

# REPORTS AND INQUIRIES

## Organised Movement of Seasonal Farm Workers

### Methods Adopted by Some National Employment Services

*Below is a summary of a report prepared by the International Labour Office in reply to requests for information concerning action that might be taken by employment services to organise seasonal agricultural employment. No attempt has been made to include all countries that endeavour to regulate the movement of seasonal workers—the purpose of the study is to describe the principal methods used by the employment services in certain countries.*

Agricultural employers experience considerable seasonal difficulty in balancing their manpower requirements throughout the year. Whatever the methods used, the steps taken or the crops grown, there are peak periods when an abundant supply of labour is needed. The problem with this seasonal work (grain and vine harvesting, fruit picking, beet hoeing and harvesting, etc.) is to satisfy the strong local demand for labour. The lack of mobility of farm labour, the shortcomings of rural housing and difficulties of transport are all problems that have to be solved if a satisfactory balance is to be achieved between labour supply and demand and if some regions are not to go short of essential labour while others suffer from seasonal unemployment.

To overcome these difficulties it is necessary to organise the labour market through employment services, which must be in a position to register any seasonal or other fluctuations in employment levels and to take action to direct available manpower as rationally as possible.

The organisation of the placement of workers is also an essential part of the campaign against unemployment, especially seasonal unemployment in agriculture, since on it depends the efficacy of the various measures taken to increase security of employment, such as diversification of agricultural production, the creation of rural industries and of alternative occupations, and the vocational training and retraining of farm workers.

In this connection some random examples are given below of the methods adopted by various national employment services to direct seasonal labour rationally.

*Austria*

For some 20 years agricultural placement offices have been used in Austria for the recruitment of seasonal workers, especially sugar-beet workers. Austria's sugar supplies depend to a great extent on the manpower available for beet hoeing and harvesting in Lower Austria, Burgenland and Upper Austria. Until 1930 the workers came from neighbouring countries, chiefly Slovakia ; but in order to be independent of foreign labour, the Austrian employment service undertook not only to recruit but also to train the necessary national labour force. As a result of its efforts the number of foreign seasonal workers employed had greatly diminished by the beginning of the second world war. In 1946 the employment service resumed its work of recruitment and training, the aim of which is not so much to find employment in other sectors for seasonal workers during the winter as to stabilise agricultural manpower in general. For the beet campaigns the employment offices in Lower Austria try to recruit the necessary workers on the spot by calling, in the first place, on the families of local farm workers, of Austrian farm workers in other provinces and of unemployed workers or industrial workers on short time. The chance to earn good wages for a short period and also to receive a certain amount of sugar attracts some underemployed farm workers (small farmers and their families) and, by increasing their income, encourages them to remain in agriculture rather than change to another economic sector.

*Belgium*

The placement services of the National Placement and Unemployment Office play an active part in the organisation of seasonal farm labour in Belgium. Their efforts have been strengthened by the Order of the Regent dated 15 May 1949 to extend social security to seasonal farm workers and the Order dated 2 June 1949 approving the General Convention of 17 January 1949 between Belgium and France concerning social security for seasonal workers. Since farmers must in any case apply to the National Placement and Unemployment Office to settle administrative questions regarding social security, they are prepared to conclude contracts for seasonal labour with the official placement offices. Workers, too, are eager to report to the placement offices so as to secure all the benefits of social legislation. When seasonal work is finished workers are not abandoned to their own fate but are paid unemployment benefit until they find work again.

The Placement Service has estimated that about 15,000 workers are engaged every year in the various seasonal farming occupations. This labour force works from the beginning of May until the end of November on the following jobs : beet hoeing, flax weeding, hay making, tobacco cultivation, pea and bean picking, etc., flax pulling, grain harvesting, hop picking, potato lifting, and beet harvesting. The two largest jobs are beet hoeing and harvesting. The employment service, in agreement with the Joint National Committee for Agriculture, promotes the placement of beet hoers and harvesters in the following manner.

