

Migrant Workers Need U.S. Protection

Farm States Won't Help; Laborers Are Gyped Everywhere They Go

Migrant farm workers, despite some protective laws, are still overworked, underpaid, cheated and forced to live in degrading conditions, staff writer Dale Wright found after working and living with them over a six-month period. His report on these "forgotten people" continues today.

By DALE WRIGHT,
World-Telegram Staff Writer.

The night I decided to leave Florida and move north with the migrant laborers for South Carolina was one of the worst nights in my life.

I was asleep in a filthy room near Hastings when a baby's shriek pierced the night and woke me up. I pushed open the unlocked door of the room next to mine to investigate.

There, lying on a burlap bag in an old packing case, was a baby, two or three months old, screaming in terror.

A huge beetle had crawled into the baby's mouth. Its parents were not home.

I picked up the baby, removed the beetle and succeed in quieting the frightened youngster. There was no more sleep for me that night so I stayed with the baby and waited for his folks to return.

Beetles and roaches and chinchies, they told me later, were the least of their problems. The Florida potato belt also breeds big rattlesnakes. They are likely to be found in or under any old building. Flies and mosquitoes were everywhere, buzzing around in the remnants of food and debris.

South Carolina Worse.
But what lay ahead of me in South Carolina was just as bad or worse.

I saw migrant farm laborers, the very old and the very young, moving into South Carolina in open trucks and battered old buses like livestock on the way to a slaughterhouse.

In the fields I saw the same kind of people I had met in Florida, working 12 to 16 hours a day, cheated on their wages and exploited at every hand.

But in South Carolina there were youngsters only 6 and 7 years old working in the fields with the grownups from early morning until it

was too dark for them to see what they were doing.

Here again, there were no schools for migrant children. But the labor contractors were there with the same promises of good jobs, good pay, nice places to live. By this time their spiel reminded me of an old record.

Evils of Crew Leader.
In Charleston, a thriving produce center for several truck crops, I talked with Julius Amaker, an insurance executive and a former agent for the U.S. Department of Agriculture for 13 years.

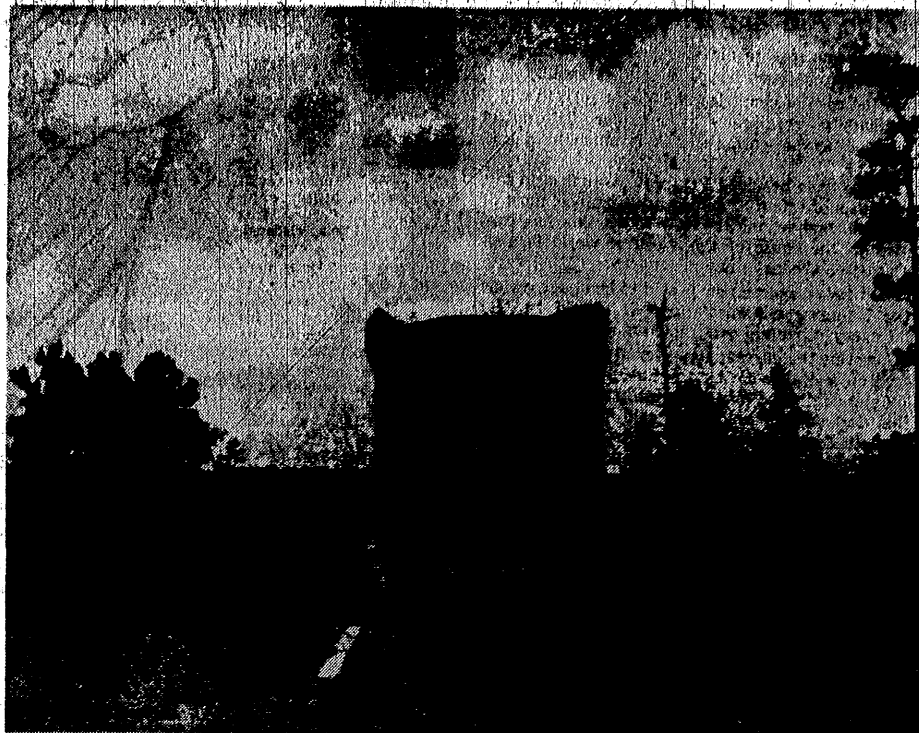
Mr. Amaker, who has spent much time trying to improve the lot of the migrant worker had some strong words:

"The worst single evil facing the migrant farm worker is his crew leader. The crew boss cheats him, short-changes him and uses every trick in the book to separate him from the money he has earned by back-breaking toil.

"I see the crew leaders driving around in big, fancy cars. I know they make from \$7000 to \$10,000 during a single season, after expenses. A lot of the money rightfully belongs to the poor, illiterate workers who can't defend themselves.

"The only solution is to take the responsibility for recruitment and payment of migrant workers away from the crew boss and turn it over to the grower or packer or processor. The employer then should be under the supervision of a trained federal agent.

Records Must Be Kept.
"The employer should be required under penalty of law to keep accurate work records so that withholding, social security and work-



For the long journey north from Florida, migrant workers ride in an open truck on crude wooden benches. The mode is the same for old and young—over hundreds, sometimes a thousand, miles.

men's compensation credits can be made."

Mr. Amaker said many migrants who come to Charleston die there or land on the local welfare rolls.

"It's always the same story," he said. "Somebody's promise of better work, better pay. When they learn it's no better here, they either keep going north or get stranded here."

He's particularly concerned with the children. He pointed out that state legislation to provide schools for the migrant children was killed two years ago by a strong farm lobby and the action of segregationists.

Federal Protection.

If these youngsters don't go to school in Florida," he said, "or wherever they come from, they simply don't go at all. So they grow up in the fields and are never prepared for anything more than farm labor."

Because no state will take

on the job of protecting the migrant laborer's interests, he said, he'd like to see federal supervisors watch the harvesting operations as the labor gangs move north and thus protect the workers' interests along the way.

They're Needed.

"Migrant farm workers," he continued, "are absolutely the lowest on the American economic scale. Yet they are vital to the harvest of American crops. Without them, the farmer, the shipper, the packer, the processor and the consumer could not exist."

Mr. Amaker sees some protection for the migrant worker in the minimum wage laws, but only if there are adequate teeth in such legislation.

"Employers," he declared, "find ways to skirt the law. The migrant worker continues to be a sorrowful victim of neglect and omission.

Some new approach is necessary, some code of 20th century laws to protect these peo-

ple from exploitation everywhere along the line."

I stood on a Charleston street corner and watched the exodus of migrants northward to another stop on the trail. A convoy of two buses, a stake truck and an ancient, broken-down station wagon was overcrowded with people and work gear.

It was a trip to more unfulfilled promises, more cheating and more sorrows.

A bus like one of those in the convoy had crashed into another vehicle in North Carolina a few years ago. A score of workers were killed. The driver was found to have had no insurance.

1000-Mile Trips.

Mr. Amaker had pointed out in our talk that labor contractors pick these people up along the road somewhere, then rumble off anywhere there's a buck to be made—for the crew boss.

The trip is frequently as long as 1000 miles, both going north to harvest and re-

turning home after the work is over.

The law does not require operators of migrant transport vehicles to carry liability insurance in Florida and other states in the south. If passengers are injured or killed, it's just tough luck for them or their families. And while compulsory insurance laws are non-existent, safety inspection regulations are so loosely enforced that they're almost useless.

I had seen many such caravans earlier in Florida. I was to see many more in my travels along the East Coast. The great tragedy was that for many of these miserable men, women and children, the trip was to nowhere.

TOMORROW:
New Jersey migrant camps—even worse than in the South.