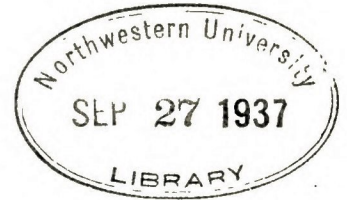


THE WORKS PROGRAM

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-- Works Progress Administration --



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The following address was delivered by Aubrey Williams, Deputy Administrator of the Works Progress Administration, before the Southern Tenant Farmer's Union and the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America, at 2:30 p.m. Sunday, September 26, 1937, in the Labor Temple, Memphis, Tenn.:

It is a great pleasure to be back in the South: I was born and reared in the deep South, in the Black Belt of Alabama. I think I understand its problems and its people, its wealth of human material and deficiency of financial power and technical equipment, its possibilities and its limitations for making a distinctive contribution to American life.

I am happy that the occasion for my coming is this joint meeting of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America. For I see in these organizations an effort to safeguard the interests of a large segment of the breadwinners of the South and of the nation. A segment which, if not reinforced by organization and governmental assistance, is, in some respects, the most insecure of any in the nation's economic fabric. If we understand security as embracing the ability to make a living comparable to that of other workers, a reasonable protection from ruinous fluctuations in this income, and public services which insure a full social enjoyment of this income, then it is readily apparent that southern tenant farmers and farm laborers are among the most insecure of any of our national groups. An income of \$300 as earned by tenants in 1934 is low enough but that was a relatively good year.

What happens in years like 1932 and 1933 is heartbreaking. The recent study of incomes in the United States made by the National Industrial Conference Board shows six states in the Southeast with the lowest incomes in the nation, less than \$250 per capita. When the states are ranked in respect to income from highest to lowest, twelve of the bottom fourteen states are in the South. But these are statewide averages held up by a few large incomes in the city. If the people in whom you are interested had \$250 per capita, they would feel rich. In 1934 their incomes averaged \$70 per capita. You are familiar with the tragic want that goes with these meagre and uncertain incomes.

It is one of the ambitions of this Administration to combat such insecurity and poverty in all walks of life and in this respect the objectives of the Administration are similar to those of your organizations.

I wish, in advance, to extend my congratulations to your organizations for the success you have already had in calling to the attention of the American public the manifest needs of the southern agricultural workers. Needs which have existed for a generation with little constructive effort to meet them. We all know of the efforts which have been made to thwart the organization of tenants and share croppers. The testimony of unimpeachable witnesses on this point is too strong. Anyone who takes the trouble to read the reports of your activities can hardly avoid a realization of the suffering which the leaders and members of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union have gone through to survive. The fact that you are meeting here today, after three years struggle, is evidence of your courage and determination and your belief in the justice of your cause.



It is well at the outset to take into account the difficulties and obstacles which mark every foot of the road towards greater security for those depending on agriculture for a living. To an audience such as this, whose daily life is agriculture, I feel a great hesitancy in attempting to speak on this subject for you know the details of the difficulties and the obstacles in a far more intimate way than I know them but it may be profitable for us, together, to review some of the major problems in the rehabilitation of the South.

In the first place, we have to remember that southern agriculture is an integral part of a national and a world agricultural economy and we have to recognize that as long as this is true, the South cannot lift itself by its own bootstraps but will be compelled to depend on the reconstruction of our national agriculture and the revitalization of our foreign trade.

At the peak of our relief load in 1935 there were more than a million families in the United States who had been dependent on agriculture but who had been so unsuccessful in weathering the depression that they had been compelled to seek public assistance. This number was on the relief rolls in a single month. It has been estimated that at one time or another during the depression some two million farm families have received relief. This gives us a measure of the insecurity of farmers throughout the nation.

The more we analyze this situation the more it becomes apparent that this was not primarily a phenomenon of the depression of the 1930's. Federal relief called attention to a numerous group of farmers and farm laborers whose distress arose from longtime factors, who had lived from hand to mouth for years before the financial depression, and for whom relief, the Works Program, and the Resettlement Administration offered the first

public agencies afforded. It is now known that agricultural depression began long before 1929 and that relative to industrial prices, agricultural prices began to decline soon after 1910. In addition, in many parts of the country, farmers had attempted to produce crops on soil which either should not have been brought under the plow or which has been mined until its fertility is lost. Soil erosion had been allowed to continue unchecked until over 150 million acres of land had lost all or most of its top soil. In some areas, farmers were attempting to make a living for large families on farms too small in size. In many sections, devotion to a single cash crop amounted to almost a worship of cotton, tobacco, corn, or wheat. More and more the practice of neglecting the production of food and feed crops spread, leaving the farmer vulnerable to the price fluctuations of a world market. A good many farmers also speculated in land values rather than farming their land, consequently, mortgage burdens accumulated rapidly. Opportunities for earning wages in off seasons were also dwindling as the timber, coal, and other minerals were progressively depleted in some areas.

