—and striking—for \$1.25 an hour minimum, an 8½ hour day with time and a half for overtime, sick pay, health and accident insurance and fair employ-



Crew leader briefs migrant workers before heading out.

ment practices. Because of their spirit and determination, they attracted the interest of the nation and although they did not meet with much immediate success, they made the plight of the country's farm workers top news.

Organizing mushrooms

What erupted in Mississippi mushroomed in California in the lush grape-growing area around Delano where grape pickers struck several of the nation's major vineyards for better pay—and the right to organize and bargain collectively in unions of their own choice.

(Farm workers at present are excluded from effective collective bargaining under federal labor law.)

In California, the strike was started by Filipino workers, who were then joined by Mexican-Americans who worked beside them. Help came to both groups from all of organized labor. Harassments and arrests by employers and local authorities were constant. The strike, first at the vineyards of Schenley Industries, spread to the giant of them all, the DiGiorgio Corporation, and is continuing there and at about 30 other smaller growers in the area. The DiGiorgio farms at Delano and Borrego Springs, however, had agreed to elections as this issue of *The Advance* went to press. Schenley this year finally came to terms with the strikers, agreed to recognize the union and has since signed a first contract. Two wineries controlled by Roman Catholic monastic orders have also recognized the National Farm Workers Association.

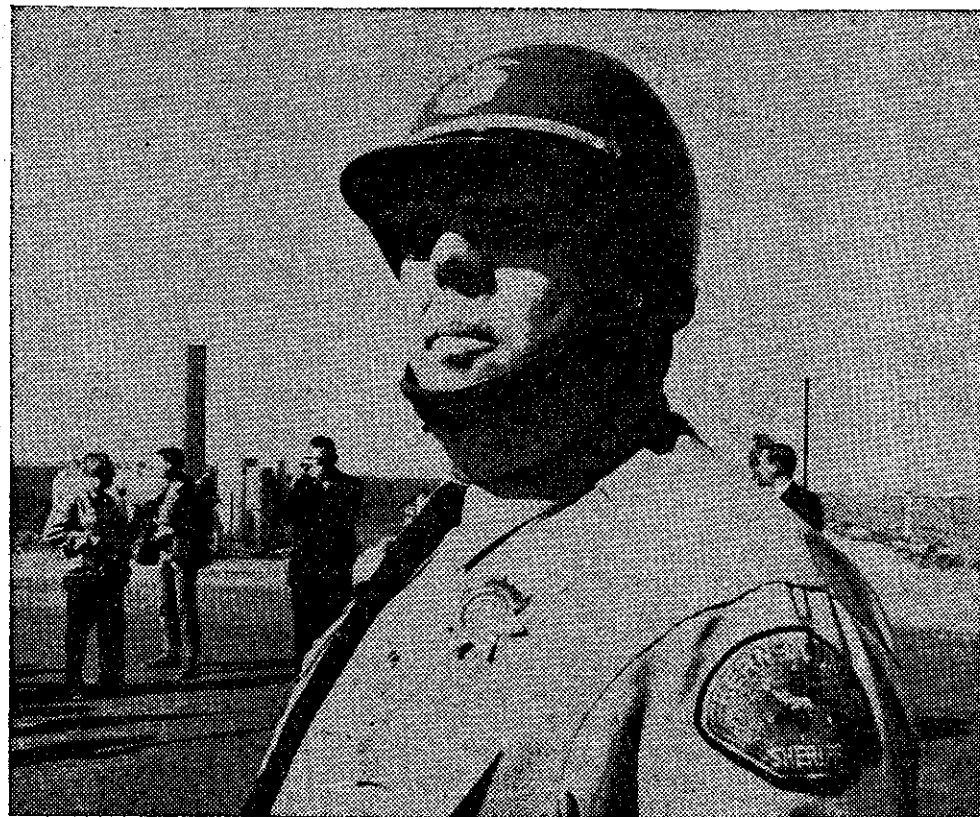
As the organizing fever grows, other areas have also been affected. In Lantana, Fla., a small farm strike was lost; south of there, on the east coast of the state, demands were met and a strike averted. A five-day strike of cane cutters at the Okeelanta Sugar Refinery was lost, but at nearby Eloise, the Steelworkers union organized Cypress Gardens Citrus Products Inc., Florida's largest multipurpose citrus plant. And that, say the Steelworkers, is only the beginning of the organizing campaign.

