MACHINE AGE PARADOX

$12 A WEEK WORKERS GROW IN FLORIDA

By JAMES RUSSELL
Miami Herald Business Editor

Could you and your family live on $644 a year?

That's just a little more than $12 a week.

Thousands of workers in Florida are earning wages in that range and are showing little inclination to try for something better.

These disclosures show up in a new study by the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, which makes frequent studies of various facets of the South's economy.

The low-wage workers the bank refers to in its current monthly review are migrant laborers who help harvest the fruits and vegetables grown in Florida.

Of the 63,000 migrant workers in the South last year, the bank says, 80 per cent or more were employed in Florida.

The Bank's economists note, with some surprise, that at a time when machines are forcing thousands of permanent workers off the farms and into other lines of endeavor, the number of migrants is increasing—particularly in Florida.

"It is difficult to understand," the bank's Monthly Review says, "why these people are willing to work for such low wages when wages in general have risen strikingly in recent years.

"It is surprising, too, that such a large number of these workers should be employed in a farming system that is mechanizing at so rapid a pace."

But, the report goes on, the very fact that the migrants will work for so low a wage keeps job opportunities open to them at a time when automation and mechanization is growing into a major national problem.

"Farmers have had little incentive to substitute machinery for this low-cost hand labor," the Federal Reserve Bank says.

"Unlike harvesting equipment that is expensive for farmers to keep up even when not in use, migrant workers cost the farmer nothing when unemployed. More often than not they live off the farm in migrant labor camps or nearby towns and are paid on a piecework basis for the jobs performed."

In Florida, the report says, "soil characteristics often give the migrant workers an advantage over the machine. Much of the land used for growing sugar cane, for example, is mucky. Rain causes the cane to fall over in the row, preventing machines from traversing the fields without damaging the cane."

Factors such as these, combined with expansion in Florida's sugar and citrus industries, have made the Sunshine State a happy hunting ground for migrants.

"If gains in output of Florida's sugar cane and citrus continue," says the Federal Reserve Bank report, "there may be an increase in the need for migrant workers in that state."

But despite the likelihood of a greater demand for these workers here, the bank says, "experts believe there is little prospect for much improvement in wages."

The bank's report views with some alarm the growth in the ranks of people willing to work for less than $700 a year but suggests that there is some hope that ultimately the situation will correct itself.

In the long run, the report says, the supply of migrants will probably diminish because their educational level is rising.

"At the same time, it is likely that farmers will eventually place more emphasis on developing adequate mechanical methods for harvesting their delicate crops."

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