All of these disadvantages to agriculture operated more or less generally throughout the nation and in turn, had their effects in the South, but, in addition to all the other agricultural sore spots, the South had its peculiar institution of slavery, since the Civil War we have had the peculiar institution of tenancy, the direct lineal descendant of slavery. A map recently prepared by the Works Progress Administration shows a remarkable coincidence of the areas of heavy tenancy in 1930 with the areas of heavy slavery holding in 1860.

Again, I will not presume in an audience of this kind to engage in a technical discussion of tenancy since you yourselves are tenants or are



intimately associated with the tenant group. But I shall call attention to the fact that the handicaps of the tenant were not born of the depression, but were gradually evolved of a long-standing economic system and a firmly established pattern of social traditions and customs. Any institution which is so dependent on the world market, upon the national agricultural structure and which is so strongly entrenched will not be easily changed. I say this merely to encourage you not to weary in the face of obstacles and disappointments, for anyone who is endeavoring to promote such a fundamental change in society should be forewarned that these obstacles will appear and these disappointments will be met.

One further factor needs to be considered as contributing largely to the insecure position of southern labor, that is the pressure of population on resources. The increase in population of the country is now coming almost entirely from the nation's farms, especially since the stoppage of European immigration, and the southern farms are producing far more than their share of this natural increase. Of course, this increase of population has wide significance in social and institutional fields but we may confine ourselves at the present to its effects on the labor market. It means first that for every available farm there are several maturing farm boys and in periods of depression, when these boys do not move to the city, they compete for farm jobs in a glutted labor market. On the other hand, it means that when they do move to the city they compete with industrial labor at a low wage level. It has been definitely shown

that differential wages between the South and other sections of the country are greatest in those jobs which can be filled by unskilled farm boys and least in those jobs where a period of training or apprenticeship is necessary before the job can be performed. This emphasizes the interdependence of southern agriculture with southern industry and national industry. It tells us why industries owned by outside capital are locating in the South. They see in this mass of poverty a cheap and exploitable labor supply. The intelligent training and direction of these future laborers of the nation is a matter of gravest national concern and one not limited to the confines of the southern states.

I suppose, however, that you are not interested in hearing me recite the catalog of misfortunes with which you are already thoroughly familiar. I can see that the question which is uppermost in your mind is: What can be done about it?

If the South is to achieve the place it so richly deserves in the national economy, its plane of living must be raised to a level which is more nearly compatible with standards of health and comfort for the masses elsewhere. It would be futile for anyone not a professional economist, statistician, political scientist, or social worker combined to try to map out a definite blueprint of how this can be done. There are, however, certain considerations which point the way. Considerations which revolve around changes in the basic economic structure. No amount of preaching of the gospel of hard work, of frugality, or rugged individualism will suffice to improve living conditions. Such improvement can result only from a concerted and determined effort on the part of southern workers, southern industry, and southern



agriculture, aided by the Federal Government with the clear understanding that problems of the South are national in their effects.

The first, and one of the most obvious points of attack which is apparent to even the most superficial observers of southern agriculture, can be made on the credit system. No one in the South, be he tenant, banker, landlord, or merchant, is satisfied with the credit structure which drains so large a proportion of the South's farm income into the reservoirs of financial centers. It is the outcome of a vicious financial system which has fastened itself on the region, along with the devotion to the one crop cotton. The Rural Rehabilitation Division of F.E.R.A., and later of the Resettlement Administration, has been able to make some headway in assuming risks which the commercial and the intermediate credit banks would not formerly assume for two reasons: (1) By making a large number of loans the risk has been spread over a great many sections and a great many clients, and (2) the loans have been accompanied by a type of supervision which the merchant or banker is not in a position to give to his borrower. In other words, the loan has been accompanied by advice and aid of the type most calculated to increase the income of the borrower, and thus, insure repayment. This is obviously beginning at the right point, but only a beginning in proportion to the vast amount of high cost credit which is still used.

