

AN ANALYSIS OF THE PUBLIC MEDIA COVERAGE
OF THE FARM WORKERS OPPORTUNITY PROJECT

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OXNARD, CALIFORNIA

BITTER ATTACK ON OXNARD PROGRAM

**Break in Impasse Over
Farm Workers Seen**

School For Poor? Let 'Em Starve

**Farm Labor
Training
Plan OKd**
First in Nation
Approved by U.S.
for Ventura

**We Don't Want Bracero
Program To Come Back**

**Wirtz Steals Workers,
Citrus Manager Charges**

VENTURA COUNTY
Star-Free Press

GOP hits poverty 'unionists'

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FARM WORKERS OPPORTUNITY PROJECT
OXNARD, CALIFORNIA

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PREFACE

Note:

This report on a special manpower project was prepared under a contract with the Office of Manpower, Policy, Evaluation and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, under the authority of the Manpower Development and Training Act. Organizations undertaking such projects under Government sponsorship are encouraged to express their judgement freely. Therefore points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent the official position or policy of the Department of Labor.

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1) INTRODUCTION

The Farm Workers Opportunity Project was a federally funded basic education program for seasonal farm workers in Ventura County, California. It was financed under the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962 as an "experimental and demonstration project." The project was initially developed in late 1964 and Spring of 1965 with broad community support. It was first designed to give farm workers the vocational skills in agriculture that would enable them to successfully master all principal harvest skills needed in the area. The program was designed to assist the local agricultural industry in the transition from a reliance upon imported Mexican National workers (braceros) to a reliance on local domestic labor. The project was funded as a deliberate attempt to help solve the labor shortage that was anticipated with the end of Public Law 78 by offering seasonal and migrant farm workers the opportunity to learn skills that would enable them to settle in Ventura County and take over the jobs that had been held in the past by Mexican Nationals. The transition to domestic labor was swift and certain. Little training or preparation was needed. In 1964 about 55% of the harvest activity in Ventura County was performed by more than 6,000 braceros. In 1965 only 660 foreign contract workers came into Ventura County and then only for two or three weeks.

The ease with which local farmers adjusted to the use of domestic farm workers eliminated a major funding rationale for the Farm Workers Opportunity Project. Farmer opposition to the vocational component in the project --an opposition which was based on the fact that they would not control the training to be given to the farm workers-- and the disclosure that there was a labor surplus in

the county rather than a labor shortage forced the Farm Workers Opportunity Project to limit its education activities to those of basic education without job training.

By the end of the Project, 208 farm workers received from six months to one year of Basic Education for which they were paid training allowances. The classes were given in a regular "institutionalized" manner, five days a week, six hours a day, thirty hours a week. Responsibility for the different components of the program was divided among three agencies at the local level. Oxnard Union High School District, assuming responsibility for the institutional training portion of the program, conducted the classes, selected the teachers and set up classrooms. The California Department of Employment was responsible for the final screening of applicants to the program, for the administration of the allowance payments, and for job development and placement. The Emergency Committee to Aid Farm Workers, the private sponsor of the project, was responsible for recruiting workers into the program, counseling trainees, assistance with job placement, community relations, special reporting and various other experimental tasks of the program. The U.S. Department of Labor provided the money for the program and determined project policy on a central level. Institutions involved with the Farm Workers Opportunity Project represented a number of different levels of public and private authority. Both federal and state agencies were involved while the main responsibility for the ongoing operations of the program was divided between the local public school district and a private agency. Confusion was common because of the complex inter-relationships between groups - a confusion which did not make it easy to obtain accurate reporting of the facts.

2) THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PUBLIC MEDIA REACTION TO THE PROJECT.

An important element in all Federally financed programs for the poor is their ability to get support for the programs and objectives on the local level. Throughout the course of the Farm Workers Opportunity Project its activities received generous recognition from the local news media. This coverage, as one of the many indexes of the community's reaction to the project, constitutes an important source material for assessing the impact of federal funds on the local level in a rural area. The response in the local media provides important answers to why target communities accept the goals and purposes of federal manpower programs, and point to reasons why this acceptance is secured by those who are running the programs. The roots of local opposition and the nature of the cultural and political tensions which are generated are also apparent. This report then is essentially an attempt to view a rural community's reaction to a federal project through the evidence that it presented in the local news media.

