

FARM Laborers in United States Turn to Collective Action

Because of their economic difficulties since 1929, farm laborers in this country have attempted collective action. Twenty-three strikes of agricultural workers were reported in 1933, and 25 in 1934 up to the end of September. At the end of September 1934, 33 agricultural workers' unions had affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. Of these, 12 were chartered in 1933, and 19 in 1934.

The economic background of these collective activities is indicated in the farm-wage and farm-labor demand and supply situation of the years 1929-34. The discussion of wages will be confined to rates per month with board, because more farm wages are paid in this than in any other way. Most comparisons of wage rates are made with those of the pre-war years 1910-14.

Farm wages changed but little from 1909 to 1915. They rose during the war period to more than double pre-war rates; the rise

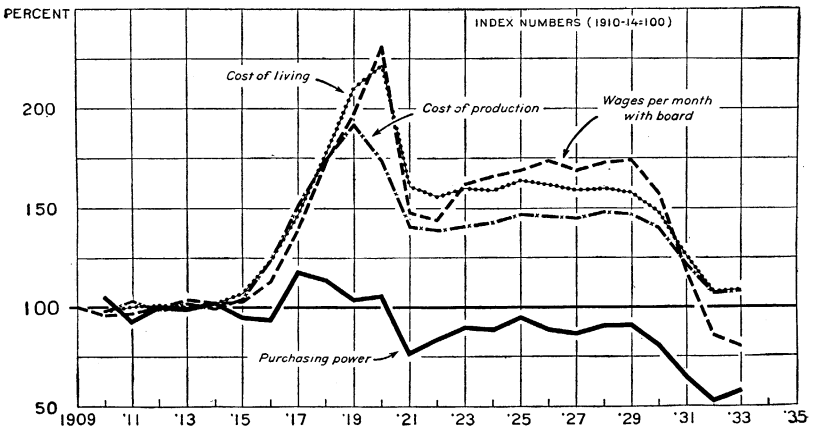


FIGURE 27.—Specified farm costs and farmers' purchasing power.

was nearly proportional to the rise in farm costs of living and in farmers' purchasing power. These relationships are indicated in figure 1.

The post-war depression of 1921-22 forced farm wages back, so that about half the wartime increase disappeared. Yet farmers found it hard to pay their laborers because the purchasing power of farm products had fallen off. Laborers found that their wages had fallen even more than farm costs of living. In addition, the industrial depression forced many workers previously nonagricultural to compete for farm jobs.

Farm wages had risen 10 percent by 1923, and held the gain from then through 1929. In the same period farmers' costs of production rose slightly. Farmers' purchasing power gained through 1925, but did not make up the post-war losses; after 1925 it declined again. Farmers throughout the 9 years, 1921 to 1929, found wage charges harder to meet than before the World War. Laborers, on the other hand, received wages higher in comparison with farm costs of living than before the war.

Wage Decline Marked After 1930

The economic collapse which began in the autumn of 1929 did not greatly affect farm wages or costs until the following year. From then through 1932 its effect was marked. There were no seasonal gains to check the fall of farm wages until after April 1933. They fell to four-fifths of the average of the 5 pre-war years. The farm-wage index declined to a third above that of farm-commodity purchasing power, and a quarter below that of farm costs of living. Farm-commodity purchasing power suffered a two-fifths drop to barely over half of that of the pre-war period. In 1932 it was 53 percent of the base period; a gain in 1933 brought it up to 58 percent.

From 1909 through 1920 farm-wage rates varied similarly in different parts of the country. Since then there have been striking regional differences. Farm wages in 1921 fell not quite 30 percent in the North Atlantic States, but in the West Central and Mountain States they fell nearly 50 percent. In general, these differentials have been maintained. Farm wages in the North Atlantic States in 1934 were close to or above their pre-war rates. Those of the other sections mentioned were decidedly below their pre-war rates, even after the summer increase.

From the post-war depression of 1921-22 until the winter of 1929, the demand for and the supply of farm labor was below normal, with supply usually above needs for the country as a whole. By April 1933 farmers were offering only 3 jobs, where they normally offered 5. Meantime, the farm-labor supply increased. The excess was increased by the competition of men thrown out of other employment. There were 5 workers available in January 1933 for every 2 farm jobs available. Since then, the demand for labor has increased in both agriculture and urban industry. In the summer of 1934 there were only 3 workers for every 2 farm jobs.

During the last 5 years many farmers have been compelled to reduce the number of their laborers, or their wages, or both. Hired farm laborers have striven to hold their jobs lest they be unable to get other work. The inevitable result has been a heavy drop in farm wages. By April 1933 average farm wages with board had fallen to \$14.67 per month—less than three-quarters of the pre-war average. Some laborers worked for their board and lodging alone during the winter of 1933-34. There were reports during the summer that farmers were paying as little as 50 cents a day without board. Laborers with families were particularly hard hit.

In most previous years farm laborers were able to obtain relief by finding employment in other industries. Between 1929 and 1934 they had practically no such opportunities. Instead, there was a farmward movement of city workers. Many farm laborers could not get work and had to appeal for public help. In parts of the country even farm operators had sometimes to ask relief.

