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# CALIFORNIA RURAL LEGAL ASSISTANCE CHEATS THE POOR

The California Rural Legal Assistance is an organization which receives money from the Federal Government to give legal aid to the rural poor. There are various offices of this organization all over California. According to articles in the newspapers, the offices of this legal group is doing good work all over California. But my personal experience is with the El Centro office in Imperial County which has been in existence for four years and in this period of time this office has been cheating the poor by not giving the full legal service that the poor should receive.

Repeated complaints have been made by me to the main office in San Francisco and to the Board of Trustees but there has been no change. So it is necessary to focus the spotlight of publicity on this El Centro office by showing how it is cheating the poor by not giving them a complete legal service. It must be realized that there are very many persons who although not qualified to receive legal service from the Calif. Rural Legal Assistance by being on welfare, still are too poor to hire private lawyers to help them and suffer from the very same problems that afflict the ones on welfare. By really giving complete legal service to the poor on welfare on these mutual problems, many persons who surpass many times the number on welfare but are indigent as regards legal service, will also benefit if the poor on welfare are helped.

One of the big problems of the poor on welfare is that wives have been deserted by their husbands and want a divorce. When these women are given legal service by the El Centro office, only one person is helped. But then there are problems where many of the poor all suffer from the same cause and would be helped by a "class lawsuit" which will help many of the poor at one time and at the same time will help those whom I have called "indigent for legal services".

Some background about Imperial County must be given so that those who do not live here can understand the problems. Imperial County ranks 6th in the United States as to yearly agricultural production. The power structure here are big ranchers. It is unbelievable that the big ranchers receive in handouts of various sorts EIGHT TIMES MORE THAN THE POOR ON WELFARE RECEIVE!!! Imperial County has the greatest percentage of its people on welfare as compared to other California counties. There is a 15% unemployment here just like in Watts

The main reason for this is that the Immigration Service, a branch of the U.S. Dept. of Justice, is in collusion with the big ranchers and permits mobs of Mexicans to cross the border daily to work in the United States. So people can not get work and the unemployed runs close to 15%. Local people if they get work, have to work at DEPRESSED WAGES. Although this racket applies mainly to farmwork, it also is going on in non-farmwork.

The County Board of Supervisors is under the control of these big

ranchers and for many years would not bring in FEDERAL SURPLUS FOOD so that the farmworkers would be starved out and would be forced to leave and go on welfare in San Diego, Los Angeles, or San Francisco. The unemployment rate would have been 30% to 40% if the starving farmworkers had been able to stay.

I wanted the El Centro office of the C.R.L.A. to file a "class lawsuit" against the Board of Supervisors, but it would not do it. Finally, this September 1969, The FOOD STAMP program was started in Imperial Co. but this came about not by legal action of the El Centro office but by a C.R.L.A. office in Northern California and Imperial County poor got the benefit of the Northern "class lawsuit". But 80% of the poor on welfare can not afford to buy the food stamps. For the Federal Surplus Food, you do not have to pay money.

The poor still are short of food here as can be seen by the fact that some social service workers and a few other persons contributed money to buy Christmas food for some of the poor on the Eastside of Brawley. The Modesto office of C.R.L.A. in Stanislaus County took legal action and got Christmas food for the poor there. The economic conditions are much worse in Imperial County YET THE EL CENTRO OFFICE OF THE C.R.L.A. DID NOTHING TO GET FEDERAL SURPLUS FOOD LIKE MODESTO DID.

Another problem is that some of the poor own shacks worth about \$2,000 to \$4,000 with outhouse toilets. There is a tax racket going on here where the big ranchers by fake low assessments escape on the average 66% of their property taxes while the poor on welfare who happen to own a shack are forced to pay higher taxes. A "class lawsuit" to solve this problem would help the poor on welfare but even more that big group of people who are "indigent for legal services". BUT THE EL CENTRO OFFICE OF C.R.L.A. DOES NOTHING!!!

There are 4 lawyers now in the El Centro office earning about \$40,000 yearly. There is an electricity swindle being perpetrated on the poor as well as those in the \$5,000 to \$10,000 yearly income bracket by the Imperial Irrigation District which sells the irrigation water to the big farm interests at 1/4 the correct price and to make up for the big losses charges the electricity consumers-the poor on welfare and the "indigent for legal services" 3 times the correct price for electricity.

One of the ways that the big landowners control the Imperial Irrigation District is that only a landowner can run for Director of the District. There was an election for 3 Directors in Nov. 1969. I brought signed authorizations by poor on welfare who did not own land asking the C.R.L.A. to start legal action to stop the election and have a new one scheduled in which people who do not own land can run for election. These four lawyers in the El Centro office refused to do anything. So the poor can not get a landless person as Director.

To show some of the nonsense that the El Centro office engages in- some Mexican-American boys in the Brawley High School wanted to wear some sort of a political button on their chests. The Brawley High School forbid this. So the C.R.L.A. made a "class suit" so the boys could wear the button. What difference does it make whether people wear buttons or not? It is all theory. Now people not getting enough to eat, having money extorted from them with high taxes and high electricity bills have much practical significance, but the C.R.L.A. office does nothing about these serious problems in Imperial County.

A C.R.L.A. lawyer not attached to the El Centro office filed a "class lawsuit" on Dec. 16, 1968 (#40096) regarding the electricity swindle. The only trouble is that Judge Kirk who worked for the Imperial Irrigation District from 1934 to 1949 sat as Judge in this lawsuit and the C.R.L.A. lawyer did not know enough to challenge Kirk. So the result was that 2/3rds of the lawsuit was withdrawn by the C.R.L.A. lawyer and the other 1/3 was dismissed by Kirk. So the C.R.L.A. lawyer appealed and nothing has happened since then.

Because of the failure of the El Centro office to do anything on the electricity swindle, I have spent my money and hired Mr. Edward Berlin, a lawyer who is Counsel for the Consumers Federation in Washington, D.C. to help the poor. I am also trying to get Ralph Nader to give help. There are many other matters the C.R.L.A. avoids doing.