

Trends In The Farm Labour Force

Agriculture is a dynamic industry. In recent years we have been experiencing what has been described as an agricultural revolution. During the second world war improved prices for the products of our farms, and the war time needs for more production, encouraged farmers to adopt, to a greater extent than ever before, new techniques of production developed by agricultural scientists and engineers and to put into practice the recommendations of agricultural economists for increased efficiency in their farming operations. These technical improvements were continued and expanded after the end of the war at an even faster rate as machinery and equipment became available in more adequate quantities.

Some of the changes which have taken place during the past two decades in the farming industry may be illustrated in a number of ways. Census data show that in 1956 farm population represented only 17 per cent of Canada's total population of 16.1 million. In 1921—thirty-five years before—there were 8.8 million people in Canada and a little more than half lived in rural areas, predominantly on farms. While no census figures are available since 1956, the continuing decline in the agricultural labour force indicates that farm population has been further reduced.³

In 1946 the agricultural labour force was 25 per cent of the total labour force in Canada, in 1958 it was 12 per cent and in 1959 it was only 11 per cent. These figures refer to the total of self-employed farm operators, unpaid family labour and paid labour. The percentage reduction in the farm labour force has been considerably greater than the decline in people living on farms because there has been a more rapid movement from farms of persons of working ages than there has been of children and older persons. There has also been a considerable increase in non-farm employment by farm residents.

The number of persons employed in agriculture in 1949 was 1,186,000. In 1959 there were only 692,000 so occupied. This represents a movement out of farming of almost 49,000 workers a year, making a total decline in ten years of 41.4 per cent. The decline in the number of farm operators has also been substantial, though less than for the total labour force. In the ten year period 1949 to 1959 there was a decrease from 663,000 to 451,000 or about 32 per cent.

Besides the decrease in farm operators, there has been an even greater decline in numbers of unpaid family workers, and a sharp drop in numbers of hired workers. In 1946, there were in Canada 679,000 self-employed workers or farm operators. They represented 57 per cent of the total number of persons with jobs in agriculture. The balance was made up of 360,000 unpaid family workers and 147,000 paid workers; they represented 31 and 12 per cent respectively of the total. In 1958 there were only 468,000 farm operators, 147,000 unpaid family workers and 97,000 paid workers. The unpaid workers were less than 21 per cent, as compared with 31 per cent in the previous year, of the total workers and the number of paid workers was reduced by 50,000. The paid workers in 1958 represented a slightly higher percentage of the total workers in agriculture than in 1946. It is also noteworthy that between 1951 and 1958 there was only a slight 3 per cent decline in paid labour, in which there seems to be a good deal of stability. The significant decrease in unpaid family workers suggests that farmers are encountering increasing difficulties in retaining their sons and daughters on the farms in the face of the higher returns and availability of employment elsewhere. It is also to be

³ Between 1950 and 1958 nearly 4 million persons left United States farms (25,058,000 to 21,172,000). The average annual decline in the farm population was therefore almost 500,000 a year. Farm population in 1959 represented about 12 per cent of the total population in the United States.