
The Rise of Factory Agriculture and Other Current Trends: Draft Report of the Committee on Farms of the Socialist Party of America

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The Farmers' Committee has held no meetings, but has conducted its work by correspondence. Although suggestions and corrections were received from all but one of the present members of the committee, and have been used in preparing this report, yet because it was impossible to submit the final draft to the entire committee before publication only the chairman, A.M. Simons, is to be held responsible for the report as printed.

The committee will meet during the first day of the convention [National Congress: Chicago, May 21-25, 1910] and will revise this report before submission to the convention.

Unfortunately this report must necessarily be issued before the census of 1910 is completed. Its conclusions must therefore be based largely on observations of general tendencies and not upon statistical data.

Agriculture at the present moment is just entering a new stage. The changes during the past few years have been greater than in many previous centuries. This change is seen not alone in improved farm machinery, although this has played its part. The old extensive system of single crop farming has almost disappeared. This change carries with it the theory based upon the idea that specialized cultivation of large areas would increase until the large farms would swallow up the smaller ones. It is time for the Socialists to completely abandon this theory. Fifty years of the most rapid evolution has produced no sign of any tendency in the direction of such a form of concentra-

tion. Farms at the present time are probably smaller per unity of area than ever before. This does not mean that concentration has passed farming by, but only that it has taken on a different form from what Socialists of 50 years ago expected.

The Farm as a Factory.

The basic feature of the new farming is found in the fact that the farm is becoming an agricultural factory. In all lines of industry the great obstacles to concentration have been found in the uncertainties of the trade and the impossibility of continuous operation. So long as farming was dependent upon the caprices of soil, weather, insects, and individual skill, it could never be sufficiently standardized to enable it to follow the course of factory industry.

Progress in all lines of industry consists largely in substituting certainty for chance. This process is now going on very rapidly in agriculture. The new farming is very little dependent upon the heat or cold or water of nature. All these can now be supplied artificially, and the introduction of certainty and complete control renders the new methods more economical than the free supply of nature.

Manufacturing Soil.

The soil, once largely the most important element, has lost much of that importance. Soil can now be manufactured, almost to order. The land furnishes little more than a location. Soil is now a part of the capital of the farmer, and not always even of fixed capital.

This control of the soil depends largely upon the use of artificial fertilizers, and here again we seem to be entering upon a new era. While upon most farms the great mass of fertilizing material is still produced on the farm itself, and the use of certain crops for fertilizing purposes is being highly developed, yet the great source of supply is becoming controlled by phosphate and nitrate trusts, and the most important element, nitrogen, is now being produced mechanically by electric plants. Another important source is the beef trust, through its utilization of by-products, and the use of bacterial cultures for nitrogen is suggestive of another significant line of evolution.

The whole irrigation movement is but a part of this change. Wherever water is supplied artificially, the price of the land is so high

that it is profitable to practically remake the soil, if it is not satisfactory.

Specializing Animals.

On the mechanical side, recent changes have tended to develop this same tendency. The production of artificial heat requires a large capital. New standards of purity in dairy products is requiring greater expense and more factory-like organization of the industry.

Another influence working in the same direction is seen in the specialization of farm animals. These are now highly perfected meat producing machines. Almost any agricultural college can furnish a formula giving the exact amount of beef or pork that will be produced from feeding a certain amount of food to certain breeds of animals.

The substitution of other sources of power than that of animals furthers the same line of progress. So long as any industry is dependent on animal power, it can never attain the factory stage. The use of the gasoline engine promises to have far reaching effect. It furnishes the power, which for the particular purpose of farming is much more suitable than steam. The portability, simplicity, and cheapness of this power make possible its application in many places where steam could never be used.

Concentration in New Form.

These mechanical changes are having the same effect on farming that they have had in every line of industry. Concentration, while it does not follow the lines at first expected, now promises to follow the parallel line with industrial evolution much more closely. All the changes that have been mentioned greatly increase the amount of capital required for the farm unit.

This tendency is further accelerated by the constant and rapid increase in the price of land, even as a location. This increase is made more rapid by the disappearance of the world frontier. Free land is now a thing of the past, save in the most remote corners of the earth. This has been accomplished by a vast increase of urban population, thus adding still more to the demand for farm products, relative to the number of farmers.

The farm, when transformed into a factory, requires large investments of capital in many directions. Almost any acre of a modern, intensively cultivated market garden requires more capital than was demanded by the even larger farms of a generation ago.

Free Land is Gone.

Even the remnant of so-called free land now open requires large capital for its use. The day when penniless pioneers pressed out to the edge of civilization, there to create a farming unit, owned by each one individually, has passed. All the new projects for farmers require a capital such as is possessed by few farmers or wage laborers; consequently the present "Back to the Land" movement is largely one of small capitalists. Indeed, the amount required would not be considered small among capitalists of 50 years ago.

