

Report on Labour Dispute between
Jamaican Migrant Farm Workers and
Glade Sugar Corporation

Honourable Members of this House will have read recent reports in the press regarding the arrest of Jamaican Farm Workers in Florida, recruited under the Migrant Farm Workers Scheme, and I consider it appropriate to make available to this House the results of Government's investigations and subsequent action taken in the issue.

2. Reports were received from the Chief Liaison Officer of the British West Indies Central Labour Organisation, Mr. Harold Edwards, that a dispute had arisen between the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative and two groups of farm workers assigned to and employed by Messrs. Glade Sugar Corporation at Camp No.1 (Kennedy) in Belle Glade, Florida, and that this dispute had resulted in the arrest of Jamaican workers on the 2nd of January, 1968. The Chief Liaison Officer quickly carried out preliminary investigations into these reports and, after consultation with the Minister of Labour and National Insurance, I sent Mr. T.M. Forrest, M.P., a member of the Regional Labour Board to investigate the matter fully and report to me. Mr. Forrest arrived in Florida on the 5th of January and remained there until the 10th of January. During his investigations, Mr. Forrest held discussions with :-

Mr. Wedgeworth and his staff at the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative
The Sheriff and his staff
The workers remaining in the affected camp
Mr. George Sorn and Mr. L.H. Dean of the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association
Representatives of the U.S. Department of Labour
Mr. Sikes
Workers at the South Bay and Bryant Camps of the U.S. Sugar Corporation
Workers at the Atlantic Sugar Association Camp
Press Representatives
Liaison Officers.

He also attended the showing of a T.V. film made during the incident.

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3. The facts as ascertained from the reports supplied by Mr. Forrest, the Chief Liaison Officer Mr. Harold Edwards, C.B.E., and the two Liaison Officers, Messrs. Comrie and Birkbeck, are as follows :-

- i) On December 31, 1967 the Jamaican Farm Workers were offered \$12.00 per row to cut cane in one field and \$14.64 per row to cut cane in another field. The workers in the \$12.00 field refused to cut their field, but 49 workers in the \$14.64 field started to cut that field. The rates, after some discussion, were raised from \$12.00 to \$12.24 and \$14.64 to \$15.00. It was also agreed that regardless of the above rates, no worker would be paid less than \$1.45 for each hour spent in the field.
- ii) All workers refused to work and returned to the camp. On January 1, 1968 the workers who were divided into 2 crews, returned to the fields but neither crew would do any work and during the course of the day both crews assembled in a body and marched back to camp on U.S. Highway 441 waving red flags and interfering with traffic.
- iii) Two other crews of Jamaican workers, working some distance from the fields where the dispute took place, did not participate in the above demonstrations; they worked throughout Sunday December 31 and except for a short stoppage on Monday January 1, worked throughout.
- iv) On the night of January 1, 1968, the car of a deputy sheriff passing through the camp was blocked by some Jamaican workers who threatened him and damaged his car to the extent of \$150.
- v) On January 2, 1968, it is alleged that workers in the camp uttered threats against the life and property of their American employers. The employers informed the workers that the rates could not be increased and that those who did not wish to work could collect their pay and return home.
- vi) The workers claimed a breach of contract by the company and refused to accept the company's terms without payment of compensation for time spent on the job.
- vii) The sheriff was called in and arrived with a number of Deputy Sheriffs, members of the Florida Highway Patrol and of the Belle Glade Police Force equipped with riot guns, tear gas and gas masks. The force totalled 70 men. The second-in-command of the Force read the Riot Act and on his third reading, the men
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dispersed and withdrew from the road where they had gathered and returned to their camp.

- viii) The police assumed sole control of the area, and announced that workers who wished to go home could collect their money.
- ix) The workers came out of their quarters, collected their money and boarded the company's buses assembled near the camp.
- x) The Sheriff then instructed 14 of the workers, whose names he read out over the loudspeaker, to report for repatriation. Upon reporting, these men were arrested.
- xi) The Sheriff stated that the management had given him those names as being those of the ringleaders. 80 workers were sent directly to Miami to the Holding Centre by bus, and another bus with 52 workers, including the 14 men arrested at the Camp, was routed to West Palm Beach. These 52 workers were arrested upon their arrival at West Palm Beach.

Of these 52 workers 38 of them boarded the bus in the belief that they were being taken to Miami International Airport for repatriation to Jamaica. At the time of boarding the bus they were not told that they were under arrest or given any indication that they had violated any law for which they were being taken in custody.
- xii) The first batch of 80 workers returned to Jamaica.
- xiii) The 52 workers were put in a stockade under arrest.
- xiv) Of the 52 workers who were arrested on January 2, two workers who were being repatriated for medical reasons and who had nothing to do with this affair, were released to the custody of Mr. Birkbeck, a Liaison Officer from Jamaica representing the workers.
- xv) Of the remaining 50 workers, a total of 22 had been named by the employers to the sheriff for arrest.
- xvi) On January 5, 49 of the remaining 50 workers were released without trial on the agreement of the Chief Liaison Officer that none of the 49 would be recruited again as cane workers. The remaining worker was identified by the Deputy Sheriff as one of the men that damaged his car, and he was remanded for trial on January 12.

4. The first concern of the Chief Liaison Officer was to secure the release of the arrested men and this he succeeded in doing on the 5th of January. It is significant that when the Palm Beach County Solicitor entered a "nolle prosequi", he is reported to have told the Court that the farm workers "committed no offence which could be successfully prosecuted". This report appeared in the Palm Beach Post Times of Saturday January 6 and so far as I am aware has not been contradicted.

5. In his efforts to secure their release, the Chief Liaison Officer agreed that the men involved in the dispute would not be recruited again for cane cutting, but that this would not debar them from being recruited for other types of work if recommended by the Regional Labour Board.

The Chief Liaison Officer also decided that he would not replace the men who had been withdrawn from the farms involved in the dispute.

6. I am satisfied that the facts related above have clearly established that -

- i) the action of the Police was precipitate and unduly harsh;
- ii) the arrest of 38 men, including the 2 sick men who were awaiting repatriation, was most irregular and performed in circumstances indicating a violation of the legal rights of these men.

7. In these circumstances, the Government has taken the following steps :-

- i) the Jamaican Ambassador in Washington has been instructed to protest to the United States Government in the strongest terms about the treatment meted out to our Nationals who entered the United States

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with the knowledge and consent of that Government. He will also ask for an assurance that there will be no such recurrence;

ii) the Chief Liaison Officer has been instructed to obtain legal advice as to whether a case for legal action lies both in the case of the 38 men and the 14 others who were arrested after the reading of the Riot Act.

8. The Government is advised that any action for compensation or damages would have to be initiated by the workers individually.

9. Since the action reported at paragraph 7 above was taken, the Chief Liaison Officer has reported that the Migrant Legal Services (an American organisation with offices in Miami, Florida), has filed suit against several defendants including the British West Indies Central Labour Organisation and Mr. Vincent Birkbeck, a Senior Liaison Officer employed to that organisation, on behalf of 18 named workers. The Law Officers have been asked to advise on the implications of this step taken by the Migrants Legal Services.

The Government is also prepared to make available such legal services as are necessary to the Organisation and Mr. Birkbeck, and the outcome of the suit is being watched with interest.

10. Members may be assured that Government will continue to give urgent attention to this matter and a further report will be presented to the House in due course.

H.L. SHEARER
Prime Minister and
Minister of External Affairs.
12th March, 1968.