

THE CALIFORNIA POLL

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EASE BRACERO BAN IF HIGHER FOOD COSTS WILL RESULT FROM HIRING DOMESTIC HARVESTERS SAYS CALIFORNIA PUBLIC

by Mervin D. Field

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High state and federal officials, growers, labor unions, and even the lowly farm laborer have all been having their say about how California's bounteous crops are going to be harvested now that the law allowing for entry of Mexican "Braceros" for agricultural work has expired. However, one voice which has not yet been heard in anything like its proportionate importance is the consuming, tax-paying, voting public.

The California Poll has recently completed a survey of a cross section of the public on this issue and it finds mixed opinions. One definite thought shared by almost half of the California public is that there are enough American workers to harvest the crops, but current wage levels are probably too low to induce enough of them to work in the fields. However, less than a majority of the public is willing to pay higher food prices to offset higher wage levels for domestic farm workers.

Behind these two clear cut patterns of public attitude exist two uncertainties: Just how much would prices go up if higher wages and benefits were paid to domestic workers, and would enough Americans be willing to do the necessary "stoop labor" required of farm workers even if they were paid higher wages and given better housing?

In a survey completed during the first week of this month, following considerable publicity occasioned by a personal investigation of the problem here in California by U.S. Labor Secretary Williard Wirtz, a representative group of Californians from all parts of the state was asked:

"Until recently, California growers could employ Mexican farm workers, called 'Braceros' to help harvest the crops. Recently, the law expired which allows these Mexican laborers to come into the United States. The growers say they can't find enough American laborers to work for current wages paid to farm workers. The Government says that enough American workers could be found and the growers must hire them. How do you feel? Do you think there are enough American workers who will work in the fields harvesting the crops or not?"

The division of replies shows that 49% think there are enough American workers, 37% do not think so, and 11% say they think there may be enough at certain times but not at others. Only 3% had no opinion.

(MORE)

The California Poll was founded in 1946 as a medium for promoting public opinion research. The California Poll is completely independent of all political parties and candidates. Its sole purpose is to report public opinion accurately and objectively. Most of the financial support for the Poll comes from newspapers and television stations that have exclusive rights within the city of publication. The Poll utilizes accepted scientific sampling and questioning procedures in obtaining the data reported in its releases. Representative samples of adults are interviewed at periodic intervals on election issues and other socially important questions of the day. Proportionate numbers of people of both sexes, from all parts of the state, from different sized communities, and of all age, economic, political, and occupation groups are included in the samples. Major surveys are made with samples of 1,200 or more respondents. Interim surveys sometimes are made with smaller samples but not less than 600 interviews.

While one in two think there are enough American workers, many feel that "wages are too low to attract domestic workers -- they could make more elsewhere", and "Americans won't do that kind of back-breaking, stoop labor work."

There exists sharp division in opinion as to why enough Americans do not apply for farm work. One view typical of many people was offered by a bar owner in Lakeside who said: "There are enough Americans available but housing and working conditions are poor." Representing another view which is heard as often is the statement of a commercial pilot in Fresno that, "Welfare takes care of Americans; they would rather collect unemployment."

Another question designed to tap the question of cost was asked:

"The growers say that to get enough American workers, they will have to pay them much higher wages than they pay for Mexican workers and this will cause food prices to go up. If that's true, would you be willing to pay higher prices for these food products--or would you prefer the growers to use Mexican workers if it would keep food prices from going up?"

Just slightly more than one in three Californians (37%) said they would be willing to pay higher food prices to support a higher wage level for domestic workers. A larger number (43%) said they would prefer the growers to use Mexican workers if it would keep food prices down. Those having a mixed opinion on this question amounted to 14% and 6% had no opinion.

Comments supporting these positions indicate that those willing to pay higher food prices feel strongly that Americans should have the work and/or that farm workers should be treated better, not only with higher wages, but with better housing.

Those who want to hold food prices down even if it means the continued importation of Mexican laborers say that they can't afford to pay more for food. In addition, the belief expressed earlier that "not enough American labor is obtainable anyway and Mexicans would do a better and faster job" was mentioned frequently.

Even though Congress has allowed the law to expire which permitted importation of Mexican laborers, Wirtz has the authority to import some workers if a real emergency exists. However, he has stated that he wants the growers to pay higher wages and improve working conditions, and to exhaust every avenue before he will use this power to bring in foreign workers. He maintains that paying high wages would have only a negligible effect on food prices.

Growers have maintained that if they pay more it would raise food prices, which would limit the market, and that the wages still wouldn't be high enough to encourage the necessary number of Americans to work in the fields. They charge that Wirtz is allowing importation of foreign workers in other states such as Texas and Florida, and that if already higher California wage rates are further increased, California agriculture will be placed at a serious disadvantage.

As of today, the California public seems to be expressing a desire to go along with the growers if it is a question of cost. However, if the impact on cost is slight, they do favor the idea of using American labor where possible.