

The Position of the Agricultural Labourer in Estonia

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UNTIL the European War the agricultural labourer in Estonia was subject to all the restrictions and repressive influences arising out of an almost feudal system of land tenure. A combined area of over two million hectares was held by the nobility, to which must be added over a hundred estates of the Lutheran clergy covering more than another fifty thousand hectares. The war began to have a marked effect on the general state of affairs. Political barriers were broken down; economic and social relationships underwent a rapid transformation, which was particularly marked in the case of agricultural employers and their labourers. The long duration of hostilities had the effect of withdrawing the worker from his work and getting him out of touch with it. The demand for agricultural workers became general and wages rose rapidly; indeed, the conditions of the agricultural worker improved in other ways as well. Agricultural produce was in good demand and market prices came to be so favourable to the growers as to make it easy for them to pay the higher wages asked by the workers.

Then came the German Occupation, from February to November 1918, followed by the invasion of the Russian Soviet troops lasting for over a year from November 1918 to January 1920. Both events had the effect of profoundly modifying the constitution of society, for while the Occupation drew together all classes in a general movement of resistance, the invasion compelled the Provisional Government to promise certain specific and definite reforms to the workers with a view to mobilising the whole population into an army. It was under these circumstances that two types of legislation came to be passed, the first for expropriating large estates and parcelling them out among smallholders, the second for improving the conditions under which the actual operations of agricultural labour should be performed.

The purpose of these two reforms was identical, namely, to raise the position of the agricultural population. Subsequent experience has proved that the reform of the land tenure system has partly aided, but partly also hindered, an improvement in the position of the agricultural labourer. The present article proposes to deal with the position of the agricultural labourer, but a preliminary sketch of the course of land tenure reform will be made in order to explain the new difficulties to which it has given rise.

EFFECT OF LAND TENURE REFORM

Land tenure reform was first promised at the time of the Bolshevik invasion. Communist leaders and parties had proclaimed the subdivision of large estates to be part of their programme and it was necessary that the Government on its side should make some statement and some promise. A threatened food shortage in the spring of 1919 led to the actual parcelling out of a few estates, but it was not until 10 October of that year that an Act was passed expropriating all large estates ⁽¹⁾.

By the peace of Dorpat of 1920 the 120 estates belonging to the Russian Agrarian Bank were also transferred to the Estonian Republic, so that the total amount of land acquired as national domain was about 2,383,000 hectares ⁽²⁾. Of this national domain the forest land is being reserved for state exploitation, the waste land (namely marsh and peat bogs) cannot be cultivated unless means are forthcoming for expensive drainage schemes. There remain only about 663,000 hectares of arable pasture and meadow land to be divided up into farms.

Cultivation in any country is naturally dependent on market conditions. In Estonia the population is scattered and markets are distant, intensive cultivation of small crops or market gardening of any kind is, therefore, hardly worth while and the land is mostly put under grains; this means that a fairly large farm is required for the support of each family and it is estimated that the standard farm should not be less than 22 hectares (20 dessiatin) and should include at least 9 to 12 hectares of arable land. Now, not only were there at the end of the war, on a rough estimate, over 120,000 families totally without land of any kind, but also 50,000 families without sufficient land, of whom perhaps 40,000 owned a mere potato patch, actually less than 4 hectares of arable soil. Putting aside some farms as experimental stations and allotting a certain amount of the expropriated land to increase the smaller type of holding, the largest number of new homesteads which could possibly be established would be, according to figures prepared by the Ministry of Agriculture, not more than 26,000.

The upshot of such agrarian reform, therefore, as has been attempted has been disconcerting. Large numbers of the rural population are still without land, and it is impossible to see any remedy except more intensive cultivation, which will require capital, or, alternatively, absorption of the rural worker into industry, which will require time. The fact is that the new system has greatly reduced the amount of paid labour needed in agriculture, with the result that a large number of persons are without employment; for—granted that there is little capital—smallholdings can only be worked on the principle of unpaid

⁽¹⁾ A Compensation Bill has not yet been passed, but will, in all probability, be introduced into the present Parliament and include compensation for stock and equipment calculated on 1914 prices.

⁽²⁾ This figure does not include 18 municipal estates covering over 41,000 hectares.

toil ; in other words, the smallholder, being unable to pay for a hired worker, does all his cultivation by exploiting or over-exploiting the efforts of his own family ; meanwhile, those agricultural labourers who happen not to have acquired a holding have, in addition, been deprived of those small money wages and perquisites which they used to earn on the big estates.