The limitations of using newspaper coverage to determine a community's reaction to a federal project should at once be obvious. Coverage of the project may be sporadic or biased. The attitudes revealed in the papers may vary with the political fortunes of the project, and it may be difficult to detect underlying themes of hostility or acceptance. The true community sentiment may never reach the newspapers. Editorials can sometimes serve as an index to the attitudes and values of the people "who count" or "run things", or they may simply reflect what the editors perceive to be the prevailing consensus in the community.

A paper may be dominated by narrow class interests, by the interests of its advertizers, or by political oligarchies which exist in the county. For this reason the values reflected in the papers may be narrow rather than community wide values. Finally, the news media may not be very revealing simply because the quality of the reporting is not very high. All these facts are true to some degree of the news media in Ventura County. Although the papers are not overtly dominated by any single economic or political interest, they tend to reflect the dominant middle class value system rather than a community wide consensus. This is less because of any overt control, than simply because the papers are themselves run by middle class people. Therefore in the following discussion of the reaction of the community to FWOP as seen through the media, we are primarily discussing the reaction of the middle class Anglo elements in Ventura County.

3) SUMMARY CHRONOLOGY OF MAJOR EVENTS AND PUBLIC REACTIONS CONCERNING THE
FARM WORKERS OPPORTUNITY PROJECT

August - September, 1964: First informal discussions between private sponsor and U.S. Labor Dept. officials on possibility of establishing a federally funded project to help eliminate bracero program.

November 28, 1964: Public Meeting in Oxnard, Project proposal discussed at community level by farm workers and local community leaders. Proposal was for vocational training tied to basic education.

December 3, 1964: Meeting between growers, Dept. of Employment and Emergency Committee to Aid Farm Workers to discuss proposed project, held in Ventura. Meeting was widely publicized as "Break in Impasse over Farm Workers," Training in citrus harvest skills was discussed as well as basic education.

January - February, 1965: Further meeting to plan project were held in Oxnard and Ventura. (Bracero program controversy rages around California and U.S. at this time.)

March 2, 1965: Los Angeles Times article announces approval of project in Washington D.C. Gives details of a vocational training program tied to basic education.

March 15, 1965: Contract between Labor Dept. and Emergency Committee to Aid Farm Workers signed. Emergency Committee hires staff for co-ordination of project, development and counseling work.

April 7, 1965: Congressman Teague makes first public statement in opposition to the Project. (quoted in local press)

April, 1965: Ventura County Citrus growers give up requests for braceros. Announce that they will rely on local seasonal and migrant farm labor.

May, 1965: Project design changes from that of vocational education tied to basic education to a program with basic education only.

June 30, 1965: Meeting of sponsoring agency representatives, five state Assemblymen, Project Director with State Superintendent of Schools (Max Rafferty) -Rafferty agrees to support and push for project.

July 28, 1965: Oxnard Union High School District Board of Trustees agree to consider sponsorship of basic education component of project.

August 25, 1965: Oxnard Union High School Board of Trustees agree (by a split 3-2 vote) to implement basic education component of the Farm Workers Opportunity Project.

November 15, 1965: First two classes begin. First forty trainees begin formal training for which they receive weekly allowances.

November, 1965 to January, 1967: Project underway in full. 208 trainees receive from six months to one year of basic education, thirty hours a week.

January, 1966: Controversy over reported "stealing" of farm workers from orchards. No recruitment in fields took place but workers who were living on ranches came into Farm Workers Opportunity Project.

January - February, 1966: Accusations by growers and in particular by Republican Associates of Los Angeles, that project was "unionizing" farm workers. Also that project was misusing public funds. No substantiating evidence given for charges.

Spring, 1966: Controversy over "shortages" of farm workers continue. Project claims there were surpluses, not shortages, growers say reverse is true.

