

THE CONDITION OF FARM WORKERS IN 1963

REPORT TO THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF NATIONAL SHARECROPPERS FUND
by Fay Bennett, Executive Secretary

"I want food for my kids, a house that doesn't have rats or bugs, that has windows in it, a house where the wind won't come through the wall and the rain won't come in like there was no roof at all. I want my kids to have an education. It's awfully hard to get a job without an education. We're good pickers. But I never in my whole life had more than forty dollars cash at one time. Right now I don't have a single penny." (An 18-year-old Florida mother of two, in Bagdikian: "The Invisible Americans," The Saturday Evening Post, December 21-28, 1963.)

"The problem of poverty in the United States is the problem of people who for reasons of location, education, health, environment in youth or mental deficiency, or who because of racial discrimination are not able to participate effectively — or at all — in the economic life of the Nation." (John Kenneth Galbraith, to the National Policy Commission on Pockets of Poverty, December 13, 1963.)

The Dilemma of Agriculture

American agriculture ought to be the greatest success story in the whole historical saga of the United States as a land of wealth and opportunity. In 1910, one American farm worker could produce enough food and fiber to meet the needs of seven people. The next half-century saw a continuous rise in the national standard of living, and by 1963, when the average American was consuming a great deal more, a single farm worker could produce enough for nearly 28 persons.

Yet when pockets of poverty in our affluent society are uncovered, the largest single area of distress turns out to be the farm economy. Nearly half of the nation's 3,300,000 farm families have incomes below \$3,000. Probably three-fourths of the 800,000 rural families whose chief income is from wages live below the poverty level.

As productivity per worker has soared, two things have happened: First, far fewer workers are needed. Second, the capitalization costs of these technical productive miracles are rising beyond the reach of many present and potential farm owners. Farm workers and working farmers alike are being displaced.

Declining Work Opportunities

The decline in the number of farms in this century has been continuous. In the decade 1950-60 alone, the number dropped from 5.4 million to 3.7 million. A third of those who made their living on the land had to turn elsewhere. The decline in the number of hired workers tells a different story. While their number dropped from 3.4 million in 1910 to 1.8 in 1962, their role in the total farm work force rose from 24.9 to 27.3 per cent, as independent farmers, tenants, and sharecroppers became hired workers on the large corporate farms that have developed.

The number of migrants is never known with exactness, but it is declining each year. The official 1962 estimate (probably much too low) was about 380,000, plus half that many foreign contract workers. How many children travel with the recognized workers is not known either, but it may be double their number. Somewhere between a million and a million and a half people still follow the crops each year.

Income

Hired farm laborers, excluding casual workers and those who worked less than 25 days, averaged 137 days of work. Their average annual cash wage from farm and nonfarm work together was only \$1,164 in 1962, the last year for which figures are available. If all farm wage workers are included, the average — even including nonfarm work — drops to \$896. Migrants averaged 116 days of work, and their average annual earnings from both farm and nonfarm work were \$1,123.

The one worker in eight who found full-time farm work (250 days or more) averaged \$2,094 in earnings, while the average annual income of the factory worker was \$5,021. While manufacturing wages have increased about 50 per cent and farm wage rates about 30 per cent in the last ten years, the cash increase for factory workers has been just over 75 cents an hour, that of farm workers just under 25 cents.

The farm worker's security is depressed further by the fact that he has no unemployment insurance and usually no accident or disability insurance, and he is often denied local social services because of insufficient residence time.

Foreign Contract Workers

One reason for the substandard wages of farm workers has been the availability of large numbers of foreign contract workers. While their employment has been declining steadily, they are not being replaced by the unemployed domestics; both are being displaced by machines.

In 1959, 455,420 foreign workers were admitted to the United States for temporary agricultural employment. By 1963 the number had declined to 209,200. Mexican workers, always the predominant group, accounted for 186,900 of the 1963 total. The remainder were 12,900 British West Indians, 8,500 Canadians, and 900 Japanese.