Each regional office with surplus seasonal manpower keeps two permanent card indexes, one for migrant seasonal workers and the other for farmers regularly employing this type of labour. Before each season the farm placement offices get into touch with the farmers whose names appear in the card index and make a list of demands for seasonal workers.

The demands are embodied in a collective contract drawn up on a form prepared by the Placement Department and submitted to the Joint National Committee for Agriculture.

Furthermore, each regional office in whose territory there is a surplus of seasonal workers has a placement officer, provided with some rapid means of locomotion, who is responsible for recruiting workers. He travels round the rural districts and uses the indications in the card index to find likely candidates. The information obtained is sent to the Placement Department of the National Placement and Unemployment Office and published in a national bulletin. Regional agricultural offices in need of seasonal workers can in this way make direct exchanges of labour with those having a surplus of seasonal workers.

The contracts signed by the farmers are sent by the regional office concerned to the local recruiting office, which submits them to a group of seasonal workers and endeavours to have them signed by group leaders. Where small groups of only two or three men are concerned the placement officer himself forms the teams and chooses the leaders. A few days before the work starts the recruiting office hands the group leader a collective card of introduction to the employer, and forms giving entitlement to a 75 per cent. reduction on railway fares.

When work starts the local placement officer makes sure on the spot that the workers he has engaged have reported for work and that the work is running smoothly. If more workers are required he at once takes steps to supply them.

To make sure that this highly specialised branch of the employment service will work as efficiently as possible the Placement Department of the National Placement and Unemployment Office carries on an intense publicity campaign at the national level by means of announcements, articles in the agricultural press and contacts with the different organisations concerned—farmers' federations, farm workers' unions, and the Department of Agriculture. The regional offices are responsible for local publicity—lectures to farmers, regional radio announcements, articles in the local press and contacts with State agricultural authorities.

Finally, the Placement Department of the National Placement and Unemployment Office sees to it that the Joint National Committee for Agriculture fixes the wage rates for migrant seasonal workers in good time.

In addition to these movements in the internal employment market, there is the seasonal emigration to France of some 16,000 to 20,000 workers, depending on the size of the harvest. The recruitment and placement of Belgian seasonal workers for the various beet seasons (hoeing, harvesting and stripping) are arranged between the Belgian and French authorities before each season, and details of the number of workers required and the general conditions of work are embodied in an agreement signed by the authorities.

The administrative procedure for the transfer of these seasonal workers is as follows. The General Confederation of French Beet Growers collects the contracts drawn up by the French growers. These are sent to the French immigration authorities at Tourcoing, who forward them to the Belgian emigration authorities in the same town. The Belgian authorities send the required number of contracts to the Belgian regional employment offices, which recruit workers willing to go to France. Just before they leave the regional offices hand the seasonal workers their contracts and travel warrants, and give them all the information they require.

*Canada*

As a result of climatic factors the geographical and occupational flexibility of manpower plays an important role in Canada. In 1920 the provincial authorities took steps to organise the movement of seasonal workers through provincial employment offices.<sup>1</sup> During the second world war the Federal Government, in order to ensure that the necessary manpower would be available for agriculture, concluded agreements with the provinces for the recruitment, transport and placement of workers in agriculture and related industries. Under one of the clauses of these agreements transport costs are shared equally by the Federal and provincial Governments. They also share the cost of transfers between provinces.

The agreements have resulted in close collaboration between the officials of the Federal and provincial Departments of Agriculture and Labour and officials of the National Employment Service. Because of the excellent results obtained the scheme for the provision of farm labour has been maintained at the request of all the provinces, and farm labour agreements are concluded by the Federal Government with the provinces each year.

For farm work the National Employment Service works as follows: usually each local office has an official with some experience in agricultural matters who deals with farm employment supply and demand, in close collaboration with representatives of the provincial Governments, especially in important farming areas. From the end of March until October the National Employment Service organises the movement of seasonal workers for maple sugar harvesting, small fruit and tomato picking, apple harvesting and packing, hay making, grain harvesting, and tobacco curing and handling.

