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Wages. From 1860
Great Britain. Farm wages

FARM WAGES AND WAGE REGULATION IN ENGLAND AND WALES

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THE FIXING of wages by law is a very old English institution. It dates back to the statute of Edward the Third. Subsequent laws were the famous Act of Elizabeth, an Act of James the First, and an Act of George the Second (1747). The Act of Elizabeth provided that the justices of the peace should meet annually and fix the wages of labourers in husbandry, and of certain other workers. Penalties were imposed on all who gave or took a wage in excess of the amount fixed. The Act of James the First was passed to remove certain ambiguities that were believed to have embarrassed the operation of the Act of Elizabeth. Among the other provisions imposed was a penalty on all who gave a wage below the wage fixed by the magistrates. The Act of 1747 was passed because the existing laws were "insufficient and defective," and it provided that disputes between masters and men could be referred to the magistrates if no rate of wages had been made that year, by the justices of the shire where such complaint was made. It was generally taken for granted that this legislation was designed to keep wages down. So firmly was this believed that the Act of James the First, which provided penalties in cases where wages were given below the fixed rate, was generally ignored and it was only the Act of Elizabeth that was customarily referred to as an act for fixing the maximum rate. A bill was introduced into Parliament in 1795 by Whitbread to fix a minimum rate. His contention was that the Act of Elizabeth ought to be repealed because of the fact that the rates which it fixed were maximum rates.

The object of this bill was to explain and amend the Act of Elizabeth, which empowered justices of the peace at or within six weeks of every general quarter session held at Easter to regulate the wages of labourers in husbandry. The provisions of the bill were briefly as follows. At any quarter session the justices could agree, if they thought fit, to hold a general session for carrying into execution the powers given them by the act. If they thought good to hold such a general session the majority of them could rate and appoint the wages and fix and declare the hours of working of

all labourers in husbandry, by the day, week, month or year, and with beer or cider or without, respect being had to the value of money and the plenty or scarcity of the time. This rate was to be printed and posted on the church doors and was to hold good till superseded by another made in the same way. The young, the old, and the infirm were exempted from the provisions of the act. The bill was defeated. Whitbread made another attempt five years later, and introduced a second bill to the same effect, but this met with the same fate as his first bill, and was thrown out.

No further attempt to regulate the wages in agriculture was made during the next one hundred years. With the opening, however, of the twentieth century, the question of the desirability of establishing minimum wages in agriculture began to be mooted in various quarters. The establishment of the Trades Boards in 1909 had introduced such a system in the case of certain, comparatively small trades. But no attempt to deal with agriculture in a similar manner had met with success. On May 27, 1913, a bill was introduced into the House of Commons by George Roberts, M. P., and others representing the Labor Party, "to provide for the establishment of a minimum wage and the regularisation of the hours of labour of agricultural labourers." In introducing the bill Mr. Roberts said that whilst he "would prefer that every class of labour should be able to secure reasonable living conditions by associated endeavour through trade union organisations," Parliament would be "doing the right thing, when it finds depressed groups of workers, in enabling them, by fixing minimum conditions ultimately to help themselves to a higher standard of existence." The principle of the bill was that the wages, which were to be fixed by district boards, should be of "such a standard as to ensure to the agricultural labourer the possibility of maintaining himself and his family in a state of decency and comfort." This bill did not receive a second reading.

Mr. Lloyd George's Land Enquiry Committee which reported later in 1913, after an extensive examination of the question, reached the conclusion that the low wages then obtaining in agriculture had "set up a vicious circle, since by keeping down the standard of physical and mental development they tend to prevent labourers from being worth a higher wage." It considered that neither the growth of small holdings, increased agricultural pros-

perity, nor trade unionism could be expected to lead within a reasonable time to a satisfactory increase in wages, and it accordingly recommended the establishment of a legal minimum wage through the medium of some form of wage tribunal.

On the 14th of April, 1914, Mr. Leslie Scott, M. P., on behalf of the Conservative Party, introduced a bill called the "Agricultural Employment Boards Bill." This was described as a bill "to provide for the establishment of agriculture employment boards and for purposes incidental thereto." In this way, each of the three political parties in England was pledged to some system of fixing wages in agriculture by law. The outbreak of war prevented any further development in this direction. A Departmental committee on the production of food, referred, in 1915, to the importance of the retention of skilled workers on farms, but said nothing about their wages. In 1916, the Prime Minister (Mr. Asquith) appointed a committee under the chairmanship of Lord Selbourne with the following terms of reference:

"To have regard to the need of increasing home-grown food supplies in the interest of national security and to consider all reports upon the message of effecting such increase." This committee was termed the agriculture policy sub-committee, and was instructed to consider post-war conditions rather than immediate issues. The report was characterized by comprehensive surveys of the agriculture problem, and exhibited some recognition of the fact that the agriculture policy of the country had to be considered from a new standpoint.

