

Farmworkers' Control

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Institute for Workers' Control

Pamphlet Series No. 20

One Shilling and Sixpence

(7½ p)



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Introduction

It is often assumed that agriculture alters little and slowly, always adapting to the natural rhythm of the countryside, but new trends are developing in the pattern of ownership and control.

This paper examines these trends.

The Present Concept of Ownership and Control in British Agriculture

The popular concept of agriculture is of thousands of small producers competing against each other, some employing workers, others relying entirely on family help.

Indeed for more than 200 years the family has been the dominant unit in British Agriculture, not in the sense of peasant holdings, but, with few exceptions, there have never been many farms employing a large mass of landless workers.

There were and still are many great estates, but these were nearly always let out to tenants. The farming family often virtual hereditary tenants, determined the pattern of farming.

Distribution of Holdings by Size of Business, England and Wales 1968

Size in Standard Man-Days		Percentage of All Holdings	
Under 275	109,400	43	— Part-time holdings
275 - 599	58,200	23	— Small full-time holdings
600 - 1,199	51,400	20	— Small commercial holdings
1,200 - 3,599	30,000	12	} usually no workers
3,600 - over	5,100	2	

The large commercial holdings occupy nearly 45% of the total acreage of crops and grass and produce more than 50% of total national output.

One can see that the class divisions in agriculture are very complex but the greatest part of its output is dependent on the exploitation of wage labour, and the main task in building a socialist agriculture is not the mobilization of a peasant agriculture, but the organisation of the industry on the basis of workers' control.

The Agricultural Workers

Many workers work together in large groups but we in agriculture with 2 employees to each employer, on average, are working in a different environment compared with ICI which employs 200,000.

Regular whole time workers reached a post-war peak of 591,000 in 1945/6. By the end of June 1968 our numbers had fell to 324,000.

A survey in 1965 showed the distribution of workers over the size of various holdings.

Farms employing		% of total work force	
"	1 man	"	20
"	2 to 4 men	"	38
"	5 to 9 "	"	20
"	10 to 14 men	"	9
"	15 to 19 "	"	4
"	20 and over	"	9

The reduction in the number of full-time workers suggests that farmers have been replacing men with machines and replacing and simplifying their farming systems so that they can manage with fewer workers.

The standard working week in agriculture is 43 hours, but with contractual and non-contractual overtime the average working week up to 30 June 1969 was about 49 hours, with total average earnings for men of a little over £16.10.0d a week.

The Prices and Incomes Board report No. 101 — Paragraph 23 stated "We have seen that there are many more low paid workers in agriculture than in any other industry."

"... agricultural workers are by a fair margin the lowest paid body of workers of significant size in the country. At the same time the hours of work laid down as standard are longer than those of most other manual workers by 4 hours and men in fact work about 3 hours longer than the average weekly hours worked in industry. In other respects, also, agricultural workers, are at a net disadvantage."

Some people assert that the difference between earnings of the agricultural and industrial workers is offset by substantial perks and the cheapness of living in the country.

Official statistics disprove both these contentions. On the other hand many industrial workers receive perks in a wide, variety of forms,

e.g. pension schemes, canteen, travel and other facilities and these benefits are on top of much higher cash earnings, and even limited control over their job.

The Tied Cottage

The biggest stumbling block to union militancy and eventual workers' control of the industry.

An increasing percentage of our workers live in tied houses for when workers leave the land the first to go are workers not tied by a house. Once a worker gets caught in the system he is virtually tied for life, for unless he is prepared to move house he cannot change his occupation or job, and anyway his low income prevents him from buying alternative accommodation as might other groups of workers on higher pay.

Even where eviction does not take place one can imagine the misery and strain, particularly on the family of knowing that they will be homeless unless they are able to make temporary arrangements for accommodation.

For workers' control over his own destiny the minimum demands of the NUAAW must make sense:

a) No worker or, in the case of a deceased worker, his family can be evicted from his home unless and until there is suitable alternative accommodation available. We would add that the decision on this be the worker's own decision. The final onus on supplying alternative accommodation should rest with the local authority.

b) As workers have left the land, the number of vacant, now often derelict, houses has increased. Where this is happening the Ministry should empower local authorities to take over such houses.

c) The practise of supplying council houses to workers with the requirement that if they leave the land they should leave the house, must be abolished.

d) The practice of councils to allow a council house to be "allocated" to a particular farmer must be abolished.

