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## Our Rural Proletariat

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# OUR RURAL PROLETARIAT



SOCIAL ACTION SERIES NO. 11

*BY*

REV. EDGAR SCHMIEDELER, O.S.B., Ph.D.

Director, Rural Life Bureau,  
National Catholic Welfare Conference



The pamphlets in the *Social Action Series*, of which this is the **eleventh** number, are edited by the Social Action Department of the National Catholic Welfare Conference. They represent an effort to present to the general public, and especially to Catholics, a discussion of current economic facts, institutions and proposals in the United States in their relation to Catholic social teaching, particularly as expounded in Pope Pius XI's Encyclical "Forty Years After—Reconstructing the Social Order" (*Quadragesimo Anno*). In the spirit of that Encyclical they are urged upon and recommended to individuals, study clubs, discussion groups and school classes.

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**Social Action Series**

**No. 11**

*Published for*

**THE SOCIAL ACTION DEPARTMENT**

**N. C. W. C.**

*by*

**THE PAULIST PRESS**

**401 WEST 59TH STREET**

**NEW YORK, N. Y.**



*Nihil Obstat:*

ARTHUR J. SCANLAN, S.T.D.,  
*Censor Librorum.*

*Imprimatur:*

✠ PATRICK CARDINAL HAYES,  
*Archbishop of New York.*

*New York, March 11, 1938.*

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APOSTLE IN THE STATE OF NEW YORK

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED IN THE U. S. A.  
BY THE PAULIST PRESS, NEW YORK, N. Y.



## FOREWORD

Father Schmiedeler, director of the Rural Life Bureau of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, gives us the high spots of the story of American farm labor, farm tenantry, including the share-croppers of the South, white and black, and mortgaged farms. It is a dismal story. He also tells of certain of the things to be done to erase this blot from American life.

SOCIAL ACTION DEPARTMENT

NATIONAL CATHOLIC WELFARE CONFERENCE.

# Our Rural Proletariat

"Moreover, there is the immense army of hired rural laborers whose condition is depressed in the extreme, and who have no hope of ever obtaining a share in the land. These, too, unless efficacious remedies be applied, will remain perpetually sunk in their proletarian condition."—Pope Pius XI, in *The Reconstruction of the Social Order*.

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THE family-sized farm, owned by the one who operated it, has from the beginning been one of the most deep-rooted of American ideals. It was the inviting opportunity to achieve land ownership, to become a freeholder on a fair-sized acreage, that induced many a peasant or yeoman to leave his native land across the sea and to set out for the new world. It was the alluring hope of a farm of his own that led him to forsake his ancestral habitat and seek to establish a new home on American soil. Nor did the ideal remain a mere idle dream. In great measure was it realized—thanks to factors such as our vast resources in land, the stanch and industrious type of individual who settled upon it, the Federal Homestead Act, various State "Homestead Acts," and still other measures and favorable circumstances. In great numbers homesteads sprang up in our earlier days that in the heyday of American agriculture compared most favorably with those of any part of the world, and the families that dwelt thereon and tilled the acres enjoyed a standard of living and a sense of security that made them the envy of the peasants of Europe and of the propertyless workers, the proletarians of the world.

## I. THE PRESENT SITUATION

But what a different situation today! Gone is the American farmer's security. The heyday of our agriculture is past. The most arresting facts regarding our once outstanding agriculture of the world now are: Vanishing ownership, insecurity of tenure, inability of those who till our acres to climb the



agricultural ladder, or in other words, to rise gradually from the lowest rung of hired hand or farm laborer to the coveted goal of ownership. Indeed, there are many things in the present picture that point definitely to a circulating down the agricultural ladder. There are unmistakable facts that indicate a constantly decreasing equity in the land, the loss of farms by former owners, increasing tenancy, mounting agricultural labor, in a word, a rapidly growing rural proletariat. It is one of the most sorry and distressing, and at the same time most dangerous developments in our country today. An unstable, shifting people, a growing proletariat without root in the land can bode nothing but ill for the future of America. A speedy remedy for the situation is of the most pressing importance.

The change from the security of farm ownership to a rapidly growing proletarianism did not come over night. The development was at first slow; then increasingly rapid. It made by far the greatest headway in times of depression. Nor was the change the same in all parts of the country. As will be indicated in some detail later, the growth was much more rapid and far-reaching in some sections than in others. The constant general drift for the whole country, however, was very definitely towards increasing insecurity, towards a growing rural proletariat.

### **1. Agricultural Laborers**

On the lowest rung of the agricultural ladder are the "hired hands" or agricultural laborers. There have undoubtedly always been some of these laborers on the farms of the United States. But their number has of recent years greatly increased. They have become more migratory. Their conditions have very generally worsened.

#### **Types of Agricultural Laborers**

At least several different types or classes of agricultural workers can be distinguished with a fair degree of clearness in this country. Farmers' sons, for instance, constitute a very important group. Not a few farm boys, when unemployed



at home, either hire out to a neighbor or go to other localities where work is available. In the past at least there was little to criticize in this type of farm labor. A large number of these young men eventually became farm owners. Before marriage they worked as farm laborers during their spare time. Usually they rented a farm when they married—in some cases even before. After some years as tenants they climbed to the rank of farm owners. This process was common and relatively simple in the days of the rapid expansion of our agricultural plant. But today it is no longer so easily carried out. The ideal of ownership for such young men has become much more difficult of realization.

Another group of farm laborers comes from the cities and towns adjacent to the surrounding farm districts. This supply of labor furnishes much of the crop season and day labor for summer season demands, and in not a few localities meets the entire seasonal labor needs of the farm. Many of this group of laborers ordinarily worked at other tasks in the cities when not actually engaged in the harvest fields. Machinery has of late years been substituted for many of them in the country. At the same time the city is also offering them less opportunity than before. As a result great numbers of them have helped swell the relief rolls of the cities.