This rise in the price of land is transforming the coming generation of farmers into a race of renters. There is little possibility for resourceless workers to become farm owners. Here, again, the absence of recent statistics makes any definite statement impossible. A straw that suggests the course of events is found in the fact that the population of Iowa, almost the foremost agricultural state in the union, is the only state showing an absolute decline in population in the last 10 years. The state census, taken in 1905, showed this, and the preliminary estimates issued by the United States confirm the fact and show that the movement is of long duration. The local authorities agree that this is due to an increase in the size of the farm unit, a growth in the amount of capital required per farm, due to the rising price of land and the consequent immigration to Canada.

Like Early Factory States.

Thus this stage upon which we appear to be just entering presents all the phenomena made familiar in the competitive stage of the factory industry. It would thus appear to be a stage immediately preceding the entrance of great capital and the trust into farming.

Along with this change is coming the change in the position of the farm laborer as distinct from the farm owner. We are beginning to see the same organization of industry that has long prevailed in the factory. Trained superintendents are being turned out of the agricultural colleges, and these are becoming the employers of unskilled men

recruited from the city. As yet, this employment has not proceeded far enough to present any practical questions for solution. Few things, however, are more striking than the great extension of agricultural education. The nation state, and in a great many cases smaller political divisions, are constantly extending their activities in this direction.

These things are largely of the future. Little more than their beginnings are with us today. The industry of agriculture is not yet a factory industry, and the majority of the farmers are not yet in a position to accept the factory psychology. Yet, because they are moving in that direction, they can be appealed to with Socialist philosophy much more effectively than before such tendencies were visible. Moreover, it is of the greatest importance that the Socialists should themselves be familiar with these new phases if the problems of the farmer are to be met in the Socialist program.

Socialists and Farm Ownership.

One thing should be well understood, in addition to the fact that the old idea of bonanza farms swallowing all others is not true, and that is that the Socialists of the world are unanimously agreed that no Socialist party proposes the immediate expropriation of the farm owner who is cultivating his own farm. Every European Socialist platform that mentions this subject agrees upon this point.

At the same time it is not for the Socialist Party to guarantee the private ownership of any productive property. The laws of evolution forbid any such guarantee save so far as it applies to the products of the laborer. So long as tools are used merely by individual handicraftsmen they present no problem of ownership which the Socialist is compelled to solve. The same is true of land. Collective ownership is urged by the Socialist, not as an end in itself, not as part of a Utopian scheme, but as means of preventing exploitation, and wherever individual ownership is an agency of exploitation, then such ownership is opposed by Socialism.

Unity of Interest.

One of the most encouraging phases of recent evolution is the closer relationship arising between farmers and the wage workers. This was inevitable as they found themselves confronted by the same enemy.

This mutual approach is seen, not alone in the overtures being made to establish direct connection between organizations of farmers and of wage workers. This in itself is but an expression of the increasing identity of interest of the members of these organizations.

It is no longer a question of what the Socialists will do for, or to the farmers. It is doubtful if the question was ever properly stated in this manner. Socialists, least of all, can afford to come forward as saviors of other social classes. The farmers, however, are definitely moving for themselves. They are moving in great masses and with fairly definite aims. They are going to have a voice in determining the tactics of any working class movement. At the same time it is well for both farmers and wage workers to bear in mind that the latter are the advance guard in the class struggle, that they are the peculiar product of capitalism, and that in every country they have played the part of pathfinders on the road to social revolution.

It is therefore of the greatest significance that within the last few years the farmers have shown a striking tendency to adopt the tactics that have proven successful in the fight of the wage workers. The tactics of the leading farmers' organizations of today are strikingly different from those of a generation ago. The methods pursued by the Farmers' Alliance and the Grange during the '80s are hardly suggested today in the councils of the American Society of Equity and the Farmers' Union.

The farmers' organizations of today seek by means of "controlled marketing" to determine the price of their product by methods familiar in the trade union world. Moreover, they are looking to direct cooperation with the unions in carrying out these methods. In so far as it is possible to do so without compromising Socialist principles, it is absolutely essential that the Socialist Party work from the beginning in close cooperation with the efforts of the farmers to resist exploitation. We must not repeat the mistake which was made in the early days of the Socialist movement of this country in our relations to the trade unions.

No Royal Road.

When it comes to outlining definite steps to be taken by the Socialist Party, we are confronted with a mass of detailed difficulties and forced to recognize that there is no royal road to the goal we are seeking. There is no ready to order program that will insure cooperation

with the farmers. There is no absolute certainty as to the steps along which we must proceed in this regard. We, in America, are not alone in this indefinite position. It is the position of every European Socialist party, many of which have worked for years upon this problem.

