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AGRARIAN DISCONTENT IN PROGRESSIVE TEXAS

BY GRAHAM ADAMS, JR.

During the first term of Woodrow Wilson's administration, the United States Commission on Industrial Relations, by public hearings and research, conducted a two year nationwide investigation of the causes of industrial strife. Congress placed no geographical limitations on the Commission's activities and empowered it to investigate agricultural as well as industrial labor. When it completed its task, the Commission published an eleven volume set of its findings and conclusions which touched upon almost every phase of economic life in America.¹

Agricultural labor in the American Southwest, with special emphasis on tenant farming in Texas, ranked among the Commission's most extensive investigations. After a preliminary field study, the Commission selected a region in the southwest United States which extended in a four hundred mile radius from Dallas, Texas. There, according to the Commission's chief research expert in this area, Charles W. Holman, "the question of land ownership has become an imminent one and the landlord-tenant struggle has reached its most acute stage." In March of 1915 the Commissioners began their public hearings.

Most witnesses agreed with the previous report of Holman that concentration of property into fewer and fewer hands represented a major problem in Texas. Forty years before, the Commission learned, every Lone Star farmer possessed his own land. Now over half of them rented plots from landlords, many of whom were absentee owners. Steady increases in the population had intensified speculation and inflated real estate values. Large farmers drove out the small, while the high prices prevented tenants from rising into the home ownership class.²

These economic processes pushed a huge portion of the population into the status of permanent migratory croppers. When a tenant rented land he usually contracted to pay the owner one-third of the grain and one-fourth of the cotton produced. Landlords furnished only the premises; croppers had to supply all the necessary animals, tools, food and seed. As land values rose, however, owners demanded an ever larger share of the produce and some charged a flat cash rental. Merchants, who distrusted the ability of tenants to raise sufficient money, tightened up on credit. Banks and moneylenders boosted interest charges to as high as 60 per cent.³

Unmercifully squeezed, the croppers staged a brief political revolt in 1914 and elected colorful James E. Ferguson as Governor. A relative unknown who had never held public office, Ferguson promised to restrict all

NOTE: A similar treatment of this same topic occurs in the author's book, *Age of Industrial Violence* (pp. 198-203), published in 1966 by Columbia University Press. This article appears with the permission of Columbia University Press.

rentals to the original one-third/one-fourth basis. But Ferguson's law failed to aid the tenants. Land owners circumvented it through the device of a "bonus system." They charged the cropper for a variety of additional items such as partial payment of land taxes and rent for his house, and compelled him to purchase his tools and machinery from the owner.⁶¹

Commission hearings transformed these dry economic facts into human terms. A tenant farm couple appeared before the federal body. A non-drinking, hard-working family man of forty-five, Levi Stewart loved his work. For eighteen years he had wandered from farm to farm in an attempt to support his family. In his best year, Stewart had eked out a profit of fifteen dollars; over most of this period he found himself unable to break even. After eighteen years of constant toil, Levi Stewart had nothing to show but a debt of seven hundred dollars.

Crushed financially, Stewart felt disinherited politically. He had voted three times against those whom he thought had oppressed him, but he had lost faith in the ballot because "it did not look like it done any good. It seemed like it went their way, anyway." Stewart never bothered to take a legal grievance to court because he knew he could not obtain justice. "I was a poor man and the other fellow had the money." Nor did this unhappy man testify before the Commission voluntarily. They had to subpoena him because Stewart feared that owners would refuse to rent him land.⁶²

Perhaps the most poignant moment in the hearing occurred when Mrs. Levi (Beulah) Stewart took the stand. "A shrinking little woman with faded eyes and a broken body," as Charles Holman described her, "her figure was strained and quivered from nervous tension. The crowd stretched their necks to hear her thin little voice." Commission Chairman Frank P. Walsh vacated his chair in favor of wealthy Mrs. J. Borden Harriman, who had evinced a desire to question the witness. Even though the two women came from entirely different backgrounds, when Mrs. Harriman assumed the Chair a look of relief passed over Beulah Stewart's face. For already, Holman noted, "these two had become acquainted and had discussed matters that proved the universal sisterhood."