Finally there are the transient workers—Mexicans who come across the line into the South, Japanese in the far West, and seasonal workers of various racial origins who spend some of their time working in the lumber camps, some on the railroads or in still other types of employment, and then go to the grain or other fields during the harvest time. It is among this group of migratory workers that the most unsatisfactory conditions are usually found.

### **Wages of Agricultural Laborers**

A highly important question for the agricultural worker is that of his wage. What does he get for his labor? It is quite useless to elaborate upon the education, the housing, and living conditions generally that these workers should have, unless at the same time definite attention is given to this fundamental question.

The Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture, for 1930, contains a table showing the average yearly farm wage per month and per day, from the year 1866 on up to 1928, the eve of the depression. In 1866 the agricultural laborer in the United States received on the average, without board, \$15.50 per month, or about 90c per day. In 1928 the wage, without board, stood at \$48.65 a month or \$2.43 a day. The highest average wage ever to be reached was that of 1920, namely, \$65.06 a month or \$3.56 a work day.

These are average rates. As a matter of fact there are considerable variations in wages for farm labor in the several sections of the nation. To take the year 1929 as an example, the average wage rate per month without board in the North Atlantic States was \$70.97; in the South Central States, \$37.44, and in the far Western States, the corresponding figure was \$79.11. The average for the entire United States was \$50.53 per month. These figures show, therefore, considerable diversity. Indeed, they show a wage average in two sections—the North Atlantic and the far Western groups of States—about twice that prevailing in another section, namely, the South.

These variations in wages in different parts of the United States are due to factors such as differences in the qualities of the men, in the degree of responsibility placed upon them, in the character of the work, and in the conditions of life. The relative abundance of men and the differences in cost of living also play a part.

The depression has unquestionably aggravated the situation for agricultural workers of all kinds, both with regard to wages and with regard to their living conditions generally.

### **Depression—Wages**

Five studies of migratory agricultural laborers were referred to in the July, 1937, issue of the *Monthly Labor Review*. These studies covered berry pickers in Arkansas (1935), farm-camp populations in California (1934-35), migrants in the Yakima Valley of Washington (1935-36), migratory relief cases in California (1933-35), and casual workers who received aid from federal transient bureaus in 13 selected cen-



ters. They showed no uniformity of annual earnings among the various groups of seasonal migrants. Still, a fairly consistent picture presented itself when the groups were separated into the following two classes: (1) A more fortunate class consisting of California farm-camp populations, western beet-sugar workers, and Yakima Valley workers; and (2) A less fortunate class composed of California relief cases and of those receiving aid from Federal transient bureaus.

Regarding these two groups the article in question stated (pp. 15, 16): "The average (median) family earnings of the more fortunate migrants ranged around \$400 a year: \$437 for the families studied in California farm camps (1934-35), \$406 for the beet-sugar families (1935), and \$357 for Yakima Valley families (1934-36). Most of these families had more than one working member. The average earnings per worker of the California group amounted to only \$221, and the average earnings of those studied in the Yakima Valley amounted to \$297 for heads of families and \$288 for unattached men. The earnings of migrants selected from relief agencies were still lower. The average (median) earnings of 775 relief families in California were \$281, and these earnings amounted to only \$181 per worker. For those who received aid from the Federal transient bureaus, net yearly earnings were computed after deducting the value of services for which charges were made by employers. The median earnings of the 500 workers studied were \$223 in 1933 and \$203 in 1934. Half of the 200 agricultural workers in this group had net earnings of less than \$110 in 1933 and less than \$124 in 1934."

The statement adds: "These studies suggest that adult men among the seasonal migrants in agriculture may average about \$300 per year and that migrant families average perhaps \$400 per year. Assuming an average of two workers and four to five persons per migrant family—approximately the family composition which has been observed in California—it may be estimated that the earnings of migrant agricultural families are equivalent to a wage of only about \$200 per worker, and that they provide maintenance of less than \$100 per year for each member of the average migrant family. Such wages are clearly inadequate for any decent level of existence."



Regarding the amount of employment of the migrants studied, the article states that the five groups showed average periods of work ranging from 40 to 60 per cent of the year, and that while the studies made were too limited to allow exact conclusions they made it clear that "a substantial proportion of all seasonal migrants fail to find enough work to give them any hope of adequate subsistence."

### Other Studies

A series of studies of agricultural labor conditions in one county in each of eleven selected states was made under the auspices of the United States Department of Agriculture in 1936. The following data regarding income are given by five of the studies already published:

*Wayne County, Pennsylvania:* "Annual incomes of these workers varied greatly, ranging from mere maintenance to \$1,200. Nearly three-fourths received less than \$400. . . . Most of the laborers depended solely on agricultural work during the year. Those who did only farm work reported as much income as the 39 who had other sources of income as well. None of the dependents of these farm laborers reported earnings in agricultural work, and only one received an income from other sources."

*Placer County, California:* "The annual earnings reported most frequently came to slightly less than \$700 for the whites and to slightly more than \$700 for the Orientals. Average incomes, which show a comparable racial difference, amounted to \$539 for the whites and \$747 for the Orientals."

*Livingston County, Illinois:* "The annual incomes of these agricultural workers showed a wide variation, ranging from \$25 to \$1,131. Up to \$400, the general limit of agricultural earnings, farm work was the prime source of income. Above that, non-agricultural wages and work relief played an important rôle. A few received direct relief. Three-fifths of the group had earned between \$200 and \$400 during the period September 1, 1935, to September 1, 1936; 17 per cent earned less than \$200; and 24 per cent reported incomes of more than \$400."

