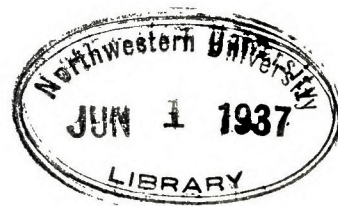


THE WORKS PROGRAM

--Works Progress Administration--



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Hopkins Releases Survey of Migratory Workers

"Although the existence of the migratory worker is vital to the economy of the nation, there is probably no group in the entire working population more exploited and disregarded," Harry L. Hopkins, Works Progress Administrator, said today in releasing a study prepared by the WPA Division of Social Research on "The Migratory-Casual Worker."

"Of course I don't mean the 'bum,' celebrated in song and story, who shrinks from work as he does from a bath," Mr. Hopkins explained. "I mean the large group of roaming, foot-loose workers who traditionally supply the seasonal labor needs of that part of America's industry which is located in remote, sparsely populated districts.

"Intensive large-scale farming of such crops as apples, hops, and lettuce; wheat raising; railroad right-of-way maintenance; logging; road, levee, and tunnel construction jobs, oil-well drilling--all these are dependent on migratory-casual workers who can be on hand when large numbers of workers are required suddenly and for short periods of time.

"Yet when the emergency for which these workers are needed is over, they are usually stigmatized as 'tramps' and given their choice of going to jail for vagrancy or leaving town in a hurry. As one newspaper sarcastically puts it: 'The only time a bum is expected to come here is when we need him as a harvest hand. What right has he to come between seasons?'

"Even in the best of times, the migratory-casual worker, because of low wages and time lost in traveling long distances between short-time jobs, scarcely earned enough to live.

"The depression hit the migratory-casual worker especially hard. It drastically restricted his job opportunities. Everywhere resident labor entered into competition with the migratory worker. Employers, able to pick and choose, could get stable family men for many of the jobs that once attracted only the roving single man.

"Wages and working conditions on the occasional jobs the migrant did get in recent years were far below decent American standards.

"Local relief has been largely closed to the migratory workers, since most had long ago lost their legal residences.

"Today the migratory-casual worker presents a pressing problem in human conservation. The situation is this: Thousands of competent, able-bodied, fairly young workers, habituated to a roving life, are now drifting about the country getting only occasional jobs and earning less than enough to keep body and soul together. Many are stranded in the big cities, crowded together in the flop house districts. They live by panhandling, supplemented by an occasional handout of 'sinkers and coffee.'

"This study states the problem. If the imminent physical, moral and occupational degeneration of a particularly active and enterprising group of workers means anything to us, the problem must be solved."

The study is based on extended interviews with migratory-casual workers in 13 cities which are well-known concentration points for industrial and agricultural migratory workers. Although these workers were at transient bureaus at the time the interviews were made, their employment histories, extending over a period of two years, provide convincing evidence that relief was incidental.

Directed by Corrington Gill, Assistant Works Progress Administrator, and supervised by Howard B. Myers, Director of the WPA Division of Social Research, the report was written by John N. Webb, Co-ordinator of Urban Research and author of "The Transient Unemployed," which is recognized as an authoritative work on the transient population of the United States.

The report traces the origin of the migratory-casual worker to "the pool of unemployment, rising and falling with business conditions, but never completely drained," which constantly furnishes new recruits for the ranks of the migratory workers from the younger unemployed who have drifted away from their home towns to seek opportunity elsewhere.

Unable to get steady jobs, they drift into migratory-casual work. Inadequate as this type of work is, the possibilities of obtaining some work are always present, because most jobs employing migratory workers are simple, rather than complex, operations. Extra workers on an auto-

mobile assembly line would only be in the way, but extra workers at harvest time serve the double purpose of getting the crop in quicker and driving wages down. "An oversupply of migratory-casual workers (from the employer's point of view) is difficult to imagine," the study finds.

A section of the report containing maps of routes of travel shows how migratory workers are able to maintain themselves by following the seasons over routes often more than a thousand miles in length. Agricultural workers may start with oranges in Southern California in the winter, follow a succession of crops up the Coast through the spring and summer, and finish their year in October with work in the apple orchards of Eastern Washington. The same routes are often retraced year after year. Industrial migratory workers follow routes of travel determined by the opening and closing of jobs in logging, construction, etc. These routes are, of course, less regular since industrial operations are not so strictly seasonal.

The workers studied were usually on the road 40 weeks of the year, working or seeking work. They found their chief employment in cotton, fruits, sugar-beets, grain, logging, oil drilling, railway maintenance work, and road construction. They usually spent their off-season (winter) in large cities, living in cheap hotels on their scant savings. When broke, they "bummed" for food, panhandled, and slept in flop houses, missions, or on park benches.

The migratory period was spent largely in interstate travel. Two-thirds of the workers crossed at least one State line and more than one-fourth crossed six or more State lines. But most of this travel was fruitless in 1933 and 1934, for one-half of the workers got jobs in only one State and three-quarters in not more than two States.

