



BAPTIST PRESS

News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

460 James Robertson Parkway
Nashville, Tennessee 37219
Telephone (615) 244-2355
W. C. Fields, Director
Jim Newton, Assistant Director

REGIONAL OFFICES

ATLANTA Walker L. Knight, Editor, 161 Spring Street, N.W., Atlanta, Georgia 30303, Telephone (404) 523-2593
DALLAS R. T. McCartney, Editor, 103 Baptist Building, Dallas, Texas 75201, Telephone (214) RI 1-1996
WASHINGTON W. Barry Garrett, Editor, 200 Maryland Ave., N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002, Telephone (202) 544-4226

BUREAU

BAPTIST SUNDAY SCHOOL BOARD Lynn M. Davis Jr., Chief, 127 Ninth Ave., N., Nashville, Tenn. 37203,
Telephone (615) 254-1631

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Church Leaders Ask Labor
Rights For Farm Workers

7/14

WASHINGTON (BP)--Spokesmen for major religious groups have asked Congress for legislation to include the nation's farm workers in the provisions of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA).

Protestant, Catholic and Jewish leaders appeared at hearings before the Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor. They pleaded that justice and human dignity demand that farm workers be included in the protections that are afforded industrial workers under the act.

The same problem was attacked on another front. Almost the entire July edition of Home Missions Magazine edited by Walker L. Knight, was devoted to the plight of the Mexican-American farm workers in Texas. The magazine is published by the Southern Baptist Convention's Home Mission Board, Atlanta.

Asking for better treatment for this "second largest disadvantaged minority in the United States," Knight said, "Surely a minimum first step would be coverage of these laborers by the minimum wage law and by the National Labor Relations Act."

Sen. Harrison A. Williams Jr. (D., N.J.) is chairman of the Subcommittee on Migratory Labor. He held hearings three days in Washington on bills to (1) include farm workers in the NLRA, (2) establish a National Advisory Council on Migratory Labor, (3) extend the child labor provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 to certain children in agriculture, and (4) provide a voluntary farm placement program.

The spokesman for religious groups focused on the NLRA as their primary target for improving the conditions affecting farm workers. Recent farm labor problems in Florida, Texas and California have brought the issue to national attention.

Speaking on behalf of the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism, Rabbi Richard G. Hirsch pointed out that the "dictates of morality" outweighed all objections to justice for farm workers.

"In a sense, Moses might be considered the first labor organizer, and in his discussions with Pharaoh of Egypt, he was the first to engage in the collective bargaining process," he said.

"We believe that men are servants of God and not of other men," the rabbi continued. "An employer can pay for an employee's time and toil, but he cannot possess his person," he argued as he asked for legislation to help "those least able to protect themselves."

John McCarthy testified on behalf of the Bishops' Committee, the National Catholic Rural Conference and the Social Action Department, U. S. Catholic Conference.

He said that the social teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, the views of every pope in this century and the expressions of the Catholic bishops of California and Texas affirm "that society must allow, safeguard and protect the right of any group to organize for its own protection and economic betterment."

"This natural right of the farm workers to organize has been frustrated for 33 years and will continue to be frustrated unless legislative machinery is put into motion to bring it to an end," the Catholic spokesman declared.

A Methodist minister, Luther E. Tyson, director of the Department of Economic Life, the Methodist Church, spoke on behalf of the National Council of Churches.

Tyson said that "Christian tradition has always emphasized mutual aid and cooperation as practical expressions of the command to love God and neighbor.

"It is our deep conviction that such mutual association with others to achieve legitimate ends is a basic need and right of all in a free society," he declared. This applies to farm workers as well as industrial workers, he said.

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Mrs. J. C. Schroeder, Rock Valley, Iowa, spoke for Church Women United, National Council of Catholic Women, National Council of Jewish Women, National Council of Negro Women and the Young Women's Christian Association.

She pointed out that women have taken the lead in other movements to relieve oppressive conditions. She cited the suffrage movement, the abolitionist movement, the plight of children of seasonal farm workers, minimum wage for farm workers and child labor laws.

"This same concern motivates our testimony today in support of legislation that extends to all agricultural workers protection of their collective bargaining rights under the National Labor Relations Act," she said.

Mrs. Schroeder pointed out the poverty of migrant farm workers. Their average wage per year is \$1,000, she said. "A settled worker from California may earn \$1,500 to \$2,000 per year. With the help of his wife and children the income may go above \$2,500," she continued.