"Ninety per cent, or \$282, of the average income of \$316 was attributed to agricultural earnings of the laborer. The remainder was added by nonagricultural wages or by other members of his family. However, in only 8 cases did the women and children add to the family income; and only 30, or 14 per cent, reported nonagricultural earnings."

*Fentress County, Tennessee:* "Annual cash incomes of the hired farm laborers in this county are extremely low. But, since the money economy has not permeated this section as completely as other sections, means for satisfying many of the primary needs are produced at home or are obtained through exchange of services, or of services of goods. Frequently laborers were found who had worked off doctors' bills or grocery bills. In these instances cash income was reduced, but the need for cash was likewise reduced by a similar amount.

"Half of the 158 workers who reported incomes received less than \$100 in cash from September 1, 1935, to August 31, 1936, and 3 out of every 10 earned less than \$50. A few relatively high incomes raised the average of \$125. Of the total earnings of all the laborers, 55 per cent came from agricultural work, 12 per cent from relief, and the remainder from nonagricultural pursuits. Children and other members of the family earned about 10 per cent of the total amount. The largest proportion of their earnings came from nonagricultural work."

*Archuleta County, Colorado:* "There was considerable variation in the income reports. As none of the group had dependents contributing to their incomes, most of them relied solely upon their ranch work for a livelihood. Nine had had other employment during the year and 7 had received help through either direct or work relief. Although total earnings ranged from \$8 to \$1,174.00, 43 per cent reported less than \$150.

"Nonagricultural earnings were more important in the higher income groups than in the lower. Two-fifths of the laborers whose incomes were about \$400 reported work off the ranch, but only one-fourteenth, or 3, of those earning less than that reported work outside of agriculture. However, the



two highest incomes of \$1,174 and \$960 were primarily ranch earnings; only \$50 of the former came from nonagricultural earnings."

Similar examples could be added. But they all tell much the same story. They call attention to conditions that, taken by and large, are nothing less than disgraceful. They bring to mind most forcefully the words of Pope Leo XIII in his Encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*: "Rich men and masters should remember this, that to exercise pressure for the sake of gain, upon the indigent and destitute, and to make one's profit out of the need of another, is condemned by all laws human and divine. To defraud anyone of wages that are his due is a crime which cries to the avenging anger of Heaven."

### **Extent of Farm Labor**

The 1935 census distinguished three groups of farm workers: Farm operators; members of their families working with or without wages; and hired labor. The farm operator, and members of his family working on the farm without wages are referred to as "family labor." Members of the operator's family and any other person receiving wages are listed as "hired help." It is the latter, the hired help, that is our interest here.

Over 14 per cent of all farms, or 967,593 farms reported hired help at the time of the 1935 census. The number of persons working on farms "for wages" was equivalent to 1.70 persons per farm reporting, but averaged only 0.24 persons for all farms in the United States.

It should be observed that the census inquiries of 1935 related to persons working on farms in the month of January. Hence, the figures for most areas do not represent the maximum number of persons employed in agriculture during the year.

The census of other years may throw some further light on this subject. The figures of 1920 show 6,440,343 farm operators and 4,041,627 farm laborers. Those of 1930 show about five and a half million laborers listed as follows: 2,732,972 wage workers; 1,659,792 unpaid family laborers; 776,278 sharecroppers; 339,207 part-time farmers.



In contrast with the last mentioned figure—339,207 part-time farmers—the 1935 census reports 2,077,474, that is, 30.5 of all farm operators of the United States. To be sure, these may none too accurately be classed as agricultural workers, since only one out of six worked on other farms, while five engaged in nonagricultural pursuits. Nevertheless, they serve to show still further the present weakened condition of American agriculture.

The census of 1935 also definitely showed the fact, quite generally recognized and accepted before, that the distribution of farm labor differs from that of the farm population. The 16 states comprising the South had 53.2 per cent of the total farm population and reported 55 per cent of the total farm workers. These 16 states reported 56.2 per cent of the total "family labor" and 47 per cent of the total "hired help" in the United States. It showed furthermore, that the distribution of persons working on farms as either family labor or hired help varies considerably from state to state. Persons working for wages constituted over two-fifths of the total farm labor in Arizona and California, and over one-fifth of the total farm labor in Connecticut, Florida, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Wyoming.

## 2. Farm Tenancy

Increasing farm tenancy is another evil that gives evidence of the growing insecurity and drift toward a proletarian condition on the part of those who are tilling the land in this country today.

In his annual report for 1936, Secretary of Agriculture Wallace, stated: "The farm census of 1935 reported about 2,865,000 tenant farmers, whose families aggregated 12,500,000 people. This was the largest number of tenant farmers ever reported by the census. In most states the percentage of tenancy increased significantly between 1930 and 1935. In certain areas more than two-thirds of the farm operators are tenants. Many of them frequently shift from farm to farm to the injury of the land, to the deterioration of community institutions, and to the decline of their own morale."

There has from earliest times been some tenancy in the United States. Even in the colonies some preferred, as the population increased along the seaboard, to rent land rather than to move westward where they might readily obtain acres of their own. After the Civil War, however, tenancy became more widespread and began to show a really appreciable growth. By 1880, the time of the first decennial census, 25 per cent of our lands were tenant-operated. Since then its growth has continued with varying degrees of intensity. To-day fully 42 per cent of our lands are cultivated by tenants. For the past 10 years the number of new tenants every year has been about 40,000. For ever-increasing numbers the dream of land-ownership has been growing more and more remote. For many it has quite faded away.

