

AGRICULTURAL WORKERS STRIKE

Memphis, Tenn.

TO the Editors: From time to time, an event with profound implications for our democratic way of life goes almost unnoticed. Such an event is the strike of fifteen hundred agricultural workers of all races and creeds under the leadership of the National Farm Labor Union on the Di Giorgio Farms Corporation near Bakersfield, California. The strike was called on October 1, after corporation officials had refused the many appeals of the union to meet with union representatives to discuss hours, wages and working conditions.

This strike is unique and deserves the support of forward-looking citizens for a number of reasons.

First, the Di Giorgio Corporation is the world's largest fruit-producing corporation and is to large scale industrialized agriculture what the Ford empire was to the automobile industry. If the National Farm Labor Union wins the strike, it will be possible to proceed rapidly to the organization of the migratory and other agricultural workers of California. Such organization is a precondition of rationalizing the industry and channeling migration in a just and orderly manner, a situation which will benefit growers and workers alike.

The Di Giorgio Corporation would settle with the union were it not for the pressure from the Associated Farmers whose activities against the civil and economic rights of migratory workers were brought to light during the investigations of the LaFollette Committee. The strike has therefore become a battle between the Associated Farmers, representing large-scale industrialized farming interests, and the National Farm Labor Union, representing the lowest group on the agricultural ladder.

Second, this strike is the first known instance that foreign nationals have been forced by the U. S. Government to become strikebreakers. While all the workers are out, except a few supervisory employees, 130 Mexican nationals working under contract between the Mexican and American Governments have been forced to work by the Department of Agriculture under threat of deportation. This action by the Department of Agriculture brought a vigorous protest by the Mexican Embassy to the Department of State. The State Department promised that the nationals would be removed, but so far the Department of Agriculture has taken no action. The use of foreign nationals as strikebreakers sets a serious precedent that must not be allowed to go unchallenged.

Third, the strike is a heartening example of cooperation between rural and urban workers. The teamsters have shut off all supplies to the Di Giorgio Farms and the railway workers have refused to move trains through picket lines. The American Federation of Labor Central Labor Union in Kern County as well as a citizens committee is active on behalf of the strikers.

Fourth, the National Farm Labor Union unites workers of all creeds, races and national backgrounds in a cooperative effort for the common welfare. From its inception the National Farm Labor Union (formerly the Southern Tenant Farmers Union) has been inter-racial and has made an outstanding contribution to the overcoming of inter-group tensions in American life. On this basis, it has organized agricultural workers who might have formed a backbone for a fascist movement in this country.

This strike has been conducted in a well-disciplined and orderly manner, without violence. It has grown to such proportions that the Weedpatch Church, formerly used as strike headquarters, had to be abandoned. A friendly sheriff offered the union the local jail, then conveniently free of occupants. The strike is now being conducted from the jail, thus reversing a well-known process.

It is unnecessary to review for your readers the conditions under which these migratory workers live. The "Grapes of Wrath" gave a graphic picture of their life. To these men and women, their union and their friends all over the country are their hope for a better life. If you would like to help them, please send your contribution to National Sharecroppers Fund, Inc.—Strike Relief, 501 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. All funds will go directly for the relief of needy families.

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