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Strategies for Change: Migrant Workers in Indiana

Louis Rosenberg

There are enormous problems which beset migrant workers throughout America. In an effort to come to grips with conditions of the downtrodden in Indiana a symposium was held recently on the campus of Indiana University which dealt with possible mechanisms for changing the inhuman plight of the farm worker. Wages, housing, and working conditions are major areas which account for the debased and squalid situation of the worker.

In Indiana the farm work period extends from May through December. The peak seasons are August and December when approximately 15,000 farm workers harvest tomatoes. The casual recruitment methods used and personal contact with growers or crew leaders who hired the worker in prior years, do not lend for binding contractual agreements such that working conditions are improved. The lack of organization of migrant workers coupled with the need for coordination of the programs of concerned agencies militate success in any appreciable degree as regards the status of the migrant worker. Thus, political lessons can be learned from prior legislative efforts concerning the farm worker—especially agencies, organizations, or individuals seeking change. The need, then, is for thorough and careful planning, structuring, organizing, and pooling of resources to accomplish desired ends.

AWARENESS OF STRUCTURE

Preliminary to any attempt to obtain success in this area one must communicate with farm workers. It is important to talk personally with as many workers in various camps as possible. The point is to indulge in a program of self-education as to the intimate feelings and problems of the workers. Needless to say, such self-education process cannot be gleaned from reading about situations; one must visit the sites, view the conditions, and discuss the frustrations the worker faces daily.

This editorial excerpt is from a conference held with Louis Rosenberg, Director of the Center for Law and Poverty, Indianapolis, Indiana, subsequent to a symposium on Farm Workers held at Indiana University—WDW.

As a result of first hand knowledge one can devise remedies more easily to apply to various situations. For instance, if workers are concerned with schooling for their children, the immediate remedy may be to approach the local board of education. Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) provides specific funds for these purposes through the local school district. Community Action Programs (CAP) may well aid in dealing with immediate frustrations. Once the particular situation is known—both from communication with migrant workers and knowledge of aims and purposes of existing institutions within the area—various options can be established to deal with problems.

THE LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Priorities must be established to form a workable strategy. Each possible problem must be closely scrutinized and evaluated. First hand awareness becomes increasingly important for balancing individual worker's needs against the needs of the workers as a whole. Such item importance may differ depending on the particular camp. That is, education may be an issue in one area whereas wages or pestitude may be more important in another.

Alternative remedies must also be evaluated. Even if there is a first priority listing it is necessary to have an alternate listing so as to effectively deal with all possible issues. For example, if a legislative priority deals with funding then its possible alternative could concern regulation.

Upon making decisions as to priorities and alternatives it is important to conduct preliminary tests of such priorities in order to determine the ones which might succeed. Legislative "trial balloons" are useful devices to ascertain barometers of legislators feelings regarding proposals. Based upon the result obtained assignment of an important issue, say, is made and forcefully pursued unrelentlessly. In the event of an impasse, negotiation or compromise is always possible as a secondary measure.

LEGISLATIVE TACTICS

In any effort to assure the passage of a bill one must engage in political analysis. Legislators—allies and enemies—must be ascertained with the idea of reaching some type of appeasement such that one's objective is accomplished with a minimum expenditure of energy.

Legislators, then, are categorized in at least three ways: positive, negative, and in-between. Some will be sensitive to the efforts advanced;

some, bitterly opposed; and others, undecided. After the initial contact, the need for informing, or educating legislators as to the nature of the problems ensue. Indeed this is no mean task because many legislators may already have their priorities ordered. To change this circumstance may well demand a great deal of persuasion. This aspect of persuasion is difficult at best especially when one considers that each legislator's first responsibility is to his constituents. What he is being asked to do may not be of concern to him directly nor to the body which elected him.

The leaders, then, of the political parties must be contacted for they wield great influence in many matters of general interest. They can also be helpful through advising one of the probabilities of passage of legislation at a given time. Key persons or persons who are respected both within and without the legislature provide sources of assistance in one's efforts. Moreover, all attempts should be made to make the Governor aware of the particular legislation which is of interest. The legislative council ought to know everything there is to know regarding the legislation. That is, the representative of the specific administrative agency should be well informed as to the purposes, aims, and desired outcomes of the legislation. Many times legislators, in seeking more information regarding an issue, prefer corresponding with administrative agencies as to feasibility and support of such matters. The point is that at the legislative level everyone who may be remotely affected by the legislation must be contacted and, hopefully, persuaded to join in the campaign for passage of the desired bill.

Although it is wise to contact officials as mentioned above, one must not overlook the talents of persons within the group which is pushing for legislative action. For instance, within a given group persons may be found who possess skills such as typing, filing, answering the telephone, or salesmanship.

While these tasks may seem mundane to some, they provide the basis for launching and sustaining the drive toward enactment. Every talent within the group must be utilized to the greatest extent; maximum use of "in-house" human resources is mandatory for the accomplishment of the group's aim. Needless to say, without complete utilization of available resources the failure of one's purpose is almost assured. Within this sphere one should look for support from other groups which may be sympathetic to the cause of concern. For instance, the Center on Law and Poverty can provide statistical assistance and various types of counseling; reform groups within the state can assist, say, in providing advice as to avoidance measures; social or club groups may be persuaded to join the effort; poverty lawyers, law school teachers, and law school students provide legal sources which may be utilized in sundry ways.

Once the resources have been located and defined an assessment must be made as regards the better means of accomplishing the goals sought. These goals and the priorities set may well determine whether it would be wise, for instance, to lobby in the statehouse or, possibly, to merge efforts and resources with other "like" groups. Compromises may be needed. If there is a stronger group which is operating in a similar area, it may be necessary to join them in their efforts for the immediate accomplishment of their goal in exchange for reciprocal assistance. It may also be possible and necessary to merge with a state-wide group so as to assure a wider degree of awareness for the issues involved. Again, this may entail compromising but not to the extent of abandoning the initial project.

Although these suggested strategies for change are general in that they must precede any desired action, they provide relevance for splinter groups working in Indiana for improving the status of the migrant worker. Organization of efforts, utilization of resources, and persuasiveness of goals are much needed mechanisms for those whose efforts are concerned with the migrant worker. The failure of any appreciable gains within Indiana may well be directly related to the absence of these strategies.