REPORTS AND ENQUIRIES

The Agricultural Labour Situation in the United States

by

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As mentioned elsewhere in this issue [1], *the first session of the Permanent Agricultural Committee had before it, in addition to the documentation supplied by the Office, a number of national reports prepared by experts in different countries. The reports are of general interest, and it is proposed to publish in these pages those which will follow most appropriately the articles on agricultural questions that have already appeared in the* Review. *The present report relating to the United States is the first of the series.*

Classification of Agricultural Workers

Agricultural labourers in the United States may be grouped into the following classes : the hired man ; the casual worker ; the migratory worker ; the share-cropper ; and family labour.

The " hired man " is the most important wage labourer on the general farms of the Northern States. An ordinary diversified Northern farm producing livestock, hay, and grain, will usually require the services of a hired man on a year-round basis. Additional labourers may be employed in the planting and harvesting seasons. The hired man may be a young man, unmarried, who is attempting to accumulate capital in order to get started in farming for himself.

The Southern correlate of the Northern hired man is the " wage hand " on the cotton plantation. While most of the labour of the plantation is performed by " share-croppers ", the wage hands constitute an important class of farm labour. A wage hand is defined as an " individual (with or without a family) who lives on the plantation and has a definite agreement with the operator to work for a more or less definite number of months at an agreed wage ".[2]

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[1] See above : " The First Session of the Permanent Agricultural Committee ", p. 697.

[2] T. J. Woofter and others : *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation*, p. 267. W.P.A. Research Monograph No. V. Washington, 1936.

The casual worker is of many kinds. He may be a " part-time " farmer who supplements the income for his own small farm by hiring himself out to neighbours. He may be a young man of the community accepting seasonal farm employment in order to finance his university education or to meet some other objective. Much of the labour supply in the production of fruits, sugar beets, and other crops requiring considerable hand labour is of this type. Often young boys and girls from twelve to eighteen years of age are recruited from neighbouring towns and villages to pick fruit or to thin sugar beets.

The migratory agricultural worker follows the planting and harvest seasons from the southern to the northern parts of the country. Thus the migratory worker on the Pacific Coast begins the agricultural year with the lettuce harvest in January and February in the Imperial Valley of California and gradually moves north, ending the crop season with work in the apple harvest of Oregon and Washington.

To-day the migratory agricultural workers are found in the cotton-producing areas of West Texas, Oklahoma, Arizona, and California ; in the berry-producing section of the Eastern and Mid-western States ; in the sugar-beet sections ; and in the truck-crop and fruit-producing sections of the Atlantic and Pacific Coasts. The area of greatest migratory labour concentration is the Pacific Coast, and notably the State of California, where the number of people—men, women, and children—who " follow the crops " is estimated at 150,000 to 200,000.[1]

The total number of wage workers in 1930 was 2,732,972.

The " share-cropper " is characteristic of Southern agriculture, particularly cotton and tobacco production. He is usually classified as a " tenant ", but essentially he is a labourer who is paid in kind rather than in cash. He receives usually half the crop in return for the labour of himself and his family. These workers have also been defined as " a family which has a definite agreement with the operator whereby the family furnishes only labour (operator furnishes work, stock, and implements) in cultivating an agreed upon acreage and receives in return a specified share to the crop, usually one-half share or less.[2] This group is by far the most important, numerically, of all classes of hired agricultural labour. In 1930, share-croppers were operating 716,000 farms, or over 10 per cent. of all the farms in the United States.

Family labour for which no wages are paid supplies almost three fourths of the work which goes into the agricultural production of the United States. While often supplemented by the hired man, the family provides most of the labour on the diversified farms of the Northern, Western, and Southern States. It is mentioned in this report only for the sake of completing the classification of agricultural labour however, and not because of its importance as a part of a national

[1] P. S. TAYLOR : " Migratory Farm Labor in the United States ", in *Monthly Labor Review*, March 1937.

[2] T. J. WOOFTER and others : *op. cit.*, p. 267.

or international problem. Unpaid family workers in 1930 numbered 1,659,792. Farm operators, both tenants and owners, and managers in 1930 numbered 6,079,234.[1]

Living Conditions

Living conditions vary widely with the different types of labour as well as with different regions of the country. The hired man on the average farm of the Northern States, employed by the month, usually enjoys about the same standard of living as the farm family itself. In fact, he is frequently regarded as a member of the household, with all the corresponding privileges. For the married hired man special quarters have to be provided, but in recent years the farmer-owner has shown an inclination to make these quarters modern and comfortable.

