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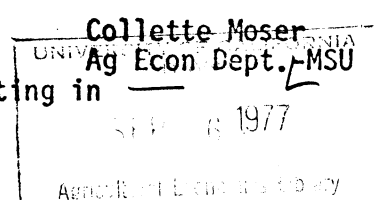
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Discussion of an Invited Paper for AAEA Meeting in
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The paper "Emerging Issues in Agricultural Labor Relations" by Philip L. Martin and Refugio I. Rochin in its first version appears to be a combination of an historical account of the development of labor-management collective bargaining in agriculture in the U.S., the current status of collective bargaining in California agriculture, and predictions about changes in labor supply and labor demand in agriculture. Sometimes the predictions refer to labor supply and demand changes in response to collective bargaining; sometimes collective bargaining is itself a response to labor supply or demand changes; sometimes the connection between the predictions and collective bargaining is unclear.

I should like to organize my discussion of the Martin-Rochin observations around four models which one often sees in the literature of labor economics and labor relations. These models are as follows:

1. A comparison of the situation of the unionization of workers in relevant industry (agriculture) with unionization of workers in another industry.
2. Analysis and predictions of the outcome of unionization of workers in an industry based on information on changes in another policy area. For example it is not unreasonable to predict what will happen to agriculture workers with changes in labor-management relations laws in view of changes in protective labor laws which affect agriculture.
3. A comparison of unionized workers in an industry, a sector or geographic area with non-unionized workers in that same industry but in a different sector or different area. For example, one might compare unionized agricultural workers in California with non-unionized workers in the Midwest.
4. Economic theory can be used to predict various effects of unionization of agricultural workers.

I. Comparisons With Other Unionization Efforts

The paper contains observations on the development of collective bargaining in agriculture which point out some special characteristics of unionization of agriculture which appear to differentiate agriculture from

other industries. Most notable of these is the lateness with which legislation for effective systems of collective bargaining has come to this industry. However, it should be remembered that legislation for collective bargaining for hospital workers and state and local employees has also been late and that there are groups of workers such as household domestics which are less unionized than agriculture. It is not clear whether the authors accept the observation in their quote from Lewin that agriculture's features of seasonality, labor migrancy, perishability of crops, and competitive output markets are "peculiar." In any event there are other industries such as construction and longshoring which have comparable characteristics. The "youthfulness and turnover of the [agricultural] labor force" is not unlike the labor force of retail trade and other service industries.

Martin and Rochin discuss in detail certain features of collective bargaining as it is emerging in California agriculture which appear to differentiate it in "the formulation of labor relations policy . . . viz., the definition of the bargaining units, the determination of voter eligibility, the timing of elections, the timely resolution of objections and union access." However, these problems have been confronted and resolved in other industries and, here again, comparisons with longshoring and construction are relevant. In fact, in some construction cases the problems of tracking down workers for a runoff election may be even more difficult since the worker may not expect to work for that employer again. In any event these are organizational problems which the union faces and if the union is sufficiently strong it will overcome them.

Martin and Rochin also raise the issue of the role of part-time workers in the union election. Other unions also have a predominance of part-time workers and are able to survive.

It should be remembered that the national legislation governing the holding of representation elections outside of agriculture is also being questioned. Recent proposals by Pres. Carter and Secretary of Labor Marshall to amend the National Labor-Management Relations Act speak to problems faced by some unions, particularly textile workers in the South, in their organizational efforts. The "anti-labor traditions [in agriculture]" are probably no worse than those in some other industries which have had much larger corporate finances for "union busting."

II. Comparisons with Protective Labor Legislation

It is interesting that while Martin and Rochin appear to be arguing for removal of part-time workers from representation elections, protective labor legislation as it is being applied to agriculture appears to be going in the opposite direction. Instead of narrowing the concept of a "worker," public policy is making workers in more industries and employed by smaller employers eligible for unemployment compensation, worker's compensation, and minimum wages.

Moreover, the effects of the extension of protective labor laws to agriculture on employer preferences as to "native male, aliens, youth, and females" are not necessarily homogenous. For example Unemployment Insurance extension may actually increase the demand for youths because since they return to school they are ineligible for benefits.

In fact proposed increases in minimum wage law, particularly those which tie automatic increases in the minimum wage to increases in the average hourly wage in manufacturing, may actually be more significant than collective bargaining in determining labor supply-demand adjustments. These proposals are not discussed in this paper.

III. Intra-State Comparisons of Agriculture Labor

The authors refer to the "remarkably stable [hired farm labor force]

over the last decade." Yet neither their own subsequent observations nor the observations which we have in Michigan confirm this. In Michigan the seasonal labor force has been cut enormously over the last decade. Many employers have switched to local labor forces over migrant workers. There is a significant growth in the employment of youths and housewives. This growth has occurred in spite of the growth in record-keeping demands referred to by the authors.

The authors assert that "enforcement of the 160-acre limitation on farms receiving Federal water . . . could encourage a shift toward labor intensive fruits and vegetables . . ." Based on experiences in the Midwest with its smaller farms, such a shift from capital to labor intensive production seems unlikely. In many cases farmers would custom-hire equipment.

IV. Predictions from Economic Theory

The authors have two sets of observations which seem to follow from economic theory. They predict the growth of mechanization in response to unionization and they predict a shift to native males in response to increase in record keeping.

Mechanization is used to lower unit output costs, labor being only one of these. In the Midwest, great mechanization has taken place without the threat of unionization. In order to determine that unionization "causes" mechanization one must assume that the union will have a strong effect on wages, that is, that wages increase greater than they would in the absence of the union. However, as Ray Marshall carefully concludes from applying Alfred Marshall's principles of elasticity of labor supply and demand, it is unlikely that a union of unskilled agriculture workers will have such an effect on wages (Rural Workers in Rural Labor Markets, Olympus Press 1974).

I assume that the Martin-Rochin prediction of a shift to native male workers is based on an expected greater productivity of this group over aliens, youth, and women and that the wage rates for all groups would be the same. While the latter condition is unlikely, the former condition may also be so. Aliens who are often worried about keeping their jobs may actually work harder and women according to the recent Brookings report "Women and the Military" may actually cost less because "men are most likely to cause . . . discipline problems, especially those arising from drug and alcohol abuse" (Chicago Tribune, June 25, 1977, p. 1).