

# CIO Aids Farm Labor

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A dramatic fight is being waged to bring a better life to American farm workers. Many thousands are migrants, needed for only a few weeks or months to tend or pick a vast variety of crops: Florida citrus, New Jersey cranberries, sugar beets in Michigan and Colorado, lettuce or melons in Arizona and California, apples in Washington, cotton in Texas, tobacco in Connecticut.

Much farming is now done by machinery, but where painstaking, slow hand work is still required, with a suddenly expanded load at certain times, the grower needs a large supply of extra workers—and, like other employers, he usually likes them cheap.

Where are these sudden large supplies of labor to be found? School kids do some of the work and so do housewives and other neighborhood folk. But with industrial jobs plentiful, fewer extra idle workers are readily at hand.

Instead of seeking to make farm jobs attractive to Americans, many growers, through their Associations and Senators and Congressmen, have turned to cheap foreign labor to meet their needs. If Mexicans or West Indians can be brought in under contract, the owner feels sure of his supply, and he

doesn't have to compete with industrial wage levels. Such workers do not bring families and when the crop is harvested, the workers have to leave. The community has no problem of educating kids or looking after stranded families.

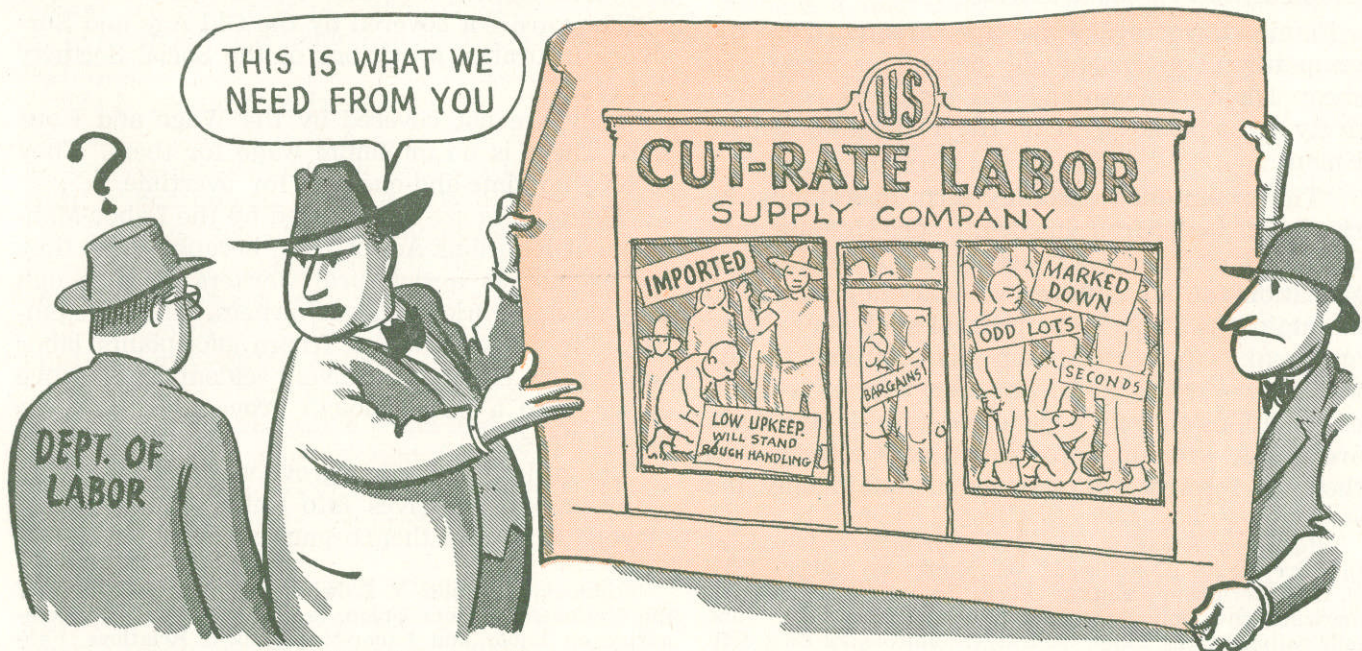
In 1951, 191,000 Mexican nationals were brought in under contract, and so were many thousand workers from the British West Indies. For tens of thousands, the contract wage was only 50¢ an hour.

