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THE ORGANISATION OF WAGE EARNERS IN
AGRICULTURE

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THE TERM "wage-earners" has been selected to differentiate the class of agricultural workers who most closely approximate to the class of workers in industry who form the great trade union movement. What proportion of workers in agriculture falls within that class in the different countries of the world it would be very difficult to state with any measure of accuracy. Agricultural statistics are notoriously deceptive for the unwary, and elusive for the careful investigator, and the material does not exist from which any useful statistics can be produced. Even if we confine ourselves to a single country it is difficult to classify the different groups, and any attempt to reconcile the statistics for different countries is quite hopeless.

Even the term "wage-earner" requires definition. The worker, as in England, who is regularly employed in agriculture and paid a cash wage, is clearly a wage-earner whose status is similar to that of the wage-earner in industry. The "deputat" in Germany is paid partly in cash and partly in farm produce, but for all practical purposes is clearly a wage-earner. Between these classes, however, we have a considerable variation until we reach the share tenant (metayer) whose status approaches more nearly the position of a tenant farmer than that of the industrial wage-earner. Again, there is the very large class of peasant cultivators who work for wages as casual or seasonal workers on larger farms.

Attempts have been made in some countries, notably in Italy, to form organisations which would include all the different classes of agricultural workers, but the attempts have not been successful. Such organisations of agricultural workers of a trade union character as have been able to survive the initial efforts, have found by practical experience that they have to confine their activities to those workers who are dependent on wages earned under contracts of employment.

There is reason to believe that this class is larger than is generally realised. Certain figures are given for the different countries in the Report of the International Labour Organisation

on "The Representation and Organisation of Agricultural Workers." In Germany it would appear that one-third of the total number of persons engaged in the industry are wage-earners, and that the number of wage workers slightly exceeds the number of working members of cultivators' families. In Denmark in 1923, 84,000 holdings used no permanent outside help; 31,000 used the help of members of the cultivator's family over 15 years of age; and 79,000 holdings used permanent outside help. In Czechoslovakia wage-earners would appear to form 40 per cent of the total number of persons engaged in agriculture; in Belgium 35 per cent; in Great Britain 63 per cent; in Italy 40 per cent; in the Netherlands 65 per cent.

The trade union movement amongst the industrial workers is a growth of the last hundred years; in agriculture it has been a development of the present century, and cannot be said to be of any importance until the years succeeding the outbreak of war. There were spasmodic attempts made to organise wage-earners during the nineteenth century. The six Dorchester labourers, who in 1832 made their feeble effort to combine and suffered deportation for their temerity, occupy an honourable place in the history of the fight against the Combination Acts in Great Britain. Joseph Arch in the seventies was successful in creating a national organisation in England which, for a brief period, focused attention on the deplorable conditions of the workers in agriculture. In the eighties the shearers in Australia engaged in a series of strikes which led to the Compulsory Arbitration Laws of Australia. In Scotland, a Ploughman's Union led a precarious existence for ten years from 1886, not without result in improving the conditions of the workers even during the worst years of that depression in industry. But all such efforts were more in the nature of temporary agitations not without political relations, and never became trade union organisations in the strict sense of the term.

The existing trade union with the longest continued existence is the Dutch Landworkers Union formed in 1900 as a Dairy Workers Union, which amalgamated in 1909 with the newly formed Union of Landworkers. The National Federation of Landworkers in Italy followed in 1901, when a large number of organisations of wage-earners, share-tenants and peasants, some of which had had a more or less continuous existence for a considerable period, were grouped together to form the National Federa-

tion. Although the Federation was affiliated with the National Trade Union centre in Italy, and was one of the unions which formed the International Landworkers' Federation in 1920, there was always some doubt whether it was a trade union of wage-earners. It was suppressed when the Fascist organisations were set up by the Government. It is difficult to get any reliable information about the position of working class organisations in Italy and Fascist organisations are not recognized by the trade unions.

Hungary is another country about which it is difficult to secure any reliable information, but it is hardly likely that the Landworkers' Union formed in 1905 is in effective action today. The year 1906 saw the formation of the National Agricultural Workers' Union of England and Wales, the Danish Landworkers Union, and the Land and Forest Workers' Union of Austria. The German Landworkers' Union was formed in 1909, and the Scottish Farm Servants' Union in 1912.