### **Geographic Distribution of Tenancy**

The proportion of farms operated by tenants who own none of the land they farm varies strikingly in different sections of the country. The lowest rate exists in the New England States. It is even lower there today than it was in 1880. Land in New England is cheap and is not the best for farming. The fact, too, that interest rates in this section of the country have usually been low has made it easier than in other parts to buy farms. Furthermore, people who live on farms in New England often have other sources of income than their farm crops. Much of New England constitutes to-day a large American playground or rendezvous for vacationists. The next lowest group of states has always been the far Western, that is, the Mountain and Pacific States. In 1880 their percentage stood at 7.4 and 16.8 respectively; in 1925, at 22.1 and 15.8.

In the Corn Belt, tenancy grew rapidly after the homestead period. A number of the states now have over 40 per cent. Iowa, for instance, has 50 per cent. The high price of this land is at least a partial explanation for this situation. It is too high-priced for tenants to buy. The Middle West on the whole approximates the national average of tenancy. Not a few who lost their farms in this territory during recent years have moved to cheaper lands further west.



The worst condition has always been found in the South, and particularly in the Southeast, or what is commonly referred to as the "Old South." Not only is there more tenancy in the South than in other parts, but it is also a worse type of tenancy. The so-called "cropper" of the South often lacks all capital and must be entirely financed by his landlord. Hence he can hardly be compared with the tenant of the Middle West who commonly owns considerable machinery and livestock. His condition is more akin to that of the agricultural laborer than the tenant.

Southern tenancy is closely associated with the typical crop of the South, namely, cotton. The "Cotton Belt" is by far the worst section. To quote from a recent publication of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics (Misc. Publ. No. 261): "In 1930, 73 per cent of the cotton type of farms, as classified by the census, were tenant operated. Inasmuch as farms of the cotton type were over one-fourth (26 per cent) of all farms in 1930, the high rate of tenancy on them not only affected the rate of tenancy in the South, where half the farms are cotton farms, but also that for the Nation as a whole. The rate of tenancy for farms other than those of the cotton type averaged only 32 per cent for the entire Nation in 1930. In the South the rate of tenancy averaged 56 per cent in 1930, but was only 38 per cent for farms other than of the cotton type."

### **Worst Condition Among Colored Farmers**

Contrasting the extent of tenancy among blacks and whites, the publication continues: "The rate of tenancy among white farmers of the South (46 per cent) in 1935, is much less than among colored farmers (77 per cent). This arises in part from the fact that the colored farmers of the South are much more commonly engaged in cotton production. Among white farmers of the Nation, excluding the South, the rate of tenancy was 30 per cent. The rate of tenancy among colored farmers of the South has increased only a little since 1900, when it was already 75 per cent. But the rate among the white farmers of the South has increased considerably—from 36 per cent in 1900 to 46 per cent in 1935. The rate of



tenancy among farmers elsewhere than in the South changed less rapidly. It averaged 25 per cent in 1900 and 30 per cent in 1935.

"Among colored tenant farmers of the South it is worth noting that 59 per cent operated as croppers in 1933, that is, they depended on their landlords not only for land, but also for the work stock with which to farm the land, and generally even for food and feed while making the crop. The proportion of southern colored tenants who were croppers was only 47 per cent in 1920, then increased to 54 per cent in 1925, 56 per cent in 1930, and 59 per cent in 1935, as noted above. By contrast, only 29 per cent of the white tenants of the South farmed as croppers in 1935, which is the same percentage as in 1925, and only a little higher than in 1920."

There is not a little evidence extending over some years that the Negro is losing out as a tenant operator and that the white farmer is taking his place.

### **The Cropper's Income**

The income of the renter or cropper in the Southern section is ordinarily much lower than that of the tenant of the North and West. In some sections of the South the average income per family among the sharecroppers is about \$300 per year. In the case of many individual families it is much lower. The earnings of great numbers of agricultural wage hands are much the same. A recent study of the Division of Social Research of the Works Progress Administration showed that the average net income of wage hands, sharecroppers, and other tenants in 1934 in 11 areas of the South was \$300 per family, or \$73 per person. Many families received much less. The average family income for wage labor was \$180 a year, varying from \$213 in the Arkansas River area to \$70 in the interior plains. Sharecroppers had an average family income of \$312, but in the lower Mississippi Delta region the average was only \$154, or \$38 per capita. Some sharecroppers reported incomes of less than \$100 for the year.

There is not a little danger that great numbers of sharecroppers will lose all foothold on the land in the cotton South and be forced to join the ranks of the migratory laborers or to

"go on relief." With increasing frequency comes the warning that the South can no longer depend on the world market for its one big crop, cotton, as it has done for so many years past. And there is the further threat that even the cotton that will continue to be grown will be picked by a machine rather than by the human hand. These and other factors point to an imminent danger that great numbers of whites and Negroes may be thrown off the land and be forced to migrate to cities and towns or become drifters in the countryside, seeking casual jobs wherever they may hope to find them. They point to very serious difficulties ahead, unless a readjustment of the whole economy of the Old South is energetically brought about. That, to be sure, will be no small task. But it is not an impossible one. The South still has tremendous resources at its disposal.

### **3. Loss of Equity in the Land**

While tenancy has been growing and the number of agricultural laborers has been on the increase, many owners of family-sized farms have also been slipping down the agricultural ladder and helping to swell the size of our rural proletariat. Thousands of owners have become as insecure as tenants. Many have lost most of the equity in their land. Great numbers of others have entirely lost their farms. In 1890, the farmers of America owned 59 per cent of their farms. By 1930 this ratio had declined to 42 per cent. Here, too, are regional differences to be found. As the publication of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, already cited, points out: "The equities of the farm operators in all farm real estate in 1930 ranged from an average of less than 30 per cent in the three States of Illinois, Iowa, and South Dakota, to an average of over 70 per cent in the three States of Maine, New Hampshire, and West Virginia, with a low of 28 per cent in South Dakota and a high of 78 per cent in Maine."

