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EDITORIAL.

MOVEMENT OF FARM POPULATION.

The drift of farm workers from their usual occupations to the industrial life of the cities, or the reverse movement of urban workers to rural occupations, are phenomena which form a recurring topic for discussion in all countries of the world, whilst, in some, posing problems of the most pressing character. This subject was discussed at length at the Sixth International Conference of Agricultural Economists held in Great Britain some eighteen months ago, the Proceedings of which are reviewed elsewhere in this journal.

Perhaps the most significant point that emerges from an analysis of the discussions at this conference is the complexity of the population question, both on a world and national basis, and the widely different influences that are operating in separate countries. It is recent history that the increased industrial output and manpower required by the participant countries in World War II compelled a significant world-wide movement of farm workers away from primary industries. It is, however, here worth noting that in the years immediately preceding the outbreak of war, the rather similar problem facing Governments in almost all countries—whether they were countries enjoying a relatively high standard of living, such as the United States and Great Britain, or of exceptionally low living standards, such as China and India—was how to move surplus rural workers into industry and so allow the limited income pool from agriculture to be shared among a smaller number of workers so that each would receive a higher and consequently more satisfactory apportionment. In countries largely undeveloped there was, and still is, the acute problem of “surplus rural labour.” A solution is being sought in part by proposals for the building of vast public works to provide power and water for irrigation and by the expansion of diversified industries. This will mean in direct results the raising of living standards and increase in purchasing power.

In Australia where the population of the five capital cities of the mainland totals approximately half the national population, the question is frequently asked, “How can we stop the drift to the cities?” It is, however, overlooked that whilst there has undoubtedly been a gradual movement of farm workers away from the land during the past half century, this movement has not reduced Australia's capacity to produce.

Statistics prove that production per rural worker has in fact increased continuously, and that apart from a short period during World War II, overall production of rural products has also increased despite the declining rural labour force.

That this should be so is not surprising when the advances that have been made in scientific farming in recent years are taken into account. Comparable figures for Australia are not available, but in the U.S.A. it took 373 man-hours to produce 100 bushels of wheat in 1800; 108 man-hours were required in 1900; but by 1940 the same quantity of wheat was produced in 47 man-hours. This is just one of the numerous examples which could be quoted to show the increased production per worker in agriculture which has been brought about by the application of

machinery and new methods to farming, and by generally improved agricultural practices. It is typical of almost every rural industry in all the advanced agricultural countries of the world. Improved techniques, new pest and disease controls, and the increased adaptation of machinery to farming, therefore, necessitate less workers in agriculture to produce the same quantity of goods, just as these same principles apply in secondary industries. Such developments, inevitably make for a higher standard of living.

Concurrent with this increase in the productivity of the rural worker has been a well-marked increase in the size of farms, principally due to the fact that increased mechanisation and improved methods make it technically possible and in fact, economically desirable that the individual farmer should handle considerably larger areas than he was formerly able to do.

The movement of rural workers away from the land may then be considered an economically healthy sign and one that is inseparable from a rising standard of living. It is necessary, however, to distinguish between this largely inescapable trend towards a comparative lowering of net farm population, and the peculiar Australian development in the aggregation of predominantly large sections of the population in huge congested metropolitan cities. There is a good case to be made out on many grounds for decentralisation of industry and for the reverse movement of population from strictly urban localities into country districts.

The problems that lie behind such an "ideal" objective, taking into account the Australian geographical and economic environment, have, however, to be recognised. It is necessary also to distinguish between a temporary drift in population from farms and an "acute shortage" of farming labour. In the aftermath of the war, with so much leeway to be made up in consumer goods and building construction, some dislocation is inevitable in the first phases of re-adjustment. Certain it is that there are now in Australia too few hands to undertake the tasks immediately available and lying ahead and that increase in population, if it is too slow or incapable of completion by natural increase, must be made good by controlled immigration, but it is equally clear that no attempts can or should be made to "put the clock back" by adding what may well be unnecessary injections of labour into farming. In so doing there must inevitably result reduced efficiency in rural industries and consequently increased production costs at a time when the whole emphasis in agriculture, as in all other industries, should be on increased efficiency, greater production per worker and lower costs. There is no question that the Australian agricultural economy can absorb some additional labour, but it must be equally recognised that this absorptive capacity is limited and is certainly not as great as some people would profess to believe.
