Economic Forms in Southern Agriculture

By TOM JOHNSON

ONE of the crassest examples of opportunism in practice in the work of the Party is our indefensible neglect of systematic stubborn work to win the agricultural proletariat and the masses of poor and tenant farmers. A few quotations will show the importance attached to this problem by the greatest masters of revolutionary theory and practice.

> "The conquest of political power by the socialist parties has become a matter of the immediate future. In order to be able to capture political power the parties must go from the cities into the villages and become powerful in the rural districts, the larger the number of peasants we . . . bring over to our side . . . the more rapidly and easily will the social transformation be brought about."
> *The Peasant Question*—F. Engels.

> "Despairing of a Napoleonic restoration, the French peasant will also abandon faith in his plot of land and the whole social edifice based on peasant ownership will collapse. The proletarian revolution will obtain a chorus without which its solo must be a swan song in all peasant countries."
> *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.*—Marx.

> "To think that the social revolution is possible . . . if no movement takes place among the non-class conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against landlord, monarchial and national oppression, means to renounce the social revolution." Lenin, in 1915.

The quotations speak for themselves—and yet, our Party has hardly made a beginning of serious work on the countryside. In the South, where this question is of peculiar importance, the spontaneous revolts of the farmers themselves (England, Ark., Georgia, etc.) brought this problem forcibly to our attention, but we have barely begun to scratch the surface in actual organization.

It is necessary first of all in any discussion of agriculture in the South, to lay bare the peculiar and specific conditions under which capitalism in agriculture has developed in this section. In the West and North capitalist agriculture developed in a virgin territory where there existed no appreciable survivals of early economic forms to hinder its free development along "pure" capitalist lines. In the South, on the contrary, capitalism in agriculture has developed and is still developing thru the penetration and subjection to capital of an earlier form of agricultural economy based on chattel slave labor.

Slave or plantation economy is adapted to the production of a crop relatively simple to cultivate and gather and requiring a large application of labor for comparatively long intervals. Cotton is such a crop, and cotton was the chief crop of old slave plantations. In the deep South today cotton remains the one important commercial crop around which almost all agricultural production is centered. The production of other crops is carried on mainly for local consumption and subsidiary to the production of the "money crop"—cotton. In consequence, a poor harvest or sharp fall in the price of this one crop spells ruin for the southern farmer.

The social relations within the process of production have changed very little since slavery times. As Lenin stated in his article on American agriculture, "after 'liberating' the Negroes, it (the American bourgeoisie—T. J.) has resorted on the basis of 'free' republican-democratic capitalism, to every possible and impossible means to secure for itself the most shameless and despicable exploitation of the Negro." The economic basis for this unbridled exploitation of not only the Negroes of whom Lenin speaks, but of hundreds of thousands of white farmers as well, is the system of "share cropping." This is the new form of production developed following the Civil War out of the plantation system operated with chattel slave labor.

Above 60% of all farms in the southern cotton belt are operated by tenants. Of these, approximately 85% are other than cash tenants, that is, they pay a varying share of their crop to the landlord as rent. They are share croppers of one category or another. Far from declining with the further subjection of agriculture to the control of finance capital, share cropping as the principle form of tenancy is steadily increasing in the South, as the following figures show:

In a typical state, Alabama, the total number of farms declined from 1910 to 1925 from 262,901 to 237,631. The numbers of farms operated by owners declined from 103,929 to 92,948. The number of tenant-operated farms likewise declined from 158,326 to 144,235. The number of cash tenants—that is, those who pay their rent in money—declined from 83,360 to 42,303. On the other hand, while the total number of all other classes of farms declined, the number of farms operated by share croppers sharply rose in this period from 74,966 to 101,932. Substantially the same picture is given by the census statistics for the other Southern states. Thus, in Arkansas, the number of cash tenant farms from 1910 to 1920 fell from 30,405 to 9,078, while the number of share croppers rose from 76,861 to 116,821. In Mississippi, the numbers of share croppers rose in the same period from 112,736 to 156,810, while all other classes of farms declined in number.

Not only are there divisions within the tenancy as a whole. There are also different categories among the share croppers. The lowest on the economic ladder is the cropper proper. The cropper goes to the landlord empty-handed. He has no control over the conditions of production. Seed, fertilizer, work animals, tools—all are supplied by the landlord. As the cropper is usually penniless at planting time, the landlord "carries him over" from planting time to fall when the crop is gathered; that is, the landlord furnishes the cropper with a specified amount of household supplies, food, etc., each month. The amount advanced varies from $12 to $25 per month, and is usually based on the acreage farmed by the cropper, at the rate of about $1 per acre. As a rule, advances of this character are not made in cash, and the cropper is forced to take his advances in supplies furnished at the plantation commissary at prices ranging 20 to 40% above prevailing retail prices. To these exorbitant prices it is customary for the plantation owner to add an interest charge of from 10 to 40%.

