

# C. W. Editor On W. Coast; Story of Lettuce Workers

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*Summary: Tells of many meetings and talks around San Francisco. Recalls the union busting and violence against lettuce workers near Salinas. Laments the lack of leaders to bring Catholic social teaching to the workers. Wants “fellow travelers with the poor and dispossessed,” who will spread the Gospel, recognizing that the poor are “creatures of body and soul.” (DDLW #356).*

March 13 was a fearful day for meetings. Up for the 6:30 Mass (I had been awake since 4:30, for some reason or other), and at 8 I was called to go out to Reid College. There I spoke to a philosophy class which is studying religion from the time of St. Augustine to Thomas Aquinas, and at 10:15 spoke to the Assembly. At noon there was a luncheon of a churchmen's group, all denominations, and that, too, was very stimulating. Two young fellows who were in the contracting business wanted to know how they could continue work, since they could not, in their small business of home building, with small profits, use union labor. One of them was a Swede, and they hired Swedes to work for them. I told them about Ralph Borsodi's project, and urged them to write to him. Also about the cooperative housing at Nova Scotia.

## Leaders Needed

The next meeting was to speak to the men at the Archbishop Blanchet Shelter, and they, too, were very responsive. Whenever I speak to a crowd like that, or at a Workers' Alliance, or a St. Vincent de Paul Shelter, I feel the intensity of interest in the idea of work and cooperation and ownership. If we had the leaders to carry on the work, start study groups, get the men together, I am sure we would have the land given us. But where are the leaders interested? I must remember the words of our Lord: “Pray ye, therefore, that there be laborers for the harvest.” Certainly the harvest is great. I feel so ineffectual, so limited, able to do so little. When I think how few there are who are reaching these men, these unemployed, these destitute, the union meetings, to bring them Catholic social teaching, some idea of the correlation of the material and the spiritual, so that they can indeed begin to realize that they are creatures of body and soul. How great a need there is to build up many little centers where men gather together and discuss these things and get these ideas moving. Patience, contentment with the little way, hard work, obscurity and poverty, the knowledge of the poor which results in the love of the poor, these are what is needed.

Right now I am in San Francisco, stopping in a little hotel, the Boyd, right around the corner from the Franciscan Church, St. Boniface. It is a beautiful church, always crowded with

worshippers, and reminds me of our Franciscan Church on 31<sup>st</sup> street, New York. Father Paul is our friend and adviser there, and has charge of the Young Christian Workers. He has been very ill the past six months, and is only now at home again. He had a frightful infection, which cost him his leg, and is preparing for another operation in a few weeks. The other day he gave his blood for a Jewish boy in Chicago who is suffering from the same disease. Since I was here last, two years ago he has been active in the labor movement, and during his illness he received letters of sympathy from many labor leaders and also from Communists whom he has met in the International bookstore, which is opposite the church.

There has also been started at the church a library and reading room, and there are clubrooms upstairs for the Y.C.W. and an auditorium downstairs, where I spoke to many of our old friends last Tuesday night. It was good, too, on Tuesday to go to the communal breakfast which is served down in a big dining room under the library. This was a feature which I much enjoyed on my last trip here, this breakfast which everyone enjoys after the novena services every Tuesday morning.

The hotel is old and dingy, but a good cheap place to stay. My room is dark and on an airshaft, but there is fragrance of flowers from the bouquet on my dresser. On every street corner they are selling spring flowers, and outside the sun pours down and during the day it is hot, until evening, when the fog rolls in like a curtain from the bay.

## **Monsignor Sheen**

One of the Sunday afternoons in Portland I was able to listen to the Catholic Hour and Monsignor Fulton Sheen. The day before I had met a convert who had been drawn to the Church by listening to him. He lived in a tiny town in Montana, and when he began to take instructions he had to go forty miles in all kinds of weather, and then he was never sure of finding the priest, who was often called far off to some remote town in his vast parish on a sick call. He took instruction for two years and read many books. The day he was baptized it was so cold they had to melt the water for the baptismal, and the priest almost froze his hands.

