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# **WORKERS, GROWERS AND MONOPOLISTS:**

## ***The "Labour Problem" in the Alberta Beet Sugar Industry During the 1930s***

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Unions of agricultural workers have been rare in Canada. Although the agricultural sector was the largest single component of the Canadian labour force until the 1940s, a majority of this group was always made up of farm operators whose ownership of land set them apart from traditional definitions of a working class, however miserable their lives and working conditions and however low their cash incomes. But even those agricultural workers who sold their labour to earn their living remained largely untouched by labour unions. Isolated on farms, they were written off as unorganizable by the trade union movement and with the exception of the Industrial Workers of the World no labour union made a serious attempt to enroll farm hands. An exception to this rule was provided by those unusual situations in which agricultural work closely paralleled an industrial occupation. One of the best examples of this was the sugar beet growing area of Southern Alberta, where farmers hired workers to thin, cultivate and harvest beets planted on small acreages of irrigated land. Faced with a situation more like factory work than work on a prairie farm, beet workers formed a radical industrial union during the 1930s and struck against their employers. The 1935 and 1936 strikes of the Beet Workers' Industrial Union were a phenomenon for Western Canada, a class struggle *within* agriculture, unlike the "agrarian protest" against the National Policy which has been such an enduring theme in Canadian historiography.

## I

The sugar beet industry in Alberta began in 1902 when Jesse Knight of Provo, Utah built a factory for processing beets into sugar at Raymond, twenty miles south of Lethbridge. Knight was a devout Latter Day Saint, as were many of the settlers in the area, and his motivation in creating the Knight Sugar Company was not to create "a commercial enterprise so much as a benefit for the settlers of the surrounding countryside."<sup>1</sup> A further spur to this philanthropy was a promise of a twelve year exemption from taxation and a bonus of 50 cents for each hundredweight of sugar his factory produced. But despite the tax holiday and the subsidy provided by the provincial and Dominion governments, the company was not a financial success. Many reasons were advanced for the factory's closing in 1914, but all could be reduced to one common denominator, the "labour problem". When the sugar beet was introduced to Canada, the labour-intensive nature of beet growing was held to be one of its benefits, a way to keep boys and girls on the farm and prevent rural depopulation. As the editor of one Western paper rhapsodized, "children working but a few hours a day participate with pleasure in a task which helps themselves, helps father, and upbuilds health by free outdoor life. . . . Neighbourhood and community are better altogether."<sup>2</sup>

The less pleasant realities of sugar beet husbandry soon became well known to those farmers who tried to grow them. Beet cultivation was tedious, back-aching stoop labour, and a farmer and his family had to sweat long hours under the summer sun for every acre of beets they produced. Until the 1950s sugar beets were grown from a multigerm seed which produced a bunch rather than a single beet plant. Once the seed germinated the bunch had to be hand thinned until only one plant remained. To perform this task properly a worker had to crawl along the rows on his knees. Then the tiny seedlings had to be weeded — sometimes as many as three times during the growing season — for the beets never grow tall enough to kill the weeds by cutting off their sunshine. Finally in the autumn the crop had to be harvested by hand, knocked together to remove excess dirt and "topped" — the leaves and crown cut away — to be ready for shipment to the sugar factory. These operations could not be done mechanically. Beets could be planted with a seed drill but all subsequent work had to be done with hand tools. About 115 hours of hand labour was required to produce an acre of beets, more than ten times the labour required for an acre of grain. Most farmers who tried beets gave them up after a season or two. Those who tried to hire workers to thin, hoe and harvest their beets found that most farm hands would do almost anything else

<sup>1</sup> O.S. Longman, "The Beet Sugar Industry in Alberta" (unpublished mss., Archives of the Glenbow-Alberta Institute [Glenbow], 1960), p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Strathmore and Bow Valley Standard*, 3 December 1910. For similar enthusiastic comments see the testimony given before the House of Commons Tariff Commission, 1905, published as *The Beet Sugar Industry* (Ottawa 1909), pp. 45-54.

before they would accept beet work.<sup>3</sup>



*Thinning a large beet acreage, 1930's. (Glenbow-Alberta Institute)*



*Harvesting sugar beets, 1930's. (Manitoba Archives)*

<sup>3</sup> For descriptions of the effort necessary to cultivate sugar beets see Franklin A. Harris, *The Sugar Beet in America* (New York 1925), pp. 44-48, 117-125, 149-157; Heather Robertson, *Sugar Farmers of Manitoba* (Altona 1968), pp. 127-150; L. S.

