

Exploitation and Discrimination

John Ferguson, a school teacher and former employee of the Indian Affairs Branch now working with the Board for Basic Education in Regina and Barry Lipton a reporter for The Prairie Fire, Regina's opposition press, recently travelled to the beet fields of southern Alberta to investigate rumours of exploitation of and discriminatory and unfair treatment of Indian agricultural labourers. Here is their report.

Calgary, symbol of the big west where oil meets beef, is one of the most affluent and fastest growing cities in Canada.

It bustles with new industries, housing developments and high rise apartments. The downtown shopping and entertainment core, centered on the Palliser square and the brazen pretentiousness of the new Husky Tower, has been virtually rebuilt over the past ten years.

Driving south from Calgary you pass through an idyllic countryside of small ranches set back from the highway, nestled in the foot hills. The further south you go the more the land flattens out until finally it becomes as flat as the Regina plains and fields of sugar beets appear on either side of the highway.

make their living doing hand hoeing in the fields. It's hard, back-breaking work beneath the hot prairie sun, yet women and children as young as six or seven take part.

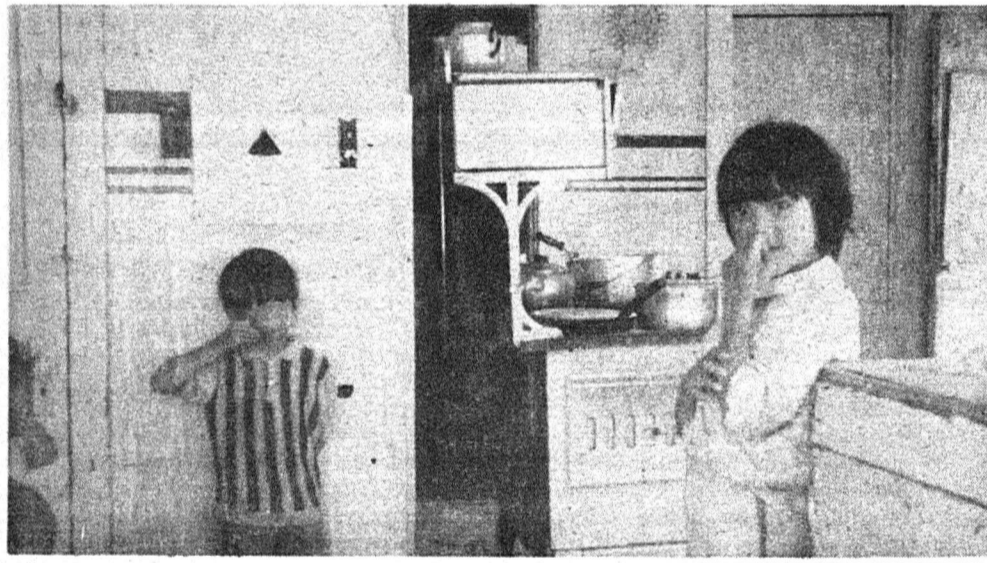
There are three different hoeings during the beet growing season.

The first involves weeding and thinning (the beets have to be ten to twelve inches apart) and pays seventeen to thirty-five dollars per acre. This is the most difficult hoeing.

The second, which is simple weeding, pays nine to fifteen dollars per acre.

The third hoeing, the final operation, is a light weeding which pays three dollars per acre. This year the third hoeing was not done due to the lateness of the season.

We found the range in pay, the



"I started working when I was six and I don't like it."

The Taber, Lethbridge, Picture Butte area of Southern Alberta is where sugar beets are grown. They grow in low straight rows in irrigated fields, and growing them takes a lot of hard hand labour, hoeing between the rows to keep the weeds down. Most of the people hired to do this work are Indians.

We spent a week in this area living and talking with the Indian beet workers.

We lived in a "Beet Shack" with an Indian family, a very old house with many of the windows and walls broken, an average home for the beet workers. There was no water and no refrigerator. Plumbing was primitive: an outdoor privy. The shack had electricity, a luxury which many others did not have.