Beulah Stewart had known nothing but hard work and poverty all of her married life. During crop time, mid-February to mid-July, she and her husband toiled in the fields from daylight until after dark. Mrs. Stewart always worked in the fields until well into the fifth or sixth month of a pregnancy. In addition, she chopped wood, cooked and sewed for her large family. "I never had got a dress ready-made for myself in my life since I have been a married woman," she said. Finally the strain of her life took its measure; she collapsed from what she termed a "nervous breakdown" and could work no longer. "It is more than I can stand," she cried.⁶³

The Commission's printed volume on the Texas hearing was filled with letters from distressed and angry agrarians from all over the state. "At the present time we are in debt about \$400," wrote one farmer's wife. "There are a few Socialists here and I wish that the whole state was

⁶¹In 1921 the Fifth District Court of Civil Appeals at Dallas declared the law unconstitutional.

Socialist." "We have a few clothes, but no shoes on our feet," declared a farmer from Harleton. "Some renters have bread once a week, and they beg that." A preacher from Kerens emphatically proclaimed: "We must change the system from private to public property. . . . Jesus denounced the system under which rent, interest, and profit, is taken as robbery, and this is why the common people heard Him gladly." "I am in a hard shape," a Cuthand farmer asserted, "and I don't know how I am to make it through another year. If you can help us poor people out anyway, it will be highly appreciated." A letter from Blossom stated: "Most all of the people in here are worse than barefooted, and very near naked." "I want to tell you that I have lived honestly all my life," avowed a cropper from Oakwood, "never committed a crime in my life; but I am ready to do something that will help my starving family; if it takes my life, let it be."

Direct testimony before the Commission abundantly disclosed the growing social tensions in Texas. Arthur Le Sueur, Vice President and Dean of the Law School of the People's College, claimed that "the class spirit . . . is today permeating the entire agricultural world." An infinitely small number of bankers, he contended, lived off the "niggardly, slavish incomes" of millions of farmers. Attorney and one-time Populist and Socialist, Judge E. O. Meitzen asserted that absentee landlordism made accommodation between the classes impossible. "If you try to harmonize the interest of exploiter and exploited," he asserted, "you are trying to harmonize the interests of a hawk and a dove." Farmers, Meitzen noted, will endure privation more patiently than those wage earners who now talk about a revolutionary class struggle. Nevertheless, he warned, when the agrarians rebel, "it will take more than all of the lawyers and bankers in the United States to stand between them and their goal . . . when they move . . . they will move so that institutions will go down like tenpins before them."

Witnesses who favored the established order blamed the unrest on demagoguery and ignorance. "There is no tragedy in the tenant situation here," claimed Judge and landowner M. M. Brooks, "and there was none until the political Jack Cades stirred this thing up!" These charlatans, he complained, "go running around the country talking about the tragedy of the tenant farmers when we were in absolute harmony." Many croppers, Brooks claimed, wore "Stetson hats and fine shoes and just as good clothes as you and I." Colonel E. W. Kirkpatrick, President of the Industrial Congress of Texas, blamed the state's plight on a lack of proper instruction in scientific farming. He blasted the newspapers for not stressing agricultural education. "If they would keep all this baseball foolishness out of the papers," Kirkpatrick declared, "and put in a little of this home sense, it would be a good deal better."⁷

Reaction to the hearing varied. Critics charged the Commission with inadequate coverage, bias, and needless agitation. Chairman Walsh considered these sessions "simply grand," but he along with others complained that conservative newspapers had suppressed many of the inquiry's most salient features. Governor Ferguson praised the federal inquiry as "one of the most patriotic and one of the most far-reaching movements on the part of the Government that it has taken in a long time." If such a commission visited the state two decades ago, he asserted, "Texas would be 20 years advanced."⁸

Texas shook Mrs. Harriman deeply. When Beulah Stewart testified, she recalled, "my own back seemed to ache." "The misery of the tenant farmers made me feel that the social scheme of things had gone wrong at the root." When the Commission rested for a few days, Mrs. Harriman could not bear to remain in Dallas. "All the delightful company there seemed curiously unsatisfying," she wrote, "when one knew of the land problem that was the skeleton-in-the-Texas-closet."⁹

These hearings highlighted the growing class discontent which had erupted throughout much of the Southwest. In a special report to the Commission, economist Peter A. Speek noted that Socialist leaders in Texas rejoiced over their swelling numbers. In fact, they considered Texas the cornerstone of their movement. Nearby Oklahoma, in 1910, already boasted more paid-up Socialists than any other state in the union. In one year alone (1909-1910) party enrollment had more than quadrupled; by 1912 over 16 per cent of Oklahoma's voters cast presidential ballots for Eugene Debs.¹⁰