Thus the Knight Sugar Company was never able to obtain enough beets to operate at an efficient level, even with an attractive price of \$5 a ton. Beet acreage in Alberta reached a maximum of 5,200 in 1908 and then decreased annually.<sup>4</sup> The company tried to provide its own beets by planting as many as 2,000 acres on its own and hiring labour to work them, but it had no more success than the local farmers. Few whites wanted to hoe sugar beets. Japanese and Chinese labour could not be obtained in sufficient quantities without arousing community opposition to the importation of Orientals. Indians were less productive, sometimes damaged plants at the critical thinning stage and could not be counted upon to remain on the job throughout the season.<sup>5</sup> When the twelve year tax exemption ended in 1914, the Knight Sugar Company's Board of Directors voted to cease operations, and the factory was dismantled and moved to the United States.<sup>6</sup>



*Japanese Contract Labourers of the Knight Sugar Co., 1904.  
(Glenbow-Alberta Institute)*

Arrington, *Beet Sugar in the West: A History of the Utah-Idaho Sugar Company* (Seattle 1966), pp. 23-37. The estimate of the number of hours of labour per acre is from F.R. Taylor, "Twenty-five Years Show Many Improvements" in *Alberta Sugar Beet Growers, Twenty-fifth Annual Report* (Lethbridge 1949), pp. 11-12. Mechanization came slowly to the beet industry. Machines that could handle the beets without damage at all stages of the growing cycle were slowly developed, but until complete mechanization could be achieved there were always "bottlenecks" at which large concentrations of labour were required. To be available when needed, workers usually demanded a season's employment.

<sup>4</sup> Alberta Department of Agriculture, *A Historical Series of Agricultural Statistics for Alberta* (Edmonton 1971), pp. 22-23. Complaints about the inability to obtain beets can be found in the Minutes of the Knight Sugar Company, Glenbow. See especially the annual report of E. P. Ellison, manager for 1907. For an editorial comment see *Canadian Farm Implements*, April 1911, p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> Glenbow, Papers of the Knight Sugar Company, E. P. Ellison to John Hallstead, 22 February 1908, J. E. Ellison to Joseph Friedl, 28 January 1913; *Beet Sugar Industry*, testimony of E. P. Ellison, p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> *Alberta's Sweetest Industry*, pamphlet in Glenbow, Canadian Pacific Railway Collection, f.876.

A decade passed before the industry could be revived. The agricultural depression which followed the Great War convinced Southern Alberta farmers that they needed a cash crop which would be less soil exhaustive and which could make weed control easier. In addition more irrigated land was available to make possible greater tonnage of beets per acre. Boards of Trade in Raymond and Cardston initiated beet growing projects to convince prospective investors that farmers would grow enough beets to support a new factory. The *Lethbridge Herald* promised editorially that a new sugar factory would have "beets shooting in from all over the horizon", and a group of farmers who promised to devote land to beet growing lent support to this pledge.<sup>7</sup> The stumbling block to the creation of a factory was the question of an adequate supply of cheap labour. When the Utah-Idaho Sugar Company agreed to begin operating in Raymond for the 1925 season it did so on the understanding that not only would there be sufficient beet production but that the prospective beet growers would assume full responsibility for providing their own labour.<sup>8</sup>

The growers could give this assurance because the Canadian Pacific Railway had suggested what they hoped would be the solution to the "labour problem." Under an agreement with the Dominion Government, the railway was given the privilege of importing immigrants of the "non-preferred nationalities" — those from Eastern Central and Southern Europe — if farm work could be guaranteed for them on arrival in Canada.<sup>9</sup> When the idea of importing Europeans to do beet work had been first proposed by James Colley, the C.P.R.'s Assistant Superintendent of Colonization, not all farmers accepted it. At a meeting of the United Farmers of Alberta in Coaldale, Colley was "sharply challenged" by those who felt that "it would be detrimental . . . to the country to import a class of settlers whose standards of living are so much lower than our own."<sup>10</sup> But the alternatives — Japanese labour or no sugar beet factory — were even less palatable. The "little yellow fellows" were specifically rejected and the C.P.R.'s Colonist's Service Association at Lethbridge began to transport Eastern Europeans to Alberta for the beet "campaign" of 1925.<sup>11</sup> Arrivals continued throughout the 1920s

<sup>7</sup> *Lethbridge Herald*, 29 January 1923. This Association became the basis of the Alberta Cooperative Beet Growers' Association, which represented the growers in their dealings with labour, the sugar company and with governments. Since the Association was not a true cooperative and did not pool production for sale the "Cooperative" was later deleted.

<sup>8</sup> In its American operations the Utah-Idaho Company, like most other American Beet Sugar Companies, was responsible for providing workers to their growers at a pre-arranged cost.

<sup>9</sup> See J.B. Hedges, *Building the Canadian West* (New York 1939), ch. XII for a discussion of this agreement.

<sup>10</sup> *Lethbridge Herald*, 13 February 1925.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, "No Need for Japs", 22 May 1925; interview with Mr. A. E. Palmer, Lethbridge, 1958, quoted in Longman, "Beet Sugar Industry in Alberta", p. 464.

until over 1,200 European immigrants were employed as beet labour by 1929, and beet acreage underwent a parallel expansion given a reliable supply of workers.