## **Methodist Church**

In Portland, too, among dozens of other meetings, I was asked to speak at the Mt. Tabor Methodist Church, and since the Archbishop had told me to speak anywhere I pleased in his diocese, I took advantage of the offer and spoke there from the pulpit. It reminded me of the little Methodist churches in the South where I had attended meetings of the sharecroppers, where the walls had the marks of bullets and where the furniture had been broken up by bands of vigilantes. One of the churches was used to shelter four evicted families who lived in the four corners of the meeting room.

## **Benedictine Monastery**

I spoke one afternoon at the Mount Angel Benedictine College and Seminary, and one of the young farmers who was a student was horrified at my story of how we had bought Rosie, our first cow. He took it very seriously and didn't seem to see the humor in the story at all.

Father Alcuin, who is pastor of the little town of Mount Angel, is promoting the flax industry among the farmers. We went over the big sheds they had built, and they showed us the processes. There is plenty of rain out here for it. I got some specimens for Teresa's little museum down at the Easton Farming Commune.

They have a creamery, a farmers' union, a gasoline station, all cooperative. They have a craft shop, where the women were weaving linen towels. This monastery is a good illustration of the influence of a monastery on the rural life around it. There was some government aid in building the sheds and offices for the flax, but most of the capital came from the farmers. The parish house is the center of charities, relief, community chest, and there is a big school and gymnasium.

The approach to the monastery is up a hill through a fairytale forest of great trees. There are stations of the cross up the hill. The monastery itself burned in 1926 and the story is that the monks, by the light of the fire, sang their office. They had been unable to save anything but their choir books.

## **Spokane**

It was an all-day bus drive from Portland to Spokane, and it was an awe-inspiring trip through the mountains and long the Columbia River highway. Then through waste lands and later vast wheat country, which made me realize more than ever the industrial system of farming out here.

One woman I met here told of the farm she had lived on, of 3,800 acres. Her husband had \$140,000 in money, but he finally was ruined by his speculation in wheat. In addition to growing wheat (which at one time went down to 25 cents a bushel), they raised everything they needed for the table. Their trouble was in staking everything on one big crop. The vast size of the place meant taxes, machinery. They finally lost the place. They are now in the cities and the son is studying business administration.

## **Indian Cooperative**

One afternoon I met a Sister of Providence who was working among the Indians at de Smet, Idaho, not far from Spokane. She and some of the college girls at Holy Names have built up a cooperative there. They make dolls, baskets, jackets and gloves. The handiwork of the gloves is so exquisite that a large Eastern manufacturer wished to get work done by them. The set-up now is infinitely superior, as the Indians tan their own hides and make the complete product themselves and have the pride of the artist in their work. Now they are co-creators, artists, but the factory would turn them into hands! They would no longer be men.

## Unemployed Cooperative

Another day I visited Riverton club, an old house of 24 rooms, with five acres around it, which has been started under the sponsorship of the St. Vincent de Paul with the help of the County Welfare. Men who are classed as unemployable and who have not reached the pension age pool their resources and live together. They intend to keep rabbits, chickens, and go in for intensive gardening. The men were glad to show us around. One had mushed for years in Alaska; another was a railroad man; another a seaman; another a mechanic. This is the first State in which the St. Vincent de Paul has engaged in this work, and it is a splendid enterprise, holding in mind the idea of personal responsibility on the part of the men.

## Lettuce Workers

Mrs. Robert McWilliams is assistant chairman of the State Central Committee of the Democratic party and has been for years interested in the condition of the migrant. Last week we drove down to Salinas which is about a hundred miles down the valley from San Francisco, and as we drove, she told me about the Salinas lettuce strike. The Filipinos and Americans had a good union, A.F. of L., and had good wages and conditions. But the growers, packers and shippers were determined to break the union by not renewing the contract when it expired. A strike followed, scabs were imported, sheds were built for them inside "riot fences" near the sheds. The frames still remain. I saw them this afternoon, a threat and a warning to the workers.