Most of these were used by large operators and corporation farms.

The Mexicans were contracted for in 27 states, with Arkansas using 34,000, New Mexico, 26,000, and Texas, 53,000. Even such states as Minnesota and Mississippi used about 2,000 each.

Depending on foreign contract labor is hardly in accord with American ideals of equality and democracy. Nor is the procedure a safe one, since the supply might be cut off. The practice clearly depresses wages and levels of living of our citizens, and lessens the amount of work available to them.

Such was the conclusion of the President's Commission on Migratory Labor, a group of distinguished citizens who studied the problem intensively and issued excellent recommendations in



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1951.<sup>1</sup> On this particular point the Commission said:

"It is our conclusion that the evidence demonstrates that the agencies of Government responsible for importing and contracting foreign labor have not been successful in protecting domestic farm labor from detrimental effects of imported contract alien labor. We find alien labor has depressed farm wages and, therefore, has been detrimental to domestic labor."

The whole situation is complicated by the tremendous numbers of Mexicans who cross the border illegally each year, seeking in our traditional Promised Land greater opportunities than are available to them as land-poor peasants in our neighbor country, which has not yet been able to match our productivity. In 1951 alone, 700,000 illegal entrants were sent back to Mexico.

Since such "wetbacks" are here illegally, they are open to terrific exploitation. In Texas, many work for a few cents an hour or even just for food and a place to spread their blankets. If they object to bad conditions, they can be sent back to Mexico.

Texas growers and their representatives in government have too often blocked efforts to stop this flow of cheap labor.

So long as the "wetbacks" flock in, they are a very dangerous threat to American conditions. In cities, as on farms, they must of necessity agree to work at sub-standard wages. From July, 1951, to February, 1952, over 17,000 Mexican "wetbacks" were arrested working in industry or trade in the United States. Hundreds of these were caught in Chicago and Detroit as well as in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Kansas City. Thousands more undoubtedly have escaped arrest.

Family farmers likewise are threatened by the competition of large-scale operations based on cheap labor. This threat was discussed constructively by a spokesman of the National Farmers Union:

"The income of the family farm operator is derived principally from his own labor. He must provide food, clothing, and shelter for his family, also education for his children so that they may help maintain the democratic principles of our society and make their maximum contribution to the world's work. He finds, however, that as a result of conditions entirely beyond his control, his efforts are being brought into direct competition with those of foreign workers who maintain only the

most primitive standards of living for their families at home. We appreciate the willing and valuable assistance that we are receiving from our friendly neighbors across the border. When they come to work for us, however, they should be afforded all the standards of payment, hours, and working conditions that our own workers have striven so long to attain.

"Otherwise they become cheap and destructive competition to our family farm operators and may either impoverish them or drive them out of independent farming altogether."<sup>2</sup>

### Forgotten Workers

Vivid pictures of the substandard conditions from which domestic farm workers suffer were provided by CIO witnesses before the Humphrey Subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare in 1952.

The plight of the Florida citrus pickers was described by a representative of the United Brewery, Flour, Cereal, Soft Drink and Distillery Workers, CIO:

"I say that these workers are forgotten because all of the great gains made in bettering the wages, hours, working conditions, and general welfare of the laboring man and the needy—all these great gains made in the last fifteen or twenty years have passed these workers by.

"They are not covered by unemployment compensation insurance because theirs is called seasonal, agricultural employment. They can get no other work in the off-season of three months because in the citrus belt there is no other work. And yet their needs go on. They still get hungry. They still need clothes and the vital necessities of life.

"They are not covered by the Old Age and Survivors Insurance provisions of the Social Security Act . . .

"They are not covered by the Wage and Hour Act. There is no minimum wage for them. They receive no time-and-one-half for overtime . . .

"The pickers are not covered by the Labor-Management Relations Act of 1947, because again they are exempt as agricultural workers even though they do not work for grove owners. They are employed by packing houses, frozen juice plants, labor contractors, et cetera, and very seldom does a grove owner have a large enough grove to employ his own pickers.

