

## MIGRANT FARM WORKERS PROJECT

### REPORT TO THE SNCC STAFF

Last summer, Steve Fraser, a full-time volunteer from New York with the Eastern Shore Project in Maryland, and I spent about six weeks in migrant labor camps in Dorchester and Caroline counties.

In retrospect, our activity was more investigative than anything else - we learned a lot.

We tried to organize a strike for higher wages which, also in retrospect, was futile. But talking about a strike enabled us to have discussions and meetings in 17 camps and to talk at length with about 200 persons, some individually, others in groups. Neither of us feel that we wasted our time or anybody else's.

What we learned, I think, more than anything else, is that the freedom movement is relevant and crucial to a labor movement among rural, southern farm laborers. They are ready to move if they are just shown how.

The farm laborer, as with other poor people, has a sophisticated and comprehensive understanding of his own condition and has many ideas of how to better it. Many of our discussions ended with our conviction that the only thing a farm labor organizer has to do is get people together to talk. Then, together they will act.

The two biggest factors which keep farm laborers from acting on their own are poverty and isolation. Their condition is almost completely similar to the majority of rural Negroes in the deep South. Poverty and isolation foster apathy and fear, which in turn increase their sense of alienation and extend the cycle of poverty.

At the end of our efforts in the Maryland camps, we wrote a report for SNCC on what we thought of the whole situation. Here is a section of that report:

"Here are some of the camps we've been into. We've been to each at least three times, talking with individuals or having a larger meeting, and to many, we've been five or six times.

Fanyard Road, North - A small camp, one crew. (Most are one crew.) Interesting because the wife of the crew leader is so strong in her defense of farm work, prevailing wages, piece work, the crew system, and really proud of herself for being a farm worker.

"Kennedy freed us all. I'se free to do what I wants."

Part of the reason for her loud defense may be understood by learning that she and her husband are planning to remain on the Eastern Shore, and will continue to work for the same farmer. He is going to let them live in a sizable house, rent free.

"Nobody pays rent in this camp. All they pays for is electricity for their televisions."

A group of shacks clustered in the shadows. The water comes from a pump emptying into a stagnant ditch. The water smells.

We have a difficult time talking with the crew because she keeps interrupting. Finally, I get her alone, and Steve talks with the crew. They have plenty of complaints and ideas.

Richardson Road Camp - If someone asks me about the camps, I'll say they're all bad, but this one's the best.

A fairly new shed with family units and a converted barn and a chicken house for single men. One pump for water, a good one. A new latrine.

Small, hand-lettered sign:

CREW LEADER - CHARLES SHARP  
I pay 25¢ for cucumbers and  
14¢ for tomatoes

This camp has a lot of single men, including two white men. (Altogether, in 17 camps, we encounter only five white men working in the crews.)

We have three good discussions in Charles Sharp's camp, with a lot of people talking up. The usual questions -- what if they kick us out? How will we get through a strike? What organization is backing you? How long will it last? When will it start?

One man insists they can't have a strike without being "legal," and without support. He is full of rhetoric and Red Rose, and may be a preacher. Phrases like "the nomenclature of a strike," which seem meaningless - but ideas about capitalism which are good.

"The only way for everyone to have work with good wages under capitalism is to have a war. And we're going to war in Viet Nam. And you and you (pointing at us), you'll be the first to go."

Shiloh - Owned by Warren McWilliams.

Shiloh Camp seems to be an old religious camp meeting ground, now fallen on harder times. It has a large shed with a stage where there may have been revivals.

With two crews and at least 150 people, there are only two water taps - for washing, cooking, and drinking.

McWilliams catches us in there one day and kicks us out. Periodically after that, state and county police cruise through.

Steve and I are each talking with a group of people when he drives in with two other guys in the car. This isn't like Mississippi in some ways, not frightening at all. More of an opportunity than anything else.

He gets out of the car and walks over to look at the "One Man, One Vote" poster tacked on a tree. Then he comes at us. People falling out of the houses to listen.

"What are you doing here?"

"We're talking about wages. Want to join us?"

"You're trash, troublemakers. Get out of here before I call the cops."

"We're not causing trouble. The trouble's already here."

(More people gathering.)

"Get out of here before I take my car and push you out."