In a number of European countries there were legal difficulties in the way of organising agricultural workers which were not removed until after the World War and the revolutions which occurred during that period. Immediately these difficulties were removed, stimulated by the labour unrest in the different countries, the unions in existence, sometimes with the help of the national trade union centres, entered upon intensive organising campaigns, while in the countries in which no organisations had existed previously, steps were taken to form landworkers' unions. When the International Landworkers' Federation was formed in 1920, the unions already named with the exception of the Hungarian Union, joined the Federation together with unions from Belgium, France, and Sweden. Later on, landworkers' unions from Poland, Latvia, Czechoslovakia, and Palestine joined the Federation. There is also a Russian Landworkers' Union but I have no authentic information about it.

In addition to these unions which are sometimes known as the "free" trade unions, or the Social Democratic trade unions, there are in some of the European countries Christian trade unions of agricultural workers. Particulars of these, and figures of membership of the various unions in each country will be found in the Report of the International Labour Office on "The Representation and Organisation of Agricultural Workers." I would refer those

interested to that report for fuller information as to the history of the efforts in the different countries, and as to the activities of the various organisations. A sentence from that report sums up the position very succinctly. "What strikes the observer about agricultural trade unionism is its youth and its very limited extent." I have given a brief outline of the history of trade unionism in agriculture and its youth is obvious. It is more difficult to assess its extent. Geographically it is confined to Europe except for the Jewish Union in Palestine and some organisation amongst shearers in Australia. In Europe, the effective organisations are to be found in central and northern Europe; such organisations as exist in the Latin countries appear to be less effective.

If the returns of membership in the agricultural trade unions be set against the total figures for agricultural wage-earners in the respective countries, the unions may be said to show a membership varying from 5 to 15 per cent of the workers eligible for membership. Even during the short-lived boom period at the end of the war, 30 to 40 per cent was probably the highest percentage reached in the most successful organisations. But such percentages are rather misleading. In Great Britain, it is doubtful if the trade unions of industrial and commercial wage-earners at the peak point ever reached 40 per cent of the workers eligible. The distribution of the organised workers is more important than the percentage of the total workers in considering the effective power of the organisation. In every country we find that in certain localities and in certain forms of production, the organisation of the workers in agriculture has been more successful than in the country generally. In Britain, it is where the large farms are the rule, generally in the cereal growing districts. In the stock rearing districts, organisation makes little headway. In Germany, organisation of dairyworkers has been successful in covering 60 per cent of the workers, while in the large farm districts and amongst forestry workers a considerable proportion of the workers have been enrolled in these unions. In the Netherlands, dairyworkers, and the workers on large farms form the bulk of the organised workers. In Czechoslovakia and Denmark the workers on farms where sugar beets are cultivated have responded best to the efforts of the organisers.

There are many causes which account for the youth of agricultural trade-unionism and for its limited extent. The legal

restrictions on the right of association in a number of European countries where large farming was the rule, prevented its development until the last decade amongst the workers from whom organisation might have been expected. It is just in these countries that it has made its greatest development since freedom of association was secured. In Great Britain where the status of the agricultural worker has most nearly approached that of the industrial worker, the industry has been continually shrinking, and the workers have been more anxious to escape from the industry than to endeavor to organise to protect themselves as agricultural workers.

Before trade unionism can be successful amongst any class of workers there must be a large body of workers employed under conditions of wages and working conditions which give these workers a large measure of common interests. In agriculture, these conditions are found only where farming in any district is conducted on a large-scale basis employing numbers of wage-earners. Large farms are a growth of comparatively modern times and in many of the countries are still the exception. Where the system has developed it will be found that before the organisation of trade unions the tendency was for wages and working conditions to be standardised. Under these conditions it might have been expected that trade unionism would have developed as in other occupations in which the workers were similarly situated. It did not do so, and it is worth while considering the reasons.

I would put as the first obstacle to the formation of agricultural trade unions the fact that agriculture is not regarded as a life occupation by the great majority of those who begin work in the industry as wage-earners. When a man serves an apprenticeship to a trade, or takes up coal mining, transport work, or work in textiles or the heavy industries, such a man normally regards that as his job and naturally looks to securing improvements in the conditions of work in that industry. He has a certain sense of the future and is prepared to take the longer view. This makes for continuity of effort, and organisation can be created with some measure of stability. In agriculture the reverse is the case. The industry cannot hope to continue to employ the young people reared on the farms even if they desired to remain in the occupation. But in every country in the world the agricultural workers seek to escape from agriculture into other walks of life. They

are less interested in attempting to influence the conditions of employment than in getting away from the industry, and the more vigorous and enterprising of them leave early, and those left have difficulty in throwing up leaders from among themselves, who are capable of making the effort to organise.