In presenting these minimal demands the NUAAW argues that this plan does not take away the right of a farmer to offer a house and for the worker to accept if he wants to. Do we accept the logic of this argument?

The Trend to Larger Holdings

There is mixed opinion as to the attitude we should adopt in relation

to the future structure of the industry. Some say that to push for more large-scale farming in the quickest possible time is neither humane, nor practical politics. Many small farmers began their working life as workers on farms and in achieving small farm status saw some sort of escape, for this reason it can be argued that there must be some common bond.

But our own experience has taught us that the small farmer rather than identify with us, would sooner identify with the employing or capitalist class.

But this debate, important as it is, is being superseded by events which will dictate the future shape of the industry.

1. There are new machines that are links in industrial processes in which primary production on the farm is only one stage in the production line. They are expensive, they have vast appetites and to be efficient they must work round the clock and not spend time negotiating winding lanes and the corners and headlands of the patchwork quilt.

2. Advances in technology, disease control and nutrition make large scale production possible.

3. The improvement in education and training combined with the increasing skill of the workers.

4. The increasing economies of scale.

e.g. Dairy Herd Size and Cost of Milk Production

Herd Size (No. of Cows)	Total Cost (d.per gall.)
6 - 19	38.5
20 - 39	33.0
40 - 59	30.9
60 - 99	30.0
100 and over	29.3

Source: The Milk Producer 1966.

Demand for agricultural produce is fairly stable, as a consequence any expansion of total production in excess of the growth of demand can only be disposed of at lower prices.

Thus the greater economy of scale achieved, the lower the unit cost and therefore the ability to do this is a measure of ones ability to withstand falling prices.

5. The ability of large scale intensive production methods to over-

come the traditional difficulty of the farming industry, i.e. variable climatic conditions.

6. The much more business like approach which large scale production methods necessitates makes it normally easier to obtain capital for such developments.

Now instead of us knowing a lot about each enterprise on the farm we work on, a division of labour is taking place, (paid lip-service to by the new wages structure) e.g. we become herdsmen or tractor drivers whilst the farmers role in all this becomes that of "controller in chief".

Also whereas in the past the cost to the industry of adopting new techniques was the gradual loss of a number of farmers, the speed of technological advance has increased very sharply and economic pressures may be brought to bear which would confront a considerable section of the farming community with bankruptcy or finding other employment at short notice.

The Labour Government and the Structure of Agriculture

The last Labour Government joined in the campaign for larger holdings with the introduction of the 1967 Agricultural Act.

The main provisions were:

1. **A retirement scheme:** farmers according to age receive either an annuity or grant if they leave agriculture where their farms are sold for approved amalgamation.

2. **Amalgamation:** grants are provided to encourage voluntary amalgamation into "Commercial" holdings. The Government is also willing to buy land for eventual amalgamation.

3. **Co-operation:** For the smaller man for whom retirement or amalgamation is not the answer, efforts are being made to encourage him to take part in group activities.

However, the evolution of larger holdings will not in the short term result in the emergence of large groupings of agricultural workers as Ministry of Agriculture statistics do suggest that an increasing percentage of the total work force is employed on the holdings employing between 2 to 4 men.

Also whilst the trend to larger holdings will accelerate it would be wrong to underestimate the resolve and tenacity of the small farmer to stay in the race.

Why the Small Farmers Don't Give Up

In 1967 small full-time farms accounted for about $\frac{1}{3}$ rd of all holdings in England and Wales, with an average acreage of a little over 60 acres.

They occupy $\frac{1}{5}$ th of the area of agricultural land and produce $\frac{1}{5}$ th of the output of the industry, the occupiers themselves contributing the biggest share of the labour. Their income is approximately £750 a year.

