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LABOR UNIONISM IN AMERICAN AGRICULTURE

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The concept of labor unionism among farm workers may seem anachronistic to many persons. We customarily view farming as a special type of enterprise, a "way of life," that has remained singularly free from unionism, strikes, class conflict and other "labor troubles."

As a matter of fact, during the past five to six decades farm workers numbering in the hundreds of thousands have organized in unions and participated in literally hundreds of strikes throughout the nation. At least three concerted attempts have been made to unionize farm workers on a nation-wide scale. Almost every state in the Union has experienced at least one farm labor strike at one time or another and dozens of different crops or types of farm work have been affected. By far the majority of such outbreaks occurred during the Nineteen Thirties.

As compared to the tremendous scope of unionism in other major fields of industry, labor organization in agriculture may seem a weak, sporadic and relatively insignificant development. However, the size which strikes in agriculture have periodically attained, the intense and violent labor-employer conflict which they have at times engendered, and their widespread effects on other elements of commerce, give farm labor unionism an importance far beyond that which its size, in terms of mere membership or number of participants alone, would indicate.

We tend to dissociate labor unionism from agriculture because farming is usually assumed to be based primarily on a system of small individual enterprises. The typical unit is usually taken to be the "family farm", in which the owner-operator does the main part of the work, and at most hires one or two individual "farm hands." The latter in turn tend to be viewed as a special type of labor: They are pictured as working alongside the owner-operator, doing the same kinds of jobs, eating at the same table, and in general enjoying a secure, personal relationship with their employers. Under the concept of the so-called "agricultural ladder," moreover, the average farm laborer is assumed to be one who, within his lifetime, normally will rise to the status of tenant and finally owner-operator.

In the regions and types of agriculture where the family farm <u>is</u> the typical unit, labor unionism and strikes have been notably absent. To an increasing degree during recent decades, however, agricultural proprietors in the United States have tended to specialize in cash crops grown for distant markets, rather than to carry on diversified farming in small family units. Large-scale "factory farms" using mass production methods and hiring workers in <u>gangs</u> rather than as individual "farm hands," have to an increasing degree supplanted family farms in certain areas and types of crops. Wherever such developments have occurred they have brought new labor problems to agriculture, or rather, brought to agriculture the type of labor problems hitherto confined to other fields. An industrial structure of operations when adapted to agriculture has tended to bring a correspondingly

industrialized pattern of labor relations, characterized by: routine, standardized jobs with extensive use of machinery; contrasting backgrounds, growing inequality and "social distance" between labor and employer; and special supervision by hired managers, foremen and "straw bosses". Moreover, due to the oftentimes extreme seasonality of employment in specialized cash crop farming, and the excessive mobility required of the workers, the latter have tended to be even more insecure and casual in their relationships with employers than is true of most industrial laborers. And finally, casual or seasonal farm laborers, despite these disabilities, have been usually more poorly paid and have received far less protection from labor legislation than have workers in other industries.

These conditions have been conducive to conflict. Hence labor unionism and strikes in agriculture have been concentrated almost entirely in those regions and crops of the type mentioned, in which seasonal workers have been employed in large-scale farms producing for distant markets.

In dealing with labor unionism and strikes in agriculture, this paper will give a brief historical sketch of the main trends prior to the 1930's, then analyze developments in that decade in more detail:

One of the earliest strikes on any important scale in agriculture occurred in 1883 among some 325 cowboys employed by seven large cattle-ranching corporations in the Texas "Panhandle." Other sporadic strikes about which there are definite records occurred during the 1880's and 1890's among casual harvest hands in the Wheat Belt of the Middle West, and among fruit and vegetable workers on the Pacific Coast.

Stable unions in agriculture, as in other industries in earlier decades, were first organized among the more skilled and better-paid workers who enjoyed superior bargaining power. Among the earliest of these was the United Sheep Shearers, organized in the sheep-raising sections of the Rocky Mountain region. This organization later became the present-day Sheep Shearers Union of North America, affiliated to the American Federation of Labor.