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By DEBORAH WESER

A CALIFORNIA FARM WORKER

"I am pretty tired of being a human species that cannot fit th



This is the "law" in Kern County, Calif. That's why farm workers are convinced that union organization is their best bet.

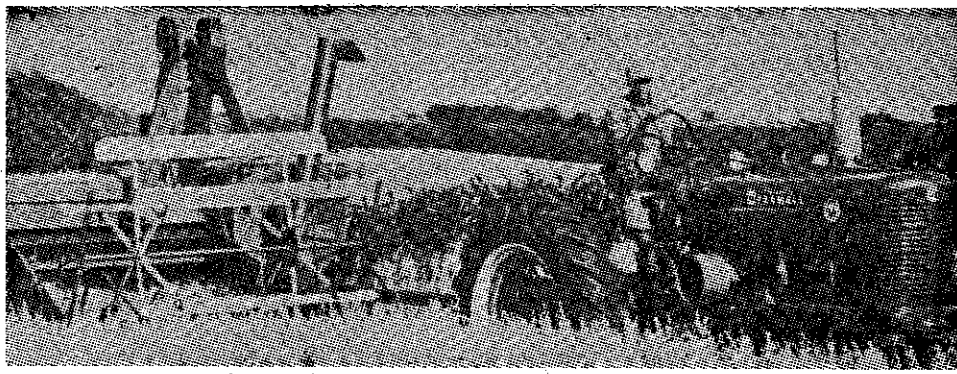
Some 1,400 other Florida farm workers and crew leaders in Belle Glade have voted to accept a charter as a local of the Laborers, the sixth largest international in the U. S. The Laborers have promised to pour half a million dollars into organizing farm workers up and down the eastern seaboard.

A local chartered by the Amalgamated Meat Cutters won Gulf Coast pogy fishermen their first overall pay hike in 25 years. The local counts members in dairy,

sugar and rice as well as the seafood industry.

On June 1 of this year, 500 farm workers went on strike in the fields of three of the largest melon growers in the lower Rio Grande Valley in Texas. Their basic demand? A negotiated contract with a \$1.25 hourly minimum wage!

The drive to organize, to stand up and be counted as first-class working citizens with the right to bargain collectively, has even spread into the Goldwater country



Automation is the key to a successful agribusiness enterprise.

of Arizona. There, in the central part of the state, farm workers organized the Arizona Farm Laborers' Association and started a campaign for higher wages, better working conditions, greater job security and protection from employment abuses. Early this year, the workers staged a peaceful protest march on the state Capitol Building in support of their demands.

All this activity is a beginning but it's still not enough.

From the citrus orchards of Florida to the vineyards of California, agribusiness mounts a powerful lobby. Its influence touches the legislative process on its own behalf at all levels of government. In the past, strong organization and solid financial resources have given the large agricultural corporations sufficient power to block progressive farm labor legislation. The corporations and their spokesmen obviously wield significant political power; the farm workers, until recently, had none.

Most Americans, unfortunately, still believe in the myth of the independent family farmer. It is a deep-rooted illusion fostered by the giant corporations to

creating the sweatshop conditions under which he was forced to work.

Age-old myths

The so-called experts used to say that workers had no ambition, no sense of responsibility and wouldn't know what to do with the extra money if their wages were raised. Now this old story is turned against farm workers in the same way it was once used against clothing workers, packinghouse workers, steelworkers, and all the others who have moved up the trade union path to collective action and self-respect.

In 1966, farm workers are the dispossessed millions in this affluent nation. Rootless, they and their families often wander with the seasons across the face of the country. As the harvest progresses, they get temporary work. When the harvest ends, most remain jobless.

In 1964, there were 2.5 million seasonal farm workers in the country and about 368,000 of them were migrants. On an average, a migrant worker puts in 131 days of farm and nonfarm work in a year and, in 1964, earned about \$585 from farm labor and \$1,049 from nonfarm work. Average earnings for those who did only farm work were \$935 for the year. Many farm workers, particularly mi-

migrant children while their parents work. Children too small to work the crops are taken to the field in the morning with their parents and left long hours alone in locked cars or left to play in roadways or drainage ditches. Others are left in camp sites or migrant housing areas under care of other children 9 to 12 years of age, and sometimes younger. There is little wonder that they are subject to accidents resulting in serious injury or even death . . ."

And the children . . .

No one knows how many migrant children there are in this country although a federal estimate in 1960 set the figure at about 150,000 under the age of 14. How many of these children work? No one knows. How many are enrolled in our schools? No one knows.

And in 1960, when the last survey was taken, only seven states had programs designed to encourage migrant children to enroll in school.

