

## **The machine in agriculture**

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The formidable crisis which accompanied the introduction of machinery into industry at the beginning of last century, is well known. From day to day thousands of workmen were thrown out of work upon the pavement of the towns, without money and without bread. As the factory chimneys rose, as the progress resulting from the slow elaboration of ages, and produced by the successive efforts of past generations, replaced the less docile, less rapid and more costly hand of man in the daily labour by the brutal strength of steam and electricity, cries of poverty and anguish came from the breasts of the workmen violently expropriated from their living, hunted from the workshops by the discoveries of science, by the onward march of mankind. It is remembered to what extremities misery forced the crowds of famished men, who threw themselves upon and broke into pieces the machines which had been substituted for them.

The same events which happened nearly a hundred years ago in industry are being repeated to-day in agriculture. Machinery is being introduced everywhere in our fields. The consequence of this new state of things, if it does not end as formerly in violence of the worst kind, is nevertheless most important and most dangerous to social life.

It is not only from to-day, however, that the machine has made its appearance in agriculture: twenty-five or thirty years ago the use of the steam threshing machine became general and replaced (by the aid of the traction engine which takes it from farm to farm) the antiquated threshing with the flail to the barn floor which occupied an entire staff of workers on all important farms during the whole of the winter. This transformation, however, was hardly felt because it occurred at a time when agriculture was at the height of its prosperity, when cultivators had not yet passed that crisis which has weighed upon them for so long a time and has caused them to modify more or less completely their old manner of life and ancient customs.

During the agricultural crisis the landowners and farmers have been led to cut down expenses, and they have sought to restrict in particular that item which costs the most—the labourer. Wherever possible they have abandoned the culture of cereals in favour of meadow and pasture for which practically no labour is required. It is indeed to be remarked that cattle raising has never suffered so much from market depreciation as the production of wheat, oats or rye. In many districts to-day only sufficient corn is sown to provide the straw necessary for wintering the cattle.

Cultivation, which was the great occupation of the rural population in former times, is much restricted to-day. Enforced idleness during a considerable portion of the year; indeed, scarcely, except at the times of haymaking and harvesting, is the agricultural labourer sure of finding work. During these two periods of hard labour, the peasants, in several countries, have sought to earn more than in the past in order to compensate by a temporary but suitable wage for the long days of unemployment that they suffer during the winter and autumn. Conflicts, declared or veiled, have arisen recently between farmers and labourers, and they become each day more and more numerous. In order to oppose the demands of the labourers, the masters shake before them the spectre of the machine. "If you create difficulties for us", they say, "we will purchase machines. Then you will have no more work and you will earn nothing. It is preferable for you that you accept what we propose, even though you find it insufficient."

A large number of farmers have passed from threats to acts. With the openly avowed aim of undermining the least manifestations of energy and combination among the agricultural labourers, they have purchased mowers, patent rakes and self binders, which enable them with an extremely reduced staff to take in their crops in a few days.

The development of machinery in our fields became generally noticeable four or five years ago, and it grows more and more in importance as rural knowledge becomes awakened. It is the direct reply of the exploiters to the demands of the exploited. It must also be remembered that the employers have been helped by recent improvements in agricultural machinery. Formerly the machines consisted only of a few parts, and when one of these was put out of action during operations (by the shock of a stone for instance) it was necessary to stop work and await a considerable time for an urgent repair. At the present time, however, the new American machines are composed of many interchangeable parts, and when one of them is put out of truth or broken it is only necessary to unscrew a bolt and replace the part on the spot. The interruption of work is scarcely noticeable.

These various reasons are the cause that, this year in particular, complete train loads of harvesting machinery were to be met with in the stations of all agricultural districts. Everywhere, from every side, the agricultural labourer saw hitherto unknown machines arrive in the fields to displace him, and a dark anger takes possession of him as he sees these machines progressing and working by means of which it is designed to starve him into submission.

There have as yet been no acts of violence or grave and general disorders; nevertheless it sometimes happens, in the shadow of the hedge and under cover of night, that a machine left in the fields is destroyed.

As immediate consequence, the advent of machinery will hasten still more the exodus of the inhabitants of our hamlets and villages towards the towns. The periods of unemployment already so terrible will become intolerable, and the able-bodied of our country proletariat will be compelled to fly toward other destinies, to go into the great centres of population to find again the same poverty that they will have left behind in their cottages.

It is always said that “agriculture is short of hands”. No. It is agriculture that no longer employs the hands which are at its disposal. The rural proletariat in the literal sense of the word is no longer able to live. The advent of machinery has given it the final blow; so true is it that, under capitalism, the most useful discoveries, the most remarkable inventions, every progress of science, if they profit a few, are nevertheless for the others—the victims—a cause of poverty and ruin.

(translated from *L'Action*)

(September 1906)