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# American Agricultural Problems

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Everywhere throughout America the actual producers of food are hungry. Some are literally hungry for the food they produce. All are suffering a mental and spiritual starvation. Everywhere the working farmer is coming to realize that his economic independence is about as tangible as the pot of gold at the rainbow's end.

Not long ago I dropped my identity as a farmer in a fertile Eastern valley, jumped over my line fence, and plunged into the great migratory stream of the unemployed which is following the freights, East and West, North and South. Known as "Slim" to the other hoboies, I covered thousands of miles, working from farm to farm and traveling from section to section on the freight trains, just one of the hundreds of "stiffs" hunting work. At meal time in the farm kitchens I came into intimate contact with the farmers and their problems throughout the country. In the jungles and box cars I learned from one stiff after another of the battle of the migratory workers for a chance to organize, to find work, and to live. In Aberdeen, South Dakota, a partially deputized mob of hoodlums, American Legionnaires, and businessmen held us up with guns, searched us for red cards, and drove us out of town, because, forsooth, the Commercial Clubs had decided that \$3 a day was all that the farmers should pay to the stiffs, and the stiffs had started to organize.

To give you a picture of American farming it will be better to follow the season as I did from the planting of the fuzzy cotton seeds in the South

to the cultivation of the fruit orchards of the Pacific Coast, through the drought-burned fields of Montana and the great harvests of golden grain from the Dakotas to Kansas, then home to the Eastern farms. The Southland is paying for the greed of its exploiters. The demand for cotton and the ability of the negroes to produce it has saddled a one-crop system upon great areas in all the Southeastern states. This crop of cotton is not a food, and the result is that a crop failure, whether because of the weather, the bollweevil, or low prices, leaves the producer with no money and a crop he can not use himself. The result is widespread suffering in its most horrible forms of plague and starvation. The Southern farmer, usually the negro tenant, must produce cotton because it is the only "cash" crop he knows how to grow. Every fall, if he is lucky, his crop cleans off his debt and leaves him completely "broke." He has neither food, clothes, nor seed. The landlord or merchant, charging extortionate rates of interest, then carries him until his next harvest. He has not even a sporting chance of ever catching up, to say nothing of getting ahead. This spring the bottom dropped out of the market for cotton. The merchants and landlords, unable to sell the cotton they had collected from the farmers, immediately restricted all advances of credit, and left the small owners and tenant farmers more hopelessly in debt than ever. There they can be seen leaning listlessly against their ramshackle cabins waiting for pellagra.

### **Tenant Farming in Cotton Belt.**

The Cotton Belt is also the Black Belt, where about 80% of the Negro race lives. The exploitation of the negroes in this region is the most devilish form of slavery imaginable. Convict labor laws and the plantation system, combined with persecution at the hands of the law and the mobs, makes the life of the negro laborer a nightmare beyond description. The antagonisms of race prejudice are being used to keep the white workers at war with the negroes and so prevent them from joining as comrades in the class struggle. As someone so aptly said, "While the two dogs are fighting the capitalist sneaks up and steals the bone." The complications due to race prejudice are quite as serious in the farm districts and rural population as those which divide the workers in the industrial sections of the South.

In the Northern districts of Texas and in Oklahoma, the Black Belt and the cotton crop give way to a different type of farming. In the Mesquite range country, where large tracts of cheap land are devoted to cattle, many farmers are dependent upon their beef for cash. I have stopped at farms of over 700 acres where the owners could not afford sugar or coffee. Although these men owned their lands they were as burdened with debt as their Southern neighbors. Their cash crop was cattle, but as in the case of cotton, the price had dropped out of sight. With bitterness and growing resentment they tell of shipping their cattle to Kansas City and receiving in return only a bill for freight charges, commissions, and cost of handling.

### **Industrialized Farming on Pacific Coast.**

The Southwest — New Mexico and Arizona — is not an agricultural country, but chiefly a sandy desert that must be irrigated. There is a change, too, in the economic status of the producers. Bigger farms operated entirely by hired hands become more common. In fact through-

out the states from Colorado to the Pacific Coast the big ranch is the typical farm unit. Here may be found thousands of acres operated like a large factory. Here there are real unions among the migratory agricultural workers. The "Fruit Tramps," as the fruit pickers are called, follow the packing season of the various crops — lettuce, cantaloupes, oranges, apricots, peaches, and apples; then back again from the apples of Northern Washington to the lettuce of Southern California. They are skilled workers specializing in one of the many operations of fruit packing. They have their wage scales and their strikes and feel far superior to the unskilled ranch hands and harvest stiffs who come in to do the heavy odd jobs in moving the crop to market. It is among these Western stiffs of the extreme West that the IWW is most active, successfully organizing and engineering strikes for better conditions, shorter hours, and more pay. Here as nowhere else in America a real proletarian class appears in agricultural production.

### **Semi-Proletarian Farming in Montana.**

This definite class alignment disappears as you come East from Washington to Montana. After you cross the Cascade Mountains and drop down into the plains country of Montana there is a blending of the proletarian and semi-proletarian producers. In some sections of Northern Montana 3 years of drought have swept across the green fields of spring wheat and left brown withering crops. Following these years of crop failures came the drop in prices, and last year's poor crop was worth less than it cost. Here again producers of food sold their labor, this time in the form of grain, far below the market price for city wage slaves. Farmers about to be closed out by the banks have offered me their farms for 50 and even 25 dollars. Their equities were worth upwards of \$2,000 but they could not raise the money to pay back interest and taxes and import food for the family and stock. If our transportation system were in the

same condition as that of Russia today we would have our own famine district in Northern Montana.