If some effort is not made now, these



In the vineyard, hard labor is a child's only teacher.

children will be the unemployed of the future. Totally unprepared to face the automated industrial world of tomorrow, they will swell the relief rolls and suffer through a life of 19-century misery surrounded by 21st-century prosperity.

But the situation is changing. The parents of these children are beginning to look up—and ahead.

"Equal protection (under wage and hour laws) . . . would give us a minimum wage and other benefits. It would give us employment insurance in off seasons instead of surplus commodities. Equal protection would give us full coverage under Social Security like first-class citizens," said a Mississippi sharecropper.

Legislation in 1961 extended Social Security to farm workers in principle. In practice, coverage is avoided because it applies only to workers who put in more than 20 days at hourly rates for one employer. Sometimes the worker himself quits before he is eligible because he can't afford to have the deduction made. Sometimes the employer fires the worker to avoid paying his share of the Social Security tax. In either case, the worker never gets Social Security credit for the hours of work he has put in.

If federal protection for farm workers is absent, state laws are little better. Based on its own studies in 1964, the U. S. Department of Labor said:

"Except for a very few states, those with the greatest need for seasonal workers have enacted the fewest protective laws."

The state law picture, so far as protective legislation for farm labor is concerned, looked like this at the end of 1965:

Five states strengthened existing laws governing housing and sanitary conditions. About 36 states have such regulations but not all are mandatory or comprehensive. California enacted the first law requiring employers to provide sanitary facilities in the fields.

Florida and Michigan raised to 10 the number of states that now set safety standards for motor vehicles used to

transport migratory workers. California last year improved its existing vehicle code.

North Dakota removed the exemption that denied agricultural workers state minimum wage protection. Only four other states provide minimum wage protection for farm workers. New Jersey expanded its wage payment and collection law to include farm workers. So far, only six other states have wage payment laws and three others wage collection laws that apply to farm workers.

Maine, Michigan, New Hampshire and Oregon all amended state workmen's compensation laws to give some coverage to farm workers. Such coverage was already available in 17 other states. Except for Hawaii, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia, no state has an unemployment compensation law that covers farm workers.

But the greatest single step forward can be made with enactment of the new wage and hour law to give farm workers standard minimum wage protection at

eated as a member of some sub-definition of a person . . . "

hide the truth. Actually, farming is a big industry supported by low-paid and oppressed workers.

In pushing the "family farm" image, farm interests (agribusiness public relations men) have always claimed that agriculture is different from other industry. They claim it's vulnerable to weather, transportation, consumer desire and other variables out of their control and needs sympathetic federal protection. The protection they call for is federally-supported price floors to prevent income from skidding down and special federal immigration laws to assure entry of enough cheap foreign labor to fill low-paid jobs that domestic workers won't take because the pay is too poor.

Agribusiness politics

The agribusiness interests work overtime convincing the public that farm produce prices will skyrocket if farm workers' wages go up or farm workers are covered by social welfare benefits. They also argue that the extra cost of fringe welfare benefits would raise labor costs so high the "family farm" will be wiped out. The truth is, the family farm doesn't enter the picture here. It's the agribusiness interests with their industrial farms that would be required to pay higher wages. The "family farm" doesn't hire enough hands to meet the modest minimum standards of the proposed wage and hour amendments.

Meanwhile, the industry encourages the public to believe the age-old prejudices that brand farm workers as irresponsible, self-defeating people with no interest in bettering themselves. These are the same vicious myths that were once told about workers in the clothing industry in the early organizing years. The worker was even blamed then for

grants, are foreign-born: Mexican, British West Indian, Canadian, Filipino, some Japanese. A substantial number are Negro. Last year, because of legislative changes, fewer foreign nationals were brought in and more domestic workers were hired for existing jobs. No matter who they are or where they come from, the farm workers' plight is poverty and their outlook is bleak.

Even the children work. In fact, if school is not in session, children of any age may work in the fields at any task and for any number of hours. The federal Fair Labor Standards Act (wage and hour law) prohibits their work only while school is in session. Yet thousands of children are found to be working in violation of even this modest restriction. (A U. S. Department of Labor report for the year ending June 30, 1965, found 2,300 farms violating child labor laws.) The pitifully few dollars they earn are desperately needed by their families.

In the words of a U. S. Health, Education and Welfare Department report:

"The condition of children of migrants is especially critical. Reports show gross lack of adequate care and protection for



Home is where you find it — if you're a migrant farm worker.