In their *Final Report* the Commissioners recommended several steps toward solution of the land-tenant problem. They first suggested development through legislation of "longer time farm leases" to facilitate fair rents and security of tenure. In addition, they called for national and state land commissions to function as "land courts with powers to hear evidence given by landlords and tenants" on matters such as fair rents, fixity of tenure and improvements made by tenants on landlords' property. These courts, their report continued, should also operate farm bureaus to act as agents between landlords and tenants in the distribution of tenant labor, the preparation of contracts, the assistance of home-seeking farmers, and the distribution of seasonal labor. Better credit facilities through government assistance and cooperative organizations of farmers and tenants ranked as the third major suggestion. Finally, the *Report* advocated revision of the tax laws so as to exempt all improvements, while taxing all unused land at its full rental value.⁵

Although a direct connection cannot be claimed, some of the ideas in the *Final Report* eventually found expression in law during later periods. The activities of the Farm Security Administration in areas such as low interest rate loans, encouragement of tenure improvement through long term leases, and development of homestead projects moved toward fulfillment of Commission goals.¹¹

During the Progressive era, the Commission had accomplished the most sweeping study of American industrial life of its generation. Many ideas in its *Final Report* respecting industrial labor eventually became law during Wilson's administration and particularly during the New Deal. In Texas, the Commission held the first public hearing ever conducted by representatives of the federal government on the land-tenant question. While the Commission suggested several remedies, some of which were adopted by a later generation, its chief contribution in its own time was to focus public

⁵This final measure closely resembled a plank in the Texas Renters Union platform of 1912 which called for a tax to the full rental value on "all lands held for speculation or exploitation."

attention on the plight of a submerged and almost forgotten class of Americans. The United States, Charles Holman observed, "was perhaps the last of the leading nations to recognize that there is a need of fixing upon a national land policy." As a result of the Commission's survey of agrarian discontent in Progressive Texas, "For the first time the attention of the American people was called to the necessity of giving serious thought to the formulation of national and state policies as to land."¹²

NOTES

¹U. S. Congress, Senate Document 415, *Industrial Relations Final Report and Testimony*, 64 Congress 1st Session (1916) vols. I-XI. Hereinafter referred to as *Testimony* with appropriate volume number.

²Charles W. Holman, "The Tenant Farmer," *Survey*, XXXIV (April 17, 1915), 62-64; *Testimony*, IX, 8951-8958, contains quotation.

³*Ibid.*, 9004-9005, 8959-8961, 9050; *Ibid.*, X, 9095-9097.

⁴Holman, *Survey*, *op. cit.*, 63-64; *Testimony*, IX, 8966, 8981, 9050, 8957, 8934; *Testimony*, X, 9193.

⁵*Testimony*, IX, 9006-9036; Holman, *loc. cit.*, p. 62

⁶Holman, *ibid.*; *Testimony*, IX, 9038-9044, contains Mrs. Stewart's quotation.

⁷*Testimony*, X 9206-9286; *Testimony*, IX, 8974-8989.

⁸Walsh to William Marion Reedy, April 17, 1915, contains first quotation, Walsh to Editor, *Dallas Dispatch*, March 31, 1915, Papers of Frank P. Walsh, New York Public Library; *Testimony*, IX, 8970, contains second quotation.

⁹Mrs. J. Borden Harriman, *From Pinafores to Politics* (New York: Harcourt-Brace Co., 1932), pp. 172-176.

¹⁰P. A. Speek, "Notes on . . . Texas," Oct. 17-19, 1914, Papers of U. S. Commission on Industrial Relations, National Archives, Proceedings of the Socialist State Convention of Oklahoma, Dec., 1914, Oklahoma City, N. P., pp. 20-24; Ira D. Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement, 1897-1912* (New York; Columbia University Press, 1952), p. 364; David A. Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1958), pp. 34-36.

¹¹*Final Report of the Commission on Industrial Relations* (Washington, D. C.: Barnard Miller Print, Chicago, 1915) pp. 127-134.

¹²Holman, *loc. cit.*, p. 64.