The only way farm workers can correct these conditions she declared, is for channels to be open to them the same as has been provided for industrial workers of the nation.

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Hunger In America Called 623
'A National Emergency'

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By Beth Hayworth

WASHINGTON (BP)--Hunger in America has been described by a United States Senator here as "shocking and as constituting a national emergency."

Chairman Joseph S. Clark (D., Pa.) of the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower and Poverty made this observation as he opened hearings on the particular problem of hunger in America.

The subcommittee heard reports of malnutrition, disease and inadequate medical facilities among the poor in several states. Because of recent claims of "starvation" among Negroes in the Mississippi Delta, most of the testimony related to this area.

Throughout the three-day hearings members of the subcommittee and witnesses pointed out that the situation, while severe in Mississippi, is by no means unique.

One witness, a physician, said that the situation in many areas was so critical that an emergency program of health education is needed. He recommended that churches be used for this.

Allen C. Mermann of the Yale University Medical School said that "organizations such as small churches were the perfect spot" for trained laymen to help educate the chronically poor on matters of nutrition, health and the community services available to help fight poverty.

Earlier this year members of the subcommittee held hearings in Jackson, Miss., on problems of poverty in the Mississippi Delta. They also toured areas of the state where they reported seeing people "suffering from the effects of acute malnutrition and hunger."

Sen. Clark said the committee wanted to find out as much as they could about hunger in America, its effect, its extent, and what is being done and should be done about it.

The hearings aroused open and heated debate between a panel of six physicians who reported "starvation" conditions to the committee and Senators James O. Eastland and John Stennis (both Democrats from Mississippi) who denied that there is "mass malnutrition" among the people there.

Sen. Stennis also disagreed about the need for emergency government action, saying the solution to the problem should be gradual, one that would not come "tomorrow" or "even a year from now." It would have to be "done by the right people, at the right time, in the right way," he said.

The six doctors, one of whom is Dr. Cyril A. Walwyn of Yazoo City, Miss., spent several days studying health conditions among the poor in Mississippi.

When asked to define the kind of starvation they said they found there, Dr. Robert Coles of the Harvard University Health Services said they did not mean the kind of starvation where "people drop like flies," but "a slow starvation where the body consumes itself."

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"Thin arms, sunken eyes, lethargic behavior and swollen bellies were everywhere to be seen," said Dr. Raymond M. Wheeler, Charlotte, N. C. "Even cursory examinations...disclosed unmistakable evidence of anemia and vitamin deficiencies," he said.

Other witnesses described Mississippi's high Negro infant mortality rate--the highest in the nation. They told of the prevalence of untreated illness in children and adults and the dearth of medical facilities for the poor.

Mississippi State Health Commissioner, Dr. Archie L. Gray, did not agree. He and Dr. William E. Lotterhos of the Mississippi State Medical Association, said that health care in Mississippi is good and that little or no nutritional anemia has been found.

Dr. Gray said this view reflected the findings of many competent public health officials whose daily work over a long period brings them in contact with children in the areas considered most deprived.

He and Dr. Lotterhos both said they did not deny that there are problems of some degree of malnutrition or other types of medical and health problems in Mississippi.

They objected, however, that publicity of the hearings seemed to imply that the situation is worse in Mississippi than elsewhere in the nation.

Secretary of Agriculture Orville L. Freeman told the subcommittee that because of the rapid mechanization of the cotton fields in the Southeast, and because many farm owners cannot meet the minimum wage requirement, it is estimated that "40,000 to 60,000 people with little or no cash income may be living in the Delta area this summer."

Secretary Freeman and other members of the administration were criticized by both Democrats and Republicans for their failure to take drastic emergency action to relieve the situation in Mississippi and elsewhere.

Freeman reported to the subcommittee on the government's food stamp program that will enable more poor people to eat better for their food dollar. The program has been liberalized and stamps that previously cost \$2.00 are now available for 50 cents. Members of the subcommittee want the food stamps to be free.

Both secretary Freeman and Surgeon General William H. Stewart, praised Mississippi health and welfare officials for cooperation with federal programs. Mississippi leads the nation in the number of counties participating in the government's food programs.

Dr. Wheeler was asked by a member of the subcommittee if three or four days was sufficient time for such a study as the physicians made. He replied, "There is doubt in mind that we've given you an accurate picture."