

# Life Improves for Florida's Orange Harvesters

## Minute Maid Workers See Pay and Benefits Rise

By PHILIP SHABECOFF

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FORT PIERCE, Fla.—Many things have changed lately for the orange harvesters working in the groves of the Coca-Cola Company's Minute Maid Division—mostly for the better.

Until fairly recently, workers in the sprawling Minute Maid groves in central Florida were treated in much the same way as migrant agricultural labor is in most parts of the country.

They were paid before bare subsistence wages, were squeezed into substandard company quarters, lived in constant fear of losing even their marginal income and were unprotected from the whims and petty cruelties of their field bosses.

Black workers were locked into the lowest paying picking jobs and exposed to whatever racial abuse their white supervisors chose to inflict.

But meanwhile, several interesting things have happened.

### Documentary Filmed

A television documentary film on the condition of the orange harvesters embarrassed the parent Coca-Cola Company in Atlanta.

Even before the documentary was shown, according to a company officer, Coca-Cola had embarked on a major program to improve the pay and living conditions of the citrus grove workers and to bring them into the mainstream of the American Labor force. And the Minute Maid workers were organized by a union, Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers.

The results, judging by the testimony of workers, management and union officials, have been dramatic.

Pay has gone up substan-

tially, most workers live in adequate housing and the farm workers feel secure for the first time in their lives. What is more, the harvesters, most of them black, are acquiring a sense of dignity and self-worth they had never known before.

Company officials, meanwhile, report that their work force has become more stable, more dependable and more productive.

The company official would not discuss Minute Maid's profits. But an outside economist, Dr. Marshall Barry of New College in Sarasota, said that his data indicated that total revenues and net profits had gone up at Minute Maid since the union was recognized by the company.

"Just about everything has changed since the union came in," said Jack Anderson, a tall, rangy fruit picker, during an interview in his spic and span new bungalow.

"We get a better price for the fruit. I was able to move into this house. But mostly a question of rights. Before the union came I didn't have rights. You used to work in the groves and the n would tell you what to do if you didn't do it he'd you to hit the road. It was way or the highway' to the guys."

### Some Rights Now

"Now with the union I got some rights. Now we got some white trash in the grove gives me some jive I say, 'F man, wait a minute.' They do tell you to hit the road fast any more."

Mr. Anderson, who is 45 years old, has been "picked fruit ever since I can remember." "I used to come out

weekends when I was going to school," he said.

Before the union organized the workers, he said, he used to take home about \$60 or \$70 a week or \$80 "in a really good week." Now, he said, "not a week goes by that I don't bring home at least \$100."

Mark Walton, a young man from New Jersey who is the United Farm Workers' business agent in Fort Pierce, outlined some of the gains made by the grove workers since Minute Maid signed a contract with the union in February, 1972.

Hourly workers' wages went from \$1.80 to \$2.10 an hour and piecework rates went to a minimum of 40 cents a box of oranges, up from the prevailing 30 to 35 cents a box. Year-round employees are guaranteed a minimum weekly in-

come. There are now sick pay, vacations, nine paid holidays, health and safety requirements and a variety of other fringe benefits that farm labor usually never sees.

### Can Do Something

But most important, as Mr. Walton sees it, is the fact that the workers now can do something when they are mistreated by their immediate supervisors.

"You've got to understand that people around here look at farm laborers just the way they look at their cattle," Mr. Walton said.

One example of the way workers were mistreated by the crew loaders, he said, was in the loading of the big round tubs set among the trees to don, Republican of Peekskill,

hold the picked oranges. The tubs are supposed to hold 10 boxes and a worker got paid for 10 boxes after the tub was filled. But some of the crew leaders, he said, insisted that the oranges be heaped up over the brim of the tub so that it ended up holding 11 boxes, and the leader would pocket the extra pay for the extra box.

"Now we settle by negotiation how much a tub will hold," Mr. Walton explained.

J. W. Warren, now a bulldozer driver in the Minute Maid groves, is a union steward. He feels that the union has already changed his life considerably for the better.

"We had a supervisor who didn't want blacks to run any

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# Orange Harvesters' Lives Improving

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of the heavy equipment because those jobs paid good money," he said. "But since the union came if a man is able to do the job he can have it, no matter whether he's white or black. I'm now bringing home \$135 a week where I didn't take home more than \$87 before the union."

## 'What I Want To Do'

"But mostly I feel good because I'm doing what I want to do," said Mr. Warren, a small, powerfully built, cheerful man.

His brother, Lender Charles Warren, remarked that things have improved in other ways.

"I had a friend that worked in the groves—his eyes got so swollen from the sulphur they spray on the trees that he couldn't see to work. So they fired him," he said.

Since the union contract was signed, Mr. Warren said, the company has stopped using that particular sulphur spray. And it can no longer discharge workers who are too sick to work.

"You know," Mr. Warren said, "I think things in general have been getting better for black people in the past year or so."

The Coca-Cola management concedes that conditions for its Minute Maid grove workers were bad until recent years.

"The things that were wrong would fill a book," William M. Kelly, vice president for groves

operation of the Coca-Cola Company's foods division, admitted.

The reason was, Mr. Kelly said, that although Minute Maid had been a wholly owned subsidiary since 1960, the company management in Atlanta simply did not know what was going on in Florida. It was only after the frozen orange juice subsidiary was incorporated into the food division that the company began to realize "it had a major problem in this country on farm workers," he explained.

