Labor for Groves and Packing Houses

W. A. Dopson.

We can get a correct idea of labor problems only by a study of labor conditions in the past. No one considered it of serious importance. We were aware that skilled labor had organized to better conditions of both the employer and the employee, and that no attention was paid to unskilled labor, as all believed the demand would never be greater than the supply. This idea became sacred to us, and all went well with us.

If any project was undertaken requiring laborers in large numbers, advertisements were placed in newspapers, stating place of employment, wages, etc. If this failed, men were sent out to procure help. Their conception of duty was to get the help needed without the slightest regard for the other employer or the industry from which this help was drawn. Higher wages or better living conditions were offered as the inducement for laborers to change their place of employment.

FIRST CHANGE.

Three years ago the Department of Labor began to give the wheat farmers assistance in harvesting their wheat crop. This benefited the farmers. The work was enlarged in this and adjacent sections as far as the funds available to the Department would allow. Last year it succeeded in sending 84,000 men to farmers. This averaged about one man to 75 farms. And in addition to supplying farm help, the Department was asked to supply help for other industries. This necessarily worked against farmers.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE.

The Department of Agriculture took a very keen interest in what the Department of Labor had been able to accomplish. Therefore, when war was declared, and the Secretary of Agriculture and his associates saw that one of the great responsibilities of this country in the war would be to produce foodstuffs in sufficient quantities to feed both ourselves and our allies, this situation brought home the question, how was the agricultural work to be kept at its maximum efficiency, under the condition of a labor shortage. Many thought the farmers should be exempted from military service, and much criticism resulted because this was not done. But it was unfair to the farmers of the nation even to entertain the thought that they were willing to have
the rest of the population do all the fighting in this struggle for world freedom. The farmers themselves, as a whole, would resent the intimation. If farmers were exempted as a class, obviously others would feel the injustice of such action. It is unlikely that any responsible body will sanction this proposal. This is a war for all Americans, in all walks of life.

OTHER INDUSTRIES.

Following the declaration of war, great labor disturbances followed on account of the large industrial developments, redistribution of energy and increased wages. The scale of operations was large, and the work had to be done quickly. Sixteen cities, covering over 250,000 acres, including ranges, had to be built between June 15th and December 1st. This called for 5,000,000,000 feet of lumber, nearly 2,000 miles of pipes for water works and 1,000 miles for drainage. Seventy-five carloads of materials were required for electric lights and roads.

Between 5,000 and 8,000 men worked on each cantonment. They cost approximately $125,000,000. Simultaneously sixteen canvas cities had to be set up for the National Guard.

We thought that when this emergency elapsed there would be less demand for labor, and the wave of an acute labor shortage would pass. But there are today 135 shipyards on the Atlantic coast. (I do not know the number on the Gulf or on the Pacific coast.) These have given work to all those employed on the cantonment work. In addition, all classes of industrial plants are being enlarged, and particularly is this true of the industries necessary for the prosecution of the war.

About two years ago negroes began moving North. I asked employers of labor if in their opinion this would affect the labor supply. The reply was, “No; only a few will go North, but with the beginning of next winter they will come back to the South.” This resulted in Florida losing more than 30,000 men. If Florida was the only State affected, she could draw on other Southern States; but all Southern States have suffered similar losses. In fact, I think our loss is among the smallest. Texas lost 125,000 in this “to the North” movement.

The fuel administration announced on the 16th of April that non-essential building operations would be reduced for the period of the war, in some cases 50%. The output of some commodities is to be reduced from 16% to 50%. The effect which this will have on labor will be small and slow in becoming visible, if it shows at all.

Florida will have furnished, by the 30th of April, 8,000 drafted men and 3,600 National Guardsmen. This does not include those who have volunteered for the national army, navy and marine services. I have not been able to get the exact number of these volunteers, but we know it will run well into the thousands; and present indications are that in the future we will furnish men more rapidly than we have up to this time.

This number of men being taken from our protective industries when our ranks are already depleted will have an effect...
which we little anticipated a few years ago.

The efforts of the Department are being directed to keep production at its maximum efficiency, to utilize and properly distribute all available labor in order that farmers may be made safe. The reason for the government taking hold of the labor problem is to insure the production of foodstuffs.

In order that farm labor may not be unnecessarily disturbed, an order has been issued by the Provost Marshal General placing skilled farm laborers at the foot of their class, and calling those not so engaged out of their regular order. Furloughs will be granted whenever it can be done without serious interference to the soldier's training. I mention these facts to picture more vividly to you the seriousness in which the government views this question.

There is an undisputed labor shortage. The extent of it can not be correctly determined, because many agencies are so closely allied with it that it is very difficult to draw sharp lines circumscribing the limitations of each. It is sufficient to say, it is one of the greatest problems confronting the agricultural interests of Florida today. You are expecting me to tell you how to meet and solve these problems. I think it is well just here to briefly mention the history of our work in the State.