In sharp contrast with the hired man, so far as living conditions are concerned, is the share-cropper in the Cotton Belt, and the migratory labourer of the Pacific Coast. The living conditions of both these groups are, in general, notoriously bad. Inadequate diet among the share-croppers is reflected in the frequent occurrence of pellagra and other nutrition diseases. The high incidence of malaria and typhoid indicates the lack of sanitation and health facilities of the same area. Housing is generally regarded as unsatisfactory among white as well as coloured share-croppers.

Social institutions are difficult to provide for this group because of the relatively low valuation of property for purposes of taxation, the necessity in the Southern States of maintaining duplicate sets of schools for coloured and white children, and the high mobility of the people themselves. Continual moving about tends to break the bonds which make social institutions possible.

The migratory labourer has achieved the least economic and social security of all the farm labourers. In pursuit of employment he must cross State boundaries so that he is unable to establish a minimum residence in any State. He is, therefore, seldom eligible for public relief in times of acute distress. His services are desired only seasonally; after the crops are planted—or harvested as the case may be—he is no longer made welcome in the community. It is expected that he will move on to some other place.

In California, a few of the large users of migratory labour provide shelters in which families can live while they are working on the crops. Small growers assume no responsibility as a rule, because they cannot afford to do so, and the labourers must provide for themselves as best they can. Their migratory way of life makes it impossible for them to accumulate more household goods than can be transported with them. The minimum needs are bedding, cooking utensils, a wash-tub, and a few other odds and ends. Some enjoy the luxury of a good tent, while others improvise shelters from whatever material can be secured

[1] Unfortunately the Census of 1935 was taken on 1 January, and the figures are not comparable with those of 1930, when the Census was taken on 1 April. The 1930 figures reflect more nearly the true situation at that date.

and does not cost money. Such materials are most often tin cans, pasteboard cartons, or wooden crates.

The problem of caring for this group is aggravated by the fact that, in addition to the normal stream of migration, large numbers of families from the Western and Northern Great Plains have been forced out of their former homes by the prolonged drought—coupled with the depression—of the past few years.[1] The result is that there are thousands of these families in the Pacific Coast States and some other less extensive areas, living in improvised shelters of various kinds, depending upon uncertain and intermittent employment, and often appealing to local agencies for charity when their distress becomes acute. They pitch their camps on vacant lots on the outskirts of a town, along a canal bank, or by the side of the open road. While some of the States are reasonably diligent in seeing to it that the children of these families are enrolled in school, other States are less alert, and without doubt many of the children have no opportunity to attend school.

The condition of children is summarised in the following statement of the Children's Bureau :

> The migrant and his family tend to be isolated from the normal activities of the community because of the circumstances of their lives and community attitudes of indifference or prejudice. They frequently stay on the outskirts of the town or at some distance from the corporate limits of the community. They seldom if ever go to town to trade, to attend church, or to take part in community activities . . . .
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> Medical care was given as a rule only in case of serious emergencies, and sometimes lack of facilities for prompt consideration of applications for relief caused delay in affording care for persons who were very seriously ill. Preventive health services were not usually extended to the migrant group. Treatment for venereal disease usually was not available, and opportunities for giving physical examination to persons suffering from venereal disease were extremely limited. Sometimes the jail was the only place where such an examination was given to non-residents. Lack of health services for mothers and young children was especially serious. The general lack of medical care and health protection constituted a menace to community as well as to individual health.
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> Educational opportunities were lacking or extremely limited for the children of thousands of migrant families. Many of the children in families of agricultural migrant workers were out of school for long periods of time and when they did attend, frequent shifting from school to school made consistent progress very difficult. Children who were old enough to work in the fields were expected to do so, as parents felt the need of adding every cent possible to the family income, and often the parents did not consider it worth while to enroll the younger children in school when they were to be in a locality only a short time. Moreover, when books and supplies were not furnished by the schools, parents frequently could not stretch family funds to include expenditure for such purposes. School authorities were often lax in enforcing the school-attendance regulations for children in migratory families because of the educational problems which these children present. In a few districts visited, notably in California, school authorities

[1] See below, p. 759.

were interested in the welfare of migrant children and were making an effort to provide educational opportunities. In most districts, however, little attention was paid to them.[1]

The distress in which these groups have found themselves has undoubtedly been a factor in precipitating the strikes which have been recurring with regularity in recent years, particularly on the Pacific Coast. The situation was brought emphatically to the attention of Congress in 1936, and the Senate passed a resolution requesting the Secretary of Labor to make an investigation and submit a report. This report was submitted early in 1937, but has not yet been made available to the public.

