

The American Child

Published by the NATIONAL CHILD LABOR COMMITTEE, NEW YORK CITY

GERTRUDE FOLKS ZIMAND, General Secretary

FLORENCE TAYLOR, Editor

LOUISE D. STETTER, Assistant Editor

Vol. XXXII

JANUARY, 1950

No. 1

THE PEOPLE WHO HARVEST OUR CROPS *Grapes of Wrath* — 1949-50

RECENT reports that several babies of migrant farm workers have died of malnutrition in one of California's fertile agricultural valleys have again focused the spotlight on the miseries of migrant life.

There seemed to be some doubt for a time as to whether the right word was malnutrition or starvation but investigations on the spot indicate malnutrition, which is by no means rare among migrant children. It would be hard to find a better recipe for malnutrition than a mixture compounded of ignorance of food values, high food prices in migrant camp stores, miserable cooking facilities in migrant shacks, and irregular income resulting from irregular work.

Investigations made since the death of the babies reveal a dismal winter in prospect for the 110,000 migrant workers in San Joaquin Valley where the babies died. *The Fresno Bee* assigned a staff writer, James McClatchy, to make an objective investigation of farm labor conditions in the Valley and his series of articles, with photographs, were published in *The Bee*, December 1-7, 1949. His first article led off with the following statement:

Hunger, sickness and misery as intense as that reflected in the novel, *Grapes of Wrath*, are expected among some of the migrant labor settlements of the San Joaquin Valley this winter.

Although every January brings suffering to the laborers and their families, it is feared this winter in some places will be as tough as the worst months of 1932, 1933 and 1934.

Predictions of unemployment in January go as high as 40,000 out of the estimated 110,000 farm laborers in the Valley.

Why — in an era of high employment and high farm prices in contrast to conditions in the 1930's?

The explanation in this particular area seems to be that cotton picking machines are reducing the amount of hand labor needed, that an improved cotton strain has shortened the time in which the cotton matures, and that the result is a longer gap and more unemployed workers between the end of the cotton season and the beginning of the fruit and vegetable season in April or May. Mr. McClatchy states:

There is no one in any organization connected in any way with the farm labor employment situation who does not agree this winter will be a black one. All predict most of the farm workers who stay here after the cotton picking ends are going to be hungry, cold or sick, or all three.

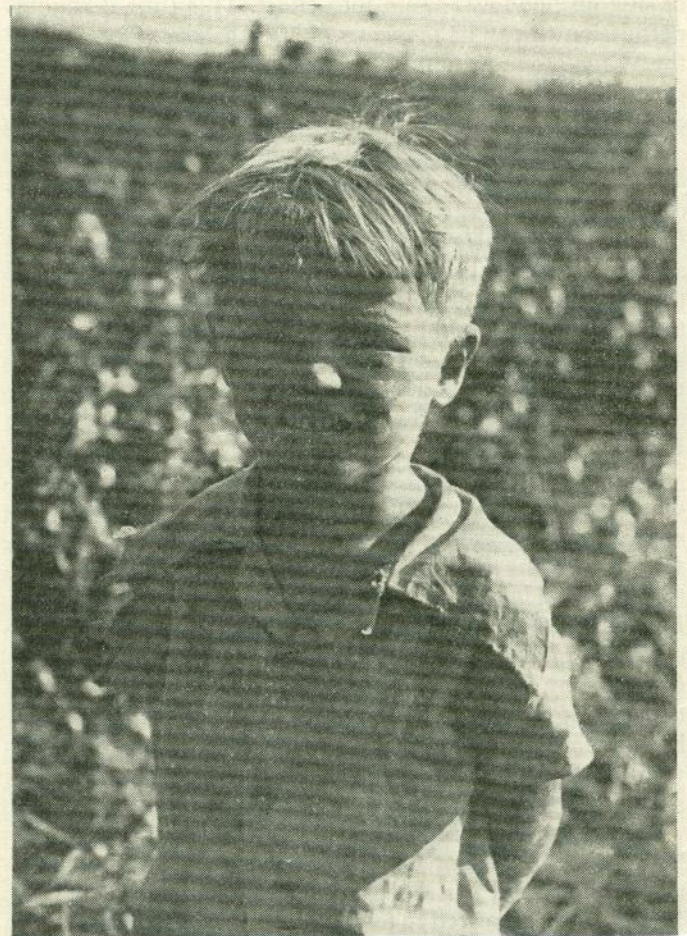
The recent malnutrition deaths of babies . . . will be repeated up and down the Valley.

Mr. McClatchy had a good look at how farm laborers live in this Valley where fortunes have been made by large growers. His descriptions and the photographs show little

change in housing or sanitation since the days of the Joads. Not all of the workers are out-of-State migrants. According to estimates (nobody has exact figures), one-third of the 110,000 come from outside the State, one-third migrate up and down the Valley but do not leave it, and the remainder are permanent residents who travel short distances to their field jobs.

