

Critique

“An Invisible Minority” is a well-written, sensitive, and on the whole, accurate article which could have been written a decade ago. I am reminded by it of an astronomer who periodically releases to the press a statement outlining the difference between astronomy and astrology as a professional obligation. So too, people need to be reminded of the terrible toll extracted from migrant worker families.

Often when severe societal problems are identified two institutions are targeted for blame and reform—the family and the schools. The private reforms began at least twenty-five years ago with the schools and some family services, leading to the modest public effort so well illustrated by Laughlin.

There have been some positive results from the various programs over the years which are not the subject of this article but which I think are significant enough for mention. First, large numbers of migrants and their advocates have learned how to gain access to the social welfare system. Second, many migrant programs have provided employment to migrants themselves. One result of these two factors has been that more migrants are settling in communities away from their home-base area.

In my opinion, however, both the causes and direction of permanent solutions to the migrant family’s plight are not to be found in the familial and educational settings. The basic reason for the problem has been the policy, both indirect and overt, of subsidizing the cost of food for the urban population at the expense of the rural sector. This wealth transfer has been the cornerstone of American industrial growth. The process began with the opening of the Great Plains in the nineteenth century, accelerated with the massive mechanization of agriculture during the Great Depression, and it continues even more rapidly with the substitution of machines for labor. An examination of priorities by people concerned about the migrant family should keep in mind that farm labor was excluded from the National Labor Relations Act from the beginning in 1935. This pattern of priority continues today.

The technological fix of mechanizing agriculture solves the basic social problem of feeding the growing population and more recently pays for massive imports of petroleum. A crisis point is rapidly approaching, however, as the economic balance of labor versus machines is tilting to more labor in the field. A re-ordering of economic and political priorities must be accomplished using the

broader perspective outlined above in conjunction with the knowledge and experience chronicled so well by Laughlin.

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