

Migrants - Fed. Agencies -

MIGRATORY WORKERS AND THEIR NEED FOR WELFARE SERVICES

by

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LUNCHEON MEETING

Members of the National Travelers Aid Society:

I was pleased by your invitation to luncheon with you this afternoon, and to remark briefly on the status, and the prospects, of our migratory farm workers--families that are often desolate, always in need of some kind.

It is my hope to use this time to recount for you some of the things that have been done to help the migrant, and to talk about some of the things that I feel must be done in the future if the migrant is ever to take his place as a full citizen of this wealthy Nation, with full access to the responsibilities and rewards of our social and economic life.

I would like to remark first, however, on the work of the Travelers Aid Society. There is no lonelier person than a traveler in trouble; our clearest example of the virtue of charity is the story of the Samaritan who helped a traveler in trouble.

Each year 30 million Americans of every background and income group change their city of residence. This ability to move freely, to pursue opportunity, to change jobs at will, was a breath-taking freedom to the people who came to this new world from the social confines and economic strictures

of the old. In a dynamic economy such as ours, it remains an American characteristic.

Yet most people on the move must rely upon the uncertain help of strangers in case of trouble. To all travelers, the glow of the Travelers Aid lamp in bus, rail and air terminals throughout the Nation is a welcome one.

Unfortunately, there are few such "kindly lights" for the 500,000 American migratory farm workers to steer by.

Anyone familiar with American agriculture is aware of the extraordinary changes that have taken place in recent decades, and that are continuing. We can produce immense crops from fewer acres, far beyond our limit to consume them or profitably dispose of them. Modern processing, packaging and marketing techniques have brought to agriculture the stylization and management methods of industrial production--a system in which the migrant appears as an economic element, as one of the phases in the process.

President Eisenhower has warned that failure to confront the complex problems of the new mass agriculture "can cause serious strains on the firm freedom supports of our society." Of particular interest to us is the fact that the "scientific revolution" that causes headaches to agricultural producers also brings grief to agricultural labor--helps, in fact, to perpetuate the migratory labor system itself.

This much seems certain to me: We may have learned to use the tools of technology to dramatically increase agricultural production but we have failed to use those tools of progress to benefit many of the men, women and children who labor for hire on American farms.

The migrants will be coming north now. As I speak to you, migrant families in our southern States are gathering their few belongings, boarding the old trucks and buses to begin their long trek; They will work long days, travel great distances before autumn brings them home again. And they can expect certain things:

The migrant can expect to receive the lowest wages in the entire American economy, less than \$900 a year;

He can expect to be unemployed, numbering the jobs he is able to pick up away from the farm as well as those on the farm, about half of the days of the year;

He is expressly left out from the protection of most of our social and labor legislation;

He can expect to be ineligible, in all but a very few cases, for health and welfare services because of residency requirements fashioned, in some places, with him in mind;

He can expect that his children will be forced by economic necessity to work beside him in the fields, and that those same children, because they move with their parents from place to place, will often be deprived of the opportunity for an education;

Our 500,000 domestic American migrants can expect, also, to be in competition with 500,000 foreign workers, brought into this country every year;

And the migrant can expect to be considered, by many who employ him, and in the literal sense of the word, a "commodity" to be bought and used at the

lowest possible price.

Those are his expectations, right now, as he starts north to harvest our crops and fill our supermarkets.

I have never been able to understand the apathy of most farm employer organizations over the years when it comes to finding solutions to this vast and compelling human problem.

Even more distressing is the traditional and historical opposition of those farm employer organizations to any and all suggestions that are put forward for the relief of the substandard conditions of farm workers.

Now I do not doubt that American growers and their organizations are not devoid of humanitarian instinct, nor that they have contributed their just share to the Albert Schweitzers and the Doctor Dooleys who dedicate their lives to the underprivileged of foreign countries. I have no doubt that many of these organizations support our foreign aid program to assist those nations that are underprivileged.

Yet, when suggestions are made that would raise the status of our own migratory workers, who live in the poverty of a \$900 a year average income, these same individuals and organizations are seized with a pious horror at this assault upon free enterprise.

During the past two years I have made several speeches on the problems of the migrant farm worker. I have attempted to show that it is a problem that cannot be rationalized out of existence, that our posture as a Nation founded on human dignity is seriously impaired by a farm labor system based upon the availability of a large supply of poverty-stricken workers.

In response to this position, recommendations have been made by farm employer organizations that would have the effect of making it the policy of the United States Government to help maintain that supply of underemployed and underpaid workers for the benefit of agricultural employers.

I do not believe that American agriculture does, can or should depend upon such a labor system.

In accordance with that conviction, I have made proposals and advanced programs that, in my opinion, would improve agricultural labor conditions and, in the long run, the health of agriculture itself.

Today I would like to summarize briefly what progress we have been able to make in the past four years. I would also like to summarize briefly some of the more important proposals, and advise you on their status.

I have the honor to serve as Chairman of the President's Committee on Migratory Labor, established by President Eisenhower in August, 1954.

One of the most important projects of the Committee is the promotion of joint Federal-State action through the establishment of State Migratory Labor Committees. Much of the responsibility for the well being of migrants and their families rests with the States. Workmen's compensation, unemployment insurance, residency laws, and regulations for housing and transportation are, for example, primarily State responsibilities.