During the decade preceding the First World War several short-lived unions were also organized among white harvest and packing-shed workers in California. Racial minorities like the Japanese, who dominated numerous farm occupations in California during that period, were also successful for a time in establishing an indigenous system of collective bargaining.

In sections of the Southern Cotton Belt, particularly in Eastern Oklahoma and Texas, the lines between owners, tenants and laborers were exceedingly fluid at a precariously low economic level, and in the pre-war decade agrarian organizations like the Oklahoma Renters' Union and the Working-class Union of the World included elements from all three groups. Several strikes were carried out by such organizations. One of the more spectacular occurrences was the so-called "Green Corn Rebellion" in Eastern Oklahoma in 1917.

The first concerted program to organize farm workers on a nation-wide scale was undertaken during the years of World War I by the Industrial Workers of the World, or IWW. This revolutionary labor federation drew most of its membership from unskilled and semi-skilled laborers employed at a variety of seasonal jobs in mining, lumbering, railway maintenance and agriculture. The IWW's affiliate, Agricultural Workers Industrial Union No. 110, carried out a vigorous campaign among harvest hands in the Wheat Belt of the Middle West and among fruit and vegetable workers in the Pacific Coast states, especially California. It was involved

in numerous strikes and, not infrequently, violent conflicts with organized growers and officers of the law. The IWW was suppressed by the Federal Government after America's entrance into the War in 1917. Its agricultural organization finally disintegrated during the early 1920's when mechanization of grain harvesting eliminated a major part of the Middle West's seasonal demand for labor from other areas.

The decade of the Twenties was a period of quiescence in agricultural labor unionism. There is definite record of only a few sporadic local unions and spontaneous, unorganized strikes. Rising national income, rapid growth of city populations, and expanding foreign markets increased the demand for various cash crops. The trend toward large-scale commercialized farming employing large numbers of seasonal workers was accentuated in certain regions, particularly along the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. At the same time the supply of seasonal labor was made much larger and more elastic than before through improved transportation facilities (particularly the automobile) through large-scale immigration of such groups as Mexicans and Filipinos, and through more effective labor recruiting by organized farm employers. These developments tended to discourage labor unionism among farm workers.

A succession of catastrophes in the 1930's brought the farm labor problem into new focus. Depression, falling farm prices, government-sponsored crop reduction and acreage control, rapid technological change, drought and other climatic factors, all had the effect of displacing small and medium-sized farm operators, particularly tenants, on a mass scale. They contributed large numbers to a chronic surplus agricultural labor supply already enlarged by sizeable additions from the ranks of urban unemployed. The situation reached the point where, according to the 1935 Yearbook of Agriculture (p. 189) "there were five (agricultural) workers available in January, 1933 for every two jobs available." Wage rates and average duration of employment were drastically reduced, such that a large, and at times a major, proportion of seasonal farm workers had to depend upon relief to supplement incomes that were inadequate for even a bare minimum of subsistence.

The severe maladjustments wrought by these developments during the Thirties generated widespread unrest among farm laborers, culminating in a series of strikes of unprecedented scope and intensity throughout the country. Under the stimulus of new labor legislation and expanding unionism in other industries from 1933 on, the collective activities of farm laborers came increasingly under union control.

Unionism and strikes among farm laborers during the Thirties comprise too scattered and complex a picture to attempt to trace in detail in this paper. From what data are available, the main aspects may be summarized as follows:

(1) Number and scope of strikes - Altogether, during the years 1930 to 1939 inclusive, there were 275 farm strikes in 28 states, affecting 39 crops, in which an estimated total of approximately 178,000 strikers participated. The peak year was 1933, when 61 strikes involving roughly 57,000 workers occurred in 17 states.

