

The 'Wetback' Racket

Big Agriculture wants to import foreign labor to undermine U.S. labor

By Hank Hasiwar

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THE FOUR TO FIVE MILLION farm workers who harvest the nation's food and fiber products are our "forgotten people." They are not covered by any of the elementary social legislation which now virtually blankets U. S. workers—such as child labor, social security, unemployment insurance, minimum wage-and-hour, or collective bargaining laws. At the same time, they are the victims of a small group of corporate farmers who, in their hungry pursuit of the dollar, carry on a systematic campaign of oppression against the workers who make possible big business in agriculture. Moreover, the corporate farmers, working through powerful and respectable lobbies such as the Grange and the Farm Bureau, have won many allies in Congress.

The corporate farmers—or, as they are called in California, "suitcase" farmers—are only a small minority of the nation's 6,000,000 farm operators. Half of the latter are sub-marginal farmers; that is, they earn less than a living wage and do not hire any labor—many of them, in fact, must supplement their incomes by hiring themselves out as laborers. The remaining half employs 1,150,000 regularly employed farm hands and 3,700,000 harvest hands. But fully 50 per cent of the labor force in agriculture is employed by the mere 120,000 farmers who fall into the corporate group.

The influence of the "suitcase" farmers became very apparent recently when the House Agricultural Committee and U. S. Senator Clinton Anderson of New Mexico, former Secretary of Agriculture, made a



WETBACKS ILLEGALLY CROSSING RIO GRANDE CAUGHT BY BORDER PATROL

organizations of farm workers and obtaining their assistance in meeting problems of labor supply; the simple but basic question of checking statistically the amount of foreign labor actually required. But such sane procedures might put a crimp into the plans of those who want to flood U.S. agriculture with cheap labor. And cheap labor, plus prices far above even the high support-prices guaranteed by the Government, meant two Cadillacs in each "suitcase" farmer's garage and two mink coats for the Missus.

The "suitcase" farmers and their "apple boys" in Washington are, of course, clever at masking their aims. They are so adapt at wrapping themselves up in the mantle of the "small farmers," for example, that even liberals are deluded. And not only do they pose as the messiahs of the small farmers—who, as it happens, hate the "suitcase" boys with a venom unmatched by the farm laborers themselves—but also as great benefactors of those "poor, ignorant foreigners" who at long last have their great chance to make an American buck. Some of the "poor, ignorant foreigners" are taken in, unfortunately, as are many liberals, who seem to think that whoever criticizes the importation of labor must have "racist" views.

But behind this smokescreen operate men who have no illusions as to the issues involved. Take, for in-

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stance, former Congressman Pace of Georgia, who is now a highly paid lobbyist for the corporate farmers. At an executive session of the Subcommittee on Farm Labor of the House Agricultural Committee, on December 7, 1950, Pace said:

“I have always been concerned with the education of children, but when men’s lives are being sacrificed [in Korea], I see no reason why children should not do their part in national defense by working on the farms.”

Pace then called upon a Department of Labor attorney to prepare standby legislation which, if ever put on the statutes, would undo the years of work of organized labor and social welfare agencies to halt the exploitation of children.

Also at this Subcommittee session it was revealed that Pace had instructed Don Larin, head of the Farm Placement Service, to bring in as large a group of Mexican agricultural workers as possible for employment by corporate farmers. Larin protested that that would be a difficult job, since the Mexican Government refused to allow its nationals to migrate to the U. S. A. without guarantees as to wages and working conditions. Whereupon Pace angrily inquired whether Mexico could not be forced to send laborers to this country. Another Subcommittee member wanted to know if Mexican adults could be brought into the U. S. but their children left behind.

If the “suitcase” Congressmen have their way and legislation is passed to import 400,000 laborers, the “grapes of wrath” period will seem a golden age compared with the fate in store for immigrants who will have no labor legislation to protect them against the vicious exploitative system of the farm corporations. For-

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Unfortunately, the issue is not entirely up to Congress—the Mexican Government, for one, will have a lot to say. The National Farm Labor Union (AFL) has already brought the problem to the attention of the Mexican trade unions, among whom it has aroused deep interest. Joint programs are being worked out between the Farm Labor Union and Mexican farm unions to protect migrant labor. But corporation money talks in Mexico, too, and the labor movement down there is running into its share of difficulties.

The tide of Mexican workers which has been flooding north of the Rio Grande illegally, in recent years, is of increasing concern to the United States. The problem of these “wetbacks”—so called because they supposedly get wet crossing the Rio Grande—was first brought to public attention in 1947, when Professor George Sanchez of the University of Texas issued a report estimating that at least half a million wetbacks were then in the U. S. The U. S. Immigration Border Patrol, which is notoriously undermanned, apprehended and returned to Mexico no fewer than 180,000 wetbacks in California alone last year. A substantial number were second and third offenders; and, of course, a much larger number have never been caught. As a result, the deportation of wetbacks is a big joke in California, as immigration officers themselves admit. There is simply no control over the continuous stream of labor which moves back and forth across the border all the time.

The illegals are lured into the United States by the prospect of making money and living in the ideal climate of states such as California.