Wages

The wages of farm labourers have generally increased more rapidly since the war than the prices of farm products. The depression compelled farmers to reduce the number of employees or their wages, or both, and farm wages dropped precipitately. In 1935 the index of farm wages was 98, while the index of farm prices was 108, the wages index being lower than the index of prices for the first time since the war, as shown in the table below. A similar disparity prevailed in 1936, and

FARM WAGE RATES PER MONTH (WITH AND WITHOUT BOARD), AND INDEX NUMBERS OF WAGES AND FARM PRICES, 1918-1937 [1]

Year	Wages with board	Wages without board	Index numbers of farm wages (1910-1914 = 100)	Index numbers of farm prices (1909-1914 = 100)
	$	$		
1918	35.12	49.13	176	202
1919	40.14	56.77	206	213
1920	47.24	65.05	239	211
1921	30.25	43.58	150	125
1922	29.31	42.09	146	132
1923	33.09	46.74	166	142
1924	33.34	47.22	166	143
1925	33.88	47.80	168	156
1926	34.86	48.86	171	145
1927	34.58	48.63	170	139
1928	34.66	48.65	169	149
1929	34.74	49.08	170	146
1930	31.14	44.59	152	126
1931	23.60	35.03	116	87
1932	17.53	26.67	86	65
1933	15.86	24.51	80	70
1934	17.89	27.17	90	90
1935	19.66	29.48	98	108
1936	21.54	31.82	107	114
1937	24.09	35.07	120	121

[1] Department of Agriculture : *Year-book of Agriculture.*

the latest figures for 1937 show a corresponding relation, although the disparity is becoming less. Owing to the large 1937 crop, demand for labour has been rising, and reports of an actual shortage of available labour have come from some areas.

[1] "Migrants and Their Problems", in *The Child*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Aug. 1937, pp. 34-35.

The annual incomes of migratory labourers are uncertain and usually low. Recent studies [1] show that the average income of labourers interviewed in the Yakima Valley (Washington) was $357, as compared with $437 for California farm-camp families, and $406 for sugar-beet families. Most of these families had more than one worker. The average annual income per worker is thought to amount to only about $200, or about $400 per family. Since the families average about four persons, this means that the annual sum available to support each member of a migrant is not more than $100.

The Depression

The general economic collapse of 1929 affected farm labour in two ways :

(1) The migration of surplus rural population, which resulted in a net flow of six million people to cities during the 1920's abruptly stopped, and there was a return flow to the country during the early thirties. This resulted in a great surplus of workers in rural areas.

(2) The fall in farm prices, which was immediate and abrupt, from an index of 146 in 1929 to 65 in 1932, was reflected by a drop in the wages index from 170 in 1929 to 86 in 1932 and 80 in 1933. Farmers were compelled to reduce wages and discharge labourers.

Thus, there were simultaneously an increase in the supply of labourers and a sharp decrease in the demand for their services. The only course open to them was to " go on relief ", a fate which befell not only labourers, but farmer-owners, share-croppers, and tenants, as well.

The severe drought which accompanied the depression added to the economic distress of large sections of the United States. A strip of country on the Great Plains stretching from Canada to Mexico, and comprising over 800 countries in 13 States, has the area of greatest drought intensity.[2] While it is impossible to say how many farmers have been forced off the land during the drought and thrown into the stream of migrating labourers, records kept at the California border for the 21 months June 1935 to March 1937 showed that 78,491 distressed persons, chiefly from the drought areas, entered California. It has been estimated that well over 200,000 people have been caught up in this exodus.[3] Many have found new farms in Idaho, Washington, Oregon, and other States, but many others have been unable to find a new foothold on the land.

Technological Changes

Meanwhile the position of the farm labourer has been rendered more and more insecure by the gradual but steady advance in agricultural technology. A recent report of the National Resources Committee on " Technological Trends and National Policy " states that

[1] Cf. N. A. Tolles : " A Survey of Labor Migration Between States ", in *Monthly Labor Review*, Vol. 45, No. 1, July 1935.

[2] F. D. Cronin and H. W. Beers : *Areas of Intense Drought Distress* 1930-36. WPA *Research Bulletin*, Series V, No. 1. Washington, 1937.