"The pickers and other grove workers are trying to organize themselves into unions, but the employers don't want them organized.

<sup>1</sup> *Migratory Labor in American Agriculture*, Report of the President's Commission on Migratory Labor, 1951, U. S. Government Printing Office, 75¢. A pamphlet summarizing the Commission's report is planned for June publication by the Public Affairs Committee, 22 East 38th Street, New York 16, New York.

<sup>2</sup> Statement of John A. Baker, Legislative Secretary of the National Farmers Union, before the Senate Subcommittee on Labor and Labor-Management Relations, February 11, 1952.



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"Reports are pouring into our state headquarters in Florida from all over the citrus belt of our people working from two to four days per week, while Bahamians are working six and seven days.

"As pointed out by the President's Commission on Migratory Labor, the Bahamians are guaranteed a minimum weekly wage. It must be paid whether or not they work. As a result, they work steadily, while the native citrus picker is allowed to work only if there is too much for the Bahamians to do . . .

"Our people estimate that the average citrus fruit picker makes yearly earnings of about \$1,300.

"He must buy his food from high priced credit stores, so he can buy food on credit during the off season. He wears second-hand clothing. His kids wear no shoes. His home has no modern plumbing facilities.

"He is required to be at the assembly point by 7:00 a.m. If an employer picks him up in a truck, he may be hauled sixty miles to a grove to pick fruit. When he gets there, it may be impossible to pick fruit for any one of a number of reasons. In such a case, he is hauled back to the assembly point and has not made a cent. Or he may be required to wait at the grove until noon before he can pick until the grove meets all specifications for picking, perhaps in the afternoon. In that case, he can pick in the afternoon for a few hours and is returned to the original assembly point at from five to seven p.m. His average workday, if he works, is four or five hours, but he is required to be on duty an average of ten hours."

When the citrus workers attempt to better their conditions through organization, the growers fight them bitterly. Nevertheless, the union reported in

March that it had 19 active locals with 5,000 members among Florida citrus workers, in processing plants as well as in the groves. Many small merchants side with the workers' efforts, knowing that higher wages for the people of Florida will mean better trade.

Conditions in Arizona were described by the CIO regional director. The growers are well organized and hold down wages for stoop labor. Migrants come in from Texas in the farm season, but they are not given any encouragement to take up permanent residence. They live at Surprise, Arizona—"a conglomeration of packing sheds, boxes and canvas and what have you."

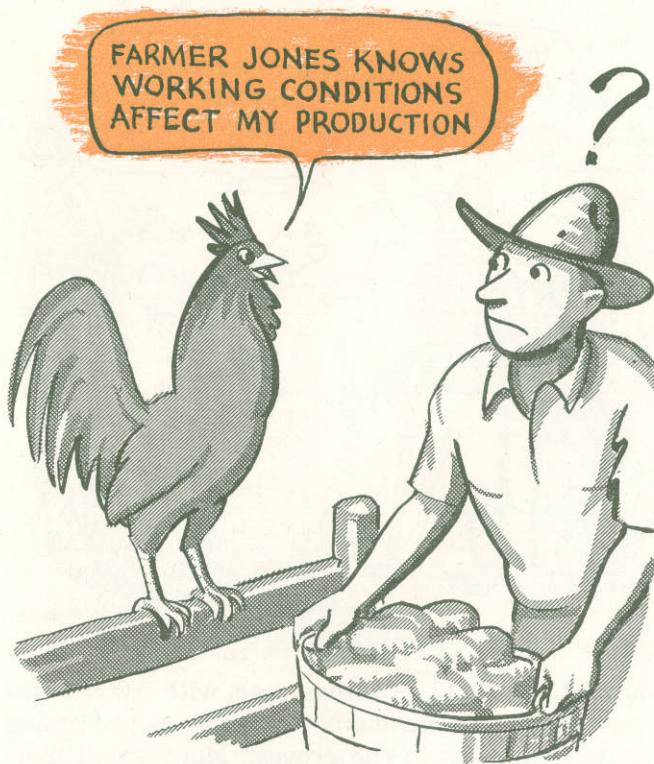
"Phoenix was called the Valley of the Sun. If you are a migratory worker and you get out of funds, it is the Valley of Death. There are some organizations that have helped out—the Salvation Army, the Catholic services, and the Jewish Community Service.