The thousands who are not permanent residents live either in tents or shacks in labor camps, their surroundings contaminated by dirty ditch water, dirty outhouses and overflowing garbage cans, or in settlements they have established on river banks, under bridges and trestles and along

(Continued on page 3)



Resource ID 8070

The People Who Harvest Our Crops, *Grapes of Wrath* 1949 - 50

off the dust from old records to demonstrate from official reports, filed with the Federal Communications Commission by Western Union, that, contrary to similar dire prophecies of the past, job opportunities for messenger boys had not declined but had actually increased for several years after the last application was denied in 1944. "In the light of that record," Mr. Markoff observed, "what reliance can be placed on Western Union's claim now that they will curtail 854 jobs? Messages have to be delivered and substitutes for messengers, such as telephone operators, have to be paid more than 75¢ an hour."

In determining whether or not employment opportunities would be curtailed if messengers were required to be paid 75¢ an hour, Mr. Markoff suggested that a broad interpretation of the words "employment opportunities" is needed. "What Western Union is doing in effect," he pointed out, "is to ask its entire force of 8,139 foot and bicycle messengers to take a 10¢ an hour wage cut in order to preserve the job opportunities of one-tenth of the group—in other words to dig down into their own jeans and pay through their lower earnings the wages of hundreds of other messengers so that Western Union can benefit from their work. The Administrator must not permit this to happen. The 'employment opportunities' that the Act speaks of are more than just jobs—they are jobs for wages—and if the Administrator granted Western Union the exemption it seeks, the job opportunities of the entire force of 8,139 messengers would be curtailed to the extent of their decrease in wages."

From all the facts, it appears that the third application by Western Union has no more merit than the other two had. Mr. William McComb, the present Administrator of the Wage-Hour Division of the U. S. Department of Labor, should do precisely what his predecessors did in 1938 and 1944—deny the application forthwith

THE PEOPLE WHO HARVEST OUR CROPS

(Continued from page 1)

side highways where conditions are even worse. To quote Mr. McClatchy again:

The problem of what to do about the living conditions of the thousands of farm workers who harvest the crops of the San Joaquin Valley each year is not much nearer a solution today than it was 15 years ago.

Then the attention of the Nation was drawn to the migrant labor camps of the Valley where poverty, ignorance, sickness and despair existed to a degree which few people could believe. Tobacco Road had moved to California.

Since then the living conditions in some camps have improved, but the changes are spotty. However, some growers, hiring farmers, public officials and others are realizing something must be done.

What should be done and what can be done to improve the shocking conditions under which these people who harvest the crops live and work? Answers to some obvious questions are:

Yes, California has sections in the State Labor Code governing labor camps — 25 of them. Some of these sections specify that "all toilet facilities shall be maintained in a clean and sanitary condition at all times; all garbage cans shall have covers and be emptied daily; pure drinking water shall be provided; clean and well drained camp grounds shall be provided, and so forth."

No, these regulations are not enforced. "Most camps vio-

late some provisions and the worst camps probably violate all 25," Mr. McClatchy reported.

Yes, there are too few inspectors to cover the camps and they are charged with inspection of many other places besides labor camps.

No, there have been no crackdowns to get compliance. "There has been tremendous resistance from some camp operators to interference," says Mr. McClatchy. "There were three prosecutions of operators of migrant camps for health violations last year in Fresno County and two resulted in convictions." Inspections are not made of the settlements which are worse than the camps because "threats of punishment would only force campers to move and there is no place for them to go except to another river bank or shacktown."

Yes, more laws are needed as well as more inspectors and more prosecutions. Nobody has to get a permit to build a camp which may house 1,000 or more persons; no plans for drainage, sewage disposal or anything else needs to be approved before they are occupied; no public agency has to be notified when a camp is built to insure that all health, sanitation and housing laws have been complied with; nobody knows anything about them "until conditions get so bad somebody files a complaint," as an inspector for the State Division of Housing said.

No, the Federal Government does nothing for farm laborers. Farm laborers are excluded from social security and from minimum wage legislation. The few Federal labor camps established after the exposures of the 1930's, and for some of the foreign labor brought in during the War, are scheduled for final liquidation on July 1, 1950. There is little provision for orderly recruitment of this interstate labor group, nothing to prevent labor contractors from recruiting an over-supply of workers, or to give workers systematic help in finding out when and where they will be needed. Problems in San Joaquin Valley have been aggravated by too many workers for the amount of work.

No, the State of California does nothing for migrant workers who are stranded without work, funds or food. The problem is left to the counties where they are stranded — and what can a single county do, no matter how hard it tries, if it has from 4,000 to 15,000 jobless farm workers on its hands for three or four months as is estimated for Fresno County this year?