Other difficulties peculiar to the industry are the low wages and the fact that in most countries payments in kind form a considerable part of the wages, rendering it difficult to secure the contributions necessary. The dispersion of the workers over wide areas, the fact that the workers may be so isolated as to make difficult the formation of groups or branches sufficiently large to give a sense of community to the workers, renders organisation work difficult and expensive. Personal difficulties arise more easily amongst small groups, differences of temperament, jealousies, and family differences all creep in to render the work of organisation very difficult. There is little association in work and a lack of social organisation, so that the idea of organised effort has to be created. It does not arise naturally out of the living and working conditions as it does where large masses of workers find themselves working and living together and where organised effort is a necessity of every day existence.

There is the fact also that the farm workers have only lately emerged from being a dependent class. I have already referred to the restrictions on the right of combination. In most of the countries the farm workers still suffer legal and social disabilities which other workers have been able to rid themselves of. "The general characteristic of agricultural labour all over the world is that it is less well protected by law than industrial labour." This sentence from the Report of the International Labour Office very well sums up the situation. The protest of the organised agricultural workers against being regarded as "second class" citizens is justified.

A very large proportion of agricultural wage-earners live in tied houses, that is houses which are owned by their employers and which they can occupy only so long as they work for that employer. This lack of freedom and status makes independent and self-reliant organisations more difficult. Education as a rule in rural districts, in spite of recent improvements, still falls considerably below the standard of that in industrial areas; and rural children are taken from school at an earlier age.

What the future may be for trade unionism in agriculture only one very rash would venture to prophesy. The decade in which it has grown up has been far from normal. The period of inflation and the necessity of adjusting nominal wages to meet the rise in prices was favourable to the development of collective bargaining. The measures taken in certain European countries to ease the adjustment of wages and working conditions, varying from the legal minimum wage in England and Wales to the quasi-legal systems in Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Austria, helped the initial work of organisation. The succeeding depression in the industry during the period of deflation and the fall in world prices of farm produce has had an adverse effect on organisation. The history of trade-unionism in industry shows a steady growth over a long period but the movement rises and falls as boom and slump alternate. The rhythm in agriculture is different from that of the manufacturing industry and time will tell whether agricultural trade-unionism will follow a similar course to industrial trade-unionism.

Whether there is a place for trade-unionism in agriculture is a question which will be answered according to the social and political philosophy of the person answering. Even the most enthusiastic advocate of peasant cultivation or family farming is hardly likely to be hopeful of abolishing the wage-earner in agriculture. The wage-earners in the older settled countries are likely to continue to form the largest single class in the industry, and in no country has the problem been faced of how to keep in the industry an efficient class of workers. There may be variations as to the nature of the problem in the different countries, but it is true of all, that the industry has to be content to work with the less intelligent, less enterprising and less efficient of the workers who are reared in the rural districts. There are signs that the problem is likely to become more acute rather than less. Education in rural districts has been greatly improved during the last two decades. It is still far from what it ought to be, but the signs are that the improvement will be maintained. But every improvement increases the drain of the best of the workers from the rural districts and away from agriculture. We cannot ever hope to make the agricultural industry as attractive as the manufacturing industry to the more vigorous and alert of the workers, or to make social life in the rural areas as attractive as in the urban areas.

Undoubtedly a great deal could be done to remove the handicaps on the industry, but so far, little consideration has been given to the position of the wage-earner. We have all sorts of schemes for farmers, for small-holders, for young farmers and so on. The chemist, the biologist, the economist, and of course the politician, have all been at work diagnosing the disease and offering remedies. Except for the work which has been done in Germany, I am not aware of any attempt to deal with the problems of organisation and methods of work and that is only one aspect of the problem so far as the wage-earner is concerned. It is true that all research in agriculture is a matter of importance to the wage-earner and that he ought to be as much interested in such work as any one engaged in the industry, but he is not alone in being primarily interested in the things that concern him most immediately. Questions of methods of remuneration, the regulation of working time and the adequate provision of leisure, the provision of means of using leisure, housing conditions, and provision for sickness and unemployment, are the immediate problems in which he is interested. Some of these problems are problems for the industry to handle, some of them are social and political, but all of them are problems which are more likely to be solved by organised action. We have enough experience to show that the method of collective bargaining can be applied to the industry, whether on questions of wages or working conditions. My own view is that the field which offers most hope to economic research today is in work studies and methods of labour organisation, but if effective use is to be made of such research it will require the cooperation of the wage-earners if changes in the traditional methods are to be made. The wage-earner, individually, will be just as tenacious in sticking to old methods as the farmers have been individually on other matters and the only way to make progress is to associate them with the work and rely upon the collective body responding to leadership.