The most obvious method of raising the standard of living is to be expected from an increase in the effective incomes of the farmers. The Department of Agriculture and the State Experiment Stations have a number of

programs in this field which need to be pressed to the limit. These range all the way from retirement of submarginal land to various devices designed to obtain parity prices for the farmers. Another method, and one which is less in the public mind, is in the line of reduction of costs of production and of marketing the product.

It is evident from the recent report of the National Resources Committee on Technological Trends that the technical improvements in agriculture are likely to continue at least as rapidly as they have in the past. It has been estimated that from 1870 to 1930, the output per agricultural worker increased from 100 to 150 percent. A similar increase per worker over the next 20 or 30 years would mean that the same agricultural production could be maintained with a reduction of 33 percent of the labor supply.

I would not, under any circumstances, oppose the reduction of farm costs by mechanization of crop production, but we must recognize that this is an existing trend and will bring with it the need for drastic adjustments in the labor supply and the demand for continuous vigilance on the part of those who are primarily interested in the human values in agriculture as opposed to cold production economics. Herein lies a challenge for all programs with a humanitarian viewpoint.



If the level of living of some families is to be improved, it will be necessary not only to effect greater efficiency in the production of the total income, but also more equity in the distribution of that income. I am not of the school of thought which would assert that all landlords are overgreedy and grasping and too prone to exploit their labor. However, I know that owing to his lack of control of capital, his lack of education and experience, his poor bargaining position which is due largely to the pressure of population, and to his lack of prestige and political power, the southern farm worker is particularly vulnerable to exploitation unless protected by a strong public sentiment and social legislation. It is the function of labor organization and governmental regulation to provide this protection.

The improvement of landlord tenant leases is a field in which England is nearly 100 years ahead of this country, to such an extent that English operating farmers would for the most part prefer to be tenants rather than landlords, keeping their capital in livestock and machinery rather than in land. The general technique which they have adopted in this field has been the careful supervision of leases by local boards and the provision that improvements made in land or buildings shall be paid for by the landlord when the tenant leaves the farm.

It is significant that the adoption of more equitable leases was one of the principal planks in the platform put forth by the President's Commission on Tenancy. It is of equal importance to an organization of this nature that the recommendation of this commission was directed entirely at the States and not at the Federal Government, since it was deemed impossible under the present constitutional limitations to promote a policy of Federal control of farm leases. The

adoption of any such program of improved leases by considerable proportion of the southern States, however, will depend upon the building of a far stronger and better organized public sentiment than now exists. Here is a task to which all people in organizations interested in the upbuilding of the South can devote themselves.

It may be too much to expect in the immediate future, but some of us present today may live to see wages and hours legislation, and unemployment insurance extended to agricultural workers. Other nations of the world, concerned lest their farm workers sink to the coolie level, have taken such steps and are well content with the results. It is not too much to hope that the future may add these bulwarks to the security of the American worker.

When we turn from the economic to the more purely social objectives of improvement in standards of living, we are immediately confronted with the present low levels of housing, diet, public health, and education of farm workers.

It is to be recognized that exactly the same type of house is not required in the South as is required in a colder climate, but the fact remains that whatever measure is applied, whether it be value of dwelling, number of rooms in relation to occupants, conveniences, such as piped water, sewerage, or sanitation, the shelter on cotton farms ranks below that of any large group in the country.

Similarly, the devotion to the one money crop has, to a ruinous degree, excluded the production of those articles which enrich the diet of more self-sustaining farmers. A glance at the Southern Regional Study, produced at the University of North Carolina, will provide ample evidence of the South's deficiencies in consumption of milk, meat, and green vegetables, and its devotion to pork, grits, and gravy.



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There is no need to point out to a group of this kind that, associated with these deficiencies in housing and diet, we have high infant mortality and the almost peculiarly southern diseases of pellagra, malaria, and typhoid. It is indeed a scathing indictment of King Cotton that he has kept so many of his subjects ill-housed and ill-fed. It is high time that we demand an improvement in the welfare of the subjects.

A genuine and lasting improvement in the standard of living will not come without a genuine desire for a higher standard which in turn is dependent upon education and efficient financing of education and its sister, public health, depend upon the equalization of opportunity between the poor and the richer sections of the Nation.

The guarantee of the minimum amount of education and of other public services consistent with the national interest is difficult without Federal equalization between States because of the wide differentials in regional wealth and income. Again the contrast is between rural and urban, agricultural and industrial wealth.

In addition, students of taxation agree that, with the integration of business and concentration of large incomes, it is practically impossible for a State which does not contain one of the large financial centers, to tax the wealth which is actually produced in the State and for that reason the broader tax base of the Federal Government should be used to collect from large surpluses and redistribute to the sources of the actual production of true wealth.