"Somebody stranded who has no food and money is out of luck. The officials of the state in their statements within the last year have said that the money they have saved on relief is tremendous.

"The old Spanish people who have never been able to read and write were getting old age pensions. Now they are out. They cannot draw pensions. Yet they have spent their lives there as Arizona domestic farm labor."

Contract Mexicans are covered under the workmen's compensation laws of Arizona, but American citizens doing identical work have no such protection.

When three Negro families arrived to pick cotton, their children were denied entry into the local school. The CIO fought the case, but the families



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had already moved elsewhere. When field workers are treated as inferior in such ways, no wonder that growers in Arizona and other states have trouble attracting and holding American workers on the farm.

### A Program for Action

These samples of the problems of farm workers suggest some of the solutions. Three major lines of attack are required:

1. To improve employment terms, living conditions and recruitment methods so that the jobs may be filled insofar as possible by American citizens.
2. To keep out illegal entrants.
3. To improve the programs for bringing in foreign contract labor.

Specific recommendations for action along these lines were made by the President's Commission on Migratory Labor. These provide a constructive basis for action by federal, state and local governments. Unfortunately, Congress and other government agencies have been slow to put the recommendations into effect.

However, in 1952, the Humphrey Subcommittee on Labor and Labor-Management Relations of the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare held extensive hearings looking towards recommendations for Senate legislation. These hearings, and the Committee's staff monographs and draft bills, constitute an additional important step towards constructive action.

The fight goes on, and must go on until the abuses are ended.

Industrial workers must be concerned about the conditions of the farm laborers for reasons of self-interest as well as common brotherhood. Sub-standard conditions among workers on large-scale farms drag down standards in surrounding areas and related industries, and these in turn affect more remote industries and cities. Progress for processing workers is more difficult if field workers are badly treated or unemployed. Disease spreads from rural slum to model home. The same forces that insist on bringing in cheap foreign labor for growers may some day force extension of the practice to industry. The law for importation of Mexicans theoretically makes them available for agricultural processing as well as farm operations. During World War II thousands were actually brought in for maintenance of way work for railroads.

Remember the figures, also, on the tens of thousands of "wetbacks" found working in industry and trade. Many Mexicans who are brought in as contract workers "skip" the farm to find jobs in industry, under-cutting American workers.

The migratory labor problem, furthermore, involves an issue that is basic to our democracy: Shall the pattern of our development be in the direction of raising levels of living for everyone engaged in essential occupations, with all our people participating equally in community facilities, with equal opportunity for education and advancement and with an equal voice in government? Or shall we permit the continuation and extension of a class system in agriculture, with large-scale operators exploiting workers at substandard conditions, too often combining racial intolerance and discrimination with a general disregard for the workers whom they bring in without any intention of integrating them into the community or permitting them to participate democratically in the community pattern?

This issue is basic for the cause of democracy abroad as well as at home, as clearly indicated by the CIO resolution quoted on page 31. Food produced by workers working under conditions of apparent, if not literal, peonage, will never nourish democracy.

An outline of the basic CIO proposals for improving the lot of the migrants is presented in the following pages to enlist the more active support of our affiliates and members.

One immediate step we favor is the establishment of a committee, representing the public and certain government agencies, that will have responsibility for continuous attention to the problems of migrants.

As CIO Executive Vice President Allan S. Haywood stated in testimony before the Humphrey Subcommittee:

"The CIO endorses in principle the pending proposal before the Committee for the establishment of a Federal Committee on Migratory Farm Labor as an important step to bring all aspects of the problem under effective government control. We agree with the conclusions of the President's Commission that such a Committee is necessary because farm labor is peripheral to many agencies without being the principal concern of any particular one. Such a proposal in no way need deprive any Department of its present functions, since the purpose of the Committee is not to supplant, but to coordinate and make more effective, existing activities. We believe that it would assist the Departments in resisting pressures exerted upon them by farm bloc Congressmen."

