

# Plight of the English Agricultural Laborer

## Farm Workers Face Low Wages and Long Hours Through Rescinding of "Guaranteed Price" Order

By W. P. CROZIER

Manchester, England—(By Mail). THE British Government has decided on the immediate "decontrol" of agriculture. This will mean that the farmer will lose his guaranteed prices and that the wages board which secures to the agricultural laborer a reasonable minimum wage will be abolished.

Agriculture is our greatest English industry, and the peasant, they say, is the backbone of his country. During the war the government said that agriculture was the most vital to us of all our "key" industries. It was because we grew so little and imported so much of our foodstuffs that the German submarine campaign brought us to the brink of destruction and innumerable voices declared that never again must war find us so helplessly dependent on imports from overseas. Thus in the popular esteem the agricultural laborer had apparently come into his own as a valuable and indispensable member of the community and it was to be presumed that he would be treated—and, in particular, paid—according to the new realization of his value.

### His Pay Was the Lowest

THE rural laborer had been the poorest paid of all the workers. Sober inquirers had described his condition as being little better than that of a serf; it was the condition of semi-serfdom that drove the laborers in increasing numbers from the fields to the variety and the good wages of the towns. An investigator of the board of agriculture thus wrote about the laborer's position:

"The farm laborer is the hardest-worked, lowest-paid, worst-fed and clothed and worst-housed class of the whole British community.

"His pre-war wages did not even warrant his paying 2s. 6d. a week in rent, and, in the vast majority of cases, neither he nor his family could have existed at all but for the supplementary earnings of his wife. In having to work, the wife almost invariably suffered in health, as in spirit; she was obliged to neglect herself, her children, her husband and her home. Both she and her family occupy the lowest rung upon the social ladder, and they are spoken of in tones of pity, if not of contempt, by their more fortunate, better organized brethren and fellow-workers.

"The farm laborer now, as in the past, approaches nearest the state of serfdom. He is, in fact, a serf, with the privilege of sleeping under a roof which, by courtesy is called his own, though his wages would not allow of his paying a just rent for it.

"Hitherto he has had no union to defend his interests; had not a copper a week to spare for contribution to any scheme of co-operation among his class."

How far the laborer was in pre-war days from receiving anything that could truthfully be dignified as a "living" or "subsistence" wage on which to support not only himself but often also a wife and a large family, may be judged from the following figures which show the weekly wage for various counties in 1907, according to a board of trade inquiry:

County	Wages per week.
	s. d.
Cumberland	20 3
Yorkshire, East Riding	19 6
Lancashire	20 8
Cheshire	19 1
Gloucestershire and Worcestershire	16 3
Warwickshire	17 2
Oxfordshire	14 11
Suffolk	15 9
Norfolk	15 4
Sussex	17 9
Wiltshire	16 0

### Hours of Work Unlimited

THE highest figures for any county in the whole of England were those for Derbyshire and they were no more than 20s. 10d. The American reader may translate these figures into his own money by taking four dollars to the pound and he will then be able to compare the Oxford laborer's wage of three dollars a week with wages in America. It must not be supposed, either, that the figures quoted exclude allowances and perquisites which would substantially increase the actual wages, for the figures officially include "cash wages, extras and allowances." For such wages the laborer had to work unlimited hours in summer and in winter and had to live in the cottage—often a miserable hovel—assigned to him by his employer.

In other industries in England the motive power which forced up wages has been the organization of labor into trade unions which dealt with the employers through collective bargaining. The agricultural laborer was not organized. It is, of course, very much more difficult to organize the widely scattered people of rural areas than the urban artisans and, in addition, all the landlords and farmers were extremely bitter and determined against the idea of organization among their laborers. It was only just before and during the war that unions began to be established effectively among the laborers and it was the organization of the unions plus the high prices obtained by

the farmers that led to the first substantial increases in wages in 1917-18.

The government, when it passed the Corn Production Act of 1917, not only guaranteed high prices to the farmer to induce him to put more land under the plow but guaranteed the laborer a minimum wage. It is true that it was only 25s. a week, but even this was a large percentage increase on the old wage and the act also provided for an agricultural wages board which should include representatives of masters and men and also neutral members, hear evidence and periodically fix the laborer's wage, with the assistance of district wages committees on which also all sides should be represented.

The wages board made its first order in May, 1920. It was for the county of Norfolk and fixed a wage-rate of 30s. for a week of 54 hours in summer and 48 hours in winter. Beyond these hours the laborer had to be paid overtime rates of 8-1/2d. an hour on week days and 10d. an hour on Sundays. There were some exceptions to the general rule such as the class of "Cowmen," who for an additional 6s. had to work the "customary" hours of their calling. This exception was capable of abuse by slave-driving farmers and in 1919 it was abolished and farm workers generally came under the common rule.