During May of last year a survey of the labor situation in the State was made, which resulted in my beginning this work June 1st. The first problem was to get the plan before the people so that it would be clearly understood. Blanks were sent out, asking for a report on labor conditions. All those reporting stated that conditions were normal; that is, there were no demands which could not be supplied locally, but, on the other hand, there was no surplus. While I failed to get the information I had hoped to get, I succeeded in arousing interest. I had numerous inquiries about where surplus labor had been reported.

Next, I encouraged farmers, whenever practical, to employ more labor during the summer than they had been in the past, because idle labor might easily become the prey of labor agents from other sections. My suggestions were accepted, and farmers were benefited.

THE FIRST VISIBLE LABOR SHORTAGE.

The first apparent scarcity of labor occurred in the cotton section, during harvesting season. This was solved by asking the housewives over the State to stop cooks from carrying pans of food from their kitchens, by demanding rigid enforcement of vagrancy laws, and by interesting the town boys. The boys responded nobly, and in some cases the girls went out and "picked cotton."

"Pan carrying" is a factor that deserves consideration. The stopping of this practice was not suggested on the theory that it might help, but upon the result of investigations made which showed that nearly ninety per cent of the cooks in some sections were practically supporting one or more able-bodied men (parasites) and enabling them to live in idleness. In many cases the men forced
their wives and daughters to supply them food in this way. It is not necessary for me to go further into the effect of this system. However, I will add that many cooks quit, and quite a number of good housewives were "read out in church," but it helped.

LATER DEMANDS.

Soon after the cotton crop was harvested, I received demands from over the entire State for help. At this time the cantonment work was in progress. This forced us into competition with employers who could pay more than the farmers and fruit growers. But by carefully laid plans and persistent work, we succeeded in getting many to the farms in all sections of the State.

The cards, which we gave each applicant, were not returned in every case, but our records show that we directed a few over four hundred to fruit work. I realize very keenly that many of those sent turned out to be worthless. I regret that this was true, but we must all agree that the plan was new and we had no precedent to follow. Therefore, we were left to meet the situation as it presented itself; and I may add, no one was bothered with men of this type a second time. The greatest criticism the Department has had to make of the farmers of Kansas was: "If a man wanted ten laborers, he applied for forty," which means he hoped to get ten out of forty. I hope to avoid this practice, and by close co-operation we can avoid it. May I now assure you of my hearty co-operation, and ask you that you give us yours? We can not hope to accomplish all we would like without carefully laid plans and a successful execution of the same.

We used all means available in locating idle labor, and placed this labor most advantageously. This was very difficult, as there was very little idle labor then. The labor that could be used to the best advantage was seasonal help, which would be needed in different sections of the State at different times of the year, and could be shifted to places where most needed.

OUTSIDE HELP.

Recently, with the assistance of others in this Department, a survey of available labor in all the Southern States was made. We secured a few laborers at New Orleans. I consider this a clear insight into the conditions in other States.

After we had exhausted all sources of supply within a reasonable distance, we succeeded in getting the operation of the emigration laws so modified that Bahama Island labor could be imported for agricultural purposes in the lower East Coast section of the State. The value of this labor can hardly be over-estimated, as the farmers would have lost heavily had they not been able to secure this help. I have just come from there, and I found both the farmers and laborers well pleased.

This matter has been handled thus far in a very satisfactory manner to all departments concerned. Therefore, I see no reason for this privilege not being extended when emergencies demand it. Labor must be imported into this section, for seasonal help, at least. As this labor has been
used here for many years, the farmers would be seriously injured without it.

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE.

What developments the future has in store for us, no one would dare predict, but I feel safe in saying that unless peace happily interrupts the progress of the war, we may expect labor to be more scarce during the next harvesting season than it has been for many years. I am forced to speak frankly, and say that all indications at this time are that more inexperienced labor will have to be used in citrus work than has ever been used in the past. Therefore, I suggest that plans be made to employ as many women as may be practical in packing houses. They are less migratory than the men, and, in most cases, are more faithful help. This would release men for picking and other outside work.

The question of wages presents itself at this point; and may I insist on a uniform wage scale? The employers and not the employees must necessarily be the losers if they continue to bid against each other. Inexperienced and inefficient help is the most expensive help in all lines of work. Therefore, uniform wages and requirements are highly essential at this time.

I cannot successfully deal with individuals in all cases, but I can deal with communities. I do not consider it is asking too much to insist on co-operation at this time. The value of team work can not be over-estimated.

In support of this argument, a national labor director will be appointed soon (perhaps today). This was brought about by duplication and over-lapping in different organizations, which has caused much unrest in labor affairs. I welcome the idea of a central power for the direction of labor. This is intended, according to the papers, to apply to labor employed in the production of war supplies. But its effect will be felt by all industries, because farmers and fruit growers must compete with all classes of industry in wages to secure help.

