

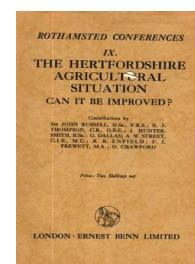
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The Problem of Agricultural Labour in the County of Hertford

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THE HERTS AGRICULTURAL SITUATION 25

THE PROBLEM OF AGRICULTURAL
LABOUR IN THE COUNTY OF
HERTFORD

BY GEORGE DALLAS

The Workers' Union

THE county of Hertford is predominantly an agricultural one. There is a residential area in the southern part round the fringe of London; there are one or two slowly developing industrial towns, like Watford, St Albans and Letchworth; but apart from these districts the county is purely agricultural.

The relationships between the employers and the workers generally throughout the county are of a fairly harmonious character.

The official organizations on both sides have come to realize that though they look at the problems of agriculture from different angles that is no reason why there should not be mutual respect on both sides, with the result that there is a considerable amount of co-operation on questions other than wages and working conditions. This has been due largely to the type of official representative for the employers and workers. I would pay tribute to the past and present chairmen of the county branch of the N.F.U., and also to the unfailing tact, skill and reasonableness of the county secretary, Captain Reed. The county has suffered in recent years, like the rest of the country, from the depression in agricultural prices, and, as a consequence, the number of agricultural workers employed in the county has considerably decreased. There are 1211 less agricultural workers in the county to-day than in 1921. For a comparatively small county this is a very serious and alarming decrease, in fact the percentage of decrease for the county of Hertford is exactly double that for the whole country. Its proximity to London may make it easier for those who leave the industry to find employment elsewhere.

I have no doubt that if the trade of the country were to improve considerably there would be an even larger number, especially amongst the younger generation, leaving the industry and finding employment in other occupations.

I feel this problem may become very serious within the next few years. There have been greater changes in the rural areas in the last generation than in any preceding one—changes that have all tended to break down the difference between the people in the countryside and the people in towns and cities. First we had the bicycle; then the war, which brought people from all parts of the country and all industries together. Since the war we have had the development of wireless and the motor-bus, so that even the remotest villages are no longer isolated from the industrial

26 THE HERTS AGRICULTURAL SITUATION

centres. All these and other influences have combined to awaken new ideas, to arouse new aspirations and to broaden the minds of the agricultural workers. The effect of this has been to create a desire amongst all agricultural workers for a higher standard of life. They look round and see all classes of workers with very considerably higher wages—railway workers, cement workers, brick workers, road-making workers, building trades' workers; in fact every industry in the country—outside of mining and one or two other depressed industries—has made giant strides in its wages and working conditions.

These workers in the other industries have not the handicaps the agricultural workers have—such as living in a tied cottage and therefore being subject to being put out of their home when their employment is changed. These other workers, further, have the benefit of Unemployment Insurance when they happen to be out of work. Naturally, therefore, the young agricultural worker, in comparing his position with the position of other workers, finds that his conditions are considerably inferior, and that agriculture offers little or no hope of advancement, or a reasonable prospect of a better standard of life in the days to come, for the ambitious and enterprising.

I am inclined to think that it will be impossible to maintain this difference, and that the tendency will be more and more for the agricultural worker to leave the countryside for other industries unless there is a considerable levelling up. Recently an inquiry was undertaken by schoolmasters in selected rural parishes at the instance of the Secretary for Education in a South Midland county. The list revealed an almost unanimous desire on the part of the parents of the boys to find employment for them in industries other than agriculture.

On every hand we hear that old skilled agricultural workers as a class are dying out, and they are not being replaced. The Ministry of Agriculture, in a circular issued quite recently, stated that "complaints are constantly made by farmers of the shortage of skilled agricultural workers."

I think this a tragedy, and is to be deplored by everybody of all sections who have the interest of agriculture at heart. There was no finer type in the whole land than the old skilled agricultural craftsman. Not only was he skilled in his industry, but he was of a sturdy, intelligent, law-abiding type—a type which has been well described :

"His dead are in the churchyard—thirty generations laid,
Their names went down in Doomsday Book, when Doomsday Book
was made,
And the passion and the piety and the prowess of his line,
Have seeded, rooted, fruited in some land the Law calls mine.

Not for any beast that burrows, not for any bird that flies,
Would I lose his large sound counsel, miss his keen amending eyes."

THE HERTS AGRICULTURAL SITUATION 27

If men and women of this class and character are to be retained for the countryside there is no question that conditions of employment and social life in the rural areas will have to be vastly improved.

I shall be told that it is impossible to go beyond the present standard, indeed on every hand we hear that the wages paid in agriculture, however low they may be, are above what the industry can afford.

It is not my object to make this paper a controversial one, and I will readily admit that what is not in the industry cannot be taken out of it. My object is merely to state the labour problem as I think it will confront the industry more and more as days go by, and to show that the agricultural workers are as vitally concerned in the economic condition of the industry as any other section of the community. If the industry is depressed they suffer: if it is prosperous they are entitled to share in the prosperity.

I want to say, quite clearly and definitely, that I regard it as my duty as a representative of the agricultural workers to examine every possibility of putting the industry on a more sound economic basis, and to co-operate with all enlightened agriculturists, such as are represented at this Conference, in trying to devise plans to bring prosperity and contentment to the people on the countryside.