The resulting inequalities in the tax base have placed six times more economic power per child in the richest State than is possessed by the poorest State and four times as much power in the richest quarter of our 48 States as

there is in the poorest quarter.

This indicates that the inequalities in our State educational offering are not so much the result of a lack of interest in or of willingness to support schools but of an absolute inability to secure funds to provide opportunities comparable to the income receiving States of the industrial and financial areas.

We, therefore, have a condition where the States with the most rapid natural increase of population and the largest proportion of school children are those least able to support education by reason of the fact: first, that they depend so largely upon agriculture for income; and second, that so large a proportion of the income from their natural resources and from the processing of their agricultural products is collected and concentrated in other regions.

I wish today that we had a wider audience of people actively interested in raising the standard of living of the southern farm worker. For those outside the South, I would quote Booker Washington's famous aphorism, "You cannot hold a man in a ditch without staying there with him." The economy of the Nation cannot hold so great a proportion of its population in the ditch of depressed agriculture without staying there with it.

For those professional people of the South and manufacturers and business men of the Nation at large, I would call attention to the fact that when we say, "Raise the standard of living" we are, in fact, saying, "Increase the purchasing volume."

Southern farmers work in jeans overalls and for all too many of them, a pair of jeans overalls is all that they have to turn aside the sun and harsh weather. They work in brogans and for all too many, these coarse shoes must



office for all occasions. Their children are often too naked to go to school. How much more pleasant would it be for the farmer, as well as profitable for the shoe and clothing merchants, if he could purchase an extra suit and pair of shoes for Sunday, and if his children could be fully and decently clothed. Likewise, it would be more profitable to the southern lawyers and doctors if they had good and steady paying clients. Also, increased spending power would make for the development of a dairy and cheese industry in the South and increased sales of processed foods.

In other words, there is no conflict between you who are attempting to form a cropper union, others who are forming textile unions, and the objectives of the New Deal, and the ultimate desires of the manufacturers and merchants who are in business for profit.

What I am trying to say is that there must be fundamental adjustments in the distribution of the national income if America is to march forward to a balanced progress instead of being strangled by the epicurean excess of the privileged classes as were Egypt, Greece, and Rome. I am also stating that your job is a part of this redistribution process.

We had a national income of 80 billion dollars in 1929, but the distribution of that income was not such as to prevent a great deal of human insecurity and misery. This unbalance of income led to misery and want among the unemployed during the depression which in the past 5 years has run up a relief bill amounting to billions of dollars. This must not happen again. It is not unreasonable to divert 8 or 10 billion dollars of an 80 billion dollar income as a preventative against want through the process of Federal taxation and Federal expenditure for smoothing out the unequal spots in our economic life.

The New Deal is merely a reflection of the growing conviction on the part of the American people that there is plenty for all and that all people can and should have a share in this plenty; that there is no reason for anyone in America to go without decent food, shelter, or clothing; that there is every reason why every last American should have some of the good things of life beyond mere food, shelter, and clothing.

Those who are opposed to this belief seem to fear that the process will take something away from them. We are not interested in taking away from anybody but are concerned that when we have prosperity we shall have balanced prosperity which will add some of the good things of life for those who now suffer in want. We believe that we should strive to see that future increases in the national income shall accumulate in the pockets of those who need the increase, not in the pockets of those whose land is already flowing with milk and honey, two cars, and numerous servants.

We are not only interested in more equitable redistribution of national income and the improvement of the standards of living of the lower tenth but we are also concerned with the democratic exercise of power.

Do not deceive yourselves. Efforts to set up such controls of power will meet with a blinding smoke screen of objections from the powerful. Prosperity, of a sort, has returned and those in power will endeavor to drug the workers with the doctrine that we should do nothing to endanger profits. But prosperity of the brand of 1929, where 36,000 families at the top had an aggregate income equal to that of 10 million families at the bottom is not the kind of prosperity in which the New Deal is interested. It is not the kind of prosperity which will make



America permanently great.

The New Deal insists that if America is to be permanently great, its lawyers, its doctors, its merchants, its landowners, its bankers, and its laborers will unite on a policy of wide distribution of the benefits of prosperity and not on a policy of monopolistic control of profits.

More decent living standards for the southern tenant is an important part of this larger pattern of social justice--a part which is as essential to the upbuilding of America as it is to the upbuilding of the South.