Certainly the period since 1930 has not witnessed any betterment in these conditions. Indeed, between 1930 and 1935, three quarters of a million farmers lost title to their



land. They lost their homes and savings of a lifetime through foreclosures and bankruptcy sales. Many are still losing their farms today.

No less than ominous is the fact that most of these recently foreclosed farms have passed into the hands of financial institutions, such as banks, insurance companies, and mortgage companies. In Iowa, for instance, where but a negligible quantity of land was held by corporations at the end of the war, not less than 10 per cent of all its farm land was held by them on January 1, 1935. Nothing but ill can come from such a development.

## **II. THE REMEDIES**

The foregoing picture of our American agricultural situation is indeed anything but a reassuring one. Tenants, croppers, and farm laborers are increasing rapidly in numbers. Owners are losing their farms outright, or at any rate much of the equity in their lands. More than half of those tilling our land today have but an uncertain foothold on it. Still others are becoming increasingly less secure. That remedies for the situation are imperative goes without saying. As President Roosevelt stated in transmitting to the Congress of the United States the Report of the Special Committee on Farm Tenancy: "When fully half the total farm population of the United States no longer can feel secure, when millions of our people have lost their roots in the soil, action to provide security is imperative, and will be generally approved."

### **1. Publicity**

One remedy for the situation, or at any rate one essential step toward remedying it, is publicity. The condition that exists must more generally be made known. Until very recently the entire problem of our rural insecurity was given but scant attention. Even today it is receiving far less attention than it should be given. The great mass of American people simply have no appreciation of this problem and its direful consequences. The reason for it is obvious. The agricultural laborers and sharecroppers live off the beaten path. They are found in the byways rather than on the highways. Particu-

larly do the people of the city lack contact with the latter. They are almost totally ignorant of the conditions under which they live. So long as they do not even know about them, they will be little concerned about anything that will look to the betterment of their lot. It is highly essential that the white light of publicity be turned upon them.

## 2. Organization

But the light of publicity alone is insufficient. A realization of the facts in the situation that publicity will bring about must be followed by energetic action for their correction.

To this end few things are more essential than organization. Organized action is positively necessary. The individual cropper or laborer standing alone, is largely helpless to remedy conditions or even to ask for aid effectively in order that they may be remedied.

As a matter of fact, considerable interest in organizing agricultural workers and sharecroppers has recently been evidenced. At a meeting of representatives of these two groups held at Washington, March 15-16, 1936, the question of organization was much to the fore. Time and again was the view expressed that only by building strong trade unions would they be able to get the concessions and attention that they needed, either from the Government or from their employers. One of the results of the conference was an increased impetus given to organization work among both agricultural workers and sharecroppers.

The American Federation of Labor has also recently been showing active interest in the organization of these groups. Speaking before its convention at Tampa, Florida, in December, 1936, Secretary of Labor Perkins referred to the neglect of the agricultural laborers both on the part of the Government and on the part of the American Federation. Among other things, she stated: "There is a very solemn obligation in which I think you share, to whole groups of wage earners, including the agricultural workers, and the sharecroppers and tenants who are actually wage earners though not legally, who in the past have not been too closely within the picture of the high standard of living which we think belongs



to America. I want to recommend to you at this time that you look into the problems of the agricultural workers. . . .” Apparently the convention took the recommendation of Madame Perkins seriously, for a number of resolutions dealing specifically with agricultural workers were passed, and there has since been considerable other evidence that the problems and needs of these people at the bottom of the agricultural heap was impressed upon the minds of the labor leaders. According to a recent report of the Federation there have been organized in some nineteen states thirty-five local unions, including the following groups: Sheep Shearers, Sugar Beet and Sugar Cane Field Workers, Fruit and Vegetable Workers, Citrus Workers, Cotton Field Workers and Horticulture Workers. These scattered locals are in reality only in a small measure indicative of the interest in organizations that now exists among the agricultural workers. In addition to the A. F. of L. units, the United Cannery, Agricultural and Allied Workers of America, C. I. O. union, claims 100,000 members. The workers of the countryside generally have become increasingly conscious of, and alive to, their plight the past few years, and have learned to appreciate more than ever before the fact that organization is one of the things that holds out to them a reasonable promise of bettering their conditions. Presumably no one will question their wisdom in emphasizing it as one of the chief means through which they may hope to better their lot.

The attempts of the agricultural groups to organize for the purpose of improving their condition have not all been without opposition. Indeed, on occasion they have met with violence and the violation of their civil rights. Apparently even a little night-riding has in some instances been resorted to in the South. Regarding this opposition the booklet of the Public Affairs Committee, *Farmers Without Land*, states: “Within the past few years tenants and farm laborers have begun to organize to increase their bargaining power. Press reports indicate that members of these tenant unions have been denied the right of peaceful assemblage and that individuals have been evicted and forced to flee from their homes. Legally the tenant is in much the same position as the dweller in a

company town. He may be charged with trespassing the moment he ceases to be a tenant. Thus if the employer can terminate tenancy at will, he can deny all civil liberties by treating the tenant as a trespasser. The tenant's legal rights are not likely to be of much help if he is poor and without influential friends. It is not enough to say that State governments should enforce the rights of peaceful assembly and protect organizations which are seeking to achieve legitimate objectives. With the vague rights of tenancy and the ever-present threat of trespass charges, the tenant remains a landless, homeless, friendless man dependent on the continued good will of the 'boss man.' Legal reform in this field must go hand in hand with reform in the land tenure situation."

The President's Tenancy Committee also adverted to this situation.