March, 1966: Demands by local county War on Poverty agency. (Community Action Commission) that Project come under jurisdiction of local Commission.

May, 1966: First class of students graduate from six month course of basic education.

May 12 - 16, 1966: Series of five lengthy articles in Oxnard Press Courier very critical of Project. Articles are highly inaccurate and misleading.

September 1, 1966: Contract awarded by Labor Dept. to American Friends Service Committee to carry out special assessment, evaluation, counseling and completion of project -until summer of 1967.

January 7, 1967: Final class of trainees graduate from basic education program.

May - July, 1967: Final phases of experimental project concluded: Follow up studies, evaluation, assessment, special reports produced.

4) MAJOR THEMES REFLECTED IN PRESS REACTIONS

Many broad themes run through the news coverage of the Farm Workers Opportunity Project, and these themes occur independently of the political fortunes of the project. These themes are important indicators of the cultural tensions which are generated by a program of this sort. These themes can be summarized as follows:

The Themes: "Education as the American Road to Culture."

"Anglo Conformity versus Cultural Pluralism."

"Local Authority versus Federal Authority."

"Rural versus Urban."

"Local versus Cosmopolitan or Outside Leaders."

I. EDUCATION AS THE AMERICAN ROAD TO CULTURE

Education has long been perceived as one of the principal roads to success and culture. As the Farm Workers Opportunity Project in its final form was a basic education project it is very fruitful to explore the controlling ideas in American public education and the reaction to a federal education project for the disadvantaged in the Ventura County community.

a) Education and Local Autonomy

A strong tradition is that in educational matters local authority is supreme. The control of education: the hiring of administrators, expenditures, curriculum, etc., have traditionally been local or state matters. For this reason there was some resentment at the Federal and non-local nature of the Farm Workers Opportunity Project, and the question continually arose, "Why aren't local adult education classes good enough for the farm workers?" Local educational institutions were seen as sufficiently capable of ministering to the needs of the farm

workers in the community. This resentment was qualified, of course, by the fact that the program was administered through the local school system, under the watchful guidance of the local superintendant of schools. However, important aspects of the educational program were under the control of non-local elements, the recruitment and counseling portions of the program, and were administered by the Emergency Committee to Aid Farm Workers staff.

b) Education and Success

Americans throughout their history have been deeply committed to the idea that there is a causal relationship between education and monetary and social success. The establishment of a common school system in the nineteenth century and the expansion of the public high school in the early part of the twentieth century were supposed to alleviate through education some of the natural inequalities which resulted in a society organized around the principle of private property. As a basic education project, financed with public funds, the Farm Workers Opportunity Project was well within this tradition, and for this reason it was difficult to oppose the basic aims of the project. Few in the community would oppose outright a project designed to give migrant and seasonal farm workers more education so that they could improve their earnings and become better members of society. The opposition to the project arose from the way in which these commendable goals were carried out. Americans have been committed to the idea that there is a causal relationship between education and success, but the key to this process was that the individual took advantage of the local school system. In other words, the formula implied that the individual was highly motivated to begin with. This simply was not

the case with seasonal farm workers. Therefore, a persistent source of misunderstanding was the inability of the local community to understand that the farm worker's problems required special educational techniques. In part, the misunderstanding was compounded by the newness of the notion that poverty stemmed as much from environmental factors as from problems involving individual initiative.

c) Education as Social Conformity

Educational institutions in the United States have been designed to produce attitudes in conformity with a comprehensive white national middle class solidarity. The progress of a child through school tends to produce attitudes which are in conformity with the current national consensus. This fact is related to the nature of educational administration which has traditionally been left up to the local areas. The Ventura community saw the Farm Workers Opportunity Project as a source of discord and disunity in the County. This stemmed from the fact that rather than educating the Mexican-American Farm workers to become a member of the dominant middle class Anglo Society, the project emphasized the cultural distinctiveness of the Mexican, their potential as a source of political power vis a vis the Anglo community, and generally emphasized approaches which were in line with conceptions of cultural pluralism. These ideas were in conflict with the dominant local traditions in education which have seen the school as an ideal medium for inculcating the community's values into the children who are in school. This role of the school as an agent of social unity is advanced in the name of "shared values" and "Americanism", but more often than not the shared values which the school administrator talks about are the rather narrow Anglo-Conformist notions of the White middle class.