The situation, therefore, has most markedly altered since the war. Then the agricultural labourer was at a premium and there was plenty of money with which to pay him higher and higher wages, now he is at a discount and the smallholder has no cash with which to pay his hire. Such a situation is the temporary result of an agrarian reform which, though it cannot be considered as final in itself, or as a solution of the rural labour problem, was yet an imperative historical necessity if the country was to emerge from mediaeval conditions. Its decisive importance from the community point of view lies in the start made in encouraging the national economic system to develop at all and on free lines. It is true, however, that for the moment the disadvantages of the situation have made themselves felt. Legislation regulating the conditions of agricultural employment, for instance, was passed as far back as September 1919, when the 8-hour day⁽³⁾ and other reforms were taken for granted ; it has since then had to struggle against the untoward conditions sketched above. Nevertheless, though the 8-hour day itself has not been wholly maintained on the land, other reforms of great importance have held their own.

AGRICULTURAL LABOUR ACTS OF 13 SEPTEMBER AND 21 OCTOBER 1921

The first Act for regulating hours of work and wage conditions of agricultural labourers was passed on 13 September 1919. It was amended and practically replaced by another Act passed on 21 October 1921. The second Act has been the basis of very important reforms, especially in the direction of giving to the workers representation on joint committees on an elective principle. These joint committees are the salient feature of the new system, and on their decisions have depended and will depend all progress in matters of hours, wages, age of employment, and other conditions affecting agricultural workers.

WORK OF THE JOINT COMMITTEES

There are three kinds of committees, chosen by election ; the local committees, the provincial committees, and one central General Committee, which is practically a national Agricultural Council for the whole country. The members of the local committees are elected, with the assistance and under the direction of the local authorities, by separate meetings of employers and workers. The local committees then elect the provincial com-

(3) The 8-hour day was promised in a Proclamation issued by the Provisional Government in November 1918.

mittees. The provincial committees do the bulk of the preparatory work, the General Committee passes the final decision.

In order to deal with the work of the coming year, the provincial committees meet annually not later than the month of December in the previous year. They have to propose and fix labour and wage conditions for the coming industrial year, which is reckoned as from 1 May. For instance, they have to settle the length of the working day in the course of the different months, annual holidays throughout the year, overtime, minimum wage rates for the different grades of workers, and, finally, the standard of output which employers are entitled to ask from their workers. Naturally, there are also a large number of details to be dealt with. It further lies within their competence to formulate proposals and schemes for improving and regularising the conditions of the agricultural labourer. All recommendations and proposals must be submitted to the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare by 15 January of each year.

The provincial committees choose their own chairman. Members are entitled to claim repayment of their travelling expenses from the provincial authorities, as well as a daily indemnity for each sitting.

The earlier Act of 13 September 1919 empowered the provincial committees to formulate labour and wage conditions for their own province; these proposals were then examined by the Ministry, if necessary, they were modified, and then proclaimed to be in force in the province. The consequence was that wages might vary from province to province. In 1921 the system broke down; the committees either were unable to meet at all, or, if meeting, could come to no agreement. In the new Act the principle of a national legislative proposal replaces the principle of provincial regulations.

Under the new Act the General Committee is formed out of the provincial committees, two representatives attending from each provincial committee on the principle of equal representation of employers and employed. This General Committee receives and reports on the agenda submitted by the provincial committees through the Ministry. The General Committee then proceeds to reduce the schemes put forward by the provincial committees to uniformity, and formulates a single legislative proposal out of the suggestions made by the nine provinces. The General Committee must submit its final results to the Ministry by 15 February; the Ministry publishes the proposals in the *Esthonian Official Gazette* so as to leave an adequate interval before the new agricultural year opens; the proposals then have the force of law for that year.

The General Committee is also empowered to submit to the Government of the Republic of Esthonia, through the channel of the Labour Ministry, proposals and recommendations on its own initiative for maintaining and improving the conditions of the agricultural labourer.

It will be obvious that under this system the bulk of the detailed work is done by the provincial committees. However,

the Act lays down certain general principles, which are binding on the provincial committees. These general principles cover questions of hours, wages, and minimum age of employment or other conditions.

