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An Unsung Champion of Farm Labor by Dick Meister

The long struggle of farm workers to win union rights has many unsung heroes — most certainly including Al Tieburg, the former director of California's State Employment Department who died in Sacramento last month at age 86.

Without him, the United Farm Workers union might not have been able to even begin its organizing drives.

For more than two decades before Tieburg took office, employment officials in California and other states had blocked unionization by allowing growers to import workers from Mexico to replace local workers who might demand better pay and conditions.

The Mexican workers, imported through the federal bracero program that operated between 1942 and 1964, dared not make any demands. That would have guaranteed them a quick return trip home, where thousands of other desperately poor men waited anxiously to take their place.

Theoretically, US workers had first call on available farm jobs. Braceros were to be imported only if there was a legitimate shortage of resident workers. But the state officials who administered the program — and who invariably were political allies of growers — openly ignored that rule in order to supply their grower friends with cheap and compliant labor from Mexico.

That raised an insurmountable barrier to farm unionization. Workers knew that engaging in union activity would subject them to replacement by braceros. They were forced to take whatever the growers offered or else.

Organizers continued trying nevertheless, some from the American Federation of Labor, some from its rival Congress of Industrial Organizations. All of them failed.

They tried again after the two labor federations merged into the AFL-CIO, by forming the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, which called a series of strikes in California in 1959. Predictably, growers responded by asking the State Employment Department to provide them with braceros to replace strikers.

By then, however, liberal Democrat Pat Brown was governor — and liberal Democrat Al Tieburg was his employment director.

"No!" Tieburg told the growers seeking strike-breakers from Mexico.

Backed by decisions of a Brown majority on the State Supreme Court, Tieburg ruled that farms being picketed were involved in legitimate labor disputes. Unlike his anti-union Republican predecessors, Tieburg said that meant he could not certify to the Federal Government that braceros should be dispatched to the farms.

Tieburg also refused to allow the Employment Department's previously unquestioning Farm Placement Service to dispatch domestic job seekers to act as strike-breakers.

His rulings helped pave the way for the end of the bracero program that had made the unionization of farm workers impossible and helped the AFL-CIO's organizing committee wage its first successful strikes.

Soon afterward, the committee merged with the independent union headed by Cesar Chavez to form the United Farm Workers of America and launch the campaign that has won worldwide support and union rights and decent working conditions for thousands of the men and women who harvest our food.

Before and after leaving state service in 1969, Tieburg worked with the UFW to improve the living as well as working conditions of farm workers. That was typical of the man, who devoted much of his life to improving the lot of minorities and the poor.

Tieburg, for instance, developed the first programs in the country that were designed specifically to improve the employment opportunities of minority workers by providing them training and job placement assistance. He was the first employment official to establish statistical reporting by race so that the services to minorities — and the results — could be measured.

But most of all, we should honor Al Tieburg for his essential role in helping farm workers in their search for a decent life. ¶¶

(Copyright© 1999, Dick Meister, a freelance columnist in San Francisco who is co-author of "A Long Time Coming: The Struggle to Unionize America's Farm Workers." (Macmillan).)