

The ending of the bracero program had been an important preliminary to reform, but only a negative one. At long last, in 1964, Congress made its first positive moves toward correcting a shameful set of conditions. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 included grants to agencies aiding migrant workers, and an amendment to the National Housing Act provided direct loans for construction of farm-labor housing. In September 1966, Congress took the historic step of extending the protection of a new federal minimum wage law to farm workers. This was only a token beginning. Whereas the minimum wage for most other workers was raised to \$1.60 an hour, effective in 1968, the national minimum for farm labor was set at only \$1, and not even this would apply to small employers.

These new federal laws were merely an entering wedge. More subsidies to help provide decent housing for migrant workers were essential in order to eradicate the rural slums that were far worse than anything in the cities. For migrant workers and their families the conditions of recruitment, transportation, health, sanitation, workers' compensation, child labor, education, and civil and political rights were disgracefully and incredibly substandard.

Of central importance was the right of collective bargaining and the guarantee of this right through extension to agriculture of laws governing election of union representatives. At the federal level, attempts to extend the provisions of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) to farm workers remained deadlocked, partly because Chávez did not wish to give up the weapon of the secondary boycott, which was illegal for workers covered by the NLRA.

But in California the replacement of Governor Ronald Reagan by Edmund G. Brown, Jr., made possible a landmark law providing for state-supervised secret-ballot elections in which California's 250,000 farm workers could pick a union to represent them, or reject unionization. Brown personally hammered out the compromise that was adopted in May 1975. The new law created a state Agricultural Labor Relations Board (ALRB) with quasi-judicial powers to oversee elections. The act allowed harvest-time strikes and permitted secondary boycotts in some limited circumstances.

In subsequent years, the makeup of the ALRB would become a matter of great controversy and remain subject to changes in the state's political leadership. Nevertheless, it was clear that the passage of the new federal and state labor laws marked the beginning of a new era for California's agricultural workers.

Selected Bibliography

The most important new book on the topic is Richard A. Walker, *The Conquest of Bread: 150 Years of Agribusiness in California* (2004). Two other works that analyze the rise of California agribusiness are Donald J. Pisani, *From the Family Farm to Agribusiness* (1984), which views the 1920s as the critical decade of transformation, and Theodore Saloutos, *The American Farm and the New Deal* (1982), which follows the story through the 1930s. On the role of public policy, see Ellen Liebman, *California Farmland* (1983), and Lawrence J. Jelinek, *Harvest Empire* (1979).