

The Farmer Question

(Contributions under this heading not necessarily endorsed.—Edit.)

THE history of the Socialist movement in Canada has been chequered with discussion on the standing of the farmer. Whether he can be considered a worker and a subject for Socialist propaganda, or whether he must be considered as a capitalist whose interests are diametrically opposed to the working class; has been, in this country, a question of some importance; owing to the large number of farmers.

It is my purpose to briefly review this discussion and point out the relative importance, in my opinion, of the different arguments brought forward.

It has been asserted by one writer that the farmer is a capitalist, an employer of labor for the purpose of obtaining surplus value or profit, and consequently that he should be "let alone," that workers should not waste time and money on those whose interests force them to oppose any change in the social structure. Let us see, first, whether there is any truth in this.

I do not think I need use up much space on the above argument. For those who have lived on the farms, or have seen how the farmers live and work; "behold," "look at them" will be sufficient to show that there are the rich farmers, poor farmers and "comfortably fixed" farmers, but that the great majority are toiling slaves. It is to these that I am writing.

In all sections of industry where individual skill and competitive effort is a factor, there are those who are exceptionally well-fitted for their work, and who forge ahead of their competitors, it is however, not with individuals that we are dealing, but with aggregations.

I think I am within bounds when I say that the majority of those who till the soil are receiving, skill for skill, no more than the wage-workers. This being the case, the farmer, as one of the cogs in the wheels of production, must be reckoned with when a change in the social order is brought about. His state of mind is therefore of importance to the wage-workers in the factories, the mills, mines and workshops.

We come now to a more serious part of our task, viz.—what is the cause of the poverty of the farmer, one argument is; that he is a marginal producer; that is, that either by using out-of-date machinery, or methods, or by not farming a large enough tract of land, or by not raising the kind of farm produce that is most suited to the land he uses, he is wasting his labor, and is on the margin of production.

It is asserted that all commodities sell at their value, farm produce included, so the only explanation possible, is that the farmer is a marginal producer. But here we come to the question, how can the average farmer be on the margin? The average is the centre, therefore it can not be the margin. Marginal producers can not possibly be average producers.

But it must be borne in mind, that just as one farm may yield a greater

amount of produce for equal labor than another, so one country may yield a greater amount of produce than another for equal labor, also it must be borne in mind that though a tract of land may not be as suitable as another for one kind of produce, it may be more suitable for another kind.

The farmer needs no help to decide what crops are the most suitable for the land he is working, he is an expert in that line. His experience and interests force him to raise the crops that he can raise in competition with other growers, still there are undoubtedly individuals who are marginal producers and there may be groups of farmers who can not avoid being marginal producers, because of location and quality of the land they work. In the raising of wheat and oats (and these are the staple crops of Western Canada) I think I may assert with safety that Canada can compete with other countries. If she can do this it is proof that the average Canadian farmer is not a marginal, but an average producer.

I would here like to again point out that the value of a commodity is determined, not by the cheapest method of production but by the average method, I want it to be thoroughly understood that the value of anything is found, **when supply and demand are equal**, by taking the whole mass of commodities of one kind, and the whole labor used in producing this mass, and dividing the labor by the number of commodities. To make a simple illustration; suppose in any particular year there is 1000 million bushels of wheat raised, and in the production of this amount there is expended, including time spent in making machinery that is used up, twine, etc., 1000 million hours, then each bushel of wheat would be worth one hour, and if each hour produced one dollar, on the average, in the gold mining and refining industries, then one bushel of wheat would be worth one dollar. (The figures are used merely for illustration.)

The fact that tractors can be used to a limited extent in farming, and that an exceptionally large tract of land can be formed so as to produce, wheat say, at a low labor cost, does not lower the value of the wheat to a greater extent than the proportion of the world's supply that is produced by that method.

For example, suppose of the assumed world's supply of wheat for one year, 1000 million bushels; 950 million bushels is raised on small farms, with little but horsepower, and its average cost is 950 million hours, or one hour per bushel; and suppose the other 50 million bushels are raised on large farms with improved methods, etc., and its cost is cut down to 25 million hours or one-half hour per bushel; then the value of the whole of the world supply would be, 950 million bushels at one hour per bushel, 950 million hours; 50 million bushels at one-half hour per bushel, 25 million hours; total 1000 million bushels valued at 975 million hours, or decimal 975 of one hour for each bushel. Taking our former figures with regard to gold as an

example we have 97 1-2c per bushel as the value of the 1000 million bushels. Though one part was raised by a more expensive method than the other, the social exchange value is the average cost in labor time, and then that cost reckoned by the universal measure of value; gold.