The largest movement is that of harvesters from Ontario and Quebec to the prairie provinces for the grain harvest. This involves, first of all, an estimate of the number of workers required, made by the provincial Governments and communicated to the Federal Department of Labour. Arrangements are then made through the National Employment Service to advise by circular all offices located in the areas where recruitment is to take place, namely, those where farm work has been temporarily completed, so that the removal of farm workers will not have an adverse effect on the agricultural position in the area. Provincial government representatives are closely consulted on these matters and agreements are reached as to the areas from which labour is to be drawn. Arrangements are made by or for the Department of Labour with the railways concerned, through the Canadian Passenger Association in Montreal, to provide transport at low rates. Usually the worker is required to pay a nominal sum for his outward journey, and the remainder of the outward costs is borne by the provincial and Federal Governments. After the completion of a minimum number of days' work in agriculture the recruited worker is provided with free (or very cheap) transport back to his home.

As soon as the date for beginning recruitment is decided all local employment offices are notified. Crop conditions determine this date, which cannot be forecast very far ahead. Local offices in the recruiting areas get in touch with all the workers who have applied for work, or

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Organised Movements of Seasonal Workers in Agriculture*, in *The Labour Gazette* (Ottawa), July 1949.

who are known to be seeking such work. Each day the distributing officer at Winnipeg reports the number of workers required at the various harvest points. This information is passed to the centres of recruitment. The recruiting offices in their turn advise Winnipeg, usually through the regional office at Toronto, of the number of workers available. These are not despatched until specific approval has been obtained from Winnipeg.

At Winnipeg an up-to-date list is maintained of the areas in which workers are required and the number required. Recruited workers are received at Winnipeg and are there provided with transport to the railway station nearest the place of employment. Arrangements are made, usually through the provincial agricultural representative, for these workers to be received at the station and transported to their ultimate destination. Local National Employment Service officers and provincial agricultural representatives visit them from time to time and arrange their transfer to other areas of employment at the appropriate time.

Apart from these seasonal movements within the Canadian frontiers there are movements of workers from Canada to the United States whenever there is a demand for farm labour. Like the national harvesting campaigns, these migrations across the border were reorganised during the war and regulated by the Hyde Park Declaration of April 1941. In years when the crops are exceptionally abundant Canadian workers from the prairie provinces travel to the mid-western and southern states for the grain harvests and work their way northwards with the crops. In addition to the individual workers a number of combine-harvesters and crews usually cross the border. After grain harvesting the main types of farm work done by Canadian workers in the United States are beet hoeing and harvesting in Montana, and potato picking in Maine and North Dakota.

When the farm labour season is over the National Employment Service, assisted by the agricultural committees, tries to find employment for workers who want it in other industries, mainly in logging, which absorbs most of them. Others are employed in coal mining on the prairies and in meat packing factories.

### *France*

The agricultural placement offices in France were taken over by the Ministry of Labour on 1 January 1946. The head of the Agricultural Manpower Office, who reports to the head of the manpower service for the department, co-ordinates all operations connected with the supply of agricultural labour. One of his responsibilities is the organisation of the movement of workers for big seasonal jobs, such as grain and vine harvesting, and beet hoeing and harvesting. At such times he has employees of the manpower service of the department at his disposal, whose offices are open on market days at the places usually frequented by farmers.

Arrangements are made between the departments by which those that are short of labour are supplied with workers by those that have a surplus. For beet hoeing and harvesting in France seasonal labour is recruited in the departments of Brittany, where the labour offices make a careful selection of those seeking employment. Each department in Brittany is allotted a number of "corresponding" departments in the rest of France, which are responsible for sending it contracts for seasonal farm workers signed by employers.

The employment offices keep in close touch with the workers' and employers' organisations represented on the agricultural subcommittees attached to the regional offices and on the joint committees attached to local offices. In this way they can collect the information required for the smooth running of the service. Quarterly inquiries into the manpower requirements of agriculture are made by the regional agricultural manpower offices and submitted to the competent sub-committee for approval.

