Management of labour—labour's response

by J. BROCKLEBANK, C.B.E., J.P.

HAD I been speaking at a conference of this kind even 15 years ago, I should have been dealing with the most expensive item in farming costs. This is no longer the position, as a drastic reduction in the labour force and steep rises in other costs have now placed labour well below the cost of feeding stuffs—in the 1970 Annual Review White Paper they came out at 29.5 per cent, against labour's 18.8 per cent —and the latter is rapidly being overtaken by machinery, rent and interest, haulage and marketing. What, therefore, is, first, the size of labour's response.

The peak figure of whole time regular workers was in 1947, with a total of 645,000. It has rapidly declined since then—in April, 1970, it was down to 216,700 —but there was an interesting deviation from the normal, in that there was a slight increase in regular female workers. This was accounted for by the fact that farm secretaries were included for the first time, surely a sign of the times.

A look at the U.K. national farm will be helpful to get management of labour in its right perspective. Figures taken from the Ministry of Agriculture's Farm Structure Report indicate that we have roughly at our disposal 30 million acres that can be farmed. Within that total, we have 270,000 holdings, made up of very small acreages of just over 1 acre right up to quite large farms. A look at the distribution of the labour force on those farms is revealing, as is what they produce (Table 1).

As a nation we continue to hold the most romantic ideas about our small farmer, maintaining his freedom and his independence. I believe these figures demonstrate very clearly indeed that there is a crying need for amalgamation and rationalisation of our farming system. As A. K. Giles and W. J. G. Cowie pointed out in a survey they did on "The Farm Worker, His Training, Pay and Status" in 1964, and desire to own and control a piece of land of their own was near to the heart of a very large number of farm workers in days gone by. The ever increasing cost of buying, and after buying, stocking and cropping, makes this method of advancement in the industry almost prohibitive today, and, in fact, it is more and more being seen as such by increasing numbers of workers.

Acceptance of the position as I have attempted to outline it so far, leads inevitably to farm structure. Ever so slowly, but perceptibly, numbers of full time holdings are decreasing, and between 1963-67 there was an 8 per cent decrease. In a paper given to a Newcastle University Conference in July, 1969, Mr. B. Peart, Chief Farm Management Adviser, NAAS, estimated a continuing reduction of 10 per cent every five years up to 1985, when the full time holdings would be reduced to 102,000. The formation of these larger units, coupled with their continued intensification, focuses more and more attention on the right kind of management, both to make the best use of the labour available, and the high returns needed to get an adequate return on the ever increasing capital investment in the industry.

The evidence available indicates that the industry is not prepared to pay for the management it needs. Figures issued by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for the period ended March, 1970, shows foremen, bailiffs, etc. ahead of all others in the wages scale, but only just. By September, 1970, they had been overtaken by dairycowmen. A glance at Tables 2 and 3 will show that mainly this arises because of all the samples given, dairycowmen's hours had increased, whereas, as one would expect, all the other hours had gone down, with the further reduction of the working week to 42 hours.

The employer's outlook

But what we really need to see is a drastic change in the outlook of employers in the industry to take full advantage of the worker's response. Let us take the simple issue of farm safety. Mechanisation of the industry inevitably led to a rapid increase in the accident rate, and of a more serious kind. Brave attempts were made to try and save lives and limbs on our farms. Tractors overturning remained easily the biggest killer of the lot. Throughout the whole of the negotiations for compulsory safety measures, farmers had to be dragged along in the effort to make our farms safer places on which to live and work, and the same applied to the new safety cabs on tractors.

Their attitude always seemed to be that these accidents could not happen to them, but only to the foolishness of their hired workers. In fact, all the statistics show that farmers, their sons and daughters, are just as vulnerable as any of the work people they employ. This attitude is bad for the image of the industry. The same applies to the reductions in the working week, where there has been a constant refusal to face facts of life as they are. When the latest reductions came in, the Agricultural Wages Board recommended a weekly short day of three

hours, when a large part of the industry was already working less, and when what was really needed, in the interests of everyone concerned, and including good management, was a drive towards a five day week. Fortunately, NUAAW propaganda has had some effect, and I know a number of farms where the working week is so organised to make a five day week possible.