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They pour in through border towns which happen to be natural gateways to huge commercial farming areas—called, in the West, “factories-in-the-field”—where they are met by labor contractors or “headhunters.” At Mexicali, for example, a Mexican border town just south of California’s Imperial Valley, 25,000 Mexican farm laborers pour in monthly. They hang around Mexicali until they get a chance to jump the border into a farming state—California—which uses up to half a million workers at the peak of the harvesting season, and into a region—Imperial Valley—which is the fabulously rich heart of the nation’s winter-vegetable producing industry.

OWNERS ANTI-LABOR

Imperial Valley, with its mild winter climate and highly successful cash crops, is probably the greatest single employer of wetbacks outside the Rio Grande Valley in Texas. And Imperial Valley is owned lock, stock and barrel by the Associated Farmers of California—a notorious vigilante and anti-labor organization which the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee exposed more than a decade ago. Now Imperial Valley alone uses 15,000-17,000 agricultural workers during the peak, which lasts about three months. A year ago this time, there were more Mexican than U. S. citizens working there, the overwhelming majority of them wetbacks. This fact has depressed Valley wages by at least 30 cents in comparison with wages paid further north. The movements of “wets” into Imperial Valley has also, ironically, displaced many naturalized Mexican-Americans and their families and forced them to move north, particularly into the San Joaquin Valley, where better wages

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and employment can be found. Imperial Valley storekeepers have been complaining about the resultant loss in revenue; and some of them have been compelled to shift too. All this makes for resentment between the wetbacks and Mexican-Americans, among whom altercations have already broken out.

UNDERPAID

The exploitation of the wetbacks by agricultural big business is perhaps the most sordid chapter of all, a chapter that will go down in labor annals alongside stories of the sweatshops in the period of the Triangle Fire. Not only is the sheer work in Imperial's factories-in-the-field back-breaking, but in return the wetback receives a pittance . . . or *no pay at all*. In one recent week an harassed Mexican consular officer in the Valley turned over to the State Labor Commissioner 390 wetback claims for unpaid wages. Add to these other thousands elsewhere in the state who received similar treatment, but feared complaining to the authorities. Why? It's simple. After he has deprived the wetback of his wages, the big farmer, if he is so inclined, can go to the Immigration Service—which is always ready to oblige—and demand that his illegal workers be deported. So the wetback is faced with the choice of accepting whatever his employer gives him, even if it is nothing but shelter, or of being deported.

The nature of California's factory-style agricultural economy produces sudden demands for huge quantities of labor for rather short periods of time. This labor is supplied by contractors who receive a commission deducted from the worker's wages. Many labor contractors specialize in

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Many labor contractors specialize in supplying wetbacks, from whom they not only take commissions but also the cost of transporting, housing and feeding them. According to the President's Commission on Migrant Labor, which conducted an investigation in 1950, the contractor may also supply his wetbacks with liquor, drugs (marijuana) and prostitutes. The wetback is lucky if, at the end of a year's employment, he has enough money to take himself back to Mexico.

The wetbacks have been used to break every strike called by the National Farm Labor Union in California in the past three years, and there have been five large ones. In the famous Di Giorgio strike—the longest in U. S. history—wetbacks were brought in by the trainload from as far away as El Paso, Texas. In all cases, the union experienced difficulty in getting the Immigration Service to remove the strikebreakers, the Service claiming that it did not want to appear to be “taking sides in a labor dispute.” The wetbacks who are usually used to break strikes are new to unionism, and therefore ignorant of the issues involved; wetbacks who have been in the United States any length of time tend to support strikes.

RACE TENSION

Sometimes racial friction develops among the farm workers, who represent a polyglot aggregation. It is as common for the Negro as it is for the Filipino or the “Anglo” to make critical generalizations about the Mexican, whether the latter is a citizen or not. Although all groups indulge in derogatory comment or some form of social coercion, Mex-

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ican illegals are more often "scapegoated" because they are at the bottom of the social heap. Fortunately, the efforts of the Farm Labor Union have kept serious situations from developing. The union has made the farm workers aware that it is uncompromising on the issue of racial solidarity; its locals and its leaders are representative of the various racial groups: Mexican-American, Filipino, Negro, "Anglo." But the importation of hundreds of thousands of foreign workers—in the cruel haphazard fashion advocated by the big farmers and their lobby—will almost certainly aggravate unemployment and lay the ground for racial disturbances which will not easily be checked.

A PROGRAM

Head-on racial collisions can be avoided if sensible and just action is immediately taken. Such action should include:

1. Fines for the hiring of wetbacks.
2. Controlled importation of foreign labor, to permit domestic farm workers to obtain employment first.
3. Coverage of foreign workers by the same social and labor legislation that applies to U. S. labor.
4. Permission to foreign workers to join agricultural unions.

The realization of such a program would make for unity of interest and purpose among farm workers, and simultaneously bring about those orderly conditions essential to the production of farm products in full abundance. It would also help our good neighbor policy and make it more difficult for Communists to penetrate Latin American labor

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unions with their hate-America gospel. Not least, it would halt the physical and spiritual destruction of literally millions of foreign and American workers. In this, our nation's most trying hour, we cannot afford to lose sight of our most precious asset—our concern for human welfare.