### Attracting Domestic Farm Workers

If more workers are needed for certain jobs, it is common sense to make those jobs attractive so that people will seek them.

To make farm labor attractive to Americans, at least three major requirements must be met:

**1. Workers must receive decent incomes.** Wage rates by the hour or piece must be sufficient to permit a good day's pay. Weekly guarantees in terms of hours or pay will be helpful where weather or crop conditions would otherwise seriously reduce weekly income. Such weekly guarantees have been included in agreements with Mexico and the Bahamas. They have been provided women workers in certain occupations under various state minimum wage laws. If American workers are to be recruited for essential temporary work on farms, similar guarantees of income are required.

One step for achieving adequate wage income would be the enactment of a minimum wage law for workers on large-scale farms, with a minimum hourly rate of 75c to start with, and higher rates to be determined by industry and area committees, plus certain guarantees as to weekly hours or income.



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Farm labor should also receive social insurance protection, as industrial workers do. If one is injured on the job, he should get workmen's compensation. If he suffers unemployment through no fault of his own, he should be able to draw jobless benefits. He should be able to pile up credits towards an adequate old age pension. He should be eligible for public assistance even though he has not resided in the state a long time. He should be assured of necessary medical care and health services.

The Mexican agreement of 1951 included certain social insurance provisions for imported contract workers in this country that, although not generous, nevertheless were in marked contrast to the complete failure to give domestic laborers similar protection. These provisions included workmen's compensation, burial expenses, and the cost of medical care.

**2. Living conditions must meet decent standards of housing and sanitation.** Certain standards are provided for foreign contract workers. But our own citizens do not receive similar protection, although conditions vary greatly from state to state. The shocking level that too often exists is revealed by a leaflet of the U. S. Farm Placement Service which urges as essential for a migrant family: "Two rooms—one for cooking and one as a family bedroom and living room."

**3. The community and the employer must treat the farm workers as people entitled to respect, in accordance with basic democratic principles.** They



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must have access to recreational and social activities. Discrimination that excludes workers' children from schools or denies the workers entry into stores and movies is inconsistent with this principle.

Among the basic rights recognized must be that of bargaining collectively through unions to remove grievances and improve conditions. This need was emphasized by the President's Commission on Migratory Labor, which stated:

"The Commission is convinced that balanced organization and effective collective bargaining would be of great assistance not only to farm workers, who would thereby be given a voice in determining wages and conditions of employment, but it would contribute also to more orderly management of labor. In the long run, self-organization is the method by which agricultural workers can best improve their working condition. For this reason, farm workers should not be denied the protection and facilities of the Labor-Management Relations Act."

These three requirements, which are basic to labor's approach, unfortunately are directly opposite to ideas common among certain growers. Too many of them would far rather not make jobs attractive to Americans in this manner, so long as they can turn to cheap labor from neighboring countries. In industry, many employers have learned that it is wise to provide good conditions and accept unions. Some growers have learned these lessons, but too often the spokesmen for family farmers have opposed coverage of their workers under labor and social legislation. The National Farmers Union is a notable exception and supports their protection under minimum wage legislation,

social insurance, and the National Labor Relations Board.

It cannot be repeated too often that the primary problem of securing an adequate domestic labor supply is not that of recruiting, but that of offering decent employment, living, and community conditions.

With high levels of employment in the country as a whole, the necessity of attracting and holding workers would have brought far greater improvement in farm labor conditions if growers had not been able to turn to cheap contract workers in the last decade.

The importation program

has interfered with the operation of normal competitive factors such as have resulted in improvements for many other types of workers.

Many growers still refuse to offer anything but substandard conditions because they do not need to make a genuine effort to attract Americans—they can fall back on workers from abroad. This same alternative has too often helped them to resist organization efforts among domestic workers, as illustrated by the Florida citrus situation already described. Proper operation of the programs for bringing in Mexicans or West Indians is therefore crucial to securing improvements for Americans.

The CIO is carrying on the fight for better legislation in the various states and in Congress. We are attempting to organize farm workers where the situation seems favorable, so that direct negotiation can achieve a better bargain with employers. We intend to continue such efforts.

