

# on in the Alberta Beet Fields

"The biggest problem with the beets," he continued, "is that one year they measure out a field, then if the same person works on it next year, like they expect it to be the same length and then they, the farmers, they do about four of five rows more, you know, and do more beets along side, a little bit, you know, lengthen the rows. Then they expect the Indians to accept the same amount of payment."

The Indians also complain that



Workers' Compensation doesn't even pay for the fields they wouldn't do nothin' about

They are not eligible for unemployment insurance and workmen's compensation.

"I can't understand why we don't get unemployment insurance," John Courtoireille said. "We work by the families with all the kids, but we don't get a cent of unemployment insurance or stamps. We don't get nothing."

"We just have to try hard to make out a living. By the time we're finished on those beets we got nothin' coming."

"When a man is hurt in the fields, workmen's Compensation doesn't even pay for that. Even if we were to be hurt in the beet fields they wouldn't do nothin' about it," David Courtoireille added.

Housing is supposed to be supplied free to the field workers by the farmer they are working for.

A "Letter of Instruction and Information, Sugar Beet and Vegetable Industry Workers, Season 1969-1970" put out by Canada Manpower and distributed to the beet-field workers contains this promise:

"Houses are supplied free and vary in size from 2 to 6 rooms, depending usually on the acres of sugar beets and the number of workers required to handle the contract. Houses are equipped with stoves, beds, and mattresses. Water is hauled if necessary, by the farmer, free of charge."

That wasn't quite the way we found things.

Living conditions for most beet workers are very poor. Almost all of the buildings provided by the farmers for them to live in are shacks, converted graneries and chicken coops. Many of them have only dirt floors and none have plumbing facilities or easy access to water.

None have refrigerators or storage areas for fresh produce. As a result the beet workers' families live on canned goods for the two to three months they work the fields.

We found the wages paid to those supplied with housing amounted to two to three dollars less per acre than those finding their own accommodation off the farm. This works out to a "rent" of two to three hundred dollars, quite a sum to be paying for a converted chicken coop.

"I don't pay rent like, but what they promised I never did get that. The difference for not living on the farm is two to five dollars more. I'd say it would cost about two hundred dollars for a hundred acre contract to live on the farm," David Courtoireille said.

Child labour is another feature of sugar beet work. Most of the Indian families have small children who work side-by-side with their parents in the beet fields. Most of the Indians don't like the idea of their children working in the beet fields, especially the younger ones of six or seven, but feel they have no choice if the family is going to feed and clothe itself. The beetgrowers cynically exploit the situation as a device to obtain cheap labour.

"I have three children under eight working in the fields," John Courtoireille told us.

His son David said, "I started working when I was six and I don't like it."

We asked the beet workers if they thought a union would make things better for them. Most thought it would.

"If we had a union the first thing I would want them to do would be to raise the price on beets and then pay unemployment insurance. Oh, I think we'd live better if they had to pay all the same like white people. We work harder than white people and we still don't make the money we should," David Courtoireille told us.

One of the most unsavory aspects of the situation the beet workers find themselves in is that they are recruited for work in the fields under conditions of compulsory or forced labour. At least two federal government agencies and the welfare departments of two provincial governments (Alberta and Saskatchewan) are complicit in this process.

Canada Manpower working in co-operation with the Federal Department of Indian Affairs recruits the Indians for work in the sugar beet

fields from as far away as Northern Saskatchewan.

And "co-operate" the Indian Affairs Branch does:

"The Indian Affairs Branch has the policy of stopping welfare payments during the summer, for all reserve members but those on permanent welfare. The result of this policy is that reserve members must leave the reserve during the summer months to find work. We asked reserve members who were working in the sugar beet fields in Southern Alberta concerning the summer work opportunities available to them. Eighty-five percent of the beet workers interviewed reported that they had tried to find work near the reserve but that none was available. These same men all said that they would prefer to work on or near the reserve. We noted earlier in this section that there are almost no jobs in the area surrounding the reserve either in the winter or in the summer. The majority of the people have no alternative in the summer but to travel to where there are jobs available, making use of the skills or lack of skills they can offer."

