

Disgraceful Plight Of Migrant Workers On California Farms

By Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, May 1940, 1, 2.

Summary: Witnesses the struggles of migrant farm workers in the San Joaquin Valley of California and the class war with the big business interests of the Associated Farmers. Is ambivalent about government help for the workers, preferring cooperatives and personal responsibility to corporation farming and birth control clinics for the rural proletariat. (DDLW #357).

This is being written from an auto camp outside Bakersfield. The hot weather has begun and a heat haze hangs over the valley so that you can barely see the mountains. I have just come down through the San Joaquin valley and now forests of oil wells loom on the horizon. It has been ninety-five in the shade for the past three days and already, early in the morning, there is promise of another broiling day.

For the first week I have been covering the government migrant camps from Yuba City, north of San Francisco, down the valley. There are thirteen of these and they house three thousand families. If you count five to an average family, that takes care of fifteen thousand people. But the estimate is that there are three hundred thousand migrant workers in the state. The season of peak labor, when 250,000 are used, lasts only five months, and the rest of the time only 50,000 are needed, according to the findings of the governor's reemployment commission.

From this it will be seen that the problem of the rural proletariat is most acute in this state, although it is present all through the country.

I must say that my first view of the government camps made me anything but happy. The pressed steel structures, each costing \$195, quite aside from the concrete base, making one-room shelters for the entire family, are anything but adequate. They are hot in Summer and cold and draughty in Winter and the rain gets in. In one camp I saw how the campers used the yellow corn meal and flour to sprinkle around the edge of the room to take up the leak so that the water would not form pools under the beds. Mother, father and children all sleep in one room, and through statistics show that the average family is between four and five, there are many large families of six to eight children. Margaret Sanger has sent her agents around, and there are birth control clinics at every camp.

Cooperation

On the other hand, educational work is being done along cooperative lines and in one camp at Farmersville, there are hundreds of mimeographed accounts of

what Fr. Coady and Fr. Tompkins have done at Nova Scotia which have been distributed to the campers, and study clubs on cooperation have been started with an attendance of sixty men. In another camp there is a camp cooperative store, which the campers have started themselves, using the ten cents a day rent-money they pay for the use of the cabins, a fund which is held by the camp to use as the council of the camp votes. This little store was started with \$150 and is now worth \$1,200.

Protection

But to me, the greatest thing the government camps have done is to give protection to the migrants from the hostility of their new neighbors, whether they are small townspeople or Associated Farmers. We have read about the terror that has existed in various areas, the violence that has been inflicted on the workers, and we have seen a factual account of these happenings in "The Grapes of Wrath," which was founded on real events. The protection of the government has done a great deal to change the attitudes of townspeople towards these struggling families. As for the attitude of the Associated Farmers, I don't believe they care two whoops about the government, and their hostility will only intensify, the more that is done for the migrants. They would rather have continued with their cheap Mexican labor, but various factors have deprived them of that. Not only the Mexican government has sought to repatriate these people, giving them tracts of land of their own in Mexico, but there has been a wholesale exodus from the state since the shooting of the Mexican vice-consul during a strike some years ago.

In Fresno the other night, I talked to two Associated Farmers one of whom sold agricultural implements, and the other the owner and renter of two thousand acres of land south of Fresno. They sat for two hours and told the most amazing tales of high wages—"up to seventy dollars a week, picking cotton, one man, not just the whole family." And of the waste, extravagance and dishonesty of the migrant.

"All the Associated Farmers talk as though someone had put on a phonograph record—it's always the same stuff," the Monsignor whom I afterwards talked to assured me. "There is not a grain of truth in it, they have been told to say those things. The worst of it is that some of the Catholic owners are building little chapels on their farms for the Mexicans as a sop to the Church. They cost them only about five hundred dollars. They get huge subsidies from the government, and their profits are enormous, and it is because these profits are endangered that there is a bitter fight on between the Associated Farmers and the worker."

An Effort

A doctor at St. Agnes Hospital told me of a battle at Madera last Fall. The men were meeting in a public park to discuss wages and a gang of vigilantes broke up the meeting with baseball bats.

The two Associated Farmers presented quite another picture. Whereas a few months before the migrants were dishonest, wasteful, dirty and illiterate, now there were loyal and willing workers, who are prevented from working by a gang of waterfront radicals who have come down from San Francisco to interrupt the peaceful agricultural pursuits of the valley.

What the government has done so far is to protect and provide for a very small fraction of these people who are living in ditch camps and small settlements all over the state. They are making an heroic effort to settle, many of them, buying small plots of land, sinking wells, living in incredible hardship in trying to build up a new life. They are exploited by real estate people, they are sneered at and despised, they are treated with violence. There is an intensification of the class war spirit to an extreme degree.

The Future?

What the future holds for them it is hard to see. How much more the government will be permitted to help, for after all this is an election year, and the program may be interrupted?

There has been a criminal apathy on the part of private agencies which might have been formed to resettle these people without exploitation. Any liberal government, federal or state, is fought every inch of the way by the Bank of America, the Southern Pacific, the Pacific Gas and Electric, the big interests which make up the Associated Farmers.

Here there is room indeed for farming communes, for missions modeled on those the Franciscans started in the beginnings of California. As it is, there is nothing so beautiful that man has made in the entire state as the remains of those very missions which non-Catholic as well as Catholic point out with pride.

Here there is room for personal responsibility, for the "Christ's room" in every house and on every ranch that the early Father's talked of, instead of leaving everything to the government, which in spite of all they have done that is good, still think in terms of corporation farming and birth control clinics for the rural proletariat.

There is not room in this short article to talk of what I have seen in detail. I am trying to cover the ground more completely in an article in the Commonweal.