Hours

In November 1918 a Proclamation announced among other fundamental reforms the adoption of the 8-hour day. On this assumption the Act of 13 September 1919 mentions a total of 2,250 hours of labour in the year. The principle of the 8-hour day began to break down, however, the very next year, for the 1920 provincial committees fixed the annual total of hours to be worked at from 54 to 120 in excess of the 2,250. In 1921 the number of hours added to the original annual total rose to 264, which really meant that not the 8-hour day, but the 9-hour day, was being adopted.

In any case this day was only a theoretical average. In actual practice the length of time worked obviously must vary according to the season of the year. This variation was arranged as follows, exclusive of overtime ; in 1920 the hours cited were those for the Province of Harju ; those cited for 1921 applied throughout the country.

	<i>Number of hours per day</i>		<i>Number of hours per day</i>		
	1920	1921	1920	1921	
May and June	10	11	December	5	6
July and August	11	11	January	5	6
September	9	11	February	6	7
October	7	9	March	8	7
November	6	7	April	8	10

In 1920 the hour for starting work was arranged according to a definite scheme as follows. During the summer months work began at 5 a. m., in September at 6, in October and November at 8, in December, January, and February at 9, and in March and April at 7 ; it ended at 6.30, 7.30, 4.30, 4, 3, 2, 4, and 4.30 p. m. according to the month ; mealtimes and rest times were reckoned at 3½ hours daily during the four summer months, and at 1½ hours and 1 hour during the other months : the worker was entitled to 9 hours' sleeping time, and this had to be maintained even where other working hours were arranged, as they could be, by agreement.

Certain elastic arrangements were made on either side for work outside the normal day. The worker could claim at least one free day in the month, in addition to Sundays and recognised holidays, "in order to carry out his own work" ; also two so-called market days in the year. The employer was entitled to demand not more than 1½ hours' extra work per day from his workers for the purpose of absolutely necessary household and farmyard work, such as looking after animals or preparing meals. While such extra work was not reckoned as overtime, it could not interfere with the prescribed rest times. Actual overtime was to be paid for at 50 per cent. above ordinary rates, and during the harvesting of crops the employer was entitled to demand that

his workers agree to do such overtime as is necessary to preserve the harvest from loss. On the day before the three great festivals work was to stop at 12 a. m. A few sets of regulations gave the farm owner the right to demand not more than eighty days of (paid) labour in the year from the wife of his labourer, if able to work.

These regulations were administered by the Ministry of Labour and provision was made for an appeal to arbitration.

The 1921 regulations were not so favourable to the worker. There are no fixed hours for starting work, and no fixed rest time; the inspecting staff reports that the workers suffered in consequence, as the employers took advantage of this omission to lengthen the working day; another omission to their disadvantage was the failure to restrict absolutely necessary extra operations to 1½ hours per day. The rates allowed for Sunday overtime no longer exceed the 50 per cent. allowed for weekday overtime, quite apart from the fact that, as the total number of hours worked per year is increased by 264, the average wage per hour is less⁽⁴⁾, with the result that the general overtime rates are also less. On the other hand, it has been a step in advance to forbid young persons to be employed on overtime⁽⁵⁾; also to stop work at 12 a. m. on another day in the year, the day preceding the First of May.

Wages

The deterioration observed in the conditions granted to the worker by the later regulations affects also his wages. Wages in Esthonia are paid both in money and in kind, and it is the function of the committees to fix the minima for both types of wage. A kind of theoretical cash basis is worked out, by the clause in the Act which requires the Ministry of Labour at least twice in the course of the year to publish a statement of the money value of wages paid in kind. Wages must be paid at least once every three months, except wages paid in the form of grants of grain, which must be given beforehand month by month. This grant of grain is indeed the principal item in the worker's wage, and again we find that the (minimum) amounts to be given in the course of the year to each worker decreased between 1920 and 1921, as follows:

	1920	1921
	<i>Pouods</i> ⁽¹⁾	<i>Pouods</i> ⁽¹⁾
Rye	55	45
Barley	40	35
Wheat	—	3
Pease	—	2
Mixed grain	—	5
Total	95	90

⁽¹⁾ One pouod = 36.41 lbs.

⁽⁴⁾ Wages are reckoned on a total annual basis; see below under "Wages". The theoretical hourly rate therefore is got by dividing the annual wage by the standard number of hours worked.

⁽⁵⁾ See below, under "Minimum Age of Employment".

