

THE JAPANESE FARMER: THE MAN BEHIND THE MANCHURIAN EXPEDITION

A FEATURE of the Japanese Labour Movement as compared with similar movements in other countries is the prominent part played in it by the agriculturist. It is as strong in the country as in the town. Roughly 10 per cent. of the adult male agricultural population is organized into peasants' or tenants' unions, a state of affairs which compares very favourably with the position in the industrial world, where the percentage of trade union membership is, according to the latest returns, only 7.5.

The explanation for this is to be found in the peculiar status of the Japanese peasant and the conditions under which he gains his living. It must first be pointed out that the landless labourer as he is known in England does not exist. The Japanese farmer is either an owner, or a tenant, or part owner part tenant, the figures being respectively 31 per cent., 28 per cent., and 41 per cent. This does not, however, mean that he is any better off than the farm labourer. The total arable area is fifteen million acres, which are split up among five and a half million families (33,000,000 people). The average family holding is a bare $2\frac{1}{2}$ acres; 35 per cent. farm under $1\frac{1}{4}$ acres, 70 per cent. under 3, only 10 per cent. over 5, and in all Japan there are less than five thousand proprietors with over 125 acres.

It is obvious that with such small holdings as these figures indicate it is as much as the Japanese peasant can do to extract a living from the soil. Before the tenant farmer can take a penny for himself he has to pay for his seed and fertilizer and hand over from 50 to 60 per cent. of his crop in kind to his landlord as rent. A few years ago investigations

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showed that on the average $2\frac{1}{2}$ -acre farm the net income of the farmer after paying these expenses and reckoning in what he made from subsidiary occupations came to about £50 a year. To-day it is probably even less. Nor is the position of the owner-farmer much better. If he has to pay no rent, he has to pay the government and local taxes, which the tenant escapes, and these amount to at least 30 per cent. of his income, while the assessed value of his land is out of all proportion to its real value. The taxes on land, moreover, are twice as heavy as those on business undertakings, and three times those that industrialists have to pay. Yearly many are forced to sell their land, and so decline into the tenant class. These figures tell a sad enough tale of hardship, and they refer only to the $2\frac{1}{2}$ -acre holding. The lot of the 35 per cent. with less than half this must be, and is, even worse. Year by year the deficit on the year's working grows. Thirty per cent. of the farming population is in debt, and every year one in six hundred goes bankrupt.

What has made the farmer's position worse has been the steady loss of the subsidiary employments by which in bygone years he eked out his livelihood. The same fate is overtaking him here that overtook his English counterpart at the close of the eighteenth century. He can, it is true, still make a little by straw plaiting, making rope, hats, sandals, and the straw cloaks and kilts of his class. In wooded areas some can augment their income by charcoal burning; until recently most could hope for a little relief at least from sericulture. Many indeed relied on this to balance accounts. Of late years, however, with the growth of the rayon industry the demand for silk has been growing less and less, and the annual production of cocoons has had to be drastically curtailed.

Altogether the Japanese peasant farmer's lot is growing more and more desperate. His position is at

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the outset weakened by the fact that at least half his product passes immediately out of his control, so that he is completely at the mercy of a market manipulated by others in their own interest. In any case he is on the horns of a dilemma. A bad harvest is disastrous. He is left after paying his rent with less even than the minimum amount required for his own subsistence, let alone to pay the costs of production. The low prices consequent on a good harvest are well nigh as bad. Figures alone cannot reveal what all this means. Even £50 a year is less than 6d. per head per day for a family of six persons. In a large number of cases this daily expenditure per head must work out considerably less. One has to have lived among them to realize the standard of life to which they are often reduced. For food many cannot even afford to eat their own rice. They must sell it and buy millet. This washed down with *bancha*, the coarsest and cheapest quality of tea, comprises their daily sustenance. Occasionally they may be able to supplement it with a few coarse pickles; about one in ten can afford fish. The houses they live in are the veriest shacks, their clothes of the poorest quality. They must work, when the season demands, from sunrise to sunset, man and woman, grandparents, and, when they are not at school, the children also. In the spring the wife works alongside her husband knee-deep in the muddy fields digging them over with a huge spade; in the autumn she reaps by his side. The commonest of sights on a country road is an old woman trudging along bent double beneath the load, almost as big as herself she carries on her back. Among the children evidences of malnutrition are everywhere. Often they must go hungry to school. Many have no midday meal. Is it any wonder that the employment brokers from the cotton mills find here a fruitful field for their activities? The 25 to 30 yen a month that their daughter can earn is too great

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a temptation to these poverty-stricken parents to whom a half of this sum will be remitted every month. And if the mills do not always want girls, the brothels do. Want has forced many a parent to sell his daughter into one of these institutions. Especially is this so in the northern provinces. Akita and Yamagata prefectures average, normally, seven hundred girls a year each, and, an example of what economic pressure can do, this number rose to 1,500 last year as a result of the extraordinarily bad harvests.