(a) Concentration by Region - The strikes were highly concentrated by region and type of farming. They were notably few or lacking entirely in sparsely settled states in the Rocky Mountain region, such as New Mexico, Utah and Nevada; in the more depressed states

in the Southern Cotton Belt, such as South Carolina, Georgia and Mississippi; and in states characterised by small or medium-sized family farming, such as Kentucky and Tennessee in the mountain region of the South, Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont in New England, and most of the states in the Corn Belt and Wheat Belt in the Middle West.

The dominant factor determining the size and frequency of strikes in each agricultural area appeared to be the prevalence of large-scale farms specializing in cash crops and employing large numbers of seasonal workers. California was outstanding in this regard. More than one-third of the nation's large-scale farms were located in this state alone, wage laborers constituted a disproportionately large segment of the rural population, and they were among the most mobile and seasonal of job tenure. Correspondingly, 140 strikes, or more than one-half of the total, and about 127,000 strikers, or more than two-thirds of all participants during the Thirties, were in this state alone. Within California the strikes were highly concentrated in counties in which large-scale specialized farming was most prevalent, such as San Joaquin, Alameda, Los Angeles, Imperial, San Luis Obispo, Kern and Tulare, in the order named. Similarly, in the other states affected, strikes were confined mainly to areas where farming was concentrated in relatively large specialized concerns in which class divisions (in many cases coinciding with racial differences) were pronounced. Outstanding among such areas were sections of the Southern cotton-growing region, the citrus belt in Florida, onion-growing tracts in Ohio and Texas, tobacco plantation areas in Connecticut and Massachusetts, cranberry bogs in Massachusetts, truck-farming sections of New Jersey and Washington, hop-growing areas of Oregon, sugar beet fields in Ohio, Michigan and Colorado, and sheep ranches in the Rocky Mountain and Pacific Coast states.

(b) Concentration by Crops - Farm strikes showed a high degree of concentration by crops as well as by region. Ninety-three, or well over one-third of the 275 farm strikes in the country during the Thirties were confined to 4 crops, or about one-tenth of those affected. Still greater concentration of labor trouble is indicated by the number of workers involved. About 70,000 or almost two-fifths of the 178,000 strikers were in two crops only, peas and cotton. If to these are added some 15,000 in vegetables and another 15,000 in lettuce, then more than 100,000 or well over one-half of all strikers in the ten-year period were employed in only four crops, or about one-tenth of those affected. While the largest number of strikes throughout the country occurred in vegetables - namely twenty-eight - the largest number of strikers - namely 47,000-odd, or well over one-quarter of the total 178,000 - were employed in cotton. California agriculture showed a similar concentration.

Various aspects of farm size, structure, and pattern of labor relations explained the concentration of strikes in certain crops. Labor trouble in vegetables was to be explained partly by the highly intensive and mechanized cultivation in certain regions for commercial uses, and partly by proximity to large urban centers, so that seasonal farm workers were accessible to the influence of

industrial unionism. The prevalence of strikes in peas was due primarily to the speculative business operations involved, the extreme mobility required of the workers, and the numerous abuses suffered under the contractor system. Special circumstances created widespread unrest and conflit in cotton. A leading factor in California cotton was the monopolistic wage-setting agreements by employers associations like the Agricultural Labor Bureau of San Joaquin Valley, which made cotton workers acutely aware of their disadvantageous bargaining position when unorganized. Several large and violent conflicts in certain sections of the Southern Cotton Belt, such as Eastern Arkansas and Southern Alabama, arouse out of severe maladjustments that were occurring during the 1930's. Old-style plantations were breaking down and adopting a structure similar to the large agricultural enterprises of California and Arizona. Many plantation owners, in order to adopt more mechanized methods of production (and in some cases to avoid having to share their AAA crop reduction checks) uprooted their tenants and sharecroppers and replaced them with casual day laborers hired for short periods of cotton "chopping" and picking.

