

# The Farmers Form a United Front

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(Miss Herbst's article on the historic Farmers Conference in Chicago should, of course, have been published much earlier. The circumstances which prevented its appearance before, and which makes it possible for the NEW MASSES to present it now, are set forth in the correspondence between Miss Herbst and the New Republic, on page 22 of this issue.—The Editors.)

**S**EVEN HUNDRED AND TWO farmers from 36 states representing 58 farm organizations applauded their own program at the Farmers Second National Conference at Chicago for cash relief, cancellation of debts, against evictions, and other radical measures aimed directly at helping the "busted farmer." Probably most of the delegates present in People's Auditorium, Nov. 15 to 18, had voted for Franklin D. Roosevelt.

A year ago the Farmers First National Conference at Washington rolled up only 238 delegates from 26 states. The chief demands had been for a moratorium and against evictions. After less than a year of the New Deal this group representing the militant farmers of the country whether from conservative Grange or militant United Farmers League, cheered the demand for cancellation and adopted it unanimously.

These farmers have been picketing roads and stopping sheriff sales for a year. In Nebraska they have some forty thousand farmers. Negro croppers in the black belt, 5,000 strong, have so entrenched themselves in one section that sheriffs cannot get white deputies to go in and smash them. Some of the delegates have been in jail, 75 percent of them are in debt, 39 percent of them cannot pay their taxes, half of them have participated in sheriff sales or other militant action. Those who are still free from debt are like the farm woman from a Grange in South Dakota who said to me, "We see the future, we are soon going to be in the same boat with the poorest."

In this convention Negro share cropper sits beside poor white farmer. Whether the speaker is John Sumption of South Dakota, dirt farmer of old American stock, militant Snyder of Oregon, Menonite Artemus Stover of Pennsylvania or Negro or white cropper from the south, the story is the same.

Drought, grasshoppers, lower than production prices, evictions and debts have united these different elements into one fighting front.

Armed with government statistics and surveys, these farmers went into a four-day study session. Today there is no such critter as "a farmer." Perhaps he disappeared with rugged individualism. There is rich farmer, middle farmer and poor farmer, the rich and the poor farmer highly antagonistic and the middle farmer either neutral or rapidly becoming poor. If the farm income for 1933 is a billion dollars more than 1932 the Chicago farmers will tell you it did not filter down to them or the class they represent. Nor did the hundred million paid to the cotton farmers of the south for plowed-under land go to the Negro or white cropper. It went to the landlords and the creditors of the cropper. The rise of prices in July could not help the farmer who had no crop to sell, who had parted with his crop out of necessity earlier to the landlord or scalper. The acreage curtailment plan cannot help the tenant farmer, numbering almost half the total number of farmers. The hog reduction plan has brought no increase to the poor farmer and has appalled him with its waste. The back-to-the-home plan can only mean he must accept peasantry.

"Hunger," says the farmer, "makes a man think." On the floor they joke good humoredly at the city fellow's idea of the dumb farmer, "brother to the ox." But if the type farmer has disappeared, so has the type city fellow. The old blanket antagonism between farm and city is divided. Now the poor farmer sees the bankers, insurance companies, railroads, processors who get the rise in price on the farm products, the milk distributor who gets the spread in milk, and he also sees the city unemployed and poor who are in the same boat with himself.

This is a new self-conscious type of farmer meeting at Chicago. Talk to him on any subject relating to his condition and he has a confident, militant answer. The New Deal did nothing for him except to make him realize where he stands. The A. A. A. theory of surplus production he ironically twists into surplus-starvation. The blue eagle has been

to the poor farmer nothing but a blue buzzard. Perhaps no other class of people is in such a favorable position as the farmer to see the contradiction in the New Deal surplus production plan. The frugal farmer has raised food all his life, he has been drilled by the government on every device to get the most from the soil. Now he is ordered to turn under crops and to destroy hogs. He also knows there are millions unemployed in the cities and many hungry on the farms. Some of these town men came out to help the farmer on the picket lines. In Sioux City they did not spill milk on the roads during the strike but gave it to the unemployed. That the government talks "surplus" under such conditions makes the farmer feel he is living in a world absolutely crazy and that officials are proceeding with straight faces does not restore his confidence.

If the cotton acreage production plan for 1934 is put through it will take 15 million acres out of production. If the tenants who have been raising cotton on this land are dispossessed, 800,000 families will be evicted from their homes. The 20 percent acreage cut proposed in the Corn Belt will not help the tenant farmer when the owner gets the check. Croppers' checks in the south go first to the landlord who takes his half and then deducts from the balance what the cropper "owes" him. This merely reduces the old debt and gives the cropper nothing for seed or feed. If the landlord leaves anything, town creditors get at what is left before the cropper does. The rise in cotton in July did not benefit the cropper or poor farmer who had long before had his cotton taken from him for "debts."

In a Department of Agriculture survey taken over 6,383 individual farms, the average yearly income per family showed up at \$66, not counting interest on mortgages and other debts amounting to \$173 a family. The survey covered farms of 233 acres to 50 acres. The average farm in this country is 157 acres and there are 2½ million farms of 49 acres or under. The government plan of acreage reduction contemplates dispossessing two million now on farms.

What will happen to these people? This conference represents the farmers slated to go. They may be pushed to