At the end of the year, when the crop is gathered, the landlord first takes half, partly as rent in kind, and partly to replace the capital invested in the tools, work animals, fertilizer, etc., which he has supplied the cropper and which have been used up in the production of the crop and next, enough of the crop to satisfy the advances he had made the cropper to tide him over from the time the crop is "pitched." The balance of the crop (if there is any balance) belongs in theory to the cropper; but as the cropper has no facilities for marketing his share of the crop, no place to store it if he wishes to wait for a better price, and as the landlord exercises considerable domination over him due to his economic status, in practice the landlord takes over the cropper's share as well as his own, and invariably at a price considerably under the market.

The border line between the cropper and farm laborer is frequently obscure. Most croppers piece out their meager income by hiring out as laborers to their own or neighborhood landlords during those periods of the year when "their own" crop needs least attention. Along the northern edge of the cotton belt where oppression is not so severe and the freedom of the white cropper to come and go as he chooses is greater, probably one-third of the croppers go into the towns and mills for work in the winter. The cropper does not work as an independent producer. He works under conditions of labor not his own. It is primarily this fact which distinguishes the status of the cropper from that of all other tenants. Marx has this to say of this form of tenancy, wherein the conditions of labor are entirely controlled by the landlord: "This requires conditions of personal independence, a lack of personal freedom, no matter to what extent, a bondage to the soil as its accessory, a serfdom in the strict meaning of the word." (*Capital*—Vol. III, page 918).

The cropping system is best adapted to fairly large plantations where a sufficient supply of capital is available to furnish all the requirements of production. Therefore, the bulk of the croppers are concentrated on the big plantations in the deep South. Although the large plantations are slowly breaking up, this process is not rapid. Mr. G. D. Woodson, an authority on agriculture, estimates that there are today not less than 40,000 plantations in the South with more than five croppers each.

Next in the economic scale is the share cropper. The share cropper supplies himself at least a part of the means of production. Conditions vary. As a rule, the cropper supplies his own tools and work animals, and in some cases a portion of the fertilizer and seed, the landlord furnishing the balance. Here the share cropper has relatively a greater independence and the control of the land owner is not so oppressive. Under this arrangement the share cropper usually pays one-third of the cotton crop and one-fourth of the grain crop as rent in kind. This form of tenancy is the dominant one above the northern border of the Black Belt where farms are smaller. There are scarcely ever more than two to five share croppers at most on the land of one landowner. Frequently small owners having not more than 40 to 80 acres rent out a portion of their land to a share cropper. In many instances the share cropper will be a friend or relative of the landowner. Here, therefore, the antagonism between landewner is not so great as on the big plantations manned by croppers. The share cropper, particularly if his landlord is a little fellow, often tends to identify his interest with those of his landlord, and to see a common enemy in the fertilizer merchant, supply merchant and local banks—in a word, in those who supply both him and his landlord on credit. Credit charges are terrific. A study made in 1928 of the Agricultural Department of the State of North Carolina, gives the average cost of credit to share croppers and small owners cultivating their own land in the cotton belt, as follows:

Cotton	19.1%
Fertilizer	36.1%
Household Supplies	71.2%
Average	50.5%

Cash tenants, that is, those who pay their rent in money, form a relatively unimportant section of the Southern tenancy. In general their interests are the same as those of the share cropper.

The next and last important figure which we shall consider in Southern agriculture is the small owner operating a farm of from 40 to 100 acres with the aid of his family and without the employment of wage labor. Almost seven-eighths of all farm owners are white. The small owner is but little better off than the tenant. With no capital, constantly in debt, and with a heavy burden of taxation, he is only able to keep his farm and eke out a miserable existence by driving himself and all those of his family able to work in the fields, at top speed from sunrise to dark.

There are extremely few large capitalist farms in the cotton belt employing wage labor. In the deep South the plantation system offers effective barriers to the introduction of large scale mechanized farming. Along the northern edge of the cotton belt, the small farmer with no capital reserves is unable to utilize advanced technique, and is forced along with the cropper and share cropper to cultivate his little farm with the 8 inch plow and single mule. At the same time, the topography of the country itself in those areas where the small owner dominates, prevents effective utilization of tractors and other farm machinery.

In the last fifteen years, large scale cotton farming has developed with considerable rapidity in the southwest, opening up new territories for the production of cotton in Texas and Oklahoma. The degree of this development is indicated by the fact that the production of cotton in Texas has grown from 11,898,000 bales in 1920 to 17,872,000 in 1929. Oklahoma 2,749,000 bales in 1920, to 4,492,000 in 1929. In 1929, Texas alone produced approximately 45% of all cotton in the United States.

In view of the chronic agrarian crisis, and its intensification in the last two years by the industrial crisis, it is doubtful if large scale farming in the southwest will develop as rapidly in the future as it has in the past. Despite the relatively low cost of production on these large scale, highly mechanized farms employing wage labor, which allow them to produce cotton at a profit at prices which mean complete ruin for the cropper and small owner with his primitive technique and higher cost of production, it is doubtful if even those big farms can produce at a profit with cotton prices at their present low level. Nevertheless, the competition of these highly developed capitalist farms is today keenly felt by the cotton producers of the old South.