(2) Violence and Organized Anti-Unionism - Farm labor strikes on the whole brought forth an unusual degree of violence, use of illegal tactics, and infringement of civil liberties. An official investigation presented before the United States Senate Committee on Education and Labor, for instance, summarized the data regarding 65 agricultural labor strikes in California involving civil or criminal disturbances as follows:

> "Arrests were made in 39 out of 65 strikes. Riots, violence and injuries occurred in 32 strikes. Use of munitions marked 16 strikes. Ranking fourth in frequency are evictions and deportations, which took place in 15 instances. Other types of disturbances include 11 strikes involving property damage, 10 involving intimidation, 8 involving vigilante action, and 5 involving death. Again it should be observed that these are only the instances in the press; undoubtedly the information is far from complete." (Hearings, Part 47, p. 17212)

Agricultural labor strikes in other states exhibited many of the same features, though not on as wide a scale. Farm employers were strongly opposed to labor unionism due partly to the alleged irresponsibility of farm labor unions organized among casual workers under radical leadership, and partly to the high perishability of farm crops and the consequent danger of heavy losses during strikes.

Anti-unionism and strike-breaking were spontaneous in most areas, in the form of short-lived protective associations, "vigilance committees," and oftentimes merely unplanned mob action. In a few states, such as California, Arizona, Oregon, and Washington, permanent employers' organizations like the Associated Farmers were established for the specific purpose of combatting unionism and strikes in agriculture. The forces of law and order tended to side with employers in disputes that occurred in rural areas, and in many counties special legislation was passed to curb the activities of organized farm labor.

(3) Farm Labor Organizations - The rebirth of farm labor unionism as a social

movement of nation-wide proportions during the 1930's developed from many scattered origins. It tended to assume a different form in each distinct farming region in the United States. Local unions in many instances grew out of spontaneous strikes, in which indigenous leaders rose from the ranks. Such was the history, for instance, of the highly-publicized Onion Workers Union in Hardin County, Ohio. Many spontaneous strikes, on the other hand, were so unorganized that no unions, or even an accepted leadership, developed to carry on collective bargaining negotiations with the employers. Such were the series of spontaneous strikes among hop-pickers in south-central Oregon and tobacco plantation workers in Connecticut and Massachusetts. Numerous strikes were planned beforehand and carried out by indigenous unions independently organized among hitherto non-unionized workers. The initiative was in many cases taken by workers who had been active union members in other industries. Such were, for instance, the Beet Workers Union of Blissfield, Michingan; the United Citrus Workers of Florida (whose membership in late 1933 reached a peak of 30,000); the Asociacion de Jornaleros, organized among onion pickers in Webb County, Texas; the Southern Tenant Farmers Union in Eastern Arkansas; and the Cape Cod Cranberry Pickers Union of Plymouth County, Massachusetts. A few independent unions which had been organized and soon became inactive during the late 1920's regained vigor, often under new and more radical leadership, in the revival of the 1930's. The Beet Workers Association of Colorado and the Confederacion de Uniones Obreras Mexicanos or CUOM of Southern California were the most important of these. Several inactive local Federal Labor Unions of the AF of L, confined mainly to the more skilled trades allied to agriculture, experienced a similar revival and expansion. Among these were packing-shed workers in California and Arizona, citrus packing-house workers in Polk and Highland Counties, Florida, sheep shearers in the Mountain States region, and greenhouse workers in Cook and Logan counties, Illinois, Middlesex county, Connecticut, in Ashtabula, Ohio and New Providence, New Jersey.

Far over-shadowing all other organizations in agriculture during the early Thirties were the affiliates of the Communist Party's Trade Union Unity League, a "dual" revolutionary federation established in opposition to the AF of L. The TUUL soon absorbed or "captured" many local indigenous unions and set up the first nation-wide agricultural labor organization to be established in the United States since the demise of the IWW. Communist-led farm labor unions were established among cotton sharecroppers and day laborers in Alabama, truck farm laborers in New Jersey, and migratory cotton, fruit and vegetable workers in the Pacific Coast states, especially California. The Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union, or C&AWIU, affiliated to the TUUL, was estimated to have led or directed three-quarters of the farm strikes involving about four-fifths of the total 48,000 strikers in that state during 1933 alone.

