

THE INVALUABLE LEGACY OF WILLARD WIRTZ (5/10)

Never has there been a greater champion of farm workers and other U.S. workers than former Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz, who died on April 24 at 98. Certainly in more than a half-century of covering labor, I've never met anyone more dedicated – or more effective – in winning and preserving vital protections for working people.

That was the lifelong task of Wirtz, who served as secretary under presidents Kennedy and Johnson from 1962 to 1969, a brilliant, charming Harvard Law School graduate who spent his life helping ordinary Americans, especially the poor.

Much can be said of Wirtz' long and distinguished career in government and academia, and his work in government and private practice as a mediator and arbitrator who helped prevent or settle many strikes and resolve many other serious labor-management disputes.

Wirtz expanded the Labor Department's job-training and education programs that were developed especially for the underemployed and undereducated and at-risk youth, increased unemployment assistance for those who lost jobs to foreign trade, created literacy programs for workers and sharply and publicly chastised construction unions for their bias against African-American workers.

Wirtz was also a leader in the passage of laws that prohibit discrimination against women and older workers in pay and otherwise. And he was one of the first to call for laws protecting workers with disabilities from discrimination.

Wirtz clearly was what current Labor Secretary Hilda Solis calls "President Johnson's general in the war on poverty."

Wirtz himself said of his time as secretary that "If there was a central unifying theme . . . It was in the insistence that wage earners – and those seeking that status – are people, human beings for whom 'work,' but not just 'labor' . . . constitutes one of the potential ultimate satisfactions."

I particularly remember a trip Wirtz made to California in 1965 in response to grower requests for creation of an "emergency program" that would in effect restore the highly exploitative Bracero Program that for more than two decades had enabled growers to hire underpaid, overworked and generally mistreated poverty-stricken Mexicans.

The Braceros had to silently accept the rotten conditions or be sent back to Mexico to be replaced by other poverty-stricken Braceros. And domestic workers had to uncomplainingly accept the conditions or be replaced by Braceros – if they were even hired, Growers much preferred the necessarily compliant Mexicans.

Wirtz did his utmost to enlighten the general public about the abysmal conditions of those who harvest most of our fruits and vegetables. He took a whirlwind tour of California's lush farmlands with a planeload of reporters in a battered DC3, popping up unannounced at farms to ask embarrassing questions and point to conditions that most newspaper readers and television viewers associated only with the dim past recorded by John Steinbeck in "The Grapes of Wrath." Growers tried to limit his agenda to farms where they had hastily and improved conditions for a token number of workers. But Wirtz would not be denied.

By closely examining the true conditions of Mexican and domestic workers alike, Wirtz was hoping to show the rest of the country the need for major reforms that would promise decent pay and working conditions and deny growers their request for Mexican workers under an "emergency program."

On the ground, he sped with a busload of reporters over dusty roads from one huge square patch of green and brown to another. We had a hard time keeping up with Wirtz, Neither his good humor nor his seemingly inexhaustible energy lessened as he put probing questions to men and women working in the fields.

At one stop in Southern California, for instance, he strode briskly down one long dirt row after another, a pipe gripped tightly in his teeth, shoes covered with dust, to greet workers as they stooped painfully, grasping the short-handled hoes used to weed and otherwise prepare the strawberry, sugar beet and lettuce crops for harvest.

"Wirtz is my name, good to see you" was a typical icebreaker – first voiced at 5:30 a.m. – only five hours after Wirtz had gone to bed.

At another stop, he walked away shuddering from the communal lavatory in the center of a circle of a ramshackle two- and three- room buildings overrun with barefoot children.

He greeted me, his face twisted in disgust.

"Did you see it?" he asked. "God!"

At yet another stop, Wirtz stood in the center of a field, surrounded by workers, looking out over tall rows of asparagus that covered the land in all directions.

"Where," he asked the grower, "are the toilets?" The grower, genuinely incredulous that the question would even be asked, explained that "there are none."

Elsewhere, Wirtz paid a surprise visit to a farm labor camp at breakfast time, finding conditions that "make me ashamed anything of this kind exists in this country. Looking at the food, I wonder how anyone can eat it!"

Wirtz returned from California determined to greatly limit, if not halt, the flow of Mexican workers that growers hired in lieu of improving conditions to attract domestic workers.

As Wirtz and others predicted, curtailing grower use of Mexican workers forced growers to improve conditions in order to attract more domestic workers. The improvements were generally short-lived, however, as growers turned to the masses of undocumented Mexicans for workers.

Yet thanks in large part to Willard Wirtz, the country had seen clearly the great need to improve the conditions of some of our most necessary but most exploited workers. That helped lay the groundwork for Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers and others who are continuing the struggle today for decent farm labor conditions.