Various surveys suggest that:

a) Over 40 years of age many farmers felt that they had little opportunity of getting another job.

b) 63% of small farmers had only attended the village school and received no other form of secondary education, whilst only 11% had received any agricultural training.

c) $\frac{2}{3}$ ds of small farmers had never worked outside agriculture.

d) More than 80% grew up in homes where farming was the dominant influence. As one farmer put it "When the family gets together, we all talk about farming." Under the circumstances, he is unlikely to learn of other opportunities and indeed to give up may be seen as an admission of failure in the eyes of the family.

e) Usually there is no alternative employment in the rural areas and a farmer will be reluctant to surrender his farmhouse.

f) Farmers as a whole tend to value the satisfaction derived from their work and their independence above consideration of income.

Vertical Integration

The trend towards vertical integration in agriculture is of significance to the debate on workers' control because of the new situation many of us will find ourselves in. For via vertical integration big business has taken further steps to control actual production process and secondly, the farmers are responding to this in the development of group and co-operative ventures.

Even in the most primitive societies it is possible to see in agriculture various stages in the production process, stages which can be separated one from another.

When all these stages are conducted under the ownership and control of one enterprise this is known as vertical integration.

Ironically, just as we begin to challenge the autocratic control by farmers of the agricultural industry, this traditional control is being threatened by big business via vertical integration.

Is this a trend we would welcome? Are we in fact prepared for it?

The New Controllers

Why should the farmers see their traditional control of agriculture threatened?

Socialists have always appreciated the interest of big business in agriculture and it is easy to see why this should be so.

1. There are now more townspeople's livelihoods depending upon farming than there are farmers.
2. Farmers and growers spend £1,000m a year on goods and services from other industries.
3. For every 10 men on the land there are 25 others whose jobs depend directly or indirectly on agriculture.
4. Agriculture is now capital intensive with fixed assets per man 3 to 4 times as great as those in manufacturing industries and approaching those of oil and chemical industries.

Why the New Interest?

1. Prepacking and standardised convenience foods are already demanding the same control as the car manufacturer expects with his suppliers. And the same economic and technical reasons that have forced the car manufacturers to merge horizontally and to control their supplies by vertical integration are already becoming apparent in our own industry.

2. Farmers and growers have acquired a bad reputation for not being reliable partners to contracts. This may be because of factors of climate and disease but when continuity of supply is of the utmost importance the industry is faced with further intervention in the production process by outside interests.

Companies with contractual arrangements in agriculture include: TESCO, FINE FARE, PRICERITE, SAINSBURY'S and MARKS & SPENCERS Sainsbury's sales total about £200m. a year.

3. The development of intensive methods of production enabling such businesses to engage in production on a large scale without the necessity of acquiring large acreage to do so.

4. The belief that large scale intensive production enables the commodity to be produced at a lower unit cost.

5. The availability of capital to big business organisations that is not available to the family business.

6. The opportunity of acquiring an additional profit through engagement in the production process.

7. Vertical Intregation should bring economies in production, processing and marketing costs.

8. The demand for new sources of capital in agriculture, e.g. in the 10 years up to 1966 - 67, Net Farm Income rose by just over 2/5ths in total, annual outlays on investment in fixed assets increased by nearly 9/10ths.

Estimates suggest that the volume of credit to farmers by agricultural merchants is about £130m. and on average, outstanding accounts amounted to about 11 weeks turnover on sales to farmers.

Who are the New Controllers? Two Examples

1. Imperial Tobacco's Farming Empire

They own and control:

115 Farms, 6 hatcheries, 18 feed mills and 6 poultry processing stations in the UK.

AFF (Pet Foods) Ltd.

Allied Farm Foods (Turkeys) Ltd.

Earlie-Bird Hatcheries Ltd.

H.S.Y. Shipping and Warehousing Ltd.

— large company for shipping grain.

Nutrikem Ltd.

— chemical feed additives

Premier Farm Products Ltd.

— marketing company working with Buxted.

Wombat Poultry Farms Ltd.

— broilers

Yeoman Seeds Ltd.

Golden Wonder Crisps

National Canning Co. & subsidiaries

— Smedleys, Norfolk, Canneries, Angus Fruit Farms.

Buxted Chicken Co.