There is a place for the organisation of the wage-earner in the industry. The day has passed when he can be treated as a "second class citizen" content to accept any place which may be allotted to him. If the industry cannot find a place for the worker who wants to retain his self-respect and who has some voice in the shaping of his destiny, then such workers will leave the industry, or if they cannot escape themselves, will rear their children to do so. That is what is happening today and no attempt is being made

to measure the loss to the industry and to the community because this is happening. Probably it is impossible to measure the loss, but that does not mean the loss is not there. There are causes which we may not be able to prevent, but we can at least give the wage-earner his status in the industry, and history shows that the only way to secure his status is by organisation.

It will be observed that I have made no reference to the position in America. I am aware that a distinct class of wage-earners has not yet appeared in agriculture in the United States and Canada, but I would suggest that it would be a profound mistake if agricultural economists in these countries were to assume that such a class is not likely to arise. I have had some opportunity of seeing the development in farming in the Middle West and I have listened to the discussions of agricultural problems at this Conference. I have been struck with the frequency with which the remark has been made that in America the close of the pioneer stage has been reached. We have heard a great deal about the mechanisation of farming operations and of the problems created by the abandonment of submarginal lands. At such a conference it is natural to expect that the economic adjustment necessary to meet such developments should claim most attention, but the social developments likely to follow ought not to be neglected. I think there is another development which has not received so much attention but which is of even greater importance—the fact that on much of the land it is now necessary to resort to liming and the use of fertilisers to maintain fertility.

If we have reached the close of the pioneer period and we are likely to be faced with the problem of keeping marginal land in cultivation, that points to the necessity of farmers possessing more capital for the purpose of carrying on more intensive farming. The day will have passed when a wage-earner could hope by the exercise of rigid thrift to scrape together enough to enable him to furnish the meagre equipment necessary to enable him to exploit the natural fertility of virginal soil. As long as there was room to widen the margin of cultivation by bringing in fresh land there were many opportunities for the wage-earners to join the class of farmers. But we seem now to have reached the stage when it is no longer possible to draw upon the bank of nature without first paying something into the account and that will mean a far reaching change in the status of the wage-earner.

For the future, capital will be a much more important factor in

farming than labour. The progress of mechanisation and the growing intensification of farming will raise the capital requirements of farming beyond the reach of the accumulated savings of the great mass of wage-earners. Whether the "family farm" persists or large-scale farms develop, both will be essentially capitalist enterprises, even if the "family farmer" continues to be a working farmer. The wage-earners may form a relatively small class judged by European standards, but that such a class will develop seems certain.

In Europe, we have been faced with this problem for three generations; America, I believe, has still to face the problem. The rate of development in America both in industry and agriculture has been so rapid, the changes following each other so swiftly, that it has been assumed in many quarters that America would escape the social problems with which Europe has had to wrestle. In the pioneer stage social classes do not form with well defined boundaries, but when development changes from extensive to intensive, boundaries become more fixed.

In Europe we have been struggling painfully to bring into being social institutions which will modify the effects of economic forces. The effort has been marked by strife and conflict, but in different degrees and in different countries we have reached a stage where the social conscience is demanding some means by which the standard of life of the people can be safeguarded. Sometimes that has taken the form of legislative enactment; sometimes it has been by the creation of organisations to defend the interests of groups. We cannot expect to educate our children to become first class citizens and then expect they will be content to be located as "second class citizens" socially and economically. The mechanisation of industry and agriculture which has developed so marvelously in America is not the last word in civilisation. It has brought an astounding increase in productive resources, but it brought with it problems of social adjustment which have yet to be solved and I am not so pessimistic as to believe that it is to be solved by making the human being the slave of the machine.