The committee expressed the opinion that "the conditions of agriculture must be made so stable out of its profits that the agriculture labourer can be assured of a fair wage, the cultivator of the soil a fair rate for his capital energy and brains, the land owner a fair rate for the capital invested in the lands." They recommended that the state should fix a minimum wage for the ordinary agriculture labourer in each county, guarantee to the farmer a minimum price for wheat and oats, and take steps to secure the increase of production which is the object of the guarantee. This recommendation was at once accepted by the government and formed the basis of the policy announced by the Prime Minister (Mr. Lloyd George) in the House of Commons on February 23, 1917, and subsequently embodied in the corn production act.

The Government took the opportunity, when introducing a bill to deal with increased corn production, of coupling with their proposals in this respect provision for the establishment of machinery to deal with agricultural wages. Under the provisions of this bill, which became law in August, 1917, an Agricultural Wages Board was established, charged with the duty of fixing minimum rates of wages for agricultural workers. The board consisted of an equal number of representatives of employers and of representatives of workers, together with independent members. As originally constituted, half of the sixteen employers' representatives were elected by representative bodies, and the other half nominated by the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries, whilst half of the representatives of workers were elected by representative bodies, and the other half nominated by the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries in consultation with the Ministry of Labour. The independent members were appointed by the Board of Agriculture and were seven in number, one of them being selected as chairman.¹

To assist them in their work the Agricultural Wages Board, under powers conferred on them by the act, appointed district wages committees for the various areas of England and Wales. These committees numbered in all thirty-nine, many committees acting for one county only, while others acted for two or more counties combined. The constitution of these committees was similar to that of the Agricultural Wages Board, but in their case the representative members were appointed by the Wages Board, and the independent members were appointed by the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries.

The right of fixing minimum rates of wages was vested solely in the Agricultural Wages Board, the district wages committees acting in a purely advisory capacity. In the first instance the committees were asked to recommend to the Wages Board what they considered to be the appropriate minimum rates for their area, and the board in arriving at a decision took these recommendations into account. After the first minimum rates had been fixed, however, it became the practice for most of the changes which

¹ In 1920 the system of appointment of the representative members was changed so as to increase the numbers elected by the organisations to 14 a side, thus leaving the number nominated by the Ministry of Agriculture to two on each side.

were made in the rates to be initiated by the Wages Board, the district wages committees being invited to give their observations on the board's proposals before an order was made.

In fixing minimum rates of wages, the Wages Board were required by the act to "secure, so far as practicable, for able-bodied men, wages which in the opinion of the Board were adequate to promote efficiency, and to enable a man in an ordinary case to maintain himself and his family in accordance with such standard of comfort as might be reasonable in relation to the nature of his occupation," and further, that the wages should be such as in the Board's opinion were equivalent to wages for an ordinary day's work at the rate of at least 25 shillings a week.

It was obligatory on the Agricultural Wages Board to fix minimum time rates of wages, but powers were also given to fix minimum piece rates of wages if the Board so desired. In effect, minimum time rates only were fixed, and workers employed at piece rates were protected by a clause in the act which provided that if the piece rate which they were receiving was, in their opinion, inadequate, they could complain to the Wages Board who had power to order the payment of arrears of wages representing the difference between what an ordinary worker would have earned at the piece rate and the wages to which he would have been entitled at the minimum time rate. It might be observed that considerable difficulty would have been experienced if any attempt had been made to fix minimum piece rates of wages. Conditions are liable to vary so greatly between one job and another that it would be impracticable to fix a reasonable piece rate to cover all jobs of one character. In practice, piece workers seldom accept any work at piece rates without having first viewed the work to be done.

In fixing minimum time rates of wages the Board adopted the week as the basis in the case of male workers, but in the case of female workers the rates fixed were hourly rates. Acting on their powers under the act, the Board also fixed overtime rates of wages and defined the employment which was to be treated as overtime employment.

The act took cognizance of the fact that it had long been customary for agricultural workers to be paid partly in kind, and the Board was therefore empowered to define the benefits or advantages which might be reckoned as payment of wages in lieu of

payment in cash and to fix the values at which such allowances might be reckoned. In the matter of fixing the values of benefits, the Board was largely guided by the recommendations of the district wages committees.

The district wages committees in addition to their advisory duties had delegated to them by the Agricultural Wages Board the duty of granting permits of exemption to workers who, by reason of mental or other infirmity or physical injury, were incapable of earning the minimum rate. Except insofar as such permits were granted, the minimum rates applied to all workers employed under a contract of service or apprenticeship.

In accordance with the terms of the act any decision of the Board with regard to minimum rates of wages could only be made enforceable after the Board had given notice of the rates which it proposed to fix in order to give an opportunity for objections to be lodged to the proposed decision. The Board was bound to consider any such objections which might be lodged within a specified period before the decision could be made operative.

The enforcement of the minimum rates was carried out by the Agricultural Wages Board, inspectors for the purpose being placed under its direction by the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries. The administrative staff attached to the Wages Board carried out the general enforcement work but cases of doubt were referred to a sub-committee of the Board for final decision.