Now I know the cry that normally goes up. What about the stock, and, on the smaller farms, the boss himself does a seven day week. This too is not altogether necessary, and is no commendation for the system, but a good example of bad management and poor organisation. In a recent bulletin issued by the Agricultural Adjustment Unit, Newcastle University, trends indicate that while the number of workers, against the general trend, has increased on cropping farms, there has been a rapid decline on mainly dairy farms. In my view, this arises almost entirely because of weekend work.

As an organiser for the NUAAW I could always tell the well organised farms, and the men working on them. If they knew they had a long weekend on the way, they looked forward with joyful anticipation, an attitude of mind that was entirely absent where the daily grind went into one weekend after another. There is no comparison here between the boss and his men. Most farmers I know could not tear themselves away from the farm at weekends; it is their own, they live there, and their capital is invested there. I place this issue high on my list of labour's response.

And there are many others. Under the Contract of Employment Act, 1963, all employers are required by law to give their workers the main terms of their employment in writing. From surveys we have undertaken I estimate that no more than 30 per cent of all hired workers have received these documents. Seventy per cent of employers in agriculture are at this time in breach of the law. This is an extremely serious matter for the injured worker, or the man made redundant, as almost the first things asked for are these written statements. Almost of equal importance, but not yet made statutory, are itemised pay slips. Pressure for these has been on for years. We very carefully record production from the dairy herd, and the progress from birth to bacon in the piggery; this is important for the profit and loss account. How much more important is the human element?

For 10 years negotiations dragged wearily on to try and introduce a wages structure into the industry, with the main object of increasing payments for skill and responsibility. In the first proposals, issued last year, and only then after two sharp reminders from the Prices and Incomes Board, in Reports No. 25 and 101, it was clear again that the human factor had been almost ignored; otherwise, how on earth could they have expected that workers not given craft certificates by their employers would rush to take proficiency tests? Young workers might, but not the over 45s, and we have, within our wage negotiating machinery which can well be used for settling simply and effectively difficulties that might arise. The proposals, which were substantially the NFU proposals, provide for three grades of worker—**Craftsmen**—being workers who hold a proficiency test certificate, having served an apprenticeship, or an employer's certificate of competence in a craft. This grade would be worth 10 per cent over the minimum rates, a rate those holding a certificate of apprenticeship are already entitled to under the Agricultural Wages Board Orders.

Grade I—a whole time worker in charge of other men, or in charge of a separate enterprise, i.e. pig or poultry—this would give a 20 per cent plus rate.

Grade II—a whole time worker, appointed to and carrying a position of managerial responsibility, with at least two other whole time workers under his control—this would give a 30 per cent plus rate.

These proposals had a very cool reception amongst NUAAW members at county level. They feel it is far too one sided, grading the man and not the job, and they wanted to see much more authority given to County Wages Committees, to sort out the difficulties that arise. Further, there was a strong feeling that the premium rates were too low, with men in some areas getting higher rates than those indicated.

More specialisation

It looks as if the drive towards specialisation and intensification will continue as far ahead as we can see. There may be some slight variations, but what should not be underestimated is the effect on individual workers. In my own part of the world large scale broiler, egg, and pig producing units are commonplace. Sometimes I pick these workers up, hitchhiking home after their day's work. You have no need to ask where they work, nausea fills the car, and remains long after the individual has left you. He lives with this all the time. Equally, tractor noise levels; driers, with their dust problems; and the constancy of indoor machinery all indicate the need for continuing and urgent research into the health problems concerned.

My own work investigating accidents in chicken factories brought me into contact with the industrial nursing staff employed there. They knew within a week when what they called a bad lot had come in, by the effect on the factory workers, with septicaemia and conjunctivitis. How much more serious could it be on those working in close confinement producing and rearing them? That is why the application for three weeks' paid holiday becomes so relevant. It is true that for those with 20 years' service there has already been an extra week, making three weeks in all, but it is a fact that for those industries which have a service element in their additional holidays,

the average length of service is now reduced to six years.

The industry must improve this image, as indeed it must in the arrangements it makes for its workers to take their holidays. They must be allowed to plan ahead just the same as any other workers. Too many labour relations are soured by short sharp decisions on holidays, merely because either the weather is too bad to get on with anything else, or so good that arrears have been overtaken. In this we have lagged behind most of Europe (See Table 4) and the International Labour Organisation, which in June, 1970, adopted a Holidays with Pay Convention, which stated (Article 3) "The holiday shall in no case be less than three working weeks for one year of service".