In 1920 these labourers also received 913 *shtoff* ⁽⁶⁾ of fullcream milk, as against only 730 *shtoff* in 1921. Money wages, it is true, were raised from 1,200 marks to 10,000 marks ; this was partly due to the policy adopted of restricting the amount to be paid in kind, which naturally involved raising the amount paid in money ; but a much more important cause of the increase in the amount of money wages paid has been the depreciation of the currency. Money wages had to be enormously raised in order to meet that depreciation. Nevertheless, it has not been possible to keep pace with the rapidly falling value of money, as will be seen from the following. If payments in kind are reckoned as commuted into money payments, the yearly wage in 1920 works out at over 70,000 marks, not including lodging, while that for 1921 only works out at 65,650 marks and includes lodging at a valuation of 100 marks a month. Meanwhile the buying power of the mark has noticeably depreciated even since 1920, so that the loss to the workers is really much more serious than at first sight appears.

Workers are divided into three grades for purposes of wages payments ; the first grade includes adult workers from 18 to 55 years of age (in 1920 those from 20 to 55 years of age) ; the second includes young persons from 16 to 18 years of age and older persons from 55 to 60 years of age ; while the third grade includes children from 12 to 16 years of age and those over 60. The minimum wages mentioned above apply to the first grade ; men second grade workers receive 75 per cent., and men third grade workers 50 per cent., of the minima. The percentages for women workers are lower ; women workers of the first grade receive 75 per cent., those of the second grade 50 per cent., and those of the third grade only 25 per cent., of the minimum ; the Act does, indeed, include a clause which states that women shall receive the same wage as men when producing the same output as men, just as it includes a statement that second grade workers shall receive first grade wages if their output is a first grade output.

Minimum Age of Employment

The non-intensive nature of the cultivation methods practised has until now made it seem essential to employ the services of children to watch the herds at pasture. The farmer has been accustomed to get children of 8 and 9 years of age, or even younger children, to do such work. If the law now forbids him to employ children under 12 years of age, this is, from his point of view, an advance so great as to be almost incredible. It was, however, a very necessary reform, for as the herding of the cattle started in the spring before the school spring session ended, and did not finish until after the autumn session had begun, the children were often forced to miss a good many weeks' school in spite of a compulsory school attendance law. Now any child still coming under that law may only be employed during the holidays.

(6) One *shtoff* = 2.7 pints.

Children between 12 and 16 years of age are defined as workers of the third grade. Together with the other workers of the third grade, namely, old persons over 60, they may only be employed on "light work". The following operations are quoted as typical of "light work": cattle herding, weeding of beet fields, hay-raking. No young person of the third or of the second grade, i. e. no boy or girl under 18 years of age, may work overtime.

Other Reforms

Another attempted reform was to define a housing standard. This was set forth as follows. Workers with families must be given at least one room and storage room; two-roomed dwellings are unfortunately a rare exception; it is much more often the case that the whole number of those living at a farm, the farmer himself and his family, together with his hired workers, generally an unmarried man and unmarried girl, live the whole winter in the so-called common room or *Riegenstube*, do their work there, and sleep there at night. It is now only permissible to house several unmarried persons together in one room if the sexes are separate. The Act also prescribes a minimum cubic space of $1\frac{1}{2}$ cubic sazhen, i. e. about $18\frac{1}{2}$ cubic yards, per person.

Compensation for accidents is provided for the agricultural worker on the same terms as for the industrial worker on the basis of an Act dating from the days of Russian rule. There is no sickness insurance, and ideas on the improvement of social conditions generally are still very much to seek.

Finally, the statement of what constitutes a standard unit of work was incorporated in the Act of 1921 against the strongly expressed wishes of the workers' representatives; the Act of 1919 had omitted anything of the kind. Although certain accepted standards existed—in theory—as to the amount of work which an average full-time worker could get through in the day, the attempted legal definition of this average is bound to give rise to endless discussions. It will probably be impossible to maintain or supervise the enforcement of such a standard.

The text of the Act and of the provincial regulations in force in the district must be posted visibly in the town halls. In addition, there must be written duplicate contracts of employment and wages conditions, one for the employer and one for the worker. All employers are compelled to keep a work and wages register, in which entries are made of payments in money and in kind, also of the number of hours worked in cases where these hours are less than the minimum number prescribed.

The importance of these reforms can hardly be overestimated. They mark the change from mediaevalism to modern conditions in Esthonian agriculture.