Despite a decline in the total number of Mexicans employed, their proportion of the total work force increased in those states where the majority of braceros are employed. In California, Mexicans accounted for 54 per cent of the work force at the 1962 peak, and 58 per cent at the 1963 peak. In Michigan the figure of 19 per cent in 1962 rose to 23 per cent in 1963. In Texas, the proportion at peak rose from 29 to 37 per cent.

In Florida the national downward trend has actually been reversed. In 1959, peak employment of British West Indians amounted to 9,800 workers; by 1963 it had risen to 13,000 (higher than the year's admissions since some workers remain and are recontracted). In order to prevent adverse effect upon domestic workers, the Secretary of Labor is authorized to set a wage rate to be paid by any employer requesting foreign workers. Under pressure from Florida's Senators and growers, in late 1963 the Labor Department suspended its earlier 95-cent-an-hour adverse effect wage rate order until April 15, 1964, when the season would be over; wages dropped to their former level of 60 to 70 cents an hour.

Recruitment of Domestic Farm Workers

In sharp contrast to the disastrous effects of foreign contract worker programs, the Puerto Rican Contract Farm Labor program offers an excellent example of efficient government recruitment — 13,116 in 1963 — coupled with specific wage and hour guarantees, workmen's compensation, and health insurance coverage. Since 1959, the guaranteed minimum wage has increased from 77 cents to \$1.00 an hour. In addition, these gains, backed by strict contract enforcement, have tended to improve the lot of mainland workers in the same areas.

Since hundreds of thousands of domestic workers are either unemployed or underemployed during much of the year, the growers' shrinking requirements for seasonal farm labor can easily be met. Yet the growers continued to press for an extension of Public Law 78, the Mexican contract import program. After a seesaw battle in the Congress, a one-year extension to December, 1964, was enacted. It seems likely that P.L. 78 will then at last terminate.

Grower response to this changed situation varies widely. The California Growers Farm Labor Committee has endorsed a massive domestic recruitment program and called upon the federal government for a nation-wide study of the number of workers needed and available and of the provisions which must be made for them, including wage rates, family housing, and school facilities. On the other hand, the United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association is categorically opposed to increased governmental responsibility for recruiting and placing farm workers. It has offered no realistic alternative.

There is no question but that the Farm Labor Service of the U. S. Department of Labor must assemble and disseminate additional facts concerning manpower needs and availability. It must also develop and maintain minimum standards for farm job placement, and additional training programs to upgrade farm skills. Grower associations will have to recognize their own responsibility for attracting the workers they need, as employers in other fields do. They must offer the incentive of a living wage, safe and sanitary working conditions, and decent housing for the migrant and his family. With such government and grower action there can be a widespread and successful domestic recruitment program.

Mechanization and Unemployment

The greatest decline in work opportunities last year was again in cotton. It is hard to distinguish between underemployment and unemployment, but the manpower of between one-quarter and one-half million persons is being replaced. In cotton, as in many other crops, this is due not only to the mechanization of harvesting, when the peak number of workers is used. It also includes use of chemicals and other agents (such as geese) to destroy weeds; this cuts off work in another part of the year.

The very size and shape of our fruits and vegetables is under continuous adaptation to meet the needs of the developing harvest machines. The list seems endless. Cranberries are now 95 per cent mechanized and so are snap beans in most states. Tomatoes and cucumbers are two or three years away from complete mechanization. An electric fan which blows grapefruit from trees was 99 per cent successful in tests; if leaf damage does not hurt next year's crop, grapefruit will be almost entirely mechanically picked within two years. In every part of the country and in nearly every crop, the advance is steady.

Each change eliminates some farm jobs. In 1962, 271,000 farm workers reported their major occupation as "unemployment." Of these, 89,000 found less than 25 days' work in agriculture. Many of these displaced workers are settling in sprawling rural fringes of the cities to seek nonfarm work, which becomes more scarce all the time. The number of unskilled jobs in the national economy is steadily declining, and farm workers have less of the educational qualifications necessary for acquiring new skills than any other group in the country. The median years of school completed by male farm workers 18 years and older was 7.7 in 1959, not significantly more than the 7.6 it had been twenty years before. Of adult migrants 25 years and older, 34 per cent have had less than five years' schooling, and their children are repeating the cycle.