### Paid for Overtime Now

THE new wage, ranging from 30s. to 36s. was small enough in all conscience, especially as the cost of living was now beginning to rise, but the legal fixing of the laborer's hours was a great boon to him and he could no longer be exploited without limit; he could claim overtime rates—and secure them—like any urban artisan. From this time on the laborers' wages gradually increased by a few shillings a week until at the present moment the minimum rate is 46s. a week and some shillings more in the better-paid counties of the North of England. Forty-six shillings is a great advance on the average for all England of 17s. 6d. in 1907 or the 19s. 10d. which wages had reached in 1913, but the pound sterling is nowadays worth only some 9s. in pre-war values. Forty-six shillings, therefore, represents only about 21s. in "real" money (or about \$4 in present American values), so that it is still true to say that the laborer has not greatly improved on his pre-war pittance except in so far as he now works reasonable hours and receives fixed rates of overtime.

And now it is announced that the wages board and the minimum wage, the laborer's charter for a decent living, are to go. The farmers have already announced that at the next meeting of the wages board, before it is abolished, they will demand a reduction of six shillings a week in laborers' wages and there is no doubt that when the board has disappeared they will en-

deavor to get wages down still further. As a general principle it is, of course, right and necessary that wages which have been largely increased on the basis of a sudden and temporary "boom" in profits should undergo reduction when severe depression sets in and persists, but it is fundamentally right and necessary also that every industry should pay a decent, living subsistence wage to its members, and what is to be said of an industry which, paying no more than 21s. a week (four dollars) in pre-war values is about to cut down even that humble pittance? That is the future that our agricultural laborers have now to face and they are preparing to resist it.

### Prices Will Not Be Guaranteed

IT IS unjust that the minimum wage and the wages board should be abolished because the guaranteed prices are to be abandoned. The one does not depend upon the other. Guaranteed prices extend only to certain cereal crops but the minimum wage applies to all kinds and grades of agricultural workers, whether they are concerned with the cereals for which prices are guaranteed or with the other agricultural products for which there is no guaranty. This was made quite clear long ago in the official organ the *Wages Board Gazette*:

"Any attempt to make a guaranteed price of wheat a corollary to an agricultural wages board should be strenuously resisted as having no foundation in history. Wheat-growing, it must be remembered, forms a very small part of the English farmers' output of agricultural produce. No minimum price is guaranteed for milk, a necessity as great as bread, for meat or for fruit and vegetables, and yet the minimum wage applies equally to all persons employed in agriculture whether they are engaged in wheat or oat production or not."

Some say that a "deal" has already been arranged between the government and the farmers. The government says to the farmers: "If we maintain the guaranteed prices, we shall be paying a subsidy to you of from 30 to 40 million pounds this year, and we simply cannot afford to do it, since the terrible depression in trade will cause a severe drop in the national revenue. Therefore, the guaranteed prices must be abandoned." The farmers, it is suggested, have in effect replied that if the government does not want to incur their undying hostility, it must relieve them from the hated burden of the wages board and allow them to get wages down as they are able. Whether there be a "deal" or not, there is at least no doubt about the fact—that the farmer is losing the guaranty of prices (although he was promised that it should not be with or even without four years' notice) and regaining his old liberty to beat down the wages of his men.

The government has thus abandoned both the principles by which, only a year or two ago, it set such store. It established special prices for the farmer in order to induce him to turn pasture into plowed land on the ground that these islands must as far as ever possible be made self-sufficing and never again be at the mercy of an enemy's attack upon their food supplies. It laid down also the sound and honorable principle that agriculture, like any other industry, must pay a wage to its workers which would enable them to live, if not in comfort, at least in decency. It seems that now the farmer will be allowed to cultivate as much or as little land as he pleases, without interference from the state, and that we shall enter "the next war," if and when it comes, as much dependent on overseas supplies as we were in 1914. For not only are the guaranties to be dropped, but the government proposes also to repeal other provisions in the act of 1920 by which farmers and landowners could be forced to cultivate their lands to the best advantage under pain of suffering severe penalties if they did not.

### Fight Is in Prospect

SECONDLY, the abandonment of the wages board will be a great disaster just as its creation was a great achievement and one highly creditable to Mr. George. Outside the notorious "sweated industries" in which wages are now fixed by trade boards there was no calling which had for decades cried out for a statutory minimum so pitifully as that of the rural laborer. I have already shown how in 1907 the Oxfordshire laborer received only 14s. 11d. a week. But it had taken him 57 years to work up to that figure from the 9s. 3-1/2d. which was the average for England and Wales in 1850. It was 13s. 4d. in 1873, and 1900 had come before the average reached 14s. Will it not be pitiful if the laborer should again be thrust back, or should be forced to fight against being thrust back, into wages that do not permit of a decent subsistence?

It is improbable that he will be thrust back without fighting. After a long struggle against the hostility of farmers and the great landowners the rural laborers are organized now into two unions, whose membership numbers some 350,000. They have had experience of collective bargaining; they have met their employers round the conference table; they have tasted slightly better wages, juster conditions of work and more leisure. If any attack should now be made on their standard of life, we shall expect to see the strike movement from which the skilled industries are suffering reproduced in the world of agriculture, and the danger will be the greater as the time of the harvest approaches.

### Mountain Road on the Side of a Huge Cliff Near Naples



Cut out of solid rock on the side of a huge mountain cliff near Naples, a road skirts the Caserta River for nearly a mile. Here is the picturesque road more than one hundred feet above the level