Though I run the risk of boring some of my readers by my reiteration, it seems necessary to repeat that the value of a commodity is determined not by the cheapest method of production but by the average method. The fact that some clever individual could produce the world's supply of, wheat say, at a fraction of the present cost, does not alter the fact that wheat is produced by man under existing conditions, and it is the cost under existing conditions that determines its value, not what someone thinks, the cost should be.

Now we have another consideration with regard to value, which must not be forgotten. It will be remembered that I said above, that the value of a commodity is determined by dividing the whole of the labor expended, by the number of the commodities on which that labor is expended **when supply and demand are equal**.

We all know that some producers expend more than the average amount of labor on a commodity, and some less. Some farmers may be forced to expend more labor than the average, by reason of having more stone or brush on their land than the average, or being farther from a market, etc. For many reasons some farmers may not be using their time and energy to the best advantage, and so, as society will declare arbitrarily, will be wasting their labor.

I am sure there are many students of economics who understand the above, to whom it has not occurred, that just as the individual may waste his labor, so the whole of the producers of a given commodity may waste their labor, not because they are producing "unscientifically" but because they are producing what society does not need; too much; and society can only afford to use up, store and waste this excess of commodities if it can get them at a lowered price.

When a commodity is over-produced, society declares arbitrarily, through the law of supply and demand, that the producers have been wasting their labor to the extent that they have over-produced, so we have lowered price; and this lowered price is an expression of a lowered value; but only in a broad sense. So if the value of farm produce is so low, under normal conditions that the farmers are poverty-stricken, it is not because they are marginal producers but because they are over-producers.

True instances of marginal producers are the bootmaker in competition with the factories; and all other small manufacturers and makers, who compete with the large up-to-date concerns. These concerns are themselves able to easily supply the market without the small man.

Here we have a very different proposition to the farmer. The large

concerns can easily supply the whole of the commodities needed, and so their method sets the value. The small man is not a necessity, what he supplies is like a drop in a thousand gallons. But the economist has a very different proposition where the small farmer is concerned. The great bulk of farm produce is produced on small farms, the small farmer is a necessity. The large farms are hardly out of the experimental stage, and the tractor, so far as my experience and observation goes, is seldom used except for breaking and threshing. On farms of 640 acres where an engine is owned, I have seen the ploughing done by horses. Why? Because it could be done cheaper. The horses have to be kept anyway as the engine will not do all their work. The traction engine on the farm is an imperfect machine, its use does not materially affect the value of farm produce. This is a sweeping statement, but from broad observation and enquiry, I believe that it is correct.

If then it is correct that the farmer's poverty is due to over-production, why does he not produce less supply, and the price rise to value and allow demand to catch up to under the condition of an equal supply and demand? The answer, in my opinion, is simple. There has been, and still is, an over-supply of labor-power on the world's market. Part of this over-supply has flowed into the farming industry (carrying along with it the ideology of the wage-worker, namely a "living-wage,") this has caused a chronic over-supply of farm produce, and a reduction of price to a point where society can stomach all the produce, and the average farmer can get a living for himself and family, and an average rate of interest on the money invested in means of production, (horses, farm buildings, machinery, tools, etc.) Whoever is the real owner of these things, gets the interest or profit.

During the war, and since, when supply and demand became equal, and then there became an actual shortage of farm produce of many kinds, the price rose to "equitable" value, or value under equal supply and demand, and then would have risen above to a considerable extent had not the government stepped in and eliminated competition at the "demand end." Should capitalist domination continue, for a few years, a fall in the price of farm produce to the pre-war level or nearly so, is, in my opinion an absolute certainty.

Now fellow farmer, I have been as brief as possible, I have not dealt with the "collector" and his "sins," or the grade mixer. If you have grasped the theory I have tried to briefly expound, you will be able to assign to these gentlemen their relative importance. I am afraid I am taking up too much space as it is, but hope our editor will allow me a little more yet.

We farmers are not called upon to be the prime movers in changing this system for one more suited to the development of the race. For that task we are not well suited. Our mode of life and work, does not weld us together, and force us to be aggressive in this matter. To the wage-workers, the proletariat, belongs the work of inaugurating a new order of society, for that task

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