

Small Farmer and the Socialist Movement

THAT the small farmer is on a par with the rest of the working class in human society, there can be no question. That he stands to gain by aligning his forces with the rest of the working class, there can be no question either. That the small farmer can gain in power, and so become a political force, in proportion as he joins his forces with the mighty forces of the working class is patent. The small farmer now has little or no influence politically, for the politicians know all too well that he can be caught by any bait which they like to hand him. He is used by the capitalist politicians as voting cattle, easily drawn into line by meaningless phrases which are built on the sandy foundation of election promises. As long as the small farmer occupies this subordinate position he cannot hope to achieve his economic freedom; and in as much as the emancipation of the working class must be the work of this class itself, he, composing one branch of the working class, must give his support to the work of the general emancipation of the working class.

What the small farmer needs more than bank credit and a low tariff is education. It therefore, devolves upon the Socialists, the educators of the working class, to give him a line of propaganda which will both interest and enlighten him; which is true to the facts of his economic life; and which does not compromise or pervert the revolutionary principles of the Socialist movement. That this is possible, the writer believes. Of course it must be understood to begin with that the chief difficulty with the small farmer lies not with his pinched pocketbook, but in his brains. He, like most of the working class, has a very narrow vision. It is difficult for him to see over the fence that bounds the farm on which he lives and works. He has the infernal habit, so common to all the species of the genus homo, of chasing shadows and chimeras believing that they are realities. Owing to his continuous battle against hail and frost and drought, grim death and slippery commercial buccaners, he has come to consider his battle, not a battle against men only, but a battle against the world. And for that very reason he may be slow to catch that fire of life-giving enthusiasm, consequent upon seeing the possibilities that lie ahead of him by the overthrow of the capitalist system, so common among people who have gotten a mental glimpse of the future. He may never catch that fire. He may never become a good, active revolutionist. But, at all events, a general knowledge of social subjects, and a better grounding in Socialist principles, will teach him to approve of the acts of those who perform the revolutionary act, and especially to spurn the insidious arguments of the counter revolutionists.

To show the small farmer that his emancipation from economic servitude is inextricably bound up with the emancipation of the rest of the working class is, then, the great object of Socialist propaganda among farmers. What success will attend the effort depends to a large extent on the method of presentment. Under all circumstances the small farmer must be addressed as one whose condition can be bettered, here and now, by the immediate overthrow of the capitalist system. This can be done without violating a single law of Marxian economics. And it is only on this ground that we can rightly expect to gain a hearing among farmers. The writer knows, of course, that the opinion is current among some Socialists that the small farmers problem can be successfully solved only by the introduction of the factory system on farms conducted on a large scale. Now without questioning the contention that production can be carried on cheaper on a large farm than on a small one, the writer wishes to point out that farming on a large scale is not the general method of farming, nor does it appear, in spite of the law of the concentration of a capital, that it will become so in the new future. Farms conducted on a large scale are few and far between, like an oasis in a desert.

It may be true that farming on a large scale will become general some day, but at present this possibility belongs to the realm of the speculative and debatable points, and is therefore, more or less of an utopian ideal. Yet since our science requires us to take account of capitalism with all its possibilities of development we cannot ignore this point, more especially, since it seems such an easy solution to the farmers' problems. Economically, however, that belongs to that category of economies which deals with the development of agricultural organization and technique, and so has nothing, strictly speaking, to do with Socialist propaganda as such. Accordingly the farmers' position, and his relation to the Socialist movement, can best be dealt with by dividing it into the two divisions into which it easily falls. Socialists are of course, interested in the subject matter of both these divisions, but in different ways.

Division 1: has to deal with the special form under which the farmer is exploited, and the impossibility of his escaping exploitation except by uniting with the rest of the working class to overthrow the capitalist system. This division also points out the immediate gain the small farmer will derive from the inauguration of the communal system of economy.

Division 2 has to deal more particularly with the development of agricultural organization and the technique of farming. Both are essential elements of Socialist propaganda; but the former is a statement of a fixed relationship, while the latter is more a description of the result of a tendency in the capitalist system.