We are seeking also to secure better administration of existing laws. Even with present legislation and inadequate funds, government agencies could do far more to help American farm workers, especially by keeping their conditions from being dragged down by contract labor from abroad. Unfortunately, the political pressures for importation of cheap workers are very great on local, state, and federal agencies alike.

The program of the U. S. Department of Labor is carried on largely through the state employment security agencies which in too many instances are far closer to the growers than to American workers. The states are constantly threatening to reduce the authority of the Department of Labor if

## Migrant Workers from Outside the Continental United States

(From CIO Resolution on Foreign Policy, November, 1951)

The Congress of Industrial Organizations is deeply concerned with the working and living conditions of migrant workers. Workers from Puerto Rico, Mexico and Caribbean nations working in the United States are particularly subject to exploitation and discrimination in ways destructive of our program of international friendship.

Hundreds of thousands of Mexicans have been encouraged to steal across the border and have found employment in industry as well as agriculture. Such illegal entrants are easy victims of exploitation, and their presence has dragged down wage scales throughout the Southwest. . . .

The Farm Placement Service of the U. S. Department of Labor was severely criticized by the President's Commission on Migratory Labor for not consulting with labor, as it does with growers, and for permitting American standards to be adversely affected. Mexicans are still being brought in without proper procedures for proving that domestic workers cannot be found if proper conditions are offered. Methods for determining appropriate wages are inadequate, and rates as low as 50¢ an hour have been authorized.

More blame attaches to Congress than to the Department of Labor, its Bureau of Employment Security and the Farm Placement Service. Although these agencies should be less subservient to the large growers and to farm bloc Senators and Representatives, Congress itself betrayed the American farm workers in the execution of the 1951 U. S.-Mexican farm labor agreement without enabling legislation for an adequate program for full utilization of U. S. farm workers. The House and Senate Labor Committees were frozen out by the efforts of powerful Senators and Congressmen and jurisdiction given to the Agricultural Committees. We call upon

Congress to start obeying its own laws for the conduct of its business in the field of migrant labor by assigning bills affecting farm workers to the Labor Committees clothed by law with exclusive jurisdiction over such legislation.

The CIO urges President Truman and Congress to put into effect the major recommendations of the President's Commission on Migratory Labor, including a minimum wage for agriculture and a constructive program for recruiting domestic workers, including Puerto Ricans, under decent conditions of employment and living. . . .

We urge the U. S. Department of Labor, in administering the Farm Placement Service and the Mexican contract labor agreement, to carry out more effectively its solemn responsibility to protect American standards of living and to prevent exploitation of citizens of friendly nations. Where Mexicans or other foreign workers are admitted, they should have decent conditions, the right to join U. S. unions, and the full protection of our social legislation. We oppose the importation of foreign workers for any type of processing operation.

As part of the development of a constructive program for supplying agricultural labor, the U. S. Department of Labor should cease to permit the Farm Placement Service to give growers overwhelming consideration in its operations. The representatives of organized labor should be given a voice on general advisory committees and on all bodies dealing with the need for bringing in foreign workers and the conditions under which they are admitted.

This Convention calls to the attention of our affiliates the importance of renewing their efforts to organize workers engaged in the processing or the growing of farm products. We favor continued close contact between the CIO and the free labor movements of Mexico and other nations of the western hemisphere for mutual consultation on the problem of migrant labor from those countries.

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it uses what powers it has been given to insist on proper action by the state agencies.

In April, 1952, a Labor Advisory Committee to the Farm Placement Service of the Labor Department was finally appointed, paralleling a growers' "Special Farm Labor Committee" that had been functioning for some years.

The Labor Advisory Committee made thirteen separate recommendations on April 1 for improved administration under existing laws. The Department was urged to place major emphasis on utilizing domestic workers including Puerto Ricans and Indians. Specific suggestions for the domestic program were:

The formation of advisory committees composed of labor and employers to work with the state farm placement services.

Establishment of recruitment centers in areas where there is underemployment in agriculture, and the development of a system of transportation to and from seasonal jobs in agriculture.

A practical program of securing the cooperation of organized labor, as well as other organizations, to assist in developing a local labor supply.

