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WHY ARE FARM LABORERS POOR?

More than 1000 laborers in the plantation country of the Mississippi Delta have refused to work any more for the going rate of three dollars a day. Organized into the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union (MFLU), they say they will return to work when cotton growers agree to pay them $1.25 an hour for an eight-hour day, time and a half for overtime, with sick pay, health and accident insurance, and equal employment practices in wages, hiring and working conditions. In short they want the minimum conditions which millions of American workers have enjoyed for decades.

Will the strikers win? They are fighting a powerful combination of enemies--the planter who has conspired for seventy years to prevent a black majority from being heard at the polling place, the industrialist whose machines threaten to make the people of the fields unnecessary to the cotton economy, the bankers and their loan sharks who milk even ambitious men's money by means of the "poor tax"--high interest charges, the textile manufacturer and the merchant who want their cotton as cheap as possible, a long succession of Presidents and Congresses who have engineered multi-billion dollar subsidies for these groups, and the millions of Americans who have allowed all this to happen.

Negroes in the Delta counties in which farm laborers have gone on strike (Bolivar, Issaquena, Panola, Sharkey, Sunflower and Washington) are a solid majority of the population (61%), and the overwhelming majority are very poor (88% of the families have incomes of less than $3000 a year). Nevertheless, since very few vote, the men who supposedly represent them in Congress (Senators James Eastland and John Stennis and Rep. Jamie Whitten) have over the years generally voted against legislation which would have helped the poor and black majority in the Delta.

Eastland, Stennis and Whitten, however, are not alone, for most of the nation has consistently, almost pointedly, deserted the farm workers.. The basic legislation affecting worker-employer relations in the United States has almost always left out the farm hand. He is not covered by minimum wage laws or the Taft-Hartley Act, which offers some protection workers trying to organize themselves.

Even when a majority in Congress finally voted this year to stop the bracero program which supplied cheap labor to Western planters, Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz backed down and permitted the program to continue in effect. Planters in the Mississippi Delta, of course, have their cheap labor close at hand, while the Great Society remains in the distance.

For decades federal farm policies, thanks to the disproportionate influence of the veteran Congressional scions of the Southern one-party system, have drained billions of dollars of the nation's resources in effect to protect large planters from change which might threaten their ruling position.

As machines, fertilizers and insect poisons have made it possible for planters, especially the largest ones, to raise more cotton than people can afford to buy, the federal government has bought up the "surplus" at a higher price than the famous "free-enterprise system" would have given them.

Presently the federal government buys cotton for about thirty cents a pound from producers, sells some to merchants, textile manufacturers and exporters for about twenty-four cents a pound (the world market price), and pays private operators to store the rest.

Although there are conflicting claims about the cost of producing a pound of cotton, studies referred to by Rep. Weltner on the House floor in 1963 conclude that costs range from 16 to 24 cents a pound, with the larger and more mechanized plantations producing more cheaply than smaller ones.

Weltner also pointed out that the present cotton subsidy greatly favors the largest producers with more than 1000 acres in cotton, such as Mississippi Senator James Eastland. The 322 farmers in his class received in 1961 an average of $100,000 in subsidy, while the small farmers with 10 acres or less (some 70% of all cotton farmers) received on the average $63 in that year. Senator Eastland's plantation, which like others in the Delta pays $3.00 a day for cotton pickers and choppers,received crop loans of $140,299.65 in 1961 and $393,514.79 in 1962. Figures for 1963 and 1964 were unavailable. The Andrews Brothers plantation in Washington County, where the present strike began, received crop loans of $102,152.90 in 1962, of which they paid back $54,268.62, and $25,369.44 in 1963, of which none was paid back. This means that they did not redeem any of the cotton which they put up as collateral for the loan of that year, and the government was stuck with the cotton. Other plantations,ssome of whose workers have gone on strike, are Dan Seligman, who received crop loans of $349,631.44 in 1960 and $116,887.63 in 1961; and the English-owned Delta Pine & Land Co., which recived loans of $1.2 million in 1960 and $900,000 in 1961.

The legislation responsible for these enormous payments has yet to be renewed for next year, due to bitter disagreement among cotton growers, handlers, merchants, textile manufacturers, shippers and the Johnson Administration. Spokesmen for the ~~growers~~ large growers, who seem to dominate over the more numerous small growers, are against proposed legislation (sponsored by Georgia's Senator Talmadge) which would encourage large farmers to reduce the number of acres they plant to cotton, while still making correspondingly smaller price support payments. But manufacturers, exporters and merchants want prices low enough to compete with foreign cotton.

The Administration seems to want to satisfy everybody (except the workers, it seems), while limiting the cost of whole program. In 1961 the cotton subsidy program alone cost $608 million, and critics have complained of rising expenses since. But planter James Eastland has bitterly opposed controls on acreage, accusing supporters ofthe program of "trying to make the farmer the whipping boy for the present cotton program."

While hundreds of farm laborers give up their income for an indefinite time to win a modest income, storage bins from Louisiana to North Dakota bulge with almost Five billion dollars worth of "surplus" cotton, rice, wheat, and corn and other commodities, which draw a million dollars a day in storage and handling fees.

In comparison with their subsidies of famrers, the PRESIDEnt and members of Congress have done very little to help ~~the~~ victims of the plantations. The food-stamp plan, for example, allows poor residents of counties which have approved the program (as of October 1964 none in Mississippi had done so) to buy stamps, at the rate of seventy cents on the dollar, to be redeemed for food at a local grocery store, which then received the full dollar from the federal government.

As for the programs operating in Mississippi, civil rights workers have heard many complaints from residents that, for example, elderly people who register to vote find their social security checks cut off.

There is a chance that if Mississippi Freedom Labor union members increase their numbers and generate enough nationwide support, Congress may be able to help them. The labor movement has managed to gather support for amendments to the Taft-Hartley Act.and the Fair LABOR Standards Act, including proposals to extend coverage to farm laborers. Public pressure on the Senate hearings in late June on these amendments could curb Senator Eastland and his friends, the planters.of the Mississippi Delta. And the Freedom Democratic Party's challenge of the five Mississippi Congressmen if successful in July could loosen the reactionary logjam which blocks help for the dispossessed farm laborer of America, the Great Society.