"If you try to push my car, I will stand in front of the bumper and you will have to break my legs."

Pause.

McWilliams: "Hey Nickerson! Hey Bellamy!" (Crew leaders)  
"Get out here. I want to talk to you!"

To Nickerson: "Who are these people? Do you know what they're talking about?"

Nickerson: "No, I Don't."

McWilliams: "Did you ask them in here?"

Nickerson: "No."

McWilliams: "Did you ask them to leave?"

Nickerson: "N o."

McWilliams (to us): "I don't know what you're trying to do. If my crops aren't picked, they'll rot."

"I'd rather see crops rotting than people rotting."

"Get out."

"Well, we're waiting for a couple of guys who say they want to come with us to another camp to talk about a strike. We're waiting for them."

"I'm calling the cops."

While he's heading for the phone, we talk with the people, at least 60 by this time.

"You know and we know that the reason he's kicking us out of this camp is because he doesn't want to pay you higher wages. We're going now because we can't get arrested, we have too much work to do. But we'll be back."

All the camps are pretty much the same. Hot, dusty. Trash everywhere. Garbage overflowing. Friday nights, people waiting to



get paid off. Food smells. Human smells. Upended baskets for sitting; Groups of people talking. People dancing. Young guys playing catch or shooting baskets or heading for town. Kids dragging tin cans on wires. Voices rising and falling. Laughter. Shouts. Trucks in from the fields with people climbing down slowly. Old people. Men and women.

Preston, Friendship, Glime Brother's, Spencer Jones', Buck Andrews', East New Market, John Hurst's..... We go into seventeen in all.

People who can't buy in a store what they pick in a field.

Camp near Hurlock where people live in rotting chicken houses. Farmer must have built a new place for his chickens. Lots of money in raising chickens.

- - - - -

Since leaving Maryland, I've spent about ten days travelling around the State of Florida, looking things over. Conditions in Florida are responsible for conditions all up and down the East Coast. Florida is the place where we must begin organizing.

Poverty in the midst of plenty.

How much longer will this problem confront and confound us? Even on SNCC wages, I am continually and painfully conscious of my own affluence. In addition to my background, education, and environment, much of my affluence is based on a simple fact - my "subsistence" income is still higher than the majority of poor people in this country.

My "subsistence" income allows me to buy the food I need for myself and my wife. It allows me to live in a decent place with heat and hot water and a gas stove and an inebox, with regular trash and garbage collection. My child will be born in a hospital and delivered by a doctor. If he/she (?) needs medicine, he/she will get medicine. We have a telephone. We have a car which we can afford to run when we need to. I write letters to relatives and friends because I know where they are living. I have been asked to do jury duty in Maryland where I am a registered voter. I can talk with my Congressman. I have a Congressman. I do not have to steal. I do not have to rob. I do not have to beg. I am not stricken with poverty.

I am not poor.

Approximately 250,000 people who work as migrant and seasonal farm workers on America's East Coast, from Florida to Maine, have a yearly income of \$500 - 800.

Afro-Americans, Spanish speaking Puerto Ricans and Cubans, and Anglo-Saxons make up the East Coast migrant stream, and live and work in the "Blue Sky Sweatshop."

The time has come for SNCC to turn its mental, physical, and spiritual energies toward the problem of organizing these people so



that the migrant stream will join the mainstream of America, and IN DOING SO, will begin to effect the necessary changes our society will have to make in order to include them on the basis of equality.

Farm workers have been excluded from our society simply because they are not paid enough to live, only to survive. The conditions SNCC confronts every day in the deep South extend their influence wherever migrant farm workers are located - as they pick tomatoes and cucumbers in Maryland, as they harvest apples and potatoes in New York or oranges and grapefruit in Florida, as they beg for public assistance in Virginia, as they are jailed for vagrancy in North Carolina, as they die for lack of medical care in New Jersey, or are killed in a collision in Georgia, as they are born in the back of a schoolbus travelling through South Carolina. North and South, North and South.

Trade unions have consistently shied away from any attempts to organize farm labor. Except for the IWW's attempt to organize West Coast "harvest stiff's," there have been few regular union organizers in America's fields and orchards, shantytowns and labor camps. Unions cite many reasons for their reluctance, but I think unions, for the most part, are like the rest of America. They just don't care.