Such was the situation that forced hired farm laborers into collective action.

Farm laborers in some foreign countries have organized to a considerable extent. Those in the United States have made only a comparatively small start.

Difficulties of Organization

Important difficulties hinder the formation of labor groups among farm laborers in the United States. Most hired farm workers are the only employees on the farms on which they work. They are widely scattered. Many farmers hire no labor. Relations between laborers and operators on farms are usually closer and more personal than in other enterprises; difficulties are better understood and adjusted than in most urban industries. Working and living conditions and relations with employers may vary so greatly as to prevent much class interest among farm laborers. Many agricultural workers move from one locality to another, and from agricultural to other jobs, so that contact and cohesion with their fellows are temporary and slight. Normally, it is possible to obtain relief from unsatisfactory farm working and living conditions by moving to other work. Organization among hired agricultural laborers has usually been attempted only when large numbers of them in limited areas have much in common, and where living and working conditions and wages have been unusually poor.

There have been three principal periods of effort to organize agricultural laborers. (1) The American Federation of Labor shortly after 1910 effected organizations of migratory trade-union members and seasonal agricultural workers on the Pacific coast. Most of these unions lasted only a short time.

(2) The Industrial Workers of the World formed the Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union. During the World War the activities of that body were widespread in the Wheat Belt and the far Western States. It met strong opposition. The membership was largely migratory, and of late years it seems to have declined.

(3) The most recent period of activity in the organizing of agricultural laborers followed the crisis of 1929. Organization seems to have been made more easy in some parts of the country by the depression. Laborers have been less able to migrate. There has been a growth of cohesion. The movement has spread east of the Mississippi for apparently the first time. Unions have been formed among orange workers in Florida and onion laborers in Ohio.

One indication of the extent of the movement is the number of charters granted in 1933 and 1934 by the American Federation of Labor to groups consisting principally of agricultural laborers. Some farm-labor groups have been formed without affiliating with national bodies. Several such attempts have been made on the Pacific coast, particularly among foreign-language groups of fruit and vegetable workers, such as the Spanish-Americans. Labor societies and unions have risen among sugar-beet workers of Colorado and nearby States. One was reported in Michigan. Probably the oldest and longest standing union of agricultural workers has been a union of sheep shearers operating largely west of the Mississippi and at stockyards and feeding plants near Chicago.

Causes of Some Strikes

Farm working conditions or wages, or both, have been the causes of some strikes. Most of these disputes have occurred on the Pacific coast; there have been others in Arizona, Colorado, Ohio, Florida, New Jersey, and Massachusetts. A strike of farm laborers usually

affects directly less than 1,000 workers. One strike, however, affected 12,000. There has been violence in some of the disputes. The good offices of the Conciliation Service of the United States Department of Labor were called upon in 4 farm labor strikes in 1930; 1 in 1931; 5 in 1932; 8 in 1933; and 8 in the first 7 months of 1934.

Conditions driving farm laborers to organization have often been such as to make them receptive to radicalism. Employers and the public, on the other hand, have frequently actively opposed new labor boards because of suspicion and of self-interest. Recent developments in sugar-beet-growing sections have demonstrated, however, that properly conducted farm-laborers' organizations can be very helpful in service to their members and in their relations with beet growers, sugar companies, the public, and Government officials.

The past history of such movements indicate that when the present economic stress is over, the movement will decline in numbers and influence, but if the farm laborers through wise means can obtain improvements in their living and working conditions and in wages, the effects will be far-reaching.

JOSIAH C. FOLSOM, *Bureau of Agricultural Economics.*

FARMING, Forestry, and Industry Profit from Land-Use Planning in California In California the most critical conflicts between major land uses occur in the foothill belts of the Sierra Nevada and other mountains. A recent comparative study in a typical mountain and foothill county by the California Forest and Range Experiment Station of the United States Forest Service and the Giannini Foundation of the University of California has brought out some very significant facts and led to conclusions which may be of use in similar difficulties elsewhere.

The Section Studied

Eldorado County, in the elbow of California, has a total area of about a million acres, of which the eastern half and a little more is within the mountainous virgin-timber belt, the division nearly coinciding with the boundary of the Eldorado National Forest at 3,500 feet elevation—about the upper climatic limit of agriculture. In the early mining days this was the most populous county in the State. Agriculture flourished with mining. Peaches cost \$3 apiece in gold. But mining declined, and agriculture with it. Then came lumbering. Last has come the specialization of agriculture in fruit orchards, which in its turn has fallen upon evil days. Population is dwindling. On a declining tax base, tax costs are rising, even without the influence of a world-wide depression. What can be done about it?

The lower, or western and southern portion of the county, which was mainly grassland from the beginning, is occupied by large livestock ranches that rely mainly on the high mountain ranges within the national forest for summer feed. The areas of agriculturally good soil are always scattered, in small patches. The larger part of those at suitable elevations for agriculture are devoted to fruit raising, mainly of pears. But all this cultivated land is less than 2 percent of the county area. Upward from Placerville, ranches are more and more scattered and isolated, and income is more precarious and dependent upon supplemental employment.