### *New Zealand*

New Zealand provides a particularly interesting example of the part that can be played in seasonal migrations by a well-organised employment service. Every year some 12,000 workers who from August to January are occupied in farm work proper or the processing of farm products have to be transferred to other employment for the next six months. As a result of the close collaboration between the National Employment Service and the Ministry of Public Works, this transfer from one employment to another is made smoothly. The Ministry keeps in reserve a number of public works which could not be executed during or after the war and which are necessary because of the increased population of the country. Each of these works, which are financed in whole or in part by the Ministry, is given a relative priority, account being taken of the urgency and the manpower available. At the end of the summer the regional offices indicate how many seasonal workers have to be found new work by the Employment Service during the winter months and, on the basis of their reports, the Ministry of Public Works draws up its plans.

The National Employment Service helps workers who are willing to be transferred from one job or region to another in the following ways: (1) it advances them the money for their fares, which may or may not be repayable; (2) it advances them money for other travel expenses; (3) it pays them an additional family allowance if they are separated from their families; (4) it helps them to find lodging.

Free transport is provided for workers leaving their families for work in a priority industry (coal mines, sawmills, dam construction), for those who would be unemployed if they did not leave a given region, and for those sent to another region to a job provided by the Central Employment Office under the adjustment scheme or taking up a job under a Ministry which reimburses travel expenses.

When the Employment Service organises the transfer of workers, it first makes sure that they can be lodged by the employer or in boarding houses or in the camps or hostels of the National Employment Service. The last type of accommodation is usually reserved for workers living separately from their families in a part of the country where they could not otherwise be lodged or fed suitably. Moreover, the Employment Service encourages employers to build workers' hostels wherever local labour is inadequate or where there is a housing shortage.

### *Sweden*

The rationalisation of farm work in Sweden has sharply accentuated the seasonal nature of that branch of the economy in the last few years. The use of tractors, combine-harvesters and milking machines has made it possible to reduce the number of workers permanently employed on large farms, and to do without permanent employees entirely on small

farms. On the other hand many more seasonal workers are needed for the big jobs in summer time. Since spring work can be done more quickly the various harvests follow one another more closely, and work such as threshing, which, before machines were used, was done through the autumn and even in winter, is now concentrated into a period of a few weeks. Fluctuations in the demand for farm labour are therefore much more marked than hitherto, and the employment service makes special efforts to find employment for farm workers in other industries during the winter months. Lumbering, which may be said to be complementary to agriculture, absorbs a large number of them. Those for whom it has been impossible to find alternative employment are engaged for public works in accordance with a precise programme, which is part of the Government's policy of full employment. The employment service and the investment division work together closely under the same authority—the Central Labour Market Board and the 25 county labour market boards—in drawing up this programme. To ensure that these public works can be started at the best possible moment, the National Employment Service has recently concluded an agreement with the Federation of Swedish Industries, the Confederation of Swedish Employers and the Swedish Industrial Production Board regarding the notice to be given by employers for the dismissal of workers. This agreement provides, *inter alia*, that employers must notify county employment offices in good time of any measures affecting seasonal workers, so that they may be found alternative jobs.

#### *United Kingdom*

The United Kingdom Government's policy of full employment calls for the movement of labour, including farm labour, from one occupation or area to another, according to the needs of the labour market. The role of the employment service is therefore to collect the necessary statistics by means of monthly surveys of movements of the labour market, to supply workers with the most reliable and complete information on employment opportunities and working conditions in other occupations and areas, and to encourage them to transfer to other areas wherever practicable, having regard to the state of the labour market and the accommodation available. Under the Employment and Training Act of 13 July 1948 the employment service may grant financial assistance or loans to help workers to transfer from any part of Great Britain to employment in other areas. The Act further provides that the employment service must make all necessary arrangements to transfer workers again when such employment ends.