[3] N. A. Tolles : *loc. cit.*

when the United States Constitution was framed (1787) the surplus food produced by 19 farmers was required to feed one city person. In recent years the same number of farmers have produced enough food for 56 city people and 10 living abroad. Between 1910 and 1930, output per agricultural worker increased by 41 per cent., as compared with an increase of 39 per cent. in manufacturing. Technological advance is further indicated by the fact that 77 per cent. of the population of the United States was engaged in agriculture in 1840, as compared with 23 per cent. to day.

Along with technological changes goes a trend towards commercialisation of agriculture, with its concomitants: the centralisation of land ownership in the hands of a few, and a steady rise in the percentage of landless workers.

By the close of the war the mechanisation of the wheat harvest was well under way. Previously, there were upwards of 250,000 workers who followed the wheat harvest from Texas to the Dakotas and Montana. To-day this group has practically disappeared from the American scene.[1] Still more recent is the introduction of the mechanical corn-picker, and the sugar-beet harvester. The introduction of tractor farming in the Cotton Belt is going forward at a rapid pace. Checkrow planting of cotton permits cross-cultivation, thereby eliminating much of the hand-hoeing. When—as seems imminent—the mechanical cotton-picker is perfected, hundreds of thousands of human beings may need to seek alternative employment outside of agriculture.[2]

Federal Legislation

There has been little Federal legislation directly affecting farm labour. The Agricultural Adjustment Act (1933) provided in its 1933 cotton contract that benefit payments for land taken out of production should be shared equally by landlord and cropper or tenant. The 1934 contract, based upon "parity" payment, also provided that the cropper or tenant should receive half of the sum paid. This usually amounted to a very small sum, however. It is quite generally admitted that, since the programme was administered locally by committees made up almost invariably of landowners, the participation of tenants in payments was irregular and uncertain, and that the scheme works to the disadvantage of the tenant in many ways. In a "considerable number of cases... tenant farmers have not received the full amount specified by the 1933 cotton contract". Moreover, the acreage-reduction programme inevitably displaced many tenants. There were specifications in the contracts designed to prevent much displacement, but these provisions were not adequately enforced. [3]

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[1] P. S. Taylor: *loc. cit.*

[2] A special study of the effect of technology on labour in agriculture is now being made under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration, but the results of the study have not at the time of writing been made public.

[3] Harold Hoffsommer: "The AAA and the Cropper", in *Social Forces*, Vol. 13, No. 4, May 1935. Cf. also Calvin B. Hoover: *Human Problems of Acreage Reduction in the South.* Agricultural Adjustment Administration, Washington.

The Jones-Costigan Act of 1934 amending the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 prohibited sugar-beet producers from employing children under fourteen, other than their own. Several thousand children are employed annually in sugar-beet fields to assist in thinning and harvesting operations. The invalidation of the Agricultural Adjustment Act by the Supreme Court put an end to this attempt at child-labour control. A survey made by the Children's Bureau in 1935 showed that the child-labour provision of the sugar-beet contracts had brought about some reduction in the number of children employed.

The programme inaugurated in 1934 by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) under its Rural Rehabilitation Division, and carried on since June 1935 under the Resettlement Administration, had a more direct effect on the share-cropper and the migratory labourer. This programme provided for small production loans, which averaged about $400 a year, for the purposes of furnishing subsistence for the family, the purchase of seed and fertiliser, the payment of rent where cash rent was required, and the acquisition of mules or horses and dairy cows and some implements. While the programme was intended for the " rehabilitation " of families who were in distress and on the relief rolls, it obviously could not set them up in commercial farming. It did provide a minimum opportunity for distressed landless workers, and an unknown but doubtless considerable number of these workers have been helped to economic independence. The Resettlement Administration reports a surprisingly high rate of repayment of loans, which was made possible in part through the careful supervision of clients by the employed personnel, and in part by the steadily rising price level for farm products. In 1935, 635,000 families were given aid through this programme, and more than 100,000 of them were so-called " grant cases ", or cases to whom direct grants of funds were made without expectation of repayment.[1]

The Federal Transient Relief Programme inaugurated by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration in 1933 provided temporary aid to distressed migratory agricultural workers. A sample study of transient shelters in 13 cities indicated that 14 per cent. of all unattached transients and 9.7 per cent. of the heads of family groups were farm labourers.[2]

Such Federal aid as has been given to migratory labourers was designed to mitigate the unsanitary and impoverished condition in which the labourers were compelled to live while following the crops. Two labour camps were constructed in California to provide minimum facilities for living while the labourers are working in those sections where the camps are situated. These facilities consist of a sanitary water supply, sanitary toilets, a central wash-house, shower baths, a community building, and some recreational facilities. Board floors on which the family erects its own tent are also provided. Several of these camps are contemplated, although only two have so far been

[1] RESETTLEMENT ADMINISTRATION : *First Annual Report.* Washington, 1936.