The Communist Party abandoned dual unionism in 1935 and reverted to a policy of "boring from within" other organizations. The TUUL was disbanded and its affiliates, as well as many of its most able and active organizers, were absorbed into other labor unions. Most of the local agricultural labor organizations which had survived obtained charters from the AF of L. A National Committee to Aid Agricultural Workers was formed to further the cause of farm labor unionism and unsuccessful efforts were made to obtain official sanction and financial support from the AF of L

to federate local and state-wide organizations into one international union of agricultural and allied workers.

A growing body of opinion among leading agricultural unionists came to favor affiliation with the newly organized Committee for Industrial Organization, or CIO. This was finally achieved at a national convention held in Denver, Colorado in July, 1937, attended by 100 delegates from 24 states, representing 56 different independent and AF of L local unions claiming close to 100,000 members in agriculture and allied industries. An international Union was established and received a charter from the CIO as the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packinghouse and Allied Workers of America, or UCAPAWA. Rapid expansion occurred at first, and by the end of 1938 the new union claimed a voting membership of 125,000 workers belonging to more than 300 local unions in a wide variety of crops and processing plants related to agriculture. From then on, however, the farm labor unions declined rapidly in size and number, due to organizational difficulties and shortages of funds and personnel. By the end of 1940 the active locals of the UCAPAWA were confined almost entirely to processing industries related (in some cases rather distantly) to agriculture.

Conclusion: Farm Labor Unionism and the Future - Farm labor unionism has been an anomalous and transitory development in the American economy, and on the whole its success has been limited. Extreme mobility and insecurity, highly seasonal and intermittent employment, low wage rates, depressed living conditions, and disadvantageous legal and political status - all combined to virtually preclude stable organization and collective bargaining among casual farm laborers.

The failure of unionism did not, however, mean the absence of unrest and conflict. Many of the largest, most violent and ruinous strikes during the Thirties occurred among non-union workers. Indeed, the very conditions which discouraged union organization were conducive to conflict. Large numbers of farm workers in the 1930's were acutely aware of their substandard wages, living conditions, job security and opportunities for advancement as compared to those of industrial workers. They were even more acutely aware of the fact that, despite their greater poverty and insecurity, they received little or no benefit from protective labor legislation like the Social Security Act, the Fair Labor Standards Act and the National Labor Relations Act which applied to other industries.

It is not unlikely that in the near future labor unionism in American agriculture may experience a rebirth, perhaps on a larger scale than ever before. There seems little likelihood that the trend toward large-scale specialized farming will decline; on the contrary, there are many indications that it is likely to continue. At the same time, farm wage rates have in many cases doubled or trebled during the war, and any tendency to fall towards pre-war levels would probably arouse organized opposition from farm labor. Furthermore, during the past few years of wartime production large numbers of agricultural workers have been employed, many for the first time, in non-agricultural industries having superior wages, hours, and job security. Those who return to agriculture would tend to find the usual peacetime standards of seasonal farm work unacceptable. And finally, in the process of unprecedented wartime expansion urban industrial unions have reached growing numbers of unskilled and semi-skilled workers, including many who had recently transferred from farm work. The existence of any sizeable pools of farm laborers having substandard wages and working conditions

would be a continual threat to the security of industrial workers and unions. For their own protection, then, the latter would be inclined to undertake a far more ambitious drive than before to unionize farm workers on a nation-wide scale.

Regardless of the success or failure of unionism, unrest and conflict are likely to recur in agriculture, perhaps on a greater scale than before, if there is any general tendency to return to the pre-war conditions of large labor surpluses, insecurity, under-employment and substandard wage rates on the land. In the last analysis, the problem of labor-employer conflict in agriculture cannot be dealt with realistically until farm wage rates and standards of job security more nearly approach those of urban industries, and until federal labor legislation is extended to cover farm workers.