### 3. Government Action

The Government, too, has until very recently been singularly neglectful of this "rural proletariat." The following statement made at the Washington conference of the agricultural workers by one of the delegates is very generally true: "We have proven that nearly all social legislation in America, whether it relates to child labor, workmen's compensation, reduced work week, unemployment and social insurance or wage standards definitely rules out the agricultural workers from protection. We have charged that the administration of New Deal agencies . . . have grossly discriminated against the agricultural workers. We have also asserted that these laws and these agencies operated further to reduce our living standards to the lowest levels anywhere in America." Neither the Department of Agriculture nor the Department of Labor had up to that time given them any considerable attention. Nor had our national social legislation been considerate of their needs. The Social Security Act had largely neglected them. The Labor Disputes Act meant nothing to them. The defunct NRA had made provision for every class of worker in the country except the toilers of the fields. The AAA had benefitted many a farmer, but insofar as the agricultural laborers and sharecroppers were concerned, had robbed not a few of the



former of their jobs and sent a considerable number of the latter adrift into the towns, while bringing to all of them higher costs of living.

One considerable exception, however, must be made in the case of the former Resettlement Administration. Although this agency of the Government has been much criticized, and in some instances justly, it accomplished not a little toward helping these underprivileged agricultural groups. Moreover, it would undoubtedly have accomplished much more had not the funds, originally placed at its disposal for other purposes, had to be diverted so largely to relief purposes in the drought areas. Even as it was, it made supervised loans to more than 300,000 farm families on a low interest basis—loans which proved very helpful. Averaging about \$300, they were usually sufficient to rent a farm and to get the necessary tools and livestock to begin farming operations. Ordinarily in the South in the past, men in these groups at the very bottom of the agricultural ladder found it necessary, if they wished to get a start at farming, to pay an interest charge either directly or indirectly of from 20 to 35 per cent. Under these circumstances it was impossible for them to make any headway.

### **The Farm Tenant Act**

A more definite step in the direction of alleviating the condition of the underdog of American agriculture was taken by the Government with the enactment of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Bill during the seventy-fifth Congress of the United States. This act embodies most of the major recommendations of the President's Tenancy Committee, and applies to all the different underprivileged rural groups.

The main provisions of the Act that deal with tenancy proper come under its first title. According to this title the Secretary of Agriculture is authorized to make loans to deserving "farm tenants, farm laborers, sharecroppers and other individuals who obtain, or who recently obtained, the major portion of their income from farming operations." Loans may also be made for necessary repairs and essential improvements in the property to be acquired. The period of the loan may be for as much as 40 years, but the final payment may not be

made before the expiration of 5 years. The interest rate is 3 per cent per annum on the unpaid balance of the loan. For security the Government is given a first mortgage or deed of trust on the farm. The borrower assumes the obligation of maintaining the farm in good repair, of avoiding waste and exhaustion of the soil, and of otherwise following approved farm practices as the Secretary of Agriculture may prescribe. An initial appropriation of \$10,000,000 has been voted by Congress to begin the program, and the Act authorizes \$25,000,000 for the second year, and sums not to exceed \$50,000,000 for each year thereafter. The loans are to be equitably distributed among the several states and territories on the basis of farm population and the prevalence of tenancy, as determined by the Secretary of Agriculture.

The limited amount of money appropriated under the Act has been no small disappointment to many who for several years have been looking forward to a far-reaching and effective effort on the part of the Government to solve the tenancy problem. As it is, a beginning will have to be made with a limited number of demonstrations—a few thousand a year, perhaps, or at any rate, far fewer than will be sufficient even to offset the annual crop of 40,000 new tenants. Possibly there are some legitimate reasons for the exceedingly small appropriation that is provided for. If so, they have not been made known. On the face of things the appropriation seems nothing less than ridiculous.

### **Rehabilitation Loans**

A second type of loan, namely, rehabilitation loans, are provided for under Title II of the Farm Tenant Act.

These rehabilitation loans are not entirely new. As already indicated, the Resettlement Administration made more than 300,000 such loans during the period of its existence. These enabled many families to begin farming again instead of remaining on relief. They assisted them to at least the first rung of the agricultural ladder.

Regarding this type of loan, the Act reads: "Out of the funds made available under Section 23, the Secretary shall have power to make loans to eligible individuals for the pur-



chase of livestock, farm equipment, supplies, and for other farm needs (including minor improvements and minor repairs to real property), and for the refinancing of indebtedness, and for family subsistence.

"Loans made under this section shall bear interest at a rate not in excess of 3 per centum per annum, and shall have maturities not in excess of 5 years, and may be renewed. Such loans shall be payable in such installments as the Secretary may provide in the loan agreement. All loans made under this title shall be secured by a chattel mortgage, a lien on crops, and an assignment of proceeds from the sale of agricultural products, or by any one or more of the foregoing.

"Only farm owners, farm tenants, farm laborers, sharecroppers and other individuals who obtain, or who recently obtained, the major portion of their income from farming operations, and who cannot obtain credit on reasonable terms from any Federally incorporated lending institution, shall be eligible for loans under this section."

The Act contains no special appropriation for these rehabilitation loans. It provides that they be taken from remaining resettlement funds and from relief appropriations allotted to the Secretary of Agriculture by the President as deemed necessary for the carrying out of the Title of the Act.

Under the rules for the administration of the Act applications for tenant purchase loans are to be filed with county rural rehabilitation supervisors. Voluntary county committees, consisting of three farmer members, will examine these applications, appraise the farms which applicants propose to purchase, and recommend applicants who have the character, ability and experience deemed necessary for successful farm ownership.