The few jobs they did manage to get were of short duration. Total time spent at work averaged only 20 to 25 weeks in each of the two years.

Annual wages of the migratory-casual workers were found startlingly low. In 1933 and 1934 the average annual earnings of the workers ranged from \$110 to \$275. More specifically, agricultural workers averaged \$110 in 1933 and \$124 in 1934; industrial workers, \$257 in 1933 and \$272 in 1934; those who combined agriculture and industry, \$223 in 1933 and

\$203 in 1934.

The report discusses the advantages accruing to employers, from the existence of this abundant supply of cheap highly mobile labor. It concludes, however, that: "The advantages that the employer derives from a large and mobile labor supply are frequently more apparent than real . . . the lower the wage level, the higher the public cost."

Too, the degradation of the migratory worker is regarded as charging the community with "another cost that cannot be assessed in dollars" resulting from "the existence of a group whose low earnings necessitate a standard of living far below the level of decency and comfort. The presence of such a group in any community, even though for a short time each year, cannot fail to affect adversely the wage level of resident workers."

After showing that the public must itself make up the deficit in the workers' wages by means of relief, the report discusses such other unhappy results of an overabundance of underpaid workers as labor strife that "promises to increase rather than decrease in bitterness." It is pointed out that in a single state, California, in 1933 there were 37 agricultural strikes, involving 47,575 workers.

Perhaps the darkest aspect of migratory life found is in the discarding of the middle-aged worker. This premature superannuation is cited as the cause of a serious problem both for the worker and the community in which he happens to be: "Long before he is 60 . . . he will almost certainly become a permanent charge on some community, as a 'park bum', in a hospital, asylum, or jail, or as a panhandler on the street."

"The evidence of this report," it is observed, "points clearly to the conclusion that the migratory-casual worker, despite his independent attitude and pride in his ability to 'get by' on the road, is in fact an under-employed and poorly paid worker who easily and frequently becomes a charge on society."

No attempt is made to suggest a cure-all for the social problem presented by the migratory-casual worker, which is described as "merely one aspect of the general problem of economic insecurity" which affects, as well, millions of resident workers.

Difficulties in plans often urged as solutions are pointed out. For instance, the use of employment offices to direct workers to jobs

and thus enable them to dovetail seasonal employment into a full year's work is shown to be impracticable as a full solution, inasmuch as peak demands for migratory workers in most crops and industries overlap one another in the months between May and October. Employment offices, the report points out, could be of little assistance during the off-season when there is small demand for migratory workers.

The second solution commonly proposed is that of devising new industries to enable migratory workers to support themselves the year around between seasons in areas where at present they are needed only a part of the year. While admitting the possibility, in some cases, of devising such off-season operations, the study observes that such attempts have "generally led to even more than ordinary exploitation" of the migratory worker.

The study further points out that migratory workers can hope for little from the present provisions of the State Social Security Acts. The working season is usually too short to enable migratory workers to comply with the requirement of at least 13 weeks of employment within one State before benefits can be paid. Moreover, much of the employment is in agriculture, which the acts do not cover. In some States (e.g., in Massachusetts) all casual workers are specifically excluded from benefits, even if employed in a covered industry.

There is no full and immediate solution for the problem of the casual worker, these findings hold, but there are some indications that partial solutions may be effected.

It is pointed out that the Social Security Act may assist indirectly, in that unemployment compensation should reduce the competition of resident workers for the jobs usually filled by migratory workers.

"The possibility of the workers themselves improving conditions through unionization cannot be ignored," the report continues, "although organization of the migratory-casual workers is extraordinarily difficult, because of their high mobility and low earnings." Recent union successes among seamen, loggers, and fruit and vegetable workers are cited.

As a palliative measure for the near future, the study suggests some form of employment office direction of the workers, at all times supplemented by a public works program to provide employment when times are particularly hard.

"Aside from these suggested means," the WPA study concludes, "there is little possibility of a solution short of those eventual and unhurried changes in population patterns that promise to eliminate the function of the migratory-casual worker." This "solution", it adds, will work increasing hardship on the army of habitual migrants, and it "can be fully approved only by those who oppose any attempt to alter the workings of the 'natural laws' of our economy."

The color and savor of migratory life is presented in the personal history section of the report. These brief descriptive accounts of typical workers, some of them written by the worker himself, show, as statistics cannot, the effect that the depression had on the social attitudes of the migratory-casual worker.

After several years of scanty, profitless work, some of the workers were still content to drift along on their seasonal rounds without worrying about the future; some were discouraged and believed that they were a "lost generation" that never would find work again. Some felt that the lean years soon would pass; others, such as the worker who said, "I don't know what's going to happen to this country, but I'd hate to say what I think is going to happen," believed their own troubles were merely symptoms of a widespread ill affecting all of society.

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