The system of wage fixing machinery which was established in 1917 was abolished as from the 1st of October, 1921, by an act repealing the earlier legislation.² The latter act provided, however, that the Minister of Agriculture should have power to take steps to secure the voluntary formation and continuance of local joint conciliation committees for the purpose of dealing with wages or hours or conditions of employment in agriculture. It was provided that the representative members of the district wages committees should become interim conciliation committees pending the formation of voluntary committees, and in effect the district wages committees eventually merged into joint conciliation committees as contemplated by the act. Power was given to the conciliation committees to appoint an independent chairman, but this power was not taken advantage of in many cases.

² The Corn Production Acts (Repeal) Act, 1921.

The act did not provide for any machinery for the nomination of employers' and workers' representatives, but in fact the employers' nominees on the conciliation committees were appointed by the National Farmers' Union, and the representatives of workers by the National Union of Agricultural Workers, and the Workers' Union.

The employers' representatives were in many cases in favour of the formation of conciliation committees for smaller areas than had existed under the Corn Production Act, and in consequence the number of conciliation committees was larger than that of the district wages committees and eventually reached a total of sixty-three, as many as five separate committees being formed in a single county.

Of the sixty-three committees, fifty-six reached agreements with regard to wages at some period during their existence, whilst the remaining seven reached no agreements at any time. The number of agreements in operation became rapidly less after the first few months and by the end of 1922, agreements were operative in only about one-third of the committee areas, whilst a year later this number had been halved. There is no doubt that the voluntary committee system was a complete failure, since only three committees out of a total of sixty-three maintained agreements throughout the period of operation of the act.

The Corn Production Acts (Repeal) Act of 1921 provided that the rates agreed upon by the conciliation committees should only be made legally enforceable in cases where the committee unanimously requested the Minister to register the agreement. Only five of the committees at any time requested such registration to be made, and consequently the great majority of agreements reached were not legally binding upon employers and workers. It is believed, however, that such agreements as were reached were fairly well observed.

The Agricultural Wages (Regulation) Act of 1924 was passed by the Labour Government, but owing to amendments which the Government was forced to accept, the machinery set up differed considerably from that established by the Corn Production Act.

A central Wages Board and local wages committees were established on similar lines to those which formerly existed, but the whole of the members representing employers and workers were to be nominated by the respective organisations, whilst in the case

of the local committees two impartial members were to be appointed by the Ministry of Agriculture and the chairman was to be elected by the committee. The power of fixing minimum rates of wages was placed in the hands of the local wages committees and the Central Agricultural Wages Board was only empowered to fix rates in cases of default by agricultural wages committees or at the request of a committee.³ The Central Board's normal func-

Table 1. Average Agricultural Wages and Index Numbers of Agricultural Wages in England and Wales

Period	Average weekly wages		Index numbers of weekly wages (1914 = 100)
	s.	d.	
1914.....	18	0	
August, 1917.....	25	0	139
First Wages Board Period:			
July, 1918-May, 1919.....	30	6	169
May, 1919-April, 1920.....	37	10½	210
April, 1920-August, 1920.....	43	0½	139
August, 1920-August, 1921.....	46	10½	260
September, 1921.....	42	3	265
Conciliation Committee Period:			
1922.....	31	2	174
1923.....	28	0	156
1924.....	28	0	156
Second Wages Board Period:			
Summer 1925.....	31	5	175
1926.....	31	7	175
1927.....	31	8	176
1928.....	31	8	176
1929.....	31	8	176

tions were confined to implementing orders giving legal effect to the county committees' decisions. The powers conferred by this act of fixing overtime rates of wages, of defining the employment to be treated as overtime and the benefits or advantages which might be reckoned as payment of wages in lieu of payment in cash, of granting permits of exemption and of hearing complaints as to inadequate piece-rates are similar to those obtaining under the previous act.

Under the present act, however, the responsibility for securing

³ In practice no such occasions have so far arisen.

the observance of the minimum rates rests with the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and not with the wage-fixing bodies.

There can be no doubt that the wages board system has made a marvellous change for the good in the working conditions of the agricultural workers of England and Wales. Agricultural wages, however, still lag far behind the wages of the workers in the towns and cities and there is very considerable difficulty in retaining the young people on the land. The annual returns taken by the Ministry of Agriculture show that in the last eight years male adult labour has declined by five per cent, whilst the number of juvenile workers under twenty-one years of age has declined in the same period by twenty-five per cent. If trade improves in England, there will, in the immediate future, be a serious shortage of labour in agriculture. Great changes are in process in the rural life of England. The old skilled agricultural craftsmen who ranked with the highest skilled workers in the whole country are slowly dying out, and there seems to be no one to take their place. England is too small a country to maintain two separate standards of life for its working class—one level for town workers and a lower level for rural workers. In the future, other adjustments will need to be made in wages and working conditions of the labourers or adjustments and changes in the type of British agriculture must inevitably result.