### **Debt Adjustment**

Another activity formerly carried on by the Resettlement Administration and to be continued under provision of Title II of the Farm Tenant Act, is the voluntary adjustment of indebtedness between farm debtors and their creditors. Under the Act the Secretary of Agriculture is empowered to assist in such adjustment work even to the extent of pay-

ing in whole or in part the expenses of local agencies and committees engaged in it. This, too, should help some toward farm security.

### **Retirement of Submarginal Land**

Title III of the Farm Tenant Act deals with the retirement of submarginal land. It in effect authorizes the continuation of the program of retiring submarginal lands that had been carried on under the Division of Land Utilization of the Resettlement Administration. Under it the Act provides for the next three fiscal years a total of \$50,000,000 for this purpose. It stipulates, among other things, that certain payments be made by the Federal Government to counties in which the acquired land is situated. Families on submarginal land, as also those on holdings of inadequate size, are at a disadvantage in their relationship to the land. A really satisfactory and complete life for them on the land is quite out of the question. The cultivation of submarginal lands is a real factor in our rural insecurity. It is a large contributing cause to our growing rural proletarianism.

### **General Provisions**

The last Title of the Farm Tenant Act sets forth a number of general provisions, practically all of them dealing with administrative matters. Under them, for instance, the former Resettlement Administration has been given the new title of Farm Security Administration and has had assigned to it responsibility for both the tenant and rehabilitation loans. Responsibility for the development of a program of land utilization and the retirement of submarginal land has been placed in the Bureau of Agricultural Economics.

### **State Help**

Over and above the activities of the Federal Government, provided for under the Farm Tenant Act, there is also need for action on the part of the states regarding the problem of tenancy. While perhaps little can be done directly by the latter by way of aiding in acquiring ownership of land they should be able to do something worth while toward bettering



tenant conditions. This might be done, for instance, through modification of the character of tenant contracts and the relationships between landlords and tenants, thereby increasing the sense of security of the later and overcoming the abuses that have become so much a part of the present system. The President's Committee on Tenancy made a number of specific recommendations along these lines. They are largely reducible to the following three items: (1) Improving the leasing contract and landlord-tenant relationship; (2) Modifying the taxation of farm lands with a view of favoring ownership; (3) Making better provisions for safeguarding the civil liberties of tenants. While it may be too much to expect that many of the evils of land tenancy can be remedied by improvement of the lease contract, something at least can unquestionably be done by this particular means toward insuring good farming, toward conserving the soil and lengthening the period of occupancy, and toward promoting harmony and better personal relationships between tenant and owner.

### **Other Federal Activities**

If genuine security is to be achieved by our farm people, and the number of our rural proletarians lessened, the Federal Government will have to do more than administer the Farm Tenant Act. Merely to make a landowner of a tenant and then send him adrift to "paddle his own canoe" in our present troubled rural waters will not be sufficient. Certainly the Government's present efforts to provide suitable credit facilities will have to continue unabated. Its program for agricultural parity or adequate prices will also have to be pushed energetically forward. An equitable economic balance between agriculture and other elements of our national life is altogether essential to farm security. More particularly will recurring land booms and depressions have to be controlled. Violent fluctuations of farm prices and income, fluctuations so abnormal at times that they swing far out of line with prices and incomes received by other groups will have to be stopped. So long as these continue, will the farmer continue to be robbed of his equity and to be rendered more and more insecure. So long as they continue will our concentration of wealth, and a

concomitantly larger number of proletarians, move steadily forward.

Nor should the ruralist by any means depend upon Government help alone. Indeed, he should place much emphasis upon self-help. Fortunately there is a particularly excellent medium at hand for this, namely, cooperative enterprise. Genuine cooperatives can unquestionably do much to enable the tiller of the soil eventually to obtain land, and also to retain its ownership. They represent a field that should be zealously and diligently cultivated. Soundly established and efficiently conducted, they would place within the hands of the farmer or farm laborer the means of making his influence felt, of safeguarding his right and getting his just due. Marketing cooperatives, for instance, if well and widely organized, would give the farmer a means second to none for effective bargaining with the highly organized business interests of the city, thereby assuring him fair prices for his products. Consumers' cooperatives, or buying in common with his neighbors, would give him the advantage of at least a measure of wholesale buying, and keep for him the profit that normally goes to the retailer. A system of credit cooperatives would do much toward assuring him credit on reasonable terms. While even scattered local cooperatives would be of some help, their influence would be greatly multiplied if established throughout the country. Developed on an international scale and effectively federated, their power would be still greater. They would then unquestionably enable their members to escape the present domination of business and banking institutions and secure for themselves fair prices, reasonable credit, and a just return on the fruits of their labor.

Cooperatives have, as a matter of fact, enjoyed considerable growth in this country of recent years—marketing cooperatives more so than consumers' and credit cooperatives. But there is need for much further growth in all fields. Even a measure of cooperative ownership, it might be added, should have some advantage in certain fields, such, for instance, as sugar.



### Why Land Ownership?

It should hardly be necessary to state at any length reasons for interest in the promotion of farm security, or motives for eagerness to foster a greater measure of land ownership. The peasant, with his roots sunk deep in the soil, is the one outstanding stabilizing force in Europe today. And no less has the American freeholder in the past been a power making for stability in our own land. And that stability is needed more than ever in the troubled conditions that are so characteristic of the world today. With much wisdom did the pagan philosopher, Aristotle, urge, "Make even the poor owners of a small inheritance." And with no less wisdom has the Church traditionally upheld that same view. Pius XI reiterated it in our own day in his Encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno* (Forty Years After). Urging that proletarian conditions be overcome by wage-ownership, His Holiness stated: "This program cannot, however, be realized unless the propertyless wage-earner be placed in such circumstances that by skill and thrift he can acquire a certain moderate ownership." Pope Leo XIII, to whom he refers in this connection, very specifically insists, in his Encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (On the Working Classes), upon the need for a widespread ownership of land for the well-being of society and of the family. More than that he sets forth some of the major benefits that normally flow from such ownership. His oft-quoted words on the subject bear repetition here. He writes: "We have seen that this great labor question cannot be solved save by assuming as a principle that private ownership must be held sacred and inviolable. The law, therefore, should favor ownership, and its policy should be to include as many as possible of the humbler class to become owners. Many excellent results will follow from this; and first of all, property will certainly become more equitably divided. For the result of civil change and revolution has been to divide society into two widely differing classes. On the one side there is the party which holds power because it holds wealth; which has in its grasp the whole of labor and trade; which manipulates for its own benefit and its own purposes all the sources of supply, and which is even represented