Wages is a factor that is demanding attention. Therefore, I want to make a suggestion for your consideration. Employ packers during a certain service on the plan of so much per box; then, if they prove to be satisfactory help, a small increase may be given; and so on. This would have a tendency to discourage changing of places, and encourage efficiency. If practical, other classes of work should be handled in a similar manner.

I can assure you that the labor division of the Department of Agriculture is at the service of the farmers and fruit growers of our State, and that we have had the most loyal co-operation from the employment service of the Department of Labor. With these organizations assisting, I see no reason for the fruit crop of this year not being harvested with reasonable ease. But we must have co-operation in enforcing laws against idleness, prohibiting cooks from carrying food from the homes in which they work, a uniform wage scale and uniform requirements of the help.

DISCUSSION.

Mr. ——: We find in this State that the government employs labor, and they bid much higher than the farmer or grower can pay. They not only bid higher, but they put a lot of their advertisements in our papers offering $2.10 and $2.20 per day of eight hours' work, and draw our labor from us.

Now, I am as loyal as any man living, and will do anything in my power to help at this time. I want them to do the same thing. I have been employing during the past season from six to ten negroes. We see these advertisements, and my neighbors would bring them to me, showing where the government is bidding and taking our labor because they are offering more wages. The government's attention has been called to this, and it should have been stopped. These glaring advertisements for eight hours' work were printed when they were calling upon us to grow more stuff, to grow more food. Now, how could we do it?

However, I believe that some of the strain of the labor situation is over, at least in our section. I believe it is a little bit easier than it has been for two or three months past. I would like for the gentleman who has just read the paper to tell us something about that.

Mr. Dopson: The government was not directly responsible. The cantonment work, which is evidently the work you mean, and which took your labor from you, had to be done by contract. So much had to be done in so short a time that there was no time to get it done except by contract. The contractors felt it was necessary on their part to offer the wages in order to get the labor there and get the work done at the time when it was required. It was short time labor only. The war would not wait until the crops were harvested, you know.

However, we must admit the privilege was abused, and we are now trying to work out the problems; but they cannot be solved in a day. An emergency was thrust upon the country, and it had to be met the best way we could. War is the first business we have. I hope the keen competition for labor is now over.

Mr. Rolfs: Those conditions have existed all through the country. And I want to say to the audience here that there was only one cantonment in the whole United States which was behind time. (Applause.) That was an achievement. Rather than to keep the million or more soldier boys back a single day, we had better pour out the money like water; $125,000,000 had to be spent, and it had to be spent on time. Things had to move like clockwork, and if we had to suffer some inconveniences, let us remember what those soldier boys would have had to suffer if we had not. It was inconvenience to us, and perhaps involved the expenditure of a few hundred dollars more; but what might have happened to the hundreds of boys if they had been sent to a cantonment unfinished, unequipped and insufficient? We knew those cantonments had to be built, and those boys were to be drafted and we should have made plans to meet the emergency.

We hear a good deal of complaint about wastefulness at cantonments.
That can't be helped. There is wastefulness, but oftentimes the saving of it would not be worth the labor that would have been necessary to have conserved it. I know in some cases where the criticism was brought, especially against the cantonment at Columbia, it was propagated by the Kaiser's emissaries and spread by the good men of this country.

Now, we have to look out; the spies are among us, and they will set all sorts of traps to ensnare. When we come up against these little difficulties, the inconvenience of losing a little help is nothing as compared to some of the hardships our boys would have had to go through had they reached the cantonments and found they had no roof over their heads, no blankets to keep them warm and no fuel to keep them comfortable and healthy. Which would you choose—a few boxes of unpicked oranges or a soldier boy dead with pneumonia? We have to look at the other side; and in my opinion the other side so far overshadows our side that there is no time to think of ourselves. We are at war, and let us stand back of every department of our government. War is the first thing there is under consideration now. I have suffered with the rest of you, so I know what I am talking about.

Let us take to heart what Mr. Dopson has given us. I would not be surprised if next year we did not have to pack practically all of our fruit through the hands of women. If we do, we will go at it just as cheerfully as we are going at the difficulties we are meeting now. There are very few people who are not coming up to the scratch and doing the very best they can. Let's not get disgruntled and discouraged because things are not going on as they used to when conditions were normal. Our minds were made up for business, and we are going to have some severe jolts when it comes to the transportation question and marketing problems.

Mr. Hume: I think the remark I made this morning will fit in again: Cheer up; the worst is yet to come.

Mr. ——: There was a man at Winter Haven trying to get some of our labor away from us. The city arrested a lot of the laborers for selling whisky, got them in jail, sentenced them and kept them on the street until the man left town. (Laughter.)