There are some things, however, that the more recent lines of evolution in agriculture would seem to suggest. The largest agricultural units at the present time are not to be found on great farms in remote districts. They are the great vegetable factories at the doors of the largest cities. It is probable that one of the largest farms in the world, measured by the amount of capital invested, is within the limits of the city of Chicago, and which has more than 30 acres under glass with artificial heat. This farm finds it possible to compete in the production of almost all agricultural products, save cereals, with farms located upon the edge of the tropics, or with any farms depending upon natural light, heat, water, and soil elements.

Municipal Plant Factories.

The Socialists might well demand that such plant factories as these should be owned and operated by municipal and state governments. It is impossible to tell how far such establishments, if publicly owned, might be developed, and how far they might go toward solving many problems that now confront Socialist management of municipalities. It is also possible that such establishments may prove of value in educational work, and also in meeting the problem of the unemployed.

The demand that there be no further alienation of public lands, already in our platform, should be emphasized, and coupled with the demand that such lands be used where practicable for intensive agriculture. The swamp and irrigated lands, which are almost the only ones now in the public possession, are especially suited for this purpose.

The Socialists of other lands are unanimous in encouraging cooperative movements among farmers. These may be extended beyond the marketing of farm products to the ownership of farm machinery, breeding animals, and the purchase of fertilizers.

Unions of Farm Laborers.

The farmers have always agreed in their organizations that they desire government ownership of transportation and storage facilities. They would also welcome the proposal for collective ownership and operation of slaughterhouses, packing establishments, and of all trusts that manufacture things used by farmers.

If the line of evolution that has been referred to above is followed much further, it is probable that the rise in the price of land, making ownership more difficult, the increase in the size of the farm unit caused by the introduction of the factory system into farming, and the need of the employment of large numbers of men continuously throughout the year in such establishments, will lead to the organization of farm laborers. Experience in other industries would indicate that this evolution must proceed for some years before such organizations become an important factor in social movements.

One thing that must be recognized by Socialists is that any program that neglects the largest single division of the producing class can not rightly call itself a working class movement, and is certainly doomed to failure. It is, therefore, of the greatest importance that careful study be given to the question of cooperation with the farmers and that some plan of common action shall be developed.

The Socialists of Oklahoma are almost the only ones in this country who have made any serious effort to solve this problem. For such an effort they are entitled to the gratitude of the Socialists of the entire country. Without in any way giving it endorsement, the program which they have adopted is herewith submitted as offering suggestions born of experience and therefore more worthy of careful consideration than any that might spring from a purely theoretical and doctrinaire knowledge of the subject:

Farmers' Program.

As measures calculated to bring into collective property the land, and enable the farmer to have the use and occupancy of the land sufficient for a home and the support of his family, we hereby advocate and pledge our elected officers to the following program.

Article 1.

Separation of the Department of Agriculture from the political government by means of

Section 1. Election of all members and offices of the Board of Agriculture by the direct vote of the actual farmers.

Section 2. Introduction of the merit system among the employees.

Article 2.

Erection by the state of grain elevators and warehouses for the storage of farm products; these elevators and warehouses to be managed by the Board of Agriculture.

Article 3.

Organization by the Board of Agriculture of free agricultural education and the establishment of model farms.

Article 4.

Encouragement by the Board of Agriculture of cooperative societies of farmers:

Section 1. For the buying of seed and fertilizer.

Section 2. For the purchase and common use of implements and machinery.

Section 3. For the preparing and sale of produce.

Section 4. For the working of land by groups.

Article 5.

Organization by the state for loans on mortgages and warehouse certificates, the interest charged to cover cost only.

Article 6.

State insurance against diseases of animals, diseases of plants, insect pests, hail, flood, storm, and fire.

Article 7.

Aid and encouragement to be given the actual workers of the farms in the formation of district cooperative associations, which shall be given the power to issue bonds for the purchase of suit-

able farming lands — bonds to be redeemable in 40 years. Individuals purchasing such lands shall pay the purchase price of land in share or cash annual or semi-annual rentals extending over a period of 40 years, or may at their option pay in full in any given number of years.

Article 8.

Exemption from taxation and execution of dwellings, tools, farm animals, implements, and improvements to the amount of \$1,000.

Article 9.

A graduated tax on the value of rental land and land held for speculation.

Article 10.

Absentee landlords to assess their own lands, the state reserving the right to purchase such lands at their assessed value plus 10 percent.

Article 11.

Land now in the possession of the state or hereafter acquired through purchase, reclamation of tax sales to be rented to landless farmers under the supervision of the Board of Agriculture at the prevailing rate of share rent or its equivalent. The payment of such rent to cease as soon as the total amount of rent paid is equal to the value of the land, the tenant thereby acquires for himself and his children the right of occupancy. The title to all such lands remaining with the commonwealth.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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