3) What value to place on Education?

One of the problems which the Farm Workers Opportunity project encountered was explaining and justifying the large expenditure of Federal funds which were involved. Traditionally, educational administrators, in part because they are vulnerable to the forces of local control which are concerned with the level of taxes, have emphasized the dollar value of education, and the dollar cost of education. When seen in this light, the project appeared both expensive and unnecessary. Dr. Crosby's final report emphasized that he thought the same goals could have been accomplished with the expenditure of a lot less money, perhaps entirely through the local adult education program. Crosby's formulation of the value of education reduces itself to the cost of education. Certainly, when considering the costs of the project, the value of the adult education program would tend to increase in the eyes of the local community. The failure of the job placement portion of the program created an impression in the minds of some people that either 1) the education portions of the program were a failure, or 2) that the individuals in the project were not sufficiently motivated after the project to find their own jobs. There is a general inability to understand such factors as the structure of the Ventura job market or racism which make it very difficult for minority individuals of low educational background to find jobs. The fact that individuals in the project were often unable to find jobs that represented some degree of vertical mobility created the impression that the education portions of the project were not fulfilling the role of providing possibilities for individual advancement and thus a dollar return on the dollars spent.

e) Education is something that goes on in the classroom

As we have noted earlier the classroom operation of the educational portions of the project were difficult to oppose because they fitted squarely with long standing American traditions. It was a different story with the counseling portions of the program, which were conceived by the staff as an essential part of the educational experience of the trainee. Here the project ran afoul of a cherished local belief which we can call the "education is something that goes on in the classroom syndrome." This feeling has two strong traditions which contribute to it. Contrary to the original idea that education is something which is absorbed from the environment, (as with the emphasis in the Nineteenth Century on the self-made man,) the Twentieth Century has stressed professionalization of the Teaching Corps, bureaucratization of school administration and in general, the teaching profession has become more self consciously professional. In addition, this professionalization contributes to the maintenance of the local value system because the people believe that cherished traditions are being passed on by competent hands. Thus the education in the classroom syndrome has two main psychological or social props, one the professionalization of education, the other the desire of the local community to pass on local and American traditions. The tradition of electing school boards has served as a link between the community values and the professional educators. By conducting extensive counseling sessions outside of the local school system the Project counseling staff called this whole system into question, and because of their lack of dependence on local sanctions and their lack of professionalization, this counseling was labelled cultural indoctrination or propaganda. To admit the need for this extra-

-institutional counseling would have been to call into question the entire adequacy of the educational structure of the county.

II. ANGLO CONFORMITY VERSUS CULTURAL PLURALISM OR COMMUNITY VERSUS FACTIONALISM

Another strain which is clearly evident in the news media is that the Federal Program was disrupting the shared values and sense of "community" which existed in Oxnard by setting employer against worker, Mexican against Anglo, and class against class. It is doubtful that the kind of community which these thoughts envisage existed in Oxnard at any time. What is more likely is that the local media interpreted a lack of visible conflict in the cultural and economic arena as evidence that a kind of community existed. But with the intrusion of Federal funds and outside organizers into the community, and with the vitalization of those elements which before had not had any voice in the ongoing cultural consensus, the past guardians of this consensus felt that the Federal program and its personnel had disrupted a kind of cultural and economic peace which had existed before their arrival.

The attacks upon the "counseling" activities of the Project staff became very intense when it was thought that counselors were involved in stimulating conflicts or teaching workers how to unionize. It was quickly suggested that the counseling component of the Project be eliminated as unnecessary. The apparent freedom from restrictions of the counseling staff was seen as threatening while the Project came under attack for operating as "a front for other goals." These "other goals" were rarely defined beyond the "unionization of farm workers" but were felt to be goals that might upset the existing community power structure.

