The lowest-paid and least-protected workers in the country were given a setback this past summer. These are the agricultural workers -- the numerous big groups employed in large-scale, corporate agriculture (not the hired hands employed on family-type farms.)

The setback took place in Louisiana. But it carries with it a threat to workers in all states where they are employed in large numbers in corporate farming. The Louisiana agricultural workers were singled out for what appears to be punitive legislative action by the State Legislature.

From 1954 till last June, along with all other workers in the state, the agricultural workers had been subject to a general right-to-work law. This law, like other such laws, gave employers legal sanction to refuse to accept union shop or maintenance of union membership provisions in contracts with their employees.

This law was repealed in June but at the same time a new right-to-work law was adopted applying to agricultural workers. The latter measure was backed by the leaders of organized labor in Louisiana in return for repeal of the general law. The definition of "agricultural worker" was expanded in the new measure before adoption to include sugar and rice mill and cotton compress workers.

The action in Louisiana was approved by the AFL-CIO Executive Council at its meeting late in August. President George Meany was quoted by the press as saying, however, that he probably would not have agreed to the arrangement if he had been in Louisiana at the time.
This episode brings into focus the significance of conditions among agricultural workers in relation to the nation's social and economic welfare as a whole. There are roughly 2 million such workers. Half of them are migrant. The hired hands of family-type farming comprise only a fraction of the total number. The gap is very great between wages of agricultural workers and wages of industrial, craft and service trades workers. Current rates of Louisiana sugar cane field workers range, for example, between 50¢ and 60¢ an hour.

Exploitation of this type of worker in areas of the country where large-scale corporate agriculture is dominant is recognized to be a considerable factor in accelerating the trend away from family-type farming. President Eisenhower expressed concern at this trend in a message to Congress early this year. Students of agricultural economics and sociology believe family-type farmers will never be able to compete successfully with large-scale, corporate farming operations as long as the latter are permitted to exploit agricultural workers at low wages and bad working conditions.

This inter-relatedness of the continuing rapid shift from family-type farming and exploitation of agricultural workers presents a challenge to voluntary organizations and their leaders concerned with our national well-being. It challenges government as well, both Federal and state. Church groups, above all others, have long tried to bring about at least amelioration of agricultural worker conditions. In large part due to their efforts over the past two decades, Congressional and Presidential Committees and Commissions have held numerous hearings, made many studies and
issued report after report on the various aspects of the agricultural worker problem.

Some improvement in working conditions has resulted. The workers remain, however, excluded from the protection of all labor legislation such as the Taft-Hartley Act and the minimum wage laws. For the most part they are excluded from the benefits of social welfare legislation. Only a fraction of them, for example, some under the Old Age and Survivors Insurance program of Social Security, do a major portion of them get protection.

The best immediate hope of these workers for improving their lot seems to lie in obtaining backing to get themselves organized sufficiently so that they will be able to use the traditional and effective method of union labor — economic action. This is difficult to accomplish because of the nature of their work, the distances involved between groups of workers, and the shifting from region to region for employment.

Since the mid-thirties when it started organizing the sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta, the National Agricultural Workers Union, AFL-CIO, has been valiantly trying to organize field workers in the face of multiple political and other obstacles. Its struggle has aroused only intermittent backing from the labor movement, during strikes. It has been helped to keep going — lacking steady per-capita payments of substance because of the pitifully low and irregular wages of its members — by small voluntary contributions year after year from hundreds of thoughtful individuals throughout the country who believe its efforts have basic economic and social value beyond the sheer humanitarian appeal involved.
The labor movement has apparently not shared this belief in the basic value of the National Agricultural Workers Union's efforts. At least such an inference is warranted from the record, especially from that record's latest entry, the Louisiana arrangement.

We, nevertheless, feel strongly that our nation's welfare will be served by encouraging every possible support, moral and material, for an organizing program among agricultural workers. Once it begins to be successful we believe its effects will be seen not only in helping to slow up and perhaps ultimately check the trend from family-type farming. We believe it will benefit the income levels of family-type and small farmers -- the 3 million with annual incomes of $3000 or less.

Improved incomes for these farmers plus increased incomes for the agricultural workers themselves -- a combined total of 20 to 25 million people -- could provide a significant bulge in purchasing power to help maintain an expanding and healthy national economy. Economists for the labor movement who base their reasoning in considerable part on the purchasing power argument will surely recognize this.

Moreover, leaders of the labor movement recognize they are confronted by steady drifting into the labor market of manpower displaced from agriculture through swift growth of large-scale corporate operations and technology and by displacement in industry through automation. They consequently cannot fail to see that organized labor's standards will not be secure as long as multitudes of unorganized agricultural workers remain as a vast labor pool, moving from place to place, upon which industrial management can draw. (The pool is significantly increased by the so-called "skips" members of the large bodies of Mexican braceros and other foreign workers imported under contract for agricultural employment who slip away from their contractual arrangements to high-wage-enticing urban labor markets.)
We are motivated in making this statement by humanitarian considerations respecting the agricultural workers and by the meaning their plight has for the welfare of the whole community. In making it we particularly note the fact that the United States is the only industrialized nation in the world in which agricultural workers are not largely organized and do not form a substantial and integral part of the general organized labor movement.

The results in agricultural worker income in countries with organized agricultural worker movements is in marked contrast to the situation in our country. Here the average agricultural worker wage is scarcely 32 per cent of the average non-agricultural organized worker wage. But in Sweden, for example, the agricultural worker wage is about 90 per cent of the other workers' average wage; in France it is about the same; in Holland it is about 85 per cent; in Great Britain it is around 75 per cent. These figures show what has been accomplished where labor movements have backed organization of agricultural workers.

One final consideration should be mentioned. Communists have always sought to obtain leadership of the agricultural worker and small farmer (peasant) masses. This will continue to be their policy. This is as true in this country as it is in the Far East and in Latin-America. Unless agricultural workers are given the kind of organizational backing their problems deserve, the risk will remain that their frustration might make them succumb to Communist leadership.