

## The Forgotten People

# Migrant Pay \$4.32 a Day In Florida Tomato Field



For 10 hours in the broiling sun staff writer Dale Wright (standing) picked tomatoes, crawling on his hands and knees to fill the basket, lugging each 60-pound basket to the edge of the field. Total pay for the back-breaking day: \$4.32. Many of his co-workers earned less.

Photo by De Marzio.

Four migrant farm workers burned to death last Sunday in their squalid shack in a Suffolk County labor farm. The tragedy typifies the shocking abuse of "The Forgotten People" which, according to an on-the-spot survey of the World-Telegram, still persists today despite some protective laws. This survey started last April, when staff writer Dale Wright was assigned to work in Florida as a migrant laborer, and continued until last month. Today his article tells of his first day of overwork, underpayment and exploitation.

By DALE WRIGHT,  
World-Telegram Staff Writer,

On a warm, humid morning last April, a rickety old bus jolted along at its top speed between rows of carefully manicured estates along Route 1 from Miami south to Homestead, Fla. Although the vehicle had seats for 35 persons, it was crammed with 64 passengers.

I was one of them.

I was on my way to my first day of work as a migrant farm laborer in the lush tomato fields of southern Dade County. I had shaped up (reported for assignment) earlier that morning on a Miami street corner and was hired—with no questions asked—by a fat character known as a "labor contractor."

In the South, labor contractors round up crews of workers for transport and assignment to farms where crops are to be harvested.

### Sales Pitch Sounds Good.

"Everybody that gets on this bus," he promised reassuringly, "makes \$10, \$12, \$15 today if you want to work. There's plenty of tomatoes to pick and there will be no cheating, nothin' taken out of your pay. And it will be clean work."

His pitch sounded good but I wanted to see for myself. The smirks on the faces of the seasoned migrant workers around me raised my doubts.

In a vast patch of ground outside Homestead our crew joined about 150 other farm workers. They were

busy when we arrived gathering a crop of "red ripers," tomatoes ready that day for shipment to the markets and canneries. It was just after daybreak and a bright sun already had begun to broil the pickers as they stooped in the long rows.

The job was to pick and pack the tomatoes into baskets that contained five-eighths of a bushel. Each loaded basket weighed 60 pounds. When we had them filled we lugged them to the end of the row where they were loaded onto trucks. Pay promised was 12 cents a basket.

### 'Kids Gotta Eat.'

In the row next to mine, an emaciated man of about 40 coughed and spat incessantly as he bent to his task. When I noticed the blood and spoke to him about it, he muttered:

"Yeah, they say it's consumption. It don't make no difference. I gotta keep working. The doctor, he can't do nothing for me. I got no money for medicine. I got a woman and a lotta kids. I gotta keep pickin' tomatoes."

Obviously, the man was seriously ill and belonged in a hospital. But he was trapped by the need to work for his family in the only job he knew how to do.

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# Packing Tomatoes At \$4.32 Per Day

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Later, when we stood up to smoke a cigaret, he said to me: "Been doin' farm work all my life. Don't know nothin' else. I can't go to a hospital. Kids gotta eat."

## Children Sick, Too.

He said his name was Alonzo and that he lived in a tin and tarpaper shack near Goulds, Fla., for which he paid \$10 a week rent. He added that three of his children—the small ones—had dry, hacking coughs and probably had caught the misery he had in his chest.

Medical treatment? No. None of the youngsters had ever seen a doctor.

Despite his illness, Alonzo was a hard worker. As we worked along the endless rows of tomato plants, he loaded basket after basket of tomatoes and was soon far down the field from me.

Later that day Alonzo told me he soon would be moving North from Homestead because the harvest was "going down." To keep living, he explained, he'd have to load his family and his belongings onto a truck or bus going North, where other crops were ripening.

"It's the same," he said. "This job is just like the last one. Next be just like this one. Never no different. Never will be."

## Typical Case.

This sick, frustrated laborer, doomed long before his time, was summing up the lot of today's migrant farm worker.

The back-breaking labor of stooping close to the orange-tinted Florida earth begins as soon as a picker can distinguish red tomatoes from green ones in the grey dawn of an endless day.

His work ends when he no longer can see the tomatoes to pick them. At the promised rate of 12 cents a basket, a good picker can fill 70 to 80 baskets a day and earn—it says there—from \$8.40 to \$9.60 a day.

As bad as that kind of pay is, it generally worked out that the man in the fields received considerably less than the promised rate. Often the rate dropped on payday to 8 cents a basket and the field hand who actually "took home" \$7 a day for his work considered himself lucky.

On my first day in the fields, I worked 10 hours with only a 15-minute break for what they called lunch. It was the hardest, most punishing work I had ever done.

## No Toilet Facilities.

In the first hours of that miserable day, my hands became grimy and encrusted with the green insecticide they spray on tomatoes. It covered my khaki pants and ate its way into my legs. It collected under my finger nails, covered my shoes and socks and festered in the scratches I received from the tomato vines.

But picking the tomatoes was the easy part of the job. The hard part was lugging the heavy baskets to the end of the rows—often as far as 150 feet—to be loaded onto the trucks.

All around me were men and women—all ages—dragging themselves along the rows on their hands and knees in the near-90-degree heat.

Toilet facilities? There were none. The pickers, male and female, used the field whenever they found it necessary. It was more than a mile to the nearest clump of trees.

## Day's Pay: \$4.32.

That lunch I spoke of? A little before noon a battered pickup truck drove into the fields. The meal consisted of greasy sausage sandwiches and warm soft drinks. The sandwiches cost 35 cents and the drinks 20 cents.

Drinking water was dispensed from a wooden barrel. We dipped our water with a sawed-off tomato can shared by some 200 other migrant laborers toiling in the fields. Because the barrel was in the middle of the field, thirsty workers had to walk as much as a half mile for a drink of water.

As I figured it that first day, we picked more than 5000 baskets of tomatoes. After 10 hours of stooping, squatting, crawling, picking and loading, I'd earned just \$4.32.

Many of the men and women working with me had earned less.

## **TOMORROW: Horror Ride to Nothing.**

Thirteen hours without a stop in a bus that broke all the laws.