III. LOCAL AUTHORITY VERSUS FEDERAL AUTHORITY

The community is inclined to be suspicious of any unusual intrusion of the Federal Government into local affairs. Here the emphasis must be on the word "unusual" because manifestly the Federal Government is heavily involved in all aspects of the lives of Ventura and Oxnard citizens. But for certain functions such as education and the right of agricultural employers to have a fairly free hand in controlling the rural society, there is a strong tradition of local control and autonomy from the Federal Government. These strains of autonomy are also noticeable in the hostility to the role of certain state agencies. In this connection the Farm Workers Opportunity Project was certainly an unusual program: one of the initial experimental and demonstration programs funded by the U.S. Department of Labor for farm workers, and it came at a time when the War on Poverty was getting under way in the county.

Traditionally in Ventura County, the Federal government has a well defined but limited role in local affairs. Many functions, military, postal or immigration are under federal jurisdiction. However, there is a definite balance of power between local, state and federal authorities. The intrusion of the Farm Workers Opportunity Project, and later other War on Poverty programs, with large amounts of federal money threatened to upset this delicate balance. The local reactions tended to be negative because the Farm Workers Opportunity Project brought federal authority into areas that were traditional reserves of local authority.

IV. RURAL VERSUS URBAN

Despite the fact that Southern Ventura County is well urbanized rural attitudes still persist and the farmer's control of the public's imagination and sympathies is fairly complete. These rural attitudes are most often noticed in the appeals which emphasize the special problems of farmers in the area, and often a central theme is that the federal government does not really understand the problems of farmers. In the case of the Farm Workers Opportunity Project this feeling was intensified by the farmer's conviction that the staff of the project had different ideas than they did about some of the problems facing both farmers and farm workers, such as the availability of Public Law 78 and the unionization of farm workers.

The Project staff made no effort to hide its opposition to many elements of the rural society as it was found to be structured. The key Project objective was to help abolish the bracero labor system, a distinctive rural phenomenon. The need for social change was paramount in the minds of the private agency staff and leadership. The Project identified heavily with the Mexican American underclass and campesino elements. The desire to bring justice to the farm worker was stronger than the concern to help workers fit into the "agricultural worker mold" --a mold that was determined by corporate farmers.

Project leadership and staff were seen as "outsiders from the Big City" who were attempting to adapt industrial and urban social patterns to the rural scene. The employers saw in this a drive to change rural farm workers into industrial laborers. The "urban, radical and reformist staff" were seen as imposing an alien and unwanted social philosophy on the innocent farm workers who preferred to see things stay as they were. The outside and urban nature of the Project leadership are often emphasized in the more critical news reports. Urbanized outsiders were not welcome and were seen as unwanted intruders who did not really belong in the "peaceful" rural society.

V. LOCAL VERSUS COSMOPOLITAN OR OUTSIDE LEADERS

In part, the resentment of the community stemmed from the belief that they were being manipulated by outside interests whose "roots" were not really in the community, and who therefore did not share the community's sense of what was right, proper and fair. Hence the attacks on the program emphasized the immigrant status of the project Director of FWOP, the fact that the Project Director of Operation Buenaventura, a companion leadership development program, came from Santa Barbara and the fact that the sponsoring Emergency Committee to Aid Farm Workers was an organization based in Los Angeles, run and managed by a mysterious Mr. Lund. The attacks of the media on the project then implied a double threat to the community, the first on the part of the federal government for its intrusion into local affairs, and second, on the part of the outside agitators who came in to run and set up the projects. Implied in these attacks was the feeling that the local community and elements within it should logically be the source and arbiters of local social change, and that the intrusion of outside forces represented a decrease in local autonomy. These community sentiments were undoubtedly strengthened by some real economic issues which were at stake in the project: farmers complained that the projects were fronts for farm labor organizing, and that by putting workers into classes the project was raiding the labor market while the farmers were trying to bridge the "bracero gap." The existence of these concrete issues on which the local power structure could legitimately oppose the aims and administration of the project gave body and coherency to the less tangible feelings of loss of autonomy and control.