The extension of day-haul programs, and the interchange of labor between various states and regions.

In emphasizing the possibility of recruiting many more domestic workers, we are not ignoring the ability of employers to provide decent conditions. As John Baker of the National Farmers Union summed up this problem,

"Some may tell you that providing decent standards for farm workers will make factory-farm operation an unprofitable enterprise. If that is true, where do such low standards leave the 98½ percent of the rest of the farmers who do most of their own work? If existing prices of farm products are not high enough to return decent wages and living and working conditions for those who produce them, then we should arrange to have more adequate returns."

The tremendous improvements in wages and other conditions brought by the CIO to fruit and vegetable shed workers in California illustrates how unionism combined with legislation can transform substandard situations and provide an adequate labor supply. Six to seven thousand work-

ers are already enrolled in the United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Workers' Local Industrial Union Number 78, affiliated with the CIO, which has jurisdiction over packing and processing of fruits and vegetables in California and Arizona. Signed contracts have been obtained with many shippers, providing wage increases, grievance machinery, and a union shop (except in Arizona, where the union shop is outlawed).

### Curbing Illegal Entrants

On President Truman's insistence, certain improvements looking towards stopping the inflow of "wetbacks" were enacted in March, 1952. But the new law did not go far enough, and the House of Representatives slashed the funds needed to provide enough personnel to the Immigration Service so that it could do a better job of patrolling the border and arresting and deporting illegal entrants. The Labor Advisory Committee concluded:

"We are disappointed that the Congress did not see fit to adopt, in recent legislation amending the Immigration laws, a section making the knowing employment of illegal aliens subject to a substantial penalty. While Public Law 283 to some extent strengthens the Immigration laws by providing penalties for persons transporting, harboring or concealing illegal aliens, this still is not adequate to stop entry of illegal aliens. The passage of improvements in the Immigration laws becomes a public fraud when the Congress fails to appropriate the funds to carry out the intention of the law."

The President's Commission on Migratory Labor suggested other essential steps, some of which involve action by the Mexican government.

### Improving Programs for Contract Workers From Abroad

We do not oppose bringing in workers from Mexico or the British West Indies under contract if it is clearly shown that such workers are needed to produce or harvest essential crops and if proper employment conditions are provided both domestic workers and the people from other countries. But methods of determining labor requirements have been entirely inadequate and employment conditions have been far from proper.

The U. S. Department of Labor has been considering improvements in procedures for the determination of both need and prevailing wages. The Labor Advisory Committee's April recommendations included the following points:

Foreign workers should be imported only after negotiation of an agreement between the United States and the country concerned. The agreement should prescribe wages, working and living conditions, and guarantee the right of workers to be represented by genuine labor unions.

A specific minimum wage of not less than 75¢ an hour should be included in the Mexican agreement, with higher rates where prevailing wages are higher.

Public hearings should be held for each major agricultural area or crop to determine the availability of domestic workers and the prevailing wages that should be paid imported workers. Prevailing wage determination should be made through a system of agricultural wage boards or industry committees made up of representatives of employers, workers and the public. "We do not believe that any system of determining prevailing wages can be effective without the representation of all parties to the wage bargain."

Like the President's Commission on Migratory Labor, union men are very critical of past methods used to decide on the "prevailing wages" to be paid imported contract nationals. The Commission said:

"The point we do wish to emphasize is that the 'prevailing wage,' as currently in vogue in seasonal and migratory farm employment, is in some respects worse than meaningless. The recruitment of the labor supply prior to the opening of seasonal work obviously requires some sort of a wage quotation. When this wage quotation is set by agreement among farm employers alone and with little or no regard to whether it is a sufficient wage to attract workers, it cannot very well serve as the price to equate the supply of and demand for labor."

Public Law 78 states:

"No workers recruited [from Mexico] shall be available for employment in any area unless the Secretary of Labor has determined and certified that . . . the employment of such workers will not adversely affect the wages and working conditions of domestic agricultural workers similarly employed."

The Secretary of Labor thus has a grave responsibility, for which far better procedures are required than have been utilized in the past.

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### DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

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