NEWS RELEASE—POLICY RESOLUTION ADOPTED, ERLANGER, KY., JANUARY 19, 1967, BY THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC RURAL LIFE CONFERENCE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

AGRICULTURAL WORKERS AND THE NATIONAL LABOR RELATIONS ACT

We re-affirm our defense of the right of agricultural workers to form unions and to bargain with their employers and also the right of farm operators to bargain for fair prices. We shall continue to labor for the protection of the just rights of workers, employers and the public at large in this matter.

We urge the Congress to amend the National Labor Relations Act, so as to make its provisions applicable to agricultural workers and their employers.

We are convinced that application of the provisions of the NLRA to agricultural workers and their employers will serve the best interests of both groups and of the public at large. In the absence of orderly worker-employer bargaining procedures, strikes, boycotts, violence and bitterness often occur. Bringing the services of the National Labor Relations Board to agriculture will protect the just interests of all parties and assure a minimum of injury to the common good.

TESTIMONY OF WORKERS DEFENSE LEAGUE

The Workers Defense League appreciates this opportunity to express its strong support for the proposed amendment to the National Labor Relations Act (H.R. 4769) which your Committee now has under consideration. This amendment would rectify an injustice of more than thirty years' standing by removing the exclusion of agriculture from the NLRA and thus extending protection of the right to collective bargaining to farm workers who have rightly been called "forgotten Americans."

The result of these decades of neglect can be seen in the fact that farm workers rank lowest in annual income of all the nation's occupational groups. The average hourly wage for all farm workers in October, 1966, was $1.18 an hour; the range was from 74 cents in South Carolina to $1.58 in California, and eight states averaged less than $1.00 an hour. The average manufacturing worker was paid $1.47 more an hour—more than double. Obviously, most farm workers live beneath the poverty level.

The exclusion of agricultural workers from NLRA protection was supposedly because agriculture was different and small farmers had to be protected. This argument was never true—small farmers must compete in the market against products produced by hired farm workers, and the low wage of the worker drives down the income of the small farmer as well. But in this day of giant agribusiness and absentee corporate farmers, it bears no resemblance to the fact. Half of United States farms use no hired labor at all. Only 2.7 of the farms pay *half* of all farm wages, and 6 per cent of them pay 76 per cent of the wage bill.

The public is often aware of the worst results of the poverty of farm workers: miserable housing and health; children at work instead of in school; the escape to the cities without resources to cope with the urban situation. And government has begun to make efforts to help particularly through the migrant programs of the Economic Opportunity Act. But the most basic thing of all is to enable the farm workers to help themselves—to gain, through collective bargaining, a living wage that would enable them to care for their families as other workers can.

Since the last century farm workers have tried repeatedly to organize into unions and to improve their conditions. Their efforts were always beaten back—by injunctions and recourse to strike-breaking local ordinances; by evictions and by violence. The California grape strikers two years ago met the same tactics. and today in Texas more than a hundred have been jailed and the brutality of the Texas Rangers has aroused public concern and protest.

It has been said that farm workers (like agriculture) are different—that they cannot be organized. But the mass-production industries which now are organized by our greatest unions were never successfully organized until after the passage of the National Labor Relations Act. Other industries that are also seasonal (and often with low capitalization, family-type companies) like construction and the garment industries, have been successfully organized and have found that this brought stability to the industries themselves. Examples of successful farm-labor organization do exist, though they are scattered: Seabrook in New Jersey now has a long history of unionization; Hawaii has complete organization, and in California a firm beginning has at last been made.