The Indians, most of whom come to the area from long distances and live there during the growing season,

difference between the top and bottom rate for any of the operations, is due to two factors — the dirtiness (weediness) of the fields and the color of the workers' skin. Indians are paid less than whites.

We talked to David Courtoreille, an Indian beet worker, and asked him if he thought racism affected the wages he was paid. To answer he spoke of a recent experience of his with a beet farmer.

"Well, he had twelve Hungarian workers there. Now he paid them thirty-two dollars an acre. Then I was supposed to do second hoeing and I got only three dollars an acre. The second hoeing is normally worth nine dollars an acre. Supposing if we did the first hoeing on his piece, we'd only get twelve dollars an acre, we Indians," he said.

In a different setting we talked to Steve Rostic, a white field worker.

"We (white field workers) get twenty-five dollars an acre on first hoeing and ten or eleven dollars for second hoeing," he told us.

According to these figures white workers get seven dollars more per acre for first hoeing than do Indian workers and one or two dollars more per acre for the second hoeing.

Many Indians claimed to have been short-changed on acreage and deductions when they were payed-off.

Three Indian families spoke of the poor treatment they received from one farmer. They said they had been "contracted" to hoe beets for the farmer. Under a "contract" there is an understanding that the man who does the first hoeing will also do the second and third.

After the families completed the first hoeing — the hardest one — the farmer refused to let them do the easier second and third. He claimed they did a poor job on the first hoeing and deducted three dollars an acre from their pay.

Many of the Indians of Lethbridge claim that they have been involved in similar incidents and can do nothing about it because they have no place to turn to for aid.

We talked to a group of Indian field workers and asked them if they had been short-changed in their pay-cheques or knew of people who had been. David Courtoreille answered first.

"Yes, I've seen a lot of that cheatin'," he said. And a lotta poor Indians got that too — they don't know the difference. A lotta these farmers, you know, they think the Indians are dumb.

"But the Indians won't say nothin'. You know, they won't even talk about it. And yet I see a lotta them said — Well, they got beat — you know a lot of them got beat. I know that myself.

"What I think it's because is a lot of them can't read or write, you know.

If anybody was here to look after those Indians ... The field men, what the heck, they are sitting over there and none come around. They don't even measure our fields. I betcha we got beat on that too."

The "Field men" he referred to are employees of the sugar factories whose job it is to measure the fields and see that the beets are grown under the conditions specified by the company. The beets are grown by the farmers under contract with the sugar mill. If the farmer does not meet the terms of the contract related to growing conditions the mill will not buy his crop.

David Courtoreille continued. "A lotta times I know darn well the Indians are getting beat on the acreage. When we get beat there is nothing we can do. What could we

do unless they come around check. The Indians are timid, you know. They are timid, that's the reason they get beat.

"If they only knew, you know, if they only knew, that would be different."

Then Clarence Miller, another Indian field worker joined in.

"They really try to beat us, you know," he said. "This last place I worked for, me and my brother-in-law Mosy Swan, me and my wife



"When a man is hurt in the fields for that. Even if we were to die in it."

his wife, we done second hoeing the and we all finished, you know.

"All of a sudden we said we were finished, so he walked through the field and he seen a few weeds, you know, in between the rows like you know, where he is supposed to cultivate. He says. No, we are not going to pay you until you do a better job.' So me and my brother-in-law went up to Picture Butte and we talked to the field man like a told him to come down here."

David Courtoreille broke in. That's his (the farmers) friend, you know. We got no chance whatsoever. The field man is right in with the beet farmer. They helps them more than we could get any help out of them.

"There's a lot of Indians that can't read or write down here. All they are is Cree and Chippeweyan and a lotta of them don't even read or write — they can't even spell their name nothin'.

"They pay them out in cash and the lord knows what happens them. They don't give a written statement. I know myself I got beat, even on the labour. I still didn't get my payme from this spring..."

"Some of these Indians when they're finished their beets, the boss that owns the place, well they say 'Okay, here is fifty dollars and that's it.' You know now they, the Indians don't realize what is going on. They don't even know how much more they got coming." Clarence Miller said.