### **Non-Partisan League.**

The conditions are less difficult in most sections of the Dakotas. Crops were not total failures. More diversified farming is practiced. And the state of North Dakota is the seat of the farmers' political movement. The Non-Partisan League is the result of many years of extreme exploitation of the farmers by the grain gamblers of Minnesota. The North Dakota farmers were growing, harvesting, and selling and running into debt at the same time. It was possible to organize them into a successful parliamentary movement on the basis of their common interest. In the Northwestern part of North Dakota a large number of the farmers are old Socialists. They are for the most part of foreign parentage and have been League members from its beginning. In the Eastern part of the state the cities and larger towns constitute the stronghold of the Republican and Democratic Parties, which have combined for opposition to the Non-Partisan League under the name of the Independent Voters' Association. The League is distinctly a semi-proletarian movement made up of working farmers, whose point of view is far in advance of the working farmers generally. Throughout the state these producers are alive to their position, and they are out in the open fighting against Big Business, Bankers, the Middlemen, and the Railroads.

The farmers throughout the grain states from North Dakota to Kansas are in debt in spite of their organizations. The small town bank has the power to break almost every farmer in its community. The small town Commercial Clubs decide the farmer's policy and the wages he may pay to his harvest help. By an ever widening cleavage the Commercial Clubs are separating the two exploited groups of proletarian and semi-proletar-

ian workers who together produce the food. Class-conscious farmers in North Dakota have told me that their bankers promised to lend them money to harvest the 1921 crop providing they agreed not to pay the harvest stiffs more than \$3 a day. The dissatisfaction and strikes resulting would separate the working farmers and the migratory harvest hands and line the farmers up more completely with the banks. Even those farmers who realize that their interest lies with the migratory workers rather than with the bankers are set at odds with the workers. On the other hand among the workers the IWW, whose policies and tactics fit the more industrialized farming of the West Coast, play directly into the hands of the Commercial Clubs in this section. They preach that the harvest stiff is the true farm producer and that once completely organized he will automatically take over the agricultural industry and run it — an impossible program in an industry still in the earliest stages of development. The exploited mortgaged owner of the grain states is a trained and skilled worker who does the major part of his work alone and only calls in help at the harvest season. Even in North Dakota less than 40% of the harvesting is done by hired help and only 17% of the United States. On farm after farm I have worked with stiffs who did not know one end of a harness from the other and had never handled a pitchfork before.

### **Middle-Class Farming in Kansas.**

In Kansas, which is the premiere wheat state, an unusual combination of good crops and war prices put the farmers more nearly out of debt than they were before the war. The sudden drop in wheat prices brought their rosy dreams to an abrupt end. They are now joining the movement for marketing organizations to raise the price of wheat and so raise their wages for the 10 to 12 hours a day they work to produce the crop. They have not learned that a loose marketing organiza-

tion can never function effectively against the highly organized capitalist machinery. They will learn eventually that they must organize as a class, as working farmers, literally as producers. There are a large number of farmers in the South-Central states north of the Black Belt, both tenant and mortgaged owners, who are aware that the entire economic system of agriculture is at fault. In Northern Texas, Oklahoma, and parts of Nebraska, the tenant farmers have been partially awakened to new possibilities, and the organization of tenants has proceeded farther than in any other region in the country.

### **Working Farmers in the East.**

The East from Iowa to the Atlantic Coast, is the land of general farming with a diversity of crops grown in regular rotation. Dairy cattle and hogs are the important stock. Hay, corn, oats, and wheat are produced on separate fields. The small farms support the dairies necessary for the milk supply of our greatest industrial centers. Potatoes and truck are added to the farms in the outskirts of the cities. In this section, in Virginia and north of the Ohio River, are concentrated the most important factors for the success of the proletarian movement, a large percentage of the farms of the country, the most fertile and productive area in the world, the bulk of the total population, and fully 75% of the total industries of the country. The importance of the farmers in this district is obvious, at least to the banker. Here the mortgaged owners and tenant farmers operate the farms while the small country banks, welded together in the American Bankers Association, follow a concerted policy in controlling them. They penetrate every rural organization and activity. They own the press, the schools, and often the very farms. The Eastern farmer is being positioned against the

city workers by insidious and open propaganda. His struggle against a system which is forcing him to the wall must be used to make him one with the city workers in their struggle. This is not only true of the farmers in the East but of all working farmers. The mortgaged owners and the tenant farmers as well as the farm laborers are foreseeing the inevitable result of the capitalist system.

General farm bankruptcy is only a matter of time. Farmers have hung on year after year, increasing their mortgages, renewing their notes, blindly hoping for a crop which would pull them out of the hole. Then along comes a drought, a crop failure, or a drop in prices, and it becomes evident that their position is a hopeless one. The average farm, even in good years, returns only 2-1/2 to 3%, yet every cent borrowed by the farmer either in the form of a mortgage or notes costs at least 6%, the difference representing an annual drain which is reflected in the steady increase in the national farm mortgage debt. The 1920 census reports show that in some states this farm mortgage debt has increased 200% and in some states 500% during the last decade. Owners are being forced to become mortgaged owners. The class of mortgaged owners is becoming mortgaged to the limit, and is slipping into the tenant group, which shows an increase with each census. This is an outline of the automatic process of capitalist exploitation as it affects the farmers throughout the United States. It is a slow process, too slow to keep pace with the movement of the industrial proletariat against the same exploitation. A proletarian struggle will depend for its ultimate success upon the support and cooperation of the semi-proletarian strata of the rural masses. It thus becomes the duty of every intelligent worker to assist in uniting the exploited working farmers with the city proletariat.

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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