J.D. Carnegie (Balloch) Ltd.

— (Ord. 51%) compounders.

Laughton Egg Co.	—	compounders
Nitrovit Ltd.	—	broilers
Premier Farms Ltd.	—	(Ord. 53%) — shop in Harrogate selling barbecued chicken
Simplified Feeding Ltd.	—	compounders
Yeoman Animal Feeds Ltd.	—	Lea & Perrins, Ocean Preserving Co., Fletchers Sauce Co., Macks (Walsall Ltd.)
Yorkshire Chicken Hatcheries Ltd.	—	selective sheep breeders
H.P. Sauce & subsidiaries	—	Sterling Poultry Products, E.F. Fairbairn;
Glenderon Farms (Winchburgh)	—	selective poultry breeders, production of day-old pullets & broiler chicks, rearing and processing of broilers and egg production.
Ross Groups and subsidiaries including:	—	
Ross Chickens	—	motorway services
Ross Services	—	road haulage
McVeigh Transport	—	structural steelwork, steel stockholders & engineering merchants.
A.H. Allen & Co.	—	
Ross Foods, Sidwell & Co., Youngs, Seafoods, Young's Potted Shrimps	—	manufacturers of frozen foods and prepared meals and processors of fish & crustacea under the brand names of Ross & Youngs.
Ross Potatoes, Waterworth Bros.	—	potato merchandising, prepacking and retailing.
Hardy & Collins, Westwick Distributors	—	agricultural merchants, fertilizer and agricultural chemical distributors.
Lowland Bulb Co.	—	growing, wholesaling & mailorder retailing of roses, bulbs and other horticultural products.

2. J.B. Eastwood Ltd. – Broiler and Egg Producer

They produce 35 million birds a year, i.e. 17% of the market. Total broiler consumption per annum by 1973 expected to be about 300 million, Eastwoods target is to produce 20% of these, i.e. 60 million a year.

Entered egg production approx. 1964. Target is to produce 20% of eggs consumed annually. Now the worlds biggest independent egg producer.

The problem of marketing was overcome by the establishment of UNITED POULTRY MARKETING LTD., in conjunction with B. THOMPSON LTD., a leading wholesaler of red meat and poultry, and manufacturers of meat products. In 1968 EASTWOODS bought out B. THOMPSON LTD.

Trading profits were up from £369,000 in 1960 to £2.5 million in 1968.

In 1968 Imperial Tobacco made a takeover bid for J.B. Eastwood, but talks fell through.

What the New Controllers Pay – some example wage rates paid by the companies in the two case studies.

Rates apply to operatives only, charge hands and foremen receive premiums.

COMPANY	Agreement Date	Working Week	Males	Females	Overtime
W. & J.B. Eastwood Ltd. Poultry packing.	2/2/70	39½ hrs	£15.4.6	£11.7.0	
W. & J.B. Eastwood Ltd. Egg packing.	3/2/70	39½ hrs	£14.17.7	£10.13.11	
Buxted Chicken Co. Ltd. Northern Factories	5/1/70	40 hrs	£15.3.11	£11.5.9	
Buxted Chicken Co. Ltd. Southern Factories	5/1/70	40 hrs	£15.13.9	£11.13.9	
Buxted Hatcheries Northern	1/2/70	42 hrs	£12.9.2	£9.9.6	1½ hrly rate. Sundays 2 hrly
Buxted Hatcheries Southern	1/2/70	42 hrs	£13.8.2	£9.17.10	as above
Ross Chicken Ltd. (Greenfield)	under review	44 hrs	£12.10.0	4/6d an hr	

Space has allowed two example case studies only, there are many more. The implications are tremendous, the figures above speak for

themselves and source material shows that they are very representative of many agricultural companies.

The Farmers Response – Co-operation?

In the words of the farmers own organisation, the NFU, who see in co-operation the means “To retain control of production and profit from production in producers hands.”

It is clear the NFU is determined to resist any encroachment on its control of agriculture.

It is important that we understand the principle of agricultural co-operation demanding as it may on our part participation in new work practices and bargaining situations.

The meaning of co-operation here is simply individuals operating their businesses together in certain respects instead of acting separately.