It was a bloody strike; there were citizens' committees, vigilantes, everyone was deputized. Strangely enough, they were afraid, not of the Filipino and Mexican and American lettuce workers, but that Harry Bridges and his longshoremen were going to march down the valley and take over the fields and the town. They organized the shopkeepers not to sell to the thousands of workers living around the town. Even a little tobacconist, when they tried to enlist him and failed, was assaulted. A tear gas shell lodged in his arm. Neither doctor nor nurse could be procured. They also had been enlisted.

Mrs. McWilliams told how she had witnessed this assault and had to dig out the shell herself. She told of treating the eyes of the workers with a paregoric solution to ease the pain of the gas attacks. Nauseating gas was used which resulted in diarrhea as well as vomiting, and the workers were humiliated and their spirit broken. Axe handles were imported and the boys at the manual training high school were given the job of weighting them with iron to be used as weapons against the strikers. Trucks loaded with lettuce were driven up and down the streets of the town to convey the impression that the strike was broken and to provoke violence.

It was a time of terror for three weeks, then an agreement was signed which left out of account the six thousand Filipino workers. Another strike occurred later and then the union was broken completely.

The Filipinos and Mexicans work in the fields, and the Americans in the sheds at cleaning and packing. The Filipinos live in camps the year around, get in debt to their employers and then have to work it out. There is a Chinatown and Filipino district which looks like

all Chinatowns even in its architecture and the narrow streets. There is a red light district, which we drove through, wide open, generally accepted by the community as a necessity. No Filipino women are allowed according to immigration laws. Only the males are admitted. We presume they are supposed to remain celibate.

## **“Okies”**

They say the great majority of the migrants are from Arkansas and Oklahoma and as we visited the camp on the outskirts of East Salinas a car drove up with an Oklahoma license. There was a rumble seat in the back and in addition to carrying two passengers, there was a double bed, a spring, mattresses, bedding, two chairs and a table, somehow loaded on the back. There were three fellows and a girl, and the girl had clutched around her a bathrobe which was too small for her, instead of a coat. There were all young, perhaps were children when the migration started. I was reminded of Ma Joad in the movie, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and her determination that they would all stick together. Most of the families I have seen have many small children, but certainly this life is not conducive to sticking together.

## **Marysville**

As I write this I am in a little cabin in a trailer camp outside Marysville. Down in the hollow, back of the road, there are forty families encamped. Down on either side of the highway, nestled down under the levee of the Feather River, there are more families. Many of the camps are surrounded by water and mud. The stars are reflected in the pools of water in the fields and the orchards. Last week there was a bad flood up here so that most of the roads were under water and many of the small farmers have taken to trailers and shacks along the roadside. There is the constant sound of frogs (remember the frogs in the movie *Grapes of Wrath*?) and of cars zooming by on the highway.

It is so sad to see this constant coming and going, hundreds of thousands of people on the move from place to place. In the Northwest there was the tragedy of greed in the cut-over ruined lands. Here there is the tragedy of a landless people, homeless, meagerly fed, housed like animals rather than like creatures made to the image and likeness of God. Those in power have waxed fat and have forgotten the things of the spirit. Those in misery have forgotten that they are temples of the Holy Ghost. How could they remember?

More than ever am I convinced that the solution lies only in the Gospel and in such a leader as St. Francis. Peter Maurin has been taking these past two years of recruiting troubadours of Christ. More and more am I convinced that together with our purely material efforts of building up hospices and farming communes we need these fellow travelers with the poor and dispossessed to share with them their poverty and insecurity and to bring them the reminder of the love of God. It is the hardest work anyone could do, in the face of that saying of Kingsley when tracts were offered to a starving people “religion is the opiate of the people.” It is a sad saying that has made cowards of many who are afraid to speak of God to those with empty stomachs. But they are not just mouths to be fed, bodies to be housed. They

are creatures of body and soul. The Communist goes among them, lives with them in his zeal for “leaders who themselves are workers,” in his zeal to build up a people who will fight oppression.

Where are our Catholic college youth who will make a vocation of their unemployment, and use it as an opportunity to tramp about the country like St. Francis and bring the Gospel to these forgotten ones?