The tied cottage

This is not the place to deal with the political implications of tied cottages, but some of the side effects cannot be ignored. Hours of work, and pride, sometimes go into the painting and interior decorating of tied cottage homes, to make them clean and comfortable. The garden, after much hard labour, is a joy for all to see. A storm on the farm blows up, with notices either given or received. Another weary and disconsolate housewife, and her keen gardener husband, decide on moving to another tied house that they will neither decorate nor do the garden, and a positive step has been taken towards creating another rural slum. Equally, there is a devastating effect on the social consequences—on the education of the children, an abrupt breaking of friendships, changing of doctors, and much unhappiness caused by the loss of a sense of security.

As every good farmer knows, the most successful farm is where there are good farmer-worker relationships. In spite of a certain amount of smugness and complacency, they are the exception rather than the rule. Our progressive approach as an industry towards cattle rearing and plant breeding, cultivation and fertilisation, has placed us way out in front of all other agriculturists in the world. We have not placed anything like the same high value on labour relations relying far too much on nostalgia and romanticism a nineteenth century approach to our most important and valuable asset. Mr. J. N. Merridew, B.Sc.(Agric.) M.Sc., is director of the commercial farm at Newcastle University. I commend what he has to say on this in a paper given at a conference at the University in February, 1970. I cannot do better than quote his general conclusions:—

1. Good labour management relationships do not occur by chance, but rather by conscious effort
2. Success could not be attributed to any one practice or policy such as high wages. Such relationships seem to be a combination of policies on the part of farmers. For the workers, they appeared to have a liking and preference for the farm work and then employers.
3. While economic benefits were important, both sides agreed that the main thing was a sense of fair treatment, of consideration as human beings rather than just employees.

It can be said that my theme in this paper has been as it was almost bound to be, the personal and human side of labour's response. We here in this conference are all individuals in our own right. So they are on the farm. Get to know them as individuals, take them into your confidence, discuss what it's all about, and why you are doing certain things. You may well be agreeably surprised at the size of labour's response

Table 1 DISTRIBUTION OF LABOUR FORCE

34,000 holdings (11%) have 4 men or over, and produce 48% of the nation's output
54,200 holdings (10%) have 2 to 4 men and, produce 27% of the nation's output
68,000 holdings (22%) have 1 to 2 men, and produce 17% of the nation's output
150,000 holdings (49%) have less than 1 man, and produce 7% of the nation's output

"The Changing Structure of Agriculture"—1970 The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food

Table 2

EARNINGS AND HOURS OF AGRICULTURAL AND HORTICULTURAL WORKERS IN ENGLAND AND WALES

	In the Year April, 1969 to March, 1970		*In the quarter*			
			Jan.—March, 1969		*Jan.—March, 1970*	
			Average weekly totals			
	Earnings	*Hours*	*Earnings*	*Hours*	*Earnings*	*Hour*
	£ s. d.		£ s. d.		£ s. d.	
All hired men	17 12 2	48.9	16 0 7	47.4	17 3 6	46.
Foremen (Bailiffs etc.)	20 14 4	47.2	19 5 6	46.8	21 10 6	45.
Dairycowmen	20 12 8	54.8	19 16 11	53.8	21 2 8	53.
Tractor Drivers	17 13 9	50.0	15 9 6	46.9	16 9 5	46.
Horticultural workers	16 15 6	46.3	15 2 7	45.3	16 15 6	45.
General farm workers	16 10 3	48.2	15 1 1	46.8	15 18 3	45.

Press Notice—July, 1970—Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

Table 3

EARNINGS AND HOURS OF AGRICULTURAL AND HORTICULTURAL WORKERS IN ENGLAND AND WALES

	In the year October, 1969 to September, 1970		*In the quarter*			
	July to Sept., 1969		*July to Sept., 1970*			
	Average weekly totals					
	Earnings	*Hours*	*Earnings*	*Hours*	*Earnings*	*Hours*
	£ s. d.		£ s. d.		£ s. d.	
All hired men	18 6 0	48.5	18 3 2	50.9	19 10 10	50.4
Foremen (Bailiffs, etc)	21 6 8	47.0	21 1 9	49.0	22 3 9	48.2
Dairycowmen	21 17 0	55.2	20 5 10	54.8	22 15 11	57.1
Tractor drivers	18 8 4	49.7	18 13 7	53.1	20 3 4	52.8
Horticultural workers	17 11 2	46.0	17 9 3	47.2	19 10 11	48.3
General farm workers	17 1 1	47.5	17 0 8	50.3	18 0 0	48.9