Just as it differed from the rest of prairie agriculture, the beet industry differed from the simple worker-capitalist dichotomy of Marxist class struggle. Like the nineteenth century British agriculture described in Hobsbawm and Rudé's study of rural class relationships, *Captain Swing*, there were three classes in the sugar beet system.<sup>12</sup> At the top was the "aristocracy", Canadian Sugar Factories — as the Utah-Idaho Company called its Alberta subsidiary. With an absolute monopoly over all beet sugar production in the province the company owned the indispensable means of making and marketing the finished product. Next in line came the growers, who signed contracts to deliver the total tonnage of beets produced on a certain acreage of land at a price stipulated by the company. At the bottom were the beet workers, who signed contracts with the growers to cultivate and harvest an acreage of beets. Contracts provided for a fixed fee for each stage of the cultivation, with a "hold back" of about 30 percent which was not paid until all operations had been completed. A bonus system was incorporated into the contract based on the tonnage of beets grown per acre, to encourage workers to strive for maximum production.<sup>13</sup>

During the 1925 to 1930 period it was possible for a beet worker to earn a good living at his trade. His work was unpleasant but if he could handle the average contract of ten acres a year he could earn more than \$200 for his efforts. Beet thinning and weeding was finished in late July, and since harvest did not begin until early October, a beet worker could add another \$100 to his annual income by working in the grain harvest in August and September. A beet contract also stipulated that a worker be provided with a "habitable house" for himself and his family. Unlike other farm workers, beet labourers provided their own food. It was customary, however, for growers to allow their contract workers an area for a vegetable garden and space to raise a cow, a hog or a few chickens.<sup>14</sup>

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Nationalities most represented among the newcomers were Hungarians, followed by Yugoslavs and Czechs. The C.P.R. also brought Mennonite settlers into the area, although the Mennonites usually worked as share-croppers on rented land or were assisted to make small land purchases by the Mennonite Colonization Board, established by the C.P.R.'s Department of Colonization.

<sup>12</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm and George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London 1969).

<sup>13</sup> Sample labour contracts can be found in Glenbow, C.P.R. Collection, f.685 and in Glenbow, Beet Sugar Papers [BSP], through various files. The "hold back" system was introduced in 1928, after high wages in the grain harvest made workers reluctant to return to dig beets. There were eventually three types of contract: straight cash contract, as described above; a tonnage contract which paid for each ton of beets produced; and a crop share contract which gave the worker a share of the value of the beets produced. The first examples of crop share contracts do not appear in BSP until 1939. Most workers could not afford to wait for the sale of the crop to receive their pay

## II

The depression of the 1930s upset the relationships among sugar company, growers, and workers. Its first effect was to force out the Utah-Idaho Sugar Company and in 1931 control of Canadian Sugar Factories passed to E. T. Rogers' B.C. Sugar. Rogers had a monopoly of cane sugar production in Western Canada, and his initial intention seems to have been to shut the factory in Raymond and eliminate beet sugar competition. The Utah-Idaho Sugar Company, however, was "more or less controlled by the Latter Day Saint Church", which did not want to see its members in Southern Alberta without a place to sell their beets. When Utah-Idaho insisted as a condition of the sale that the factory operate for another ten years, Rogers determined to make a profit on his new Alberta operation.<sup>16</sup> The price his factory paid for beets was not determined on an open market as the beet growers had no alternative purchaser for their crop, and as the operator of the only game in town Rogers could make his own rules. By reducing the price he paid for his raw material — sugar beets — he was able to put Canadian Sugar Factories into the black with a 20 per cent profit in the first year after the takeover.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the reductions, beet growers had no alternative to growing beets. The prices of grains and animal products had declined even more precipitously and growers actually increased the acreage they devoted to beets in 1932, the year following the takeover. Their response to the price cut was a traditional agrarian protest which took the form of pressure group action by the Growers' Association to obtain government help to establish a competitive beet sugar factory in Southern Alberta. The Growers' Association tried to convince the Dominion Government to rebate half of the two cent sugar tax to beet sugar producers, while leaving the tax on cane sugar untouched.<sup>17</sup> This advantage, it was argued, would attract a second factory and the resulting competition would increase beet prices. When their attempts to have the tax removed were unsuccessful, the beet growers responded in the outraged tones typical of Western farmers, denouncing the "big interests" — the cane sugar

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and chose the cash option.

<sup>16</sup> See Glenbow, C.P.R. Collection, Art Dahl to J. E. Brownlee, 13 February 1929, f.1017. Beetworkers, like most agricultural workers, lived in quarters that are better described as shacks than houses. Growers provided them with whatever was available — an abandoned chicken coop, an unused granary, or what was left of the house once occupied by the grower and his family.

<sup>16</sup> Longman, "Beet Sugar Industry in Alberta", pp. 432, 463-5.

<sup>16</sup> Glenbow, BSP, J. S. Stewart, MP, to J. M. Macdonnell, MP, 20 June 1933, f.2. The weighted average beet price for 1925 to 1930, when Utah-Idaho operated the factory, was \$6.88 a ton. From 1931 to 1934 the weighted average price was \$6.01 a ton. Authors' calculations using data from *Agricultural Statistics for Alberta*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>17</sup> Glenbow, BSP, W. F. Russell to R. B. Bennett and H. H. Stevens, 28 November 1932, f.1.



producers — which had “too much influence” in Ottawa.<sup>18</sup> W. F. Russell, secretary of the Growers’ Association Development Committee, described the situation as “war” and promised that the beet growers would “keep on fighting until we root out the evil.”<sup>19</sup>

One Albