

CHILDREN ARE CHIEF VICTIMS OF MIGRATORY-LABOR SYSTEM

Federal Committee Shows Way Toward Action

IN A COUNTY in the Southwest—a rural county of 5,380 square miles—a child-welfare worker was talking about her work.

"Much can be done," she said, "for this county's children. But not for the children in the cotton camps. Those families are shrugged off by the county, by the folks as well as the officials. Even the State finds the job of helping them too big. These migrants are the American untouchables! Yet these families—children included—pick the crop; without them the growers would be sunk."

"What can be done for these children?" Her thoughtful eyes seemed to look for an answer beyond her own county to the continental expanse of 48 units woven into one great people: Surely that people is equal to caring for the children who follow the million miles of criss-crossing highways, back and forth across State lines—spending their babyhood in trucks, in shacks, on the edges of fields; spending their childhood working with their parents on the crops that mature somewhere every month of the year. Following rich harvests, they lose the advantages that are supposed to accrue to American children from the Nation's agricultural and industrial wealth.

What can be done for these children who move from crop to crop?

The Federal Interagency Committee on Migrant Labor offers an answer. In a report, "Migrant Labor; a Human Problem," published by the Retraining and Reemployment Administration of the United States Department of Labor, that committee restates, in national terms, what that local child-welfare worker said about the children in the cotton camps of her county:

"A sizable segment of our population," it says, "through community and State neglect, has been robbed of so many normal American and human rights that it is almost unbelievable. Child labor, substandard living, and a

padlock against education have destroyed the rights of children and drastically disturbed the integrity of family life among migrant workers. Estimates ranging from one to five million individuals comprise America's forgotten people of 1947, agricultural and industrial migrants. This equals the population of from 4 to 12 of our 48 States. Unorganized, . . . ineligible for educational, health, or welfare benefits, . . . migrants frequently find maintenance of even a minimum standard of living an impossibility."

The seriousness of the situation was recognized by the Twelfth National Conference on Labor Legislation, which was held in Washington late in 1945, representing 42 States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. This conference recommended organization of a Federal committee made up of the agencies having responsibilities toward migrant workers (these agencies are the Department of Labor, the Department of Agriculture, the Federal Security Agency, the National Housing Authority, and the Railroad Retirement Board). This committee, the conference decided, should study and report on working and living conditions and should work out a program to set standards for migrants equal to those set for other workers.

The committee was established in May 1946 under the authority of the War Mobilization and Reconversion Act of 1944. Now it has issued its report, describing actual conditions, and making recommendations in three parts: (1) Community and employer acceptance of their obligations toward migrant workers brought in for agricultural and industrial labor; (2) improved practices in recruiting, transporting, and placing migrant workers and in providing them with better housing, health, education, and welfare services; and (3) legislation, Federal, State, and local, to improve the working and living conditions of migrants.

"The chief victims in the families of migratory workers," says the report, ". . . are the children." Of the six "background discussions," which narrate the difficulties and the remedies for them, the focus for readers of *The Child* is "Child Labor and Education."

The report shows that much of the agricultural work these children do is as undesirable for them as the work that children did in factories until legislation forbade or regulated it. It shows the meagerness of current legislative protection, Federal and State, for these extremely young workers.

Frequent change from place to place makes these children feel uprooted and unwanted. Left to themselves day after day they may develop serious physical and mental difficulties. The committee recommends tax-supported day-care centers, with local people, employers, and workers joining to plan and to put thought and effort into making them work.

Specific about the education of migrant children, the report declares that not only do these children have a right to the services of schools in whatever community and State they reside in for short times, but the schools have a duty to plan services especially for these children, even though the services cost many dollars.

For example, a thorough service might mean the employment of an extra supply or reserve of teachers or tutors by State, county, or city school systems. Part of their duties would be to locate migrant children, to help them get into school, and to organize classroom groups when and where they were needed. These teachers would be educated to understand the hardships these children had suffered arising from their changing home life, their irregular schooling, undernourishment, and the fears and hostilities created by their being discriminated against in many of their temporary homes. Courses and school equipment for older pupils are also suggested.

If we Americans sincerely want to prevent a caste system from growing up based on a gross difference in education and the other necessities of childhood, the problems of the migrant family are the problems of us all.

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