Press Notice—8th February, 1971—Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

Table 4

STATUTORY HOLIDAY PROVISIONS FOR ALL WORKERS, INCLUDING AGRICULTURAL WORKERS IN THE MAIN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

	Annual Holidays	*Public holidays (where known)*
Belgium	12 working days	10
Germany	15 working days	10-13
France	18 working days	9
Denmark	3 weeks	
Finland	3 weeks	
Norway	3 weeks	
Switzerland (some Cantons)	3 weeks	
Iceland	3 weeks	

WALES

Sept., 1970

Hours

50.4
48.2
57.1
52.8
48.3
48.9

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MANAGEMENT OF LABOUR

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

1. The Chairman invited Mr. Atkinson, of the Agricultural, Horticultural and Forestry Industry Training Board to open the discussion.

2. Mr. Atkinson said that there was a common thread to the papers—all mentioned the rapid decline in the farm labour force which had taken place since the end of the war, the rate of decline in Denmark being very much more rapid than in the UK. A number of factors discussed in the papers, he said, had considerable bearing on this problem. The first was that of attracting and recruiting the right people. By planning this more carefully and using some of the rules mentioned in Mr. Upton's paper, it might be possible to improve the situation. Ways then needed to be found of keeping this labour force in the industry, such as competitive wages, good working and living conditions, the pleasant environment of the countryside for a family to live in. In addition, however, were the other vital factors of managing men at work—giving a man responsibility so that he was making a maximum contribution to the business, training him to do his job better and enabling him to take more responsibility, recognising and rewarding his achievements.

3. Mr. Atkinson asked the speakers if they felt the move toward specialisation could generate, in some sectors of the farming industry, monotonous jobs; jobs of a kind similar to those giving rise to problems in other industries. Mr. Brocklebank said that he was concerned about certain jobs in the poultry sector and also certain dangerous crop spraying activities being carried out in agriculture generally. A delegate from the USA emphasised that, as the total labour force declined, the individual worker would require to be able to perform a wider range of skills and would need to be rewarded accordingly.

4. Mr. Upton was asked if he took into account the suitability of wives of applicants when recruiting staff. He replied that he was sorry it was not mentioned, but it certainly was a factor to be taken into account. When asked if he had any evidence that better selection of staff had resulted in extra farm profits, he said that the only evidence he had to show that clients derived benefit from this service, was that they came back on other occasions.

5. A delegate from New Zealand asked what was being done about the training of farmers to compare with TWI courses. Mr. Upton replied that great strides had been made in such techniques as Monte Carlo planning but little had been done in day to day management activities such as man-management. Mr. Atkinson added that the Training Board had already run two pilot courses in man-management at the Training Centre at Stoneleigh and when this course had been fully tested it would be provided on a national basis for managers and foremen. This, he said, would be the first of a number of training courses which the Board would be developing in the future.

6. In reply to a question on the desirability of a pension scheme for farm workers, Mr. Brocklebank said that a scheme had been operating since 1962 but numbers in this scheme had fallen to around 6,000. The reason for its lack of success had been the low level of wages paid to farmworkers, which meant few could afford to pay the contributions.

7. The three speakers were asked if they felt the reason for the workers' financial involvement and participation in management in some firms was to motivate them or because they were recognised as human beings. Mr. Upton replied that people were better educated and better informed than ever before and therefore their involvement in running a business was very desirable and essential if they were to make maximum contributions to that business. Mr. Brocklebank added that a lot of consultation did take place between farmer, managers and workers—most of it on an informal day to day basis. A delegate from the south west of England said that herdsmen in his part of the world gave orders to their bosses and, if this ever stopped, the boss could "look out for his cows"! Another contribution to this topic was made in relation to the Mid-Western farmers in the USA who, it was said, enjoyed working better than managing. Although they employed only one man, he had to be a mixture of worker and manager, forming a very effective two-man management team.

8. The final point in the discussion was made by a delegate from the Netherlands who said that the image of the farmworker was wrong and this made recruitment difficult. Wages, it was maintained, would need to be at least equal to those in other industries, in order to attract the right type of person.