[2] John N. WEBB : *The Transient Unemployed,* WPA Research Monograph, No. III. Washington, 1935.

completed. The camps are supervised by an employee of the Resettlement Administration. The programme is admittedly no more than a minimum one designed partially to ameliorate the intolerable conditions of these workers.

The Works Progress Administration (WPA) has given temporary aid to unemployed farm labourers, especially in the small towns and villages of the countryside. The WPA (established on 6 May 1935) is the successor of the work-relief programme inaugurated by the FERA.

The effect of the WPA upon the agricultural labour supply is not clearly discernible, but farmers in certain areas have complained that farm labourers temporarily employed on WPA work projects are loth to accept farm work when it is offered to them. The wages paid by the WPA are considerably higher than those which farmers feel able to pay, and the labourer hesitates to accept seasonal farm employment under an apprehension—whether justified or not—that he may not be able readily to obtain WPA work assignments after the farm job is finished. It has been the policy of the WPA to terminate employment of farm labourers when the seasonal demand of farmers for help with the crops justifies it, thus practically forcing labourers into the employment market.

The Social Security Act of 14 August 1935 did not include agricultural workers under its provisions. The Social Security Board, which administers the Act, is conducting studies of the agricultural labour situation, however, presumably for the purpose of determining a feasible future policy with reference to this group.

The child-labour amendment to the Federal Constitution has now been ratified by 28 States, four States having accepted the measure during the past year. Favourable action by 8 more States is needed before the amendment becomes effective.

State Legislation

State legislation of importance to farm labour lies chiefly in the realm of child-labour regulation. In general, States have gradually been raising the upper age-limit for compulsory school attendance to 16 years and some of them to 18 years. All States require school attendance up to a specified age, which varies from 14 to 18. In thirty States the age is 16. Minimum wage laws governing children have been enacted in nineteen States, eleven having passed such laws since 1933.

Possible Future Developments

The farm labour problem of the United States, as in other countries, is affected by the same influences which impinge upon commercial agriculture. The growth of economic nationalism with resultant structures upon international trade, wars and threats of further war, the advance of technology—all tend to create uncertainty and disorganisation.

Domestic factors which must be considered of outstanding importance in the United States are :

(1) The mechanisation of cotton culture, which for a hundred years has largely resisted mechanisation ;

(2) The further mechanisation of corn and sugar-beet production ;

(3) The differential birth-rate in favour of the rural classes, resulting in a perennial surplus of labour beyond the needs of agriculture ;

(4) Unstable land-tenure arrangements, with a possible trend to even higher rates of tenancy or larger numbers of people in the farm-labour class, or both ; and

(5) Greater concentration of land-ownership, and increase in the size of the farm unit.

Should the trend towards mechanisation continue unabated, with a concomitant " enclosure " movement and increasing concentration of land-ownership, the United States may be confronted in the near future with the existence of an agricultural proletariat of considerable magnitude. This development, which is already under way, would be a relatively new phenomenon in rural American life. It would be a disturbing contrast to the traditional family farm, where the occasional hired man enjoys a social status not markedly different from that of the family for whom he works.

Such a development would likely bring with it a larger measure of group consciousness on the part of the labourer and the employer alike. It would, no doubt, ensure the success of efforts to organise the farm labourers for purposes of collective bargaining. Such efforts have not been conspicuously successful in the past, though attempts have been made since 1910 to effect the organisation of migratory labourers' unions. In recent years the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, the name of which is self-explanatory, has met with some success in gaining membership among the tenants and share-croppers of the South. These efforts at organisation are not relished by the land-owning farmers, whose attitude is definitely opposed to them.

A development of this kind will make necessary the enactment of provisions in the Social Security Programme to cover the needs of farm labourers. Indeed, there is need for such provisions at the present time.

In view of the unsettled outlook for the future, with its portent of possible distress among agricultural workers due to an increasing surplus of labour and to changes in technology and the commercialisation of agriculture, the Government of the United States should take into account more definitely than it has done heretofore the welfare of labourers when framing its agricultural policy.