"We've got what we want and the rest of the world can go to Hell."

But a strike by agricultural workers in Kern County, Calif., is giving hope to those who are more than just "concerned" with poverty stricken farm laborers, those who are willing to work to begin to change things as they are.

HUELGA! means STRIKE! in Spanish, and that's what 3,500 grapepickers and their allies are shouting. They are shouting it loud enough to be heard in Sacramento and San Francisco, in Washington and on Wall Street. And, more important, they are shouting it loud enough so that they can hear it themselves.

They know what they are doing.

They are shouting "down with the Blue Sky Sweatshop!" Down with shacks and labor camps. Down with agribusiness. We want decent wages and a decent life. We want them NOW!

Here is an excerpt from the National Guardian:

The strikers are getting substantial help from many organizations including the ILWU, Teamsters, the LA County Federation of Labor and other SFL-CIO unions, SNCC, Progressive Labor, CORE, the Du Bois Clubs, and some Young Democrats and CDC clubs.

In addition, about 25 clergymen from the San Francisco area have been making trips to the (Delano) area to aid the strikers. Four clergymen were arrested on charges of unlawful assembly after they refused to stop urging the field workers to join the strike. One minister had been reciting Jack London's definition of a scab:

".....a two-legged animal with a corkscrew soul, a waterlogged brain, a combination backbone of jelly and glue, ...a traitor to his God, his country, his wife, his children, and his class."

I believe the grape pickers are going to win their strike.

Their victory will signal the beginning of farm labor unionism all up and down the West Coast, from the lettuce fields of the Imperial Valley to the apple orchards of Washington State. And if other people learn about their victory, it will signal the end of economic and political exploitation of farm workers all across the country.

But how will a farm worker in Belle Glade, Florida hear about the grape-pickers' victory in California? Will he read about it in the Belle Glade Herald? Will Glades growers put out a leaflet explaining the strike and how the strike will benefit him?

I doubt it.

Well, then, who is going to tell them? Who is capable of telling them? Who wants to tell them? Florida's Governor Burns? The U.S. Department of Labor? The directors of the U.S. Sugar Corporation? The NAACP? I doubt it.

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee? Why not?

WHY NOT SNCC?

Hasn't SNCC discovered by now who really controls this country? Hasn't SNCC found out that the courthouses and city councils, the city cops and the county cops and the state cops, the state legislatures and the federal government, the politicians and the rednecks and the goons, do not control anything at all?

Haven't we found out they are controlled by the greatest aggregation of raw power this world has ever known, the American Corporate Empire? Haven't we discovered that decisions are made not by politicians in smoke-filled rooms, but by company directors in corporate suites?

It is not Washington but Wall Street which runs poor people's lives. And if we haven't discovered this yet, what have we been doing?

A farm worker's organization will begin to combat the corporate power structure known as Agribusiness from the place where it counts, from the bottom up. Assisted by civil rights organizers and by militant and independent trade unions, the farm worker and his organization will be instrumental in not only changing the conditions under which he lives and works, but in any community in which he is present.

Like the Teamsters, for instance, and the MFDP, a farm labor union will have a strength and an influence all out of proportion to its actual size.

There are thousands and thousands of people who are not considered farm workers, but who are part of the farm labor force. These people are located up and down the East Coast, mostly in slums and ghettos of cities and large towns.

During the harvesting season, they work in the fields not because they want to but because they have to, in order to live.

There are thousands and thousands of people who work steadily for 80 cents or a dollar or a dollar twentyfive an hour. They want and need more money. But the rural, agricultural interests also control local and state politicians and keep wages low and unions out.

Poverty is a one-way street and the only way out is up. I believe that SNCC, with its experience and its resources and its spirit, is the only organization which is able and willing to begin to organize East Coast and southern farm labor. It will not ~~xxx~~ be an easy job. If we think we have met reprisals already, wait until we begin to organize around economic problems on a large scale.

An organization of American farm workers can be thought of as a wedge to thrust open the door to a better life for millions of people in the South, black and white, and in the North, black and white.

Unorganized labor is sixty percent of the American working people.

There is a lot of work to be done.

When are we going to get started?

Gren Whitman  
SNCC staff