What is the way out? It does not lie in increased production. The yield per acre has already reached its maximum. It is over twice that of any other country—2,500 lbs. per acre compared with 1,130 lbs. in the U.S.A., 970 lbs. in Java, 805 lbs. in India. Moreover, increased production under the present system would only tend to make matters worse. A reduction of rents is hardly possible, unless the government reduces the taxes. As it is, the landlord is getting a return of only 3 or 4 per cent. on his capital. He himself is suffering almost as badly as his tenant. A monetary rent, instead of one in kind, might help in good years, but in bad would make matters worse than they are now. For the government to attempt anything in the way of price fixing would, under present conditions, do no good. A price high enough to be of any use to the farmer would be unfair to the rest of the population, and might have calamitous reactions in the industrial world.

A factor in the situation not so far brought out is the high cost of production compared with other rice-producing areas. While the yield is high per acre it is low per man. It pays to import rice. Here it is true something might be done by the adoption of more modern methods and so reducing labour costs, but it is doubtful if it would be very much. The Japanese rice field does not as a rule lend itself to the use of modern

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machinery, while where it does the question of the initial capital outlay is a matter for serious consideration. What, too, is to be the fate of the workers displaced by the machinery?

The labour movement's proposals for improving the farmer's lot have not in the past shown many signs of imagination or a real conception of the problem. Perhaps inevitably they have been based on the tenant farmer's own views, which are naturally somewhat constricted. He cannot see further than the immediate causes of his misery, and his chief demand, therefore, is for a drastic and permanent reduction in the high rent which he regards as the main reason for his wretched plight. The labour parties have not gone much further than to sponsor this. The landlord, however, can hardly be expected to agree—not because he is particularly grasping—in bad seasons he usually voluntarily accepts a lower percentage of the crop as rent—but because he simply cannot afford to. If the government were to reduce his taxes and assess him on a more equitable basis he might, but this is not likely to happen. It would mean increasing the burden on industry. In any case such measures would afford no great or permanent relief. The owner farmer is little better off than the tenant, unless his holding is well over the average $2\frac{1}{2}$ acres. Even the wholesale expropriation demanded by the extremists would leave the farmer little better off than he is to-day, unless he could be assured of a considerably larger holding and a much higher price for his rice, the first of which is out of the question, since practically all the land available has already been brought under cultivation and the population is increasing, not decreasing, while the second depends on a number of other factors.

The troubles of the farmer, indeed, are only one part of the greater problem created by the rapid growth of population, over three-quarters of a million yearly.

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The land cannot support more, and only in industry can the increasing millions find employment. But industry has to compete in a world market, and of necessity has to keep its production costs low. Especially must labour costs be kept low, since it is cheap labour which has largely enabled it to attain its present position. Japan is singularly deficient in raw materials, and has to import practically all she uses. Thus it is essential that rice, the staple food, should be cheap, since a rise in its price must inevitably lead to a demand for the higher wages which would mean a possibly disastrous increase in production costs. On the other hand, if industry could be enabled to pay these higher wages, then the price of rice would rise also.

Here we have part of the explanation, at least, of the Manchurian adventure. The assurance of a cheap and certain supply of raw materials and of a huge potential market, which control of that region with its rich resources would give, would enable industry to pay higher wages. Moreover, the government could then adjust the taxation balance more evenly without fear of the consequences to industry. The farmer's production costs could thus be appreciably lessened, and at the same time, since a rise in the price of rice would no longer be disastrous, he could be protected against the importation of cheap rice from abroad. To this point of view the labour movement also seems to be coming round. Very few have expressed their disapproval of their country's Manchurian policy, while many openly support it.

This in any case is the solution Japan's rulers have found for her social and economic problems. Given their outlook, and leaving on one side the question of its international propriety, it is hard to see that they could have found any other better. It is practical, logical, and, above all, holds out some prospect of success. To the socialist and those who would like

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to see international relations placed on a somewhat more idealistic plane than one of mere national advantage, this is, of course, insufficient justification, but the trouble is that in Japan the socialists have never propounded any reasonable solution of their own. The programme of the Japanese Labour Movement is, when all is said and done, only one of palliatives, except where it is coloured by a Marxism which is purely theoretical. It has never put before the Japanese public any reasoned and practical policy for dealing with the country's problems as a whole, and if it came into power to-morrow would be completely at sea. That, however, is not likely to happen yet awhile.

It is little wonder, therefore, that the majority of the nation turns to those with a policy which seems to fit the situation and promises immediate and practical results. The farmer represents 50 per cent. of the nation. Every year his numbers grow and his position gets worse. His unions are the outcome of desperation—a desperate effort to alleviate his lot by the only measures he can envisage. He is certainly not a socialist or class conscious, and if his associations appear in socialist guise it is because they have been organised by intellectuals from the cities who have seen in agrarian discontent their opportunity. Himself he will support any policy which promises him relief from his misery. It is he who in the final analysis is the man behind the Manchurian Expedition.

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