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EDITORIAL.**STRUCTURAL CHANGES IN OUR RURAL LABOUR FORCE.**

Considerable publicity has been given during recent months to the comparatively slow rate by which Australia's post-war agricultural output has expanded in the face of a growing demand both domestic and overseas. It has been widely recognized that a key factor in this problem has been the decline in the rural labour force, that took place during the war and immediate post-war years.

Most discussions of this problem and its implications for agricultural expansion in the future have tended merely to measure changes in the *absolute level* of the rural labour force—the latter being regarded as composed of homogenous labour units. Perhaps insufficient attention has been given to aspects of the problem such as the changing age composition of the rural work force, and associated changes in the structure of farm families which make up about four-fifths of this pool.

Although exact figures are difficult to obtain, it is apparent that an "ageing" of the farm labour force has accompanied the decline in the rural population. Migration from farms, not only in this country, but in all advanced farming communities, has been unduly concentrated in the more youthful age groups. This trend has resulted in many Australian farms being operated by fewer and older farm workers. It seems obvious that these developments have had a profound influence on the efficiency of farm management.

Some concrete evidence of this is available in respect of a group of dairy farms on the Lower North Coast of New South Wales. A survey conducted in that district last year supported the view that recent changes in the farm labour situation have already had adverse effects on farm output and managerial efficiency. As a general rule, it was found that farmers who were still receiving full-time assistance (mainly from one or more adult sons) were operating their properties in a much more efficient manner than were farmers who relied solely on their own labour. A greater variety of improved techniques were employed on the former group of farms which were characterized, not only by higher total output, but also by greater output per head of stock.

The survey also established that with the latter group of farms, a low level of managerial efficiency was associated with operators of the greatest age. This was not the case on those farms where the operator was assisted by a younger adult worker. These and other results of the survey have been discussed in previous issues of this journal.

The majority of farms in Australia have always depended on family labour for their operations, except perhaps for "outside" help in certain seasons of the year. Few farmers have been accustomed to rely for permanent assistance on non-family labour as is the case in almost all other business enterprises. The problem of persuading farmers to make greater use of non-family labour than has been customary in the past must assume considerable significance in the future if increased output and efficiency is to be achieved, particularly in the dairying industry.

The stability of the family labour force over time was maintained in pre-war years by keeping the family intact, or by encouraging at least one son to remain on the home farm and to gradually assume a major role in its management as increasing age sapped the energy and enterprise of his father. With the drift of many hundreds of younger folk from farms over the last decade or so, this "family cycle" has, in many instances been broken.

Any future programme designed to encourage an improvement in the rural labour situation must be two-fold in character. Firstly, measures to encourage city and town workers to adopt rural vocations will be necessary. At the same time farmers will need to be encouraged to look more to non-family labour than in the past. Any steps which may be taken to encourage workers in secondary or tertiary industries to engage in rural occupations will be almost entirely nullified if concurrent measures designed to persuade farmers to utilize such labour are ignored. Secondly, measures to induce the younger members of families to remain on farms will need to be adopted. To some extent the same measures may also result in a movement back to rural pursuits of some of those who have drifted from rural work to secondary or tertiary occupations during the past decade.

The solution to both these aspects of the rural labour problem will depend greatly on the extent to which the amenities of country life are improved as compared with the amenities of the cities. It will not be completely solved so long as a large number of the younger members of rural society consider that living and working on farms involves substantially longer working hours, less holidays, and greater discomfort of living with relatively limited opportunities for social and cultural advancement as compared with living and working in the larger towns and cities.