As to division 1: The subject matter of this division can best be understood in light of the "socially necessary labor" phase of the law of value. It will be remembered that in a previous article the opinion was given that the operation of this phase of the law of value, owing to the large annual oversupply of farm products, was largely responsible for the poverty of the small farmer. Overproduction, in normal times hangs like a Damoclean sword over the head of the farming class. It lowers the social value of farm products, cuts down prices and so reduces the income of the individual farmer. The oversupply of products may never become so great that the slender thread will break. But still the sword hangs there—a constant menace, keeping the farmer in a continuous state of fear.

The oversupply on the market is, of course, one of the open sores on the body of capitalist economy. And it is a source of worry to more than the farmer. It adversely affects every living being living within the confines of the capitalist system, although it is probably true to say that its effect on the small farmer is chronic, while on other classes it is periodical. What is the cause of this disease? Is it that the farmer produces too much? Certainly not, because there are many people who would give almost anything to get the surplus farm products that grow stale on the market. Thousands of people are actually starving amidst an abundance of products. In order to account for this state of affairs one only needs to understand the mechanics of the capitalist system. This is, that the working class, the great consumer of farm-products, does not get sufficient wages to take off the market a quantity of goods equivalent in value to the goods it placed on the market. In truth, the working class can take off the market only about one-fifth of the values it puts thereon, so that it is only possible for this class to buy but a meagre portion of the goods, including farm products, offered for sale. Nor can this condition be materially changed so long as production takes place under the capitalistic system. For the mechanics of this system demand just such a condition. However, this leaves the small farmer in the serious predicament of a man bound to poverty because the great purchaser of his products, the wage worker, is too poor to buy. In

fact, he has nothing to buy with. But the small farmer cannot buy his necessities before he first sells his products, and he cannot get sufficient to buy what he wants, unless he can sell his products at a good price. However, this is not possible because the capitalist system allows the wage-worker only a small wage. Thus the wage worker and the small farmer stand on the markets of the world, as two men, who would gladly exchange products, but are prevented from exchanging but very small quantities, to the detriment of each, by the laws of capitalist production and exchange.

Now the wage worker will get the full value of his product under the communal system of economy, enabling him to buy to the extent of his capacity to produce. When he has the wherewithal to buy, no products will grow stale and rot on the market. Oversupply will have become a mere figment of the imagination. As a consequence the small farmer will also be able to get the full value of his product and be enabled to buy to the extent of his capacity to produce. This is the immediate gain, among others, which both branches of the working class will derive from the social revolution.

But this result cannot be attained except by the mutual co-operation of the wage worker and the farmer. From this it follows that the small farmer, owing to his dependence upon the industrial proletariat, cannot achieve his emancipation by his own efforts. His only one royal road to freedom is by aligning his forces with those of the proletariat.

As to II.: The subject matter of this division is comprehended within the meaning of the efficiency phase of the Law of Value. It comprises all such subjects as the introduction of better methods of tillage, of more efficient management, of greater conservation of energy and the use of labor-saving devices, in short, with all those subjects that have to do with the lessening of the socially necessary labor time required to raise farm products, and thus, with the increase of his efficiency as a producer with a view to increasing his output.

Naturally this is the phase of the farmer's problem with which capitalist economists and agricultural experts are chiefly concerned. The forcing down of the socially necessary labor time required to produce farm products is the solution they offer for the small farmer's problem. As an abstract statement this is true enough. But advance along this line can take place only as agricultural science, social experience and, more especially, social relationships advance. And so, just as the butterfly can only develop to a certain stage in the chrysalis, so farming, in all its different branches, can only develop to a certain stage in the chrysalis of the capitalist system.

This phase of the small farmer's problem occupies a peculiar position in Socialist propaganda. In the first place, agricultural development is a growth whose unfolding will follow certain social laws according to its environment. This will be as true under the communal system of economy as it is under the capitalist system. No one can say with any degree of certainty what course this unfolding will follow—whether, for instance, farming in the future will be done on a small scale as now, or whether large scale farming will become universal. But this really does not matter. We are content to let the future take care of itself. But this is the point that Socialists contend, and contend rightly, that development in agricultural methods and organization will be more orderly and take place more rapidly under the communal system than it does now, owing to the more orderly management of industry as a whole, and to the elimination of the distressing poverty that exists in many agricultural communities. Indeed, no great advance in agriculture can take place until much of this poverty is done away with.

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