There has been co-operation in agriculture for the last 100 years in the form of the large co-operative societies. But it is in the informal pattern of co-operation that we are witnessing growth e.g. numerous buying groups have been set up whose aim is to secure economies in the purchase of requisities, others market members produce and because marketing depends so much on the finished article, what started as a marketing group, often becomes a production group.

The advantages of group development collectively is that they can participate to a degree in the trend to vertical intregation and for a limited period at least, hold off the threat from big business.

The pattern of small groups seems to be the way farmers will move as distinct from the old co-op society with its thousands of members spreading its wings, farmers feeling that they don't belong with the big society.

When the Labour Party was in power it established the “Central Council for Agricultural and Horticultural Co-operation” whose aims are promoting and developing agricultural co-operation.

Briefly it means that approved schemes for setting up groups etc. will qualify for payment of a grant.

Severe criticism must be levelled at the Labour Government and the NUAAW that they did not insist that work practices, job controls and basic conditions of employment should be discussed and written into agreements in exchange for any grant aid.

It is quite clear that the unorganised farmers cannot hope to match themselves against the integrated concerns and overall it is in our opin-

ion that the demands for workers' control in agriculture must centre around the typical well run family farm taking part in co-operative ventures, running a longside large scale industrial set-ups of which the recent involvement of Imperial Tobacco is only a start.

The Workers' Response – Bargaining

It is clear that the control which will be wrested from the employers will be a reflection on the unions bargaining strength or weakness.

When heralding in the new wages structure, Reg Bottini, General Secretary of the NUAAW made a big play on the fact that until now any increases on the minimum basic wage had been negotiated at local level.

We say why not? For it is our belief that in the AWB (Agricultural Wages Board), we place too great a reliance on what must be described as a fairly inadequate form of wage fixing machinery.

It discourages recruiting, firstly because workers feel that there is no need to belong to a TU, and secondly the wage negotiated is low, which again discourages recruiting.

By relying on the AWB our basic wage we agree is higher than most other industries, but our total earnings are amongst the lowest in the country.

But to abolish the AWB would be wrong; we are not prepared for it, and the NFU would have little confidence that its members would voluntarily observe minimum rates.

The answer must be a change of emphasis on the part of the NUAAW.

Individual farms or groups of farms should be chosen as wage targets, these could be company farms set on enlarging their stakes in the industry.

The union could use the farms where it is able to achieve an advance as price leaders in order to force wages up on other farms.

Equally they could do the same in the ancilliary industries. With an ever shrinking work force the effect would be to force up wages on the smaller unorganised farms.

Without any seemingly conscious effort on the part of the NUAAW, this state of affairs can already be seen to work, if we consider that the premium (i.e. what is paid to workers voluntary on top of the basic rate by the farmer), was 5/9d per week in 1947 and was £1.11.5d in 1967.

We would add that it would be dangerous if from the start we applied these tactics to wages only, forgetting control issues, for we would abandon to the farmers the power to organise the production process as they please.

Accountability and Government Support for Agriculture

Workers in agriculture will know that the sum the exchequer pours in annually floats somewhere between £280 million and £300 million.

It does seem incredible, that although this scheme was introduced by a Labour Government some 23 years ago, no one has asked why these sums can be poured in without the industry in any way being accountable to the community or indeed its own workers.

The NUAAW should demonstrate vocally and publicly its attitude that in return for the £300 million, the farmers should submit to minimal demands of accountability and control over the production process.

Conclusions

These are only background discussion notes, more could have been added, e.g. we ought to have discussed control over safety arrangements, land nationalisation, the various committees already in existence in agriculture or the role of County and Rural District Councils, increasing union membership and participation in union affairs, particularly in improving the range and quality of services provided.

The case for an extension of militancy and demands for workers' control in the wider food and forestry industry has not been discussed. For this purpose we think it will be necessary for the Agricultural Workers' Seminar Group to convene a National Conference of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Workers to draw up and publish a programme of action and demands.

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Single Issues 5/- Subscription for six issues 30/-

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Printed by The Partisan Press Ltd. (TU), Nottingham.