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Migratory Worker Problem Belongs to Entire Nation

Country warned not to regard "Okies" as concern of west coast states alone

The map above shows how from 1933 to 1937, during the period of extreme drouth and depression in the Great Plains area, the flood of migration to California began.

Migratory labor is not new in United States. Every year commander-in-chief sends out thousands of workers to harvest crops from coast to coast. Almost every state knows the migrants, but their plight has been especially pathetic in California.

This map illustrates the seasonal migration streams in the United States, north to Dakota wheat fields, south to cotton, east and west to small fruits, and so on.

By PAUL FRIGGENS

THERE is tremendous struggle today in the fields of California and Arizona and whatever the outcome, the effect on the rest of origi will happen to agriculture over the nation.

The pre-dominating problem of the migratory workers, the "Okies" and "Arkies" who have flooded into the West, Big-time, corporate farming organizations have no responsibility for labor beyond the seasonal paycheck, experts. It is more an extra the job is done, and the worker is left to shift for himself. Drouth and disaster, depression and mechanization, intend to stick because there's no place else to go.

The relief burden is enormously greater than the state can carry, even with migrant camps and special services but the basic problem itself remains unsolved.

Here is a situation changing the whole structure of life in the United States. Between 1924 and 1936 350,000 migrants entered California alone. And the flood continued, from the dust bowl over the Great Plains. They are found not only in California but in all states from Arizona to Washington. They constitute a staggering problem in relief, health, and education, regardless of civil constitution and marketing agreements and treaties and all manner of farm benefits.

The migration of farm labor is not new. Every year commander-in-chief sends out from one to two million men, women and children follow the plantings and the harvests, have followed them for years. But they return to their homes and their families, as pictured in the cartoon of John Steinbeck's "Wrath" turn to homes to return to.

Paul S. Taylor, professor of economics, University of California, discussed the problem of the migrant, the whole tremendous problem in a timely pamphlet, "ARTH on the Land," just published by the Public Affairs Committee, New York City.

"The migrant problem is becoming no longer the problem of price alone," says Taylor. "For even when price is adequate there remains insecurity in a variety of forms. The farm problem is increasingly a problem of the relation of people to the land on which they work. And among the most dramatic symptoms of insecurity is our migratory agricultural labor."

Taylor, who has been in California to follow the factors in the migrant case, Taylor warns the problems in these states should not be considered isolated or local.

"In a sense," says Professor Taylor, "it may be that the situation in these states provides a 'preview' of what may be expected in other parts of the modified farm on a national scale."

CALIFORNIA and Arizona, flooded with migrant population, have been the scene of bitter conflicts for seven years, says Professor Taylor. So serious did the situation become that the Senate Civil Liberties Committee launched an investigation last year.

But the trouble in California and Arizona is not the strife between farmer and his "hired man." It is a struggle between individual and corporate farming, one of the most important facing American agriculture.

Five factors clearly distinguish these conflicts from ordinary farm labor problems, Professor Taylor says.

"1—Industrialized agriculture. 2—Access of employers for complete control of wages as distinct from other factors of production. 3—Extreme lack of security of mobile workers in agriculture, and 5—for intensive migration of native American farmers and farm workers from the land.

"There has developed in the large scale farms in the United States, according to census of 1935," says Taylor, "were located in California. Large farms, defined as those with sales approximating $25,000 or more.

"The dominating position of these great enterprises, in respect to both production and employment of labor, is indicated by the fact that in California they numbered less than 3000 farms or barely 2 per cent of all farms in California, they produced 28 per cent of all California agricultural products and they paid out approximately 60 per cent of the cash paid to wage workers by all farms in the state.

"Many of the agricultural employers of California and Arizona are not farmers in the usual sense of the word, but are grower-shippers, with cable addresses, direct wire services, modern offices in busily lush with sensitive markets, and were with representatives and distant headquarters."

NO the sharecropper finds himself working for a man he doesn't know, with a system of farming, methods, gang labor, low price rates. The "hired man" doesn't exist.

And because he doesn't exist, there is frequent trouble, "strikes," says Taylor, "against employer-growers who produce on the factory pattern and hire and fire their unorganized workers in the manner of old-fashioned factory owners.

"The big corporation-growers themselves are organized in associations which control labor policies, for long as this pattern on the land continues, and it seems to be growing, and not out of it become stronger, we may expect the same friction which may be found in similar types of industry."

Second factor, and one closely related to the first, according to Professor Taylor, is the attitude of large-scale employers toward labor costs. Most of their costs, he said, they control, but labor costs, he said, they are not. Employers, therefore, resent any attempt by labor or other "interference" to adjust them.

As a result, says Professor Taylor, "the farm labor, the farm workers, who appear to challenge this control over wages are in peril, whether they be laborers themselves or outsiders."

INDEED with this same point is the third factor, perishability of crops. Employers also fear any organization of farm labor, because the farm employer is at the mercy of labor should workers decide to call a strike. "Unpermissable," concludes the professor, "agricultural employers have been able to do as they please. Whether because of these difficulties and peculiarities the agricultural industry must be regarded as in a class by itself remains to be proved."

Fourth factor, he said, "Fourth factor making for strife in the agricultural industry are the conditions under which the migrants live and work.

"Many men travel great distances to get to work they face low earnings, unemployment, instability and insecurity, bad housing, interrupted schooling for their children, prejudice and hostility from established residents.

"Jobs are hard to find and short-lived. The annual income is low.

"A study by the Resettlement Administration of 1936 showed that work in 1935 found average annual earnings of about $350 a worker and between $400 and $500 for a family. A study in the same year of 783 migrant families on relief by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration showed average family earnings of only $386."

Finally, there is the factor of prejudice and hostility.

"In the past," points Professor Taylor, "California has drawn farm labor from among the Chinese, Japanese, Hindus, Filipinos, and Mexicans. To these groups have been added tens of thousands of refugees from the dust Plains.

"The very abundance of this labor has helped keep wages down, and has served as a focus of prejudice and conflict. And it has encouraged the further industrialization of agriculture."

SO stacks up the picture in the "Grapes of Wrath" country. What is it like in the rest of the nation?

In the Yakima Valley, Washington fields, reveals Professor Taylor, little strife has occurred in Washington's Yakima Valley, may occur again, where the average annual cash income of farm families is $1,000.

In the Lower Rio Grande Valley and Winter Garden districts of southern Texas labor strife and attempts to organize have come simultaneously.

In the Southeastern states, farms are expanding and with them the migratory labor pattern. There is the same story from Jersey to Florida.

Power farming is invading the Delta region, the cotton producing and producing section of the deep south. In the Delta lands of Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, says Professor Taylor, the old plantation system survives in a form more feudal than anywhere else in the Cotton Belt.

But how much longer will it survive? Who will take care of the refugees before tractor and industrialization?

These are the questions that face American agriculture. They must be answered as surely as grass takes root after a fresh rain.

Development of vast, industrialized farms has brought . . .

. . . strife such as this, a tear gas bottle during a lettuce pickers' strike in California.

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