Migrant Children

The most neglected children of America, it was reported at April, 1963, hearings on farm worker legislation, are those 50,000 migrant children who are six years old and less. Too young to work in the fields (although some are so employed at the age of 5 or 6), they are either left locked up in the shack that serves as home, perhaps in the care of a scarcely older child, or taken to the fields to sleep in trucks or play in the dust under a blazing sun.

At least another hundred thousand children of school age follow the crops with their parents. The Fair Labor Standards Act provides a 16-year minimum age for their employment in agriculture during school hours but no minimum age outside of school hours. Local crop and harvest "vacations" make it legal to bring them out of the classroom at peak seasons. Yet the Department of Labor, with limited inspection facilities, found 6,712 children illegally employed in the fields in 1962. Of those who were migrants, 72 per cent were below their normal school grade.

Housing and Health

Rural America has almost three times the proportion of dilapidated houses as urban America. Shelter for seasonal workers often does not approach the classification "houses." While 39 states have a peak employment of more than 1,000 seasonal farm workers, only 29 states have laws setting any standards for labor camps or similar farm housing. These range from limited to comprehensive coverage of sanitation, housing, location, and construction. The degree of inspection and enforcement also leaves much to be desired.

Testimony submitted in October, 1963, as the result of investigations by the Bureau of Labor Standards, indicated that many farm workers still must work and live in shocking conditions. In a midwestern state,

"The first camp visited consisted of a group of six city buses and a trailer located in the middle of a field in the hot sun with no shade. . . no water of any kind was available in the camp itself. Water was hauled in a large garbage-type can from a long distance; garbage and waste were collected in uncovered cans within 15 feet of the bus, which had no screens of any kind."

In a southwestern state,

"The camp was found to have no hot water for bathing, improper drainage, and fire hazards. In other camps the investigator found stagnant water around outside spigots, bath water seeping into a nearby well, screens in need of repair, and doors, floors, and seats from outside toilets missing."

The American Public Health Association has testified:

"Crowded, unsanitary, and insect- and rodent-infested housing accommodations increase the likelihood of enteric and communicable diseases. Crowded living quarters are conducive to the spread of tuberculosis, a disease found in inordinate amount among migrants and their families. Unscreened, filthy housing brings an automatic toll of debilitating and disabling illness. To this can be added the complication and attendant problems borne by lack of water and sanitation facilities; namely, acute dysentery and dehydration."

Not enough attention has yet been given to the dangers involved in the increasing use of chemicals for weed and crop-disease control. Reports to the California State Health Department indicate that between 1950 and 1961, 3,040 farm workers in that state were poisoned by pesticides and other farm chemicals; 22 workers and 63 children died from this cause.

Accidents

In the latest report of the National Safety Council, agriculture is still third, after mining and construction, in death rates per 100,000 workers in work-related accidents. The rate is 60 per 100,000, up from 54 in 1952. The actual figure for agriculture is higher: 3,100 deaths compared with 2,400 in construction and 700 in mining. Despite this record of mechanized agriculture as one of the most hazardous of occupations, only seven states require workmen's compensation for agricultural, as for industrial, workers.

Legislation

A primary reason for deplorable conditions among farm workers is their continued exclusion from the benefits of social legislation that most American workers enjoy. Some of them are now covered by Old Age Assistance and Survivors Insurance; and the Migrant Health Act is the beginning of the extension of health services to them.

