

ORGANIZING MIGRANTS

by Gene Guerrero

Last April SSOC sponsored a "Students and Labor" Conference in North Carolina. The conference brought together students and forward-looking labor representatives to discuss the history and present state of the labor movement, how the labor movement will be working for change in the South, and roles students can play in labor organizing situations.

The general consensus of those attending the conference was that there should be some program which would enable students to work with labor organizers over the summer.

From this came a program in which SSOC recruited seven students to work in the preliminary stages of a drive, conducted by the Industrial Union Department (IUD) of the AFL-CIO, to organize migrant farm workers in Florida.

The Plight of Migrant Workers

Migrants are caught in a combination of very low pay, underemployment, and unemployment. In 1963 a migrant's average earnings were \$868. In 1961 total yearly earnings for migrant families where there were three or more workers averaged \$1,432.

Migrants are excluded from most of the nation's social legislation, and there are no federal guarantees of their right to collective bargaining.

Working Conditions

Florida's 100,000 or so migrants stay on the move constantly, working from one harvest to the next. From late spring until winter they are scattered through-out the eastern and northern states. During the winter months many move about within Florida.

Most work as part of a crew headed by a crew leader or contractor. Such crews range from 15 to 200 persons. The crew leader contracts with the farmer to provide pickers; recruits and transports them to the field; and sometimes supervises field work.

Normally the farmer pays a piece-rate to the crew leader, who then pays the pickers, taking a cut to cover his expenses and provide his profit. Some crew leaders exploit the workers more than the farmers do. Others treat their crews pretty fairly because they want dependable crews. Finally, there are crew leaders who take more than a self-interest in their crews and are willing to work for real change on the farm.

Beginnings of Unionization

The current Florida union drive began last spring with the formation of an independent association of crew leaders to work for high piece-rates during the summer season. The association turned to the labor movement for help, and the IUD began work around the middle of June.

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The students, for union representatives, and four farm workers worked throughout the summer traveling to migrant camps along the east coast and around the Great Lakes. They talked to workers about the union and got names and addresses of those interested to serve as a basis for meetings to be held in Florida this winter.

Almost all workers were found to be dissatisfied, angry, and very interested in building a union. In several places there was either talk of strikes or small independent strikes themselves.

Problems Confronting a Migrant Union

Building a union in Florida will not be easy because of the mobility of the workers. Apparently about the longest stable picking in one spot in Florida is about three months.

The first concentrated effort will be in South Dade County just below Miami. Here the crop is tomatoes and picking lasts from November to about January.

The mobility means that organizing will have to be done on a "crisis" basis with little time for slow building on an organization.

Contrast with Delano

This is in contrast to the Grape Strike led by Caesar Chavez in Delano, California where most workers lived year round. This meant more time for organizing and it also meant a different situation with the contractors.

In Delano it was possible to by-pass the contractors by working only with the pickers. In Florida most agree that the contractors should be included.

Current Activity

Right now, work is going on in the Tampa area and in South Florida. No one really knows how it will go. It is expected that resistance from the farmers will be strong and that there will be strikes.

SSOC will continue to work with the drive, helping students relate to the organizing. There are many ways Florida students can help presently, and later on, larger numbers may be called on to help in such things as boycotts. Students who are interested in helping should write to the SSOC office.

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