— Morton Newman, For the Human Resources Research and Development Executive Council.

The Alberta and Saskatchewan

Thus the state provides a service to the beet growers — abundant, cheap labour.

But the state provides few services for the Indians. Although they are recruited by Canada Manpower, they are not even eligible for unemployment insurance.

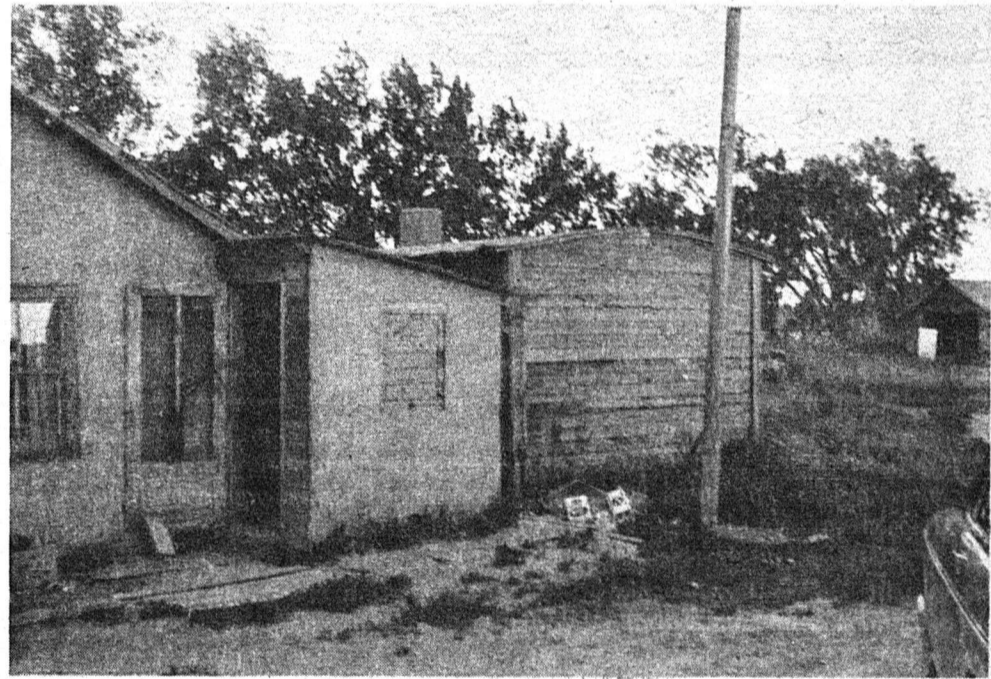
It's over thirty years since John Steinbeck wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*, his classic tale of life for migratory workers in the great depression. Since then men have landed on the moon and there's a lot of talk about the "affluent society" but the Indians of the Alberta beet fields live in conditions worse than those described by Steinbeck.

The agencies of the federal government and two provincial governments contribute to the situation that denies these people a decent human life, basic human dignity, yet we do nothing about it.

We're pretty smug when we condemn the Americans for the way they treat Blacks or the way they exploit the grape pickers. But what about the Indians and what about the beet fields?

Will anybody do anything about it? We doubt it.

Things will only change when the Indians organize and force a change. They might even have to arm them-



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government welfare agencies do their share by cutting off payments to non-treaty Indian and Metis.

Then the buses cruise the Indian communities, waiting to take them to work in the Alberta beet fields for little pay and poor working and living conditions.

Our society destroys the ability of the Indian society to support itself, makes the Indian society dependent upon welfare handouts, then cuts the welfare off in the beet season, forcing the Indians to go to work for low pay.

themselves to do it. Who knows? They'd certainly be justified.

But then, of course, the actions of the Indians working in the Alberta beet fields would become headline stories. Not stories about the plight of their life, but stories about law and order and anarchy. Nobody would ask why the Indians were driven to such extreme measures. The papers and the good, solid, white citizens would only demand that order be restored and the guilty be punished.