At the time the Committee was established, only seven States had migratory labor committees. Today, the total has reached twenty-eight. Of the thirty-one States which employ 4,000 or more domestic migrants per year, twenty-four have organized migratory labor committees.

It seems to me that during the next general State legislative year, 1961, we should see a good deal of action by the States in the field of migratory labor. My optimism is based on a new source of support for migratory labor legislation. In the past what has been lacking in attempts to extend protective legislation to farm workers has been support from most farm employer organizations.

At a speech in Chicago last year, I suggested that such organizations might contribute constructive suggestions in this area. I am delighted by the news that the American Farm Bureau Federation has recommended that its affiliated State Farm Bureaus consider State legislation to: (1) improve housing standards for migratory workers; (2) extend occupational insurance to farm workers; (3) license farm labor contractors; (4) enact safety standards for truck transportation of farm workers; (5) insure availability of school facilities to children of migratory workers; and (6) establish minimum age restrictions for the employment of minors in agriculture.

I welcome this somewhat belated action on the part of the Farm Bureau and I would like to suggest that they join with those groups and individuals which have traditionally fought for such legislation through the years to put their recommendations across.

In addition to the growth of State interest stimulated by the President's Committee, the Department of Labor has been moving ahead in those areas within its competence and interest. Among those programs are:

Development and expansion of the Annual Worker Plan through which an estimated 200,000 workers will move this year;

Development and issuance of amendments to the regulations governing the interstate recruitment of migratory farm workers;

Development and introduction of a bill for national registration of crew leaders operating across State lines;

Development under PCML auspices of proposed legislation for the establishment of overnight rest facilities for migrant workers;

Initiation of studies now underway in several States to determine the advisability and feasibility of extending unemployment compensation to farm workers;

Development of much stronger foreign worker standards--protecting our own workers from substandard competition.

These are concrete accomplishments by the Department of Labor in the field of farm labor. Taken together, they represent more significant progress than was made in any comparable period of time in history. I think that in the years to come the record will show that the programs undertaken by the Department of Labor over the past 4 years on behalf of farm workers will have laid the groundwork for the accomplishments of the future.

In regard to that future, I believe there are a number of items of the first priority.

There is, first, the question of a minimum wage in agriculture.

In February of last year I first announced my conviction that a minimum wage for farm workers was an essential first step in providing our migrants with the necessary economic improvement from which other improvements would follow, and without which no lasting improvement is possible.

At that time, I directed a special study to determine both the desirability and the feasibility of extending the minimum wage to agricultural workers.

A report will be released at the end of this month, and it will show that a minimum wage for hired farm workers is both feasible and desirable.

It will also show that such a minimum would apply to a relatively small percentage of farm employers, all of them large, who hire a substantial portion of the hired farm help in the United States, and would not apply to the small family farmer.

To assume, of course, that such legislation would receive the appropriate attention of Congress in a political year is to avoid the realities of our society. I am releasing this report however, so that ample discussion and thought can be given to it, in sufficient time and detail, to insure a meaningful consideration in the next Congress.

A second broad question relating to the future of the American migrant is the status of our foreign labor programs.

A little over a year ago, I appointed four distinguished consultants to advise me on the operation of Public Law 78, the Act which enables the Secretary of Labor to recruit supplemental farm labor from Mexico.

The consultants reported that the mass importation of Mexican farm workers, occurring at the rate of 450,000 last year, is having a definite adverse effect on the wages and working conditions of American farm workers. To cure this, the consultants made recommendations.

In recent weeks, the Subcommittee on Equipment, Supplies and Manpower of the House Committee on Agriculture has held hearings on the extension of Public Law 78.

Several of the bills before that Subcommittee would do the opposite of what the consultants recommended. They would not only dilute the Secretary of Labor's authority to administer this very difficult program; three of the

bills would also revoke the Secretary of Labor's authority to issue regulations governing the use of the United States Employment Service - a Service through which many farm employers recruit domestic farm help.

I think that those bills are hostile to progress. I consider them dangerous to the progress that has been made so far, and I urged strongly that the Administration declare itself against them by opposing them without dissent - and this was done.

It is the Department of Labor's position that Public Law 78 should not be extended unless and until adequate remedial measures are adopted and substantial improvements are made in the program.

The Department of Labor, in accordance with that position, will make recommendations for improving the operation of the Mexican Farm Labor Program before the present law runs out.

To the individuals and organizations that have supported the Department of Labor's farm labor programs, I would like to say that even though the attention of Congress is distracted in a political year, that is not an indication that the momentum toward reform is slackening. Rather the opposite is true. Indifference is giving way to concern; ignorance is declining before knowledge.

This problem is going to be solved. Despite the long history of frustration that has been the lot of those who have worked to find just solutions to this great human need, the tide is beginning to run with them. I believe that the day will come when the migratory American farm worker will be able to hold up his head as a self-sufficient and self-sustaining member of our

society, like every other American worker.

When that day comes - and it will come - then we will have held out a genuine hand of help to the families that wander on the face of our land, and know so little of its true richness.

Thank you.