Yes, the children suffer most for, in addition to experiencing nothing but the lowest and most degrading form of living, they have little opportunity for the education that would break the vicious circle of migrant life. County school, welfare and public health agencies, no matter how concerned or conscientious, cannot meet the large scale social problems which go hand in hand with large scale economic problems.

There is no local solution—it has to be state and national. The spotlight has been turned on California again and California is not enjoying it. But public opinion has to be aroused if there is ever to be a solution of the migrant farm labor problem — a problem which is not peculiar to California but is spread over no less than 40 states. Public indifference and apathy obtain no social security or minimum wage coverage for farm laborers, no integrated measures for orderly recruitment of them where they are needed in the numbers they are needed, no decent housing for them to live in while they harvest the crops we all depend on,

no education for their children, no anything else they are entitled to as human beings and essential workers.

The Fresno Bee is to be congratulated for going after the facts and for publishing Mr. McClatchy's articles with all their unsavory findings. Aroused public opinion and concerted action depend on such full exposures of the facts.

THE BIBLIOGRAPHY SHELF

CHILDREN ABSENT FROM SCHOOL. *Citizens' Committee on Children of New York City, Inc.* 116pp. Single copies \$1.00. Special price for quantity orders. Oct. 1949.

This thoroughgoing study of the attendance problem belongs in all schools which have high non-attendance rates—and there seem to be relatively few schools which are not in that category. The problem is perhaps more acute in a city the size of New York, where this study was made, and where volume alone (400,000 non-attendance referrals a year) slows down the process of sorting out the unlawful from the lawful absences, the serious from the not serious cases of absence. However, New York's volume results, to a great extent, from its failure to adopt a modern program to deal with the social, educational and economic causes of non-attendance instead of concentrating on the legal aspects. Some communities have made progress in this direction but the National Child Labor Committee's study of 1,360 drop-outs showed that lack of alertness to increasingly poor attendance records as a trouble sign was common to the five communities studied.

Unlawful absences were found to concentrate in the junior and senior high schools in New York City but the factors that cause unlawful absence are not known as no studies have been made to determine what they are. New

York is probably not unique in lacking this information as it is doubtful if many school systems have made studies of the characteristics of all of their absentees to find out, as this study suggests:

- the influence of the quality of the school program on unlawful absence;
- the relationship of school retardation to unlawful absence; also
- the relationship of the boredom of the very bright children to such absence;
- the effect of social and economic conditions on attendance rates;
- the extent to which ethnic differences represent the key variables in lawful and unlawful absence.

However, enough studies have been made of truancy and other forms of unlawful non-attendance to leave no doubt that such absence is likely to be a symptom of mild or severe disturbance and that the roots of serious unlawful absence "lie in the school, in the child's home or in the child himself." School services should be geared to getting at the root of the trouble — and before it becomes acute — since compelling disturbed children to attend school solves no problems.

A broad well-integrated school program for dealing with adjustment problems, this study points out, should have its foundation in the classroom. Good teachers, *trained to detect signs of trouble*, can do more than anybody else to prevent maladjustment by spotting symptoms of distress at an early stage and seeing to it that the child receives help. To do this a full school record on the child's development, background and family must be available to the teacher and there must be specialists on whom she can call for advice when evidence of distress appears, such as sudden change in behavior, a nervous habit, inability to learn or unexplained absence. These would include school social and clinical services and referrals to outside agencies when home, emotional or other problems are too complex for school adjustment.

Case material in this study, obtained by making home visits with an attendance officer and attending hearings on cases referred to a division superior, reveals clearly, not only the complexity of home and emotional problems which are at the root of many non-attendance cases, but also the difficulty of doing constructive work at a late stage. Cases snowball and problems snowball when early trouble signs are ignored. The result of the snowballing process, by the time the truancy stage is reached, is either a case load far in excess of the referral sources available in most communities or refusal by children or parents to cooperate in voluntary referrals.

Education is preparation for life. Children who are forced out of school, first as truants, then as school leavers, by the failure of the school to know them, understand them, and help them with their problems, are more likely to become liabilities than assets to society. On the other hand, some of the children who have the spunk to leave because they feel they aren't being prepared for life, probably come out better than many who sit it out quietly and take their unresolved problems with them when they go. That is why, as this report makes abundantly clear, the schools need to understand *all* their children—and from the early grades—so that special attention and help can be given, of the right kind, in the right amount, at the right time.

When somebody says to you

There is no more child labor

Do you say

Yes, thank goodness, that's all over

Or do you say

No—thousands of children still harvest our crops—and work in other jobs when they should be in school. The National Child Labor Committee is still needed and it needs contributions from you and me to do the job.

NATIONAL CHILD LABOR COMMITTEE
419 Fourth Avenue
New York 16, New York

I am glad to enclose \$..... to help you continue your work on behalf of American children.

Name.....

Address.....