Eleven farm labor bills were introduced in the first session of the 88th Congress. Six were passed by the Senate but not by the House. They dealt with assistance to states for education of migrant children; day-care services for migrant children; regulation of child labor outside of school hours; registration of crew leaders; aid to employers for construction of sanitary facilities; and establishment of a National Advisory Council on Migratory Labor. Neither House has completed action on three other bills: two would aid in farm labor housing; the third would provide a Voluntary Farm Employment Service for recruiting, training, placing, and transporting agricultural workers.

Two urgently needed measures, extending to farm workers the minimum wage and the right to collective bargaining, are buried in Congressional committees with no hearings scheduled.

Federal Farm Benefits

The claim that extension of protective labor legislation to cover farm workers would be ruinous to the nation's small farmers falls before an examination of who hires farm labor and who

benefits now under federal programs. In fact, only 5 per cent of the nation's farmers pay \$2,000 a year or more in farm wages. Small farmers have to compete in the market with the produce of the agricultural giants, and their incomes are depressed by the low wages of the corporation farms.

The agricultural giants benefit disproportionately from federal farm subsidies. Seventy per cent of all cotton farmers are small farmers whose allotment is 10 acres or less; the average subsidy they received in 1961 amounted to about \$60 for the year. At the same time, 322 farmers had allotments of 1,000 acres or more; their average subsidy was \$113,657 each. Two great corporations received more than \$2,000,000 each; and the 13 farms with allotments above 5,000 acres averaged \$649,753 in subsidy. Small farmers cannot afford to cut their acreage; large farmers profit exorbitantly by doing so.

Unionization

Despite the absence of coverage by the National Labor Relations Act and other national standards that would improve wages and working conditions of farm workers, the workers themselves have continued efforts to organize in order to better their conditions.

In California, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO, continues active with several locals organized. California workers are the worst affected by Mexican contract labor since by far the largest number are used there.

Last summer AWOC had labor disputes with eight farm labor contractors. While the disputes were going on, braceros were being assigned to all these contractors through the facilities of the state and federal employment services. (In other cases, however, the Department of Labor has cut off braceros in labor disputes.) One important and precedent-setting victory was an NLRB decision that an alfalfa mill employee discharged for AWOC activity must be rehired.

In Louisiana, the Agricultural and Allied Workers Union, affiliated with the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen, AFL-CIO, has not only organized sugar cane plantation workers, but has contracts with dairy farmers and menhaden fishermen.

National Sharecroppers Fund

The greatly expanded program of NSF has required separate publication of the "1963 Report on the Work of National Sharecroppers Fund." This has been sent to NSF contributors and is available to others on request. Here are a few highlights:

*An NSF grant has financed a study of the wages and working and living conditions of Louisiana sugar cane workers, soon to be reported in pamphlet form.

*In a series of regional and state conferences held in South Carolina, Georgia, and Mississippi, NSF brought together low-income farmers and other rural people — mostly Negroes — to meet with state and federal officials and with cooperative representatives to learn how to use public and private programs that can help them surmount the roadblocks to their economic and social progress.

*NSF's expanded field staff in South Carolina, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Arkansas brings knowledge of these programs and aids in getting surplus food, federal farm loans, integrated job training, and other services for those in need.

*NSF's national staff meets frequently with agency officials in Washington to seek remedy for individual injustices. Documentation of local discriminatory administrative practices has led to corrective action, including the appointment of Negro representatives to Farmers Home Administration county committees and to Area Development committees.

*NSF, under an eighteen-month contract with the U. S. Department of Labor, has begun a program to stimulate federal job-training programs in rural areas of six Southern states.

*NSF's legislative program has continued to oppose the extension of the foreign contract labor system, to support social legislation for farm workers, and to work for special protections needed by migrants.

*NSF's publication program is extensive: its fact sheets explaining governmental rural aid programs in non-technical language are widely used; its pamphlets, reports, and releases are relied upon by newspapers, libraries, public officials, labor and civic organizations, writers, and concerned individuals.

Despite increasing public awareness of the problem of poverty in America, the needs of the sharecropper, the small farmer, the migrant, and other farm workers and low-income rural people continue to be neglected. The job of speaking out for them remains urgent.