in the councils of the state itself. On the other side there is the needy and powerless multitude broken down and suffering, and ever ready for disturbance. If working people can be encouraged to look forward to obtaining a share in the land, the consequence will be that the gulf between vast wealth and sheer poverty will be bridged over, and the respective classes will be brought nearer to one another. A further consequence will result in the greater abundance of the fruits of the earth. Men always work harder and more readily when they work on that which belongs to them; nay, they learn to love the very soil that yields, in response to the labor of their hands, not only food to eat, but an abundance of good things for themselves and those that are dear to them." That such a spirit of willing labor would add to the produce of the earth and to the wealth of the community is self-evident.

A people with their roots sunk in the soil—in other words, a nation composed largely of landowners—will offer poor ground in which the seeds of radicalism and revolution may grow and flourish. The ownership of land tethers a man to law and order. It protects him against the inroads of pernicious social doctrines. Both the individual and the community gain by such a system. Ownership develops in the individual a sense of personal worth and of family and community pride that is not only deeply satisfying to himself but also highly useful to society. The individual who has a stake in the land has excellent anchorage. He enjoys a sense of security, a feeling of stability that cannot but redound to his own good and to the welfare of his family and his community. More specifically is the community the gainer because of the fact that holding land in the community closely identifies a man with the locality and naturally gives him an interest in its essential social institutions.

Tenancy, on the other hand, usually fails at least in considerable measure to do these things. More than that, it leads to specific evils. It leads to a wastage of natural resources, to soil mining and land erosion, since a system of tenancy leaves little inducement to care for the land or the improvements upon it. Worse still, anything in the nature of permanent tenancy leads to social erosion, to the wearing down of the



morale and fiber of those who till the land under such circumstances. It begets low standards of living, leading to both economic and cultural poverty. Furthermore, it destroys liberty. Political liberty without a reasonable economic freedom is largely a bogus liberty.

Tenancy and our growing rural proletariat are a blot upon our land. More than that, they are a threat to our national stability. If we wish to give genuine hope and comfort to the radical elements in our midst, then we may well permit our present condition of farm insecurity to continue and increase. But if we wish to establish our country again upon a sound basis of stability and security, upon a reasonable conservatism, then we must take a definite and effective stand against our growing tenancy and the related evils that characterize our present agricultural system. There is no question about which of these two we should choose. Nor is there less question that we can solve our farm insecurity problem. Other countries with far fewer resources have done so. We can do so too.

### **Bibliography**

*Farm Tenancy. Report of the President's Committee.*

*Agricultural Labor in the United States, 1915-1935.* This is a large compilation of articles, books, pamphlets and reviews on agricultural labor and related topics prepared by the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, United States Department of Agriculture.

**STUDY CLUB OUTLINE**

1. Describe the early land tenure situation in the United States. What factors contributed toward this situation?
2. How many agricultural laborers are there in the United States at present?
3. In what sections of the country are most agricultural laborers found? Most sharecroppers? Most migratory laborers?
4. What is the income of laborers and sharecroppers?
5. Show briefly the growth of tenancy in the United States.
6. What is the farmer's present equity in his land?
7. In what sections is tenancy highest? Where is it lowest?
8. How can publicity help solve the problem of our growing rural proletariat?
9. What can organization accomplish?
10. Explain the provisions of the Farm Tenant Act with regard to land purchase loans? With regard to rehabilitation loans?
11. What provision does the Farm Tenant Act make for the retirement of submarginal lands?
12. In what other ways besides the administration of the Farm Tenant Act can the Federal Government help solve the problem of our rural proletariat?
13. What can the states contribute toward the solution of the problem?
14. State some of the dangers of a landless people.
15. What are some of the positive benefits of land ownership?



## Catholic Action for Social Justice \*

**H**OW shall we know well the right moral principles and spread them?

We shall all be unified in our religious program and our work under the Bishops (48).

We shall join a Catholic lay organization working with and under the Church (31).

We shall get it to start, or we shall join, a program of training (31).

We shall take part in study clubs and industrial conferences and the like (8).

We shall spread books, newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets (8).

We shall get the help of a priest trained in this matter (46).

We shall start work among youth (47).

We shall attend lay retreats (47).

We shall be apostles to our own associates—workers to workers, employers to employers, and so on (46).

We shall ground all our ideas in the Encyclicals of the Popes (48).

We shall take on the social charity of brotherhood in God and in Christ (44).

We shall lead good Catholic lives (44).

We shall know the crisis facing us which has, with the grace of God, put the destiny of mankind in our hands (47).

We shall have hope, because the Christian spirit of the people is strong, ignorance and environment can be overcome, and even the most abandoned have in them the sparks of "a natural Christian soul" (45); and because already much has been done to make known and apply the social teaching of the Church (7-13; 45-6).

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\* Numbers refer to page numbers of Pope Pius XI's Encyclical "Reconstructing the Social Order" (N. C. W. C. edition).

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