

PROSPECTIVE PROJECT WITH MIGRANT WORKERS

Every year over two million migrant workers follow three streams, up the West Coast, up the East Coast, and up the middle western portion of the country, picking the nation's crops. Farm laborers---both those who remain in one area and those who travel as pickers---are the last large group of truly exploited American workers. Federal legislation does not cover their wages, unions are practically non-existent, and farm laborers are usually excluded from employment benefits such as unemployment compensation, medical insurance, retirement pensions, and a guaranteed number of working days.

Migrant workers suffer even more than most farm workers because of the circumstances under which they work. Most of them move like nomads from farm to farm, and many cover several states during a season. They live in state- or farmer-owned camps, in cars, trucks, buses, tents, and on the ground. Their children join in picking as early as possible because wages are so low that it is imperative that every hand be used in order to accumulate enough income to keep from starving; babies often go to the fields with their parents or stay in a car or truck during the hot picking hours---they are uncared for because no one can be spared from the field.

Last summer a migrant workers' project was begun on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Two SNCC workers began visiting camps in three counties, talking with workers, almost all of whom, in the East Coast stream, are southern Negroes. Although federal legislation has recently required that minimum health standards be maintained in the camps, violations abound. Decrepit, makeshift structures without windows, indoor toilets, or running water are the 'homes' of the migrant families. Camps and migrants are almost entirely isolated from the communities in which they exist, and in this sense they compose a 'subculture'---a group of people outside of the normal working of American society. They never remain long enough in one place to make acquaintances, participate in the political process, or benefit from public welfare programs; migrant children attend school irregularly, and they rarely return to the same school they last left. Migrants and migrant children have little chance of breaking out of the constrictions of their subculture because of inevitable limitations in their education, because their training consists solely of picking, and because of prejudices among stationary communities, where migrants are considered unreliable drifters.

At the root of this complex of problems is wages. Wages vary from state to state, far to farm, but they are uniformly low, and they are usually piece wages. When SNCC workers went into Maryland's Eastern Shore camps, pickers were earning \$1. to \$2. a day. They had not worked for several weeks because they had arrived before the crops were ripe; when a field of crops was ready, farmers flooded the field with workers so that his field got picked quickly, but none of the workers earned more than a few dollars.

Essential to understanding the migrant problem is the contract system under which they work. Representatives of the State of Maryland Office of Employment contact 'contractors' in Florida, arranging with them to have crews of pickers brought up for local farmers. The contractor, or crew leader, then recruits pickers and provides transportation for bringing them into Maryland. The worker never deals directly with the farmer, always through the contractor. The farmer may pay the contractor 30¢ a bushel for tomatoes, the contractor then passes on to the picker a portion of that price---maybe 25¢, maybe 20¢ or less. The contractor is responsible for almost every aspect of the workers' lives while they are part of his crew. A dishonest contractor may earn from \$10,000 to \$40,000 in a three month season by pocketing his workers' social security withholdings, taking a commission from the local grocery where he takes workers who have no cars, selling liquor at a high profit in the camps, and giving loans to destitute workers at high interest rates. A worker can not pick unless he is part of a crew, which means agreeing to the contractor's demands and accepting his terms. The contractor is the spokesman and the most powerful person in a camp. He controls the lives of the workers who depend on him for everything from the evening meal to a trip back to Florida.

SNCC workers found that migrants easily recognized the need to organize for better wages, but often the contractor was opposed to minimum wage demands since he profits by the piece-wage system. The farmer, of course, is adamantly opposed to raising wages. Although labor costs make up a very small percentage of the cost of producing crops, the farmer has a difficult time passing these costs on to the large corporations (part of the 'agribusiness' system) which process and market his crops.

What is the best approach to the migrant problem? It's difficult to say. Last summer SNCC workers attempted to organize a strike involving 15 camps in Maryland. If pickers had refused to pick a farmer's crop of tomatoes unless

he paid \$1.25 an hour, they probably would have gotten their demands since tomatoes must be picked as soon as they ripen and the farmer would not have had time to recruit scab labor. But getting into camps (farmers charged SNCC workers with trespassing), overcoming the influence of the crew leader, and persuading workers who were 1,000 miles away from home to risk their meager wages proved too difficult a task to be accomplished in the two months that migrants spent in Maryland before moving on to another set of crops. The federal government and other agencies have attempted to reach migrants through health legislation and poverty programs such as the project Headstart; the National Council of Churches has a migrant ministry which sends ministers into camps (sometimes to carry out the dead). But none of these programs attempts to solve the basic problem of wages and working conditions.

Right now one SNCC person is in Florida talking to migrants and the people who work with them, purposing to set up an expanded project with migrant workers in their home areas. A union of migrant workers, similar to the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union, is one possibility; a program to get jobs in their local communities for migrants could complement a union demanding minimum wages--- in most cases if farmers paid decent wages to have their crops picked, local people who are presently unemployed would do the picking, making migrant workers unnecessary.

The proposed migrant workers project relates directly to the strike of farm workers in Delano, California, who are asking for \$1.40 an hour plus 25¢ a box for the grapes they pick. Before the strike began, the growers were paying \$1.15 and \$1.10 plus 10¢ a box. The Bay Area Friends of SNCC Council reported from its last meeting:

officers from the Kern and Tulare Counties Sheriff's offices have been asking for identification from and taking pictures of strikers two and three times a day. The effect is to create an air of fear of arrest. As harrassment increases and the strike grows longer, tensions are on the increase, DAs in Kern and Tulare have been taking complaints on major items but they refuse to listen to complaints from farms workers when the complaint is one of being pushed by a rancher, threatened, etc. Try to get support for these demands from local organizations, by petition tables in your area, etc. Pickets are needed, especially during the week. If you go, bring a sleeping bag, a little bit of money. HAVE YOUR OWN BIL CONTACT HERE AT HOME in case there are arrests. Fires, letter, and petitions should be addressed to Governor Brown, Governor's Mansion, Sacramento, California. They should say: "We urge you to protest the intimidation and harrassment of striking farm workers in Delano by the Tulare and Kern County Sheriff's offices. We urge you to go to the scene of the strike and offer your office to mediate the conflict. We urge you to demand that local District Attorneys in Kern and Tulare Counties take complaints from strikers.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: Farm Workers Association, 102 Albany, Delano, California, phone 8661. Or SNCC, 1316 Masonic St., S.F., MA 6-4577.