

Organizing the Agricultural Labor Force

Many individuals and groups in Pennsylvania have struggled with the question of supporting efforts to organize farm workers into unions. The support usually includes manpower and/or financial contributions for organizing efforts or support of consumer boycotts of certain products.

This question presents the public with some difficult dilemmas with regard to appropriate actions. Objective evidence makes it obvious that there are real social problems in the plight of many American farm workers. What is not so obvious is what the appropriate solutions to those problems are. While much has been said and written about the issues by the advocates on either side, there have been many distortions and inaccuracies on both sides. There is little objectivity in information regarding union membership, participation, strikes, working conditions, performance under contracts, and violence alleged by the various parties to agricultural-labor disputes. This presents a dilemma to individuals and groups concerned with social justice seeking to make informed and objective judgments about the issue.

In order to understand the issue, some background information about the economic status of farm workers and the structure of agriculture is essential.

The economic status of farm workers

There is no question that "farm laborers" as an occupational group fare substantially worse economically than most other occupational groups in the economy. Census data show that only private household workers (domestics) rank lower in average annual earnings. This is partly because rates of pay for many agricultural jobs are low, but also because of the large component of seasonal workers in the farm work force. For example, in 1972 (the most recent year for which national data are available) there were 28 million persons who did some farm work for wages in the United States at some time during the year. However, 40 percent of that number did less than 25 days of farm wage work during the entire year. Another 37 percent did from 25 to 150 days of farm wage work during the year. Only 13 percent worked as many as 250 days at farm wage work in 1972. Obviously, average

earnings data across such a diverse labor force are very misleading.

Only about a quarter (24 percent in 1972) of the hired farm work force is chiefly engaged in farm work during the year. Others are chiefly engaged in non-farm work, operating their own farms, or are not in the labor force at all most of the year. Persons not in the labor force most of the year account for much of the seasonality of farm employment. In 1972, nearly half (47 percent) of the hired farm work force indicated their chief activity during the year was "keeping house," or "attending school." Students represent a large component of the hired farm work force, although most of them work relatively few days at farm work and therefore account for relatively little of the total hired agricultural labor input. (For example, in 1972 there were approximately 825,000 youth 14 through 17 years of age who did some farm work for wages, of which 56% worked fewer than 25 days, and another 30% worked from 25 to 74 days.) Only a small number of these youth were migratory workers, and they worked only a few days at farm wage work.

While wages earned by farm wage workers are low, they are related to the duration of work. The wages earned by all farm wage workers in 1972 averaged \$1,160, or about \$13.20 per day. However, this average is greatly influenced by the fact that 40 percent of these workers only averaged 9 days of farm wage work and had average total farm earnings for the year of only \$94. By contrast, those workers who worked 250 days or more at farm work had average annual farm earnings of \$4,358 and average total annual earnings, including non-farm earnings, of \$4,551. These figures relate to cash wages and do not include the value of prerequisites, such as housing or meals, that may also be provided.

There are too few migrants in the farm work force to provide statistically reliable data on annual earnings of migrants related to the duration of their work. The data that are available show that daily cash wages are similar among migrants and non-migrants (actually slightly higher for migrants). However, migrants average fewer days of work and therefore have lower total annual earnings. Only about 7 percent of the hired


farm work force (or fewer than 200,000 persons in 1972) were migrants.

The above is not intended to imply that farm workers' incomes are not low, but to suggest that the problem is related to the duration of the working season, which is short for many agricultural activities. An examination of hourly pay rates for farm workers also suggests this. In October, 1973 (the most recent period for which statistics are available) the US average hourly rate paid to farm workers was \$2.24 (\$2.17 in Pennsylvania, \$2.83 in California). For workers paid piece-rate, which includes many migrants, the US average hourly earnings were \$2.71 (\$2.69 in Pennsylvania, \$3.11 in California).

The structure of the agricultural industry

Much of the discourse on the farm labor problem (and other agricultural problems such as the recent concern over food prices) creates the impression that the agricultural industry is dominated by large corporations. Whether this is true is essentially irrelevant to the economic

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