At harvest time, particularly in late summer or early autumn, labour for agriculture becomes a matter of the first importance and, before the various jobs start, the regional controllers of the Ministry of Labour, who are responsible for co-ordinating the supply of seasonal labour in their regions, arrange conferences of representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture and other interested departments and of employers' and workers' associations. Usually a large proportion of the labour required consists of casual workers who work for the same farmers' year after year, and the farmers enlist the help of the local offices of the Ministry in getting into touch with these workers. The main work of the conferences, therefore, is to try to assess the numbers needed to supplement this regular supply and to put in hand plans for recruiting them. Under statutory provisions travel warrants are issued to the workers con-

cerned and those who wish are accommodated in agricultural executive committee hostels. Farmers employing seasonal workers must undertake to retain them for a minimum period and to pay for their accommodation. When farm work is finished, the employment service tries to find other employment for the seasonal workers.

### *United States*

There are three categories of seasonal farm workers in the United States: casual workers (students, housewives and old persons); the families of small farmers who leave their homes at certain times of the year to increase the family income by taking up agricultural employment elsewhere for wages; and migrant workers with no fixed home, who follow the harvests from south to north.

The United States Employment Service has set up a specialised department concerned with employment in agriculture and related industries, in an effort to save the last category of workers from migrating aimlessly and to help them to find employment—if possible, alternative employment. The purpose of the department is to secure the harvesting of crops at the right time by providing farmers with enough qualified workers and to direct available farm workers to continuous employment. It is advised by a special farm labour committee representing all the States and composed of recognised leaders in agriculture and related industries.

To facilitate their work 80 per cent. of the local offices of the farm placement service are in areas from which the farm workers come or in which they are employed. The offices exchange accurate information on the state of crops, on the basis of which a co-ordinated recruitment plan can be prepared in time, and at all levels. The available manpower is distributed among the States by a system of adjustment.

Along main highways used by migrants the Farm Placement Service has stationed trailers and other temporary farm labour information offices at strategic points. Signs posted along the highway tell the migrants where the stations are to be found. The stations issue work-guides and charts showing the areas in the United States where different types of farm work are done, the periods when there is usually a demand for labour, and other useful information. As the itinerant offices keep in close touch with the local offices, they are in a position to give workers the latest information.

### CONCLUSIONS

The above examples show how employment services can help to stabilise employment in agriculture. Of course, they cannot do useful work unless other employment opportunities for farm workers during the dead season exist or are created, and their main task is therefore to help in transferring seasonal farm workers rapidly from one job to another. In this respect certain conclusions may be drawn from the cases quoted on the preceding pages:

(1) Employment services can play an important part in the rational distribution of seasonal labour. This is amply proved by the work of vocational training undertaken by the Austrian placement offices in order to provide the seasonal manpower required to maintain the



country's sugar supplies ; the extremely thorough work done by the Belgian and Canadian employment services for the recruitment, transfer and control of seasonal farm workers ; and the organisation of hostels and camps for seasonal workers in New Zealand and Canada.

(2) A well-organised employment service can regulate the supply of farm labour by finding new employment for farm workers whose jobs are finished.

(3) From some of the information gathered it is clear that the efforts of employment services are more effective where seasonal workers are covered by social security.

(4) The problem of finding employment for seasonal workers is closely linked to the geographical and occupational mobility of labour. The I.L.O. Recommendation (No. 83) concerning the organisation of employment services (1948) specifies what measures the service should take in this connection, and it may not be without interest to repeat them here. The employment service should collect and disseminate the fullest and most reliable information concerning employment opportunities and working conditions in other occupations and areas and concerning living conditions (including the availability of suitable housing accommodation) in such areas. It should facilitate transfers of labour by granting financial assistance adapted to national and individual circumstances (travel and subsistence allowances and separation allowances) to workers prepared to accept employment in other areas. It should assist the unemployment insurance and assistance authorities in defining and interpreting the conditions in which available employment which is in an occupation other than the usual occupation of an unemployed person or which requires him to change his residence should be regarded as suitable for him. And, finally, it should assist the competent authorities in establishing and developing the programmes of training or retraining courses, selecting persons for such courses and placing in employment persons who have completed them.

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