## Wiping Out Abuses

Well before television documentary, the company had developed a five-part program to wipe out the labor abuses, Mr. Kelly said. This is the program as he described it:

1. An improvement in employment and income—initially by providing year-round jobs to the largest possible number of farm workers and by guaranteeing weekly income to regular employees. Also, all employees are given the kind of fringe benefits that go to workers in other sectors of the economy.

2. The company decided to get out of the business of providing housing for its workers and helped them instead to finance their own homes.

3. The provision of health, education and social services is the "biggest ongoing part of the program."

4. Organizational development to end abuses by field supervisors, including "sensi-

tivity training" for supervisors and foremen.

5. A community relations program to improve communications between the company and the farm communities in which it operates in the grove country.

## 'For Better Lives'

Mr. Kelly said that so far the program had been a success in its effort "to create an opportunity for better lives for our workers."

It has also helped the company, he said, explaining: "The stability of our work force has improved considerably. Three years ago we had to hire 3,000 workers to keep 1,000. Now we've cut that number in half."

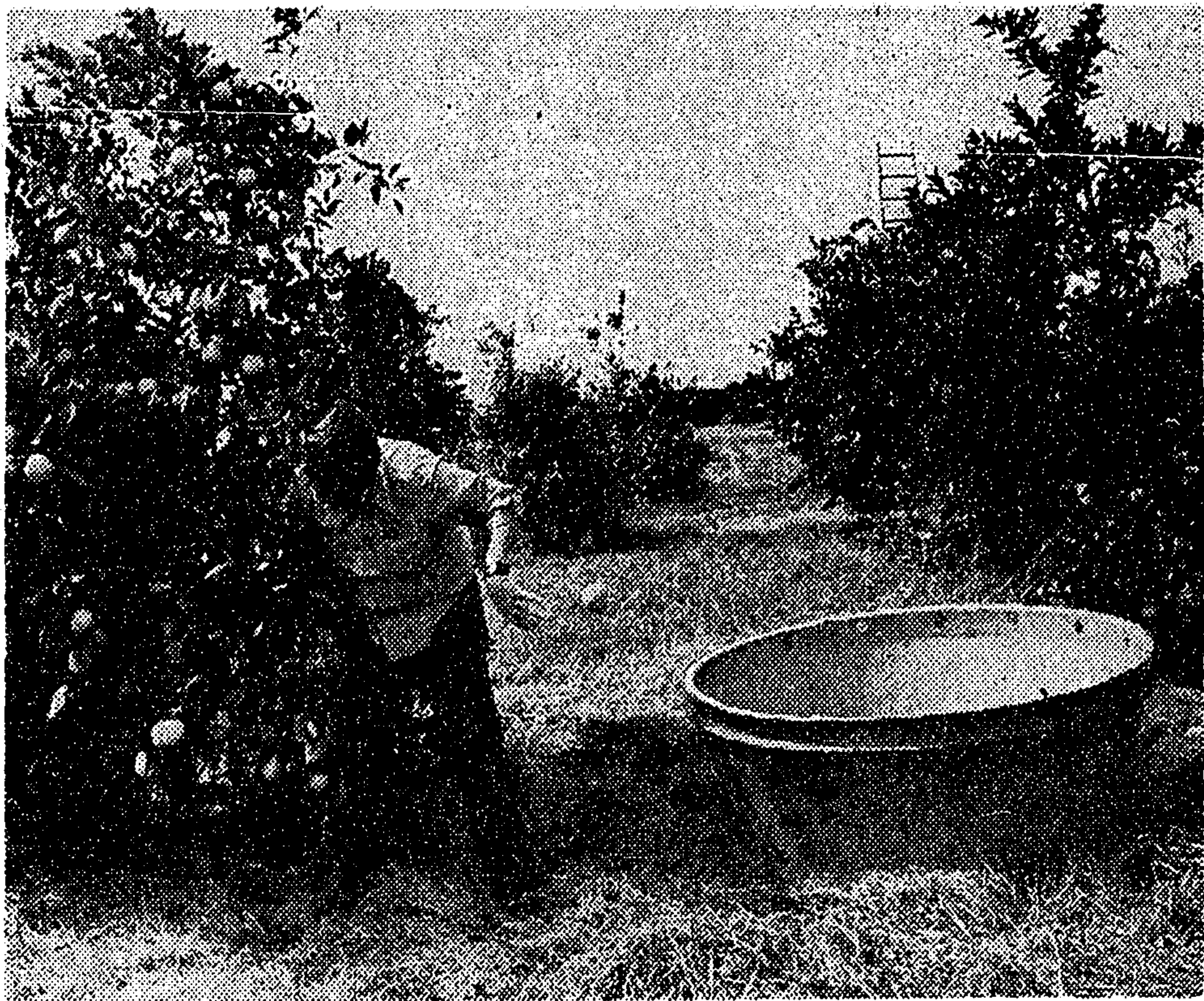
At the same time, he said, the productivity of each worker has gone up sharply. The company now maintains 36 crews to do the amount of harvesting previously done by 52 crews.

"I have no idea of whether profitability has gone up," he replied when questioned.

Mr. Kelly did not particularly credit the union with any of the changes made, saying that organization of the workers had "no major positive or negative effect."

But Perry Smith, a 25-year-old fruit picker, thinks the union means a whole new life for him.

"It used to be that blacks couldn't get any good jobs," he says. "The blacks were pickers cause that was the lowest job. Well, now I think maybe I will be a foreman someday. The union has opened the door."



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**Mark Walton, business agent for the United Farm Workers, in a Minute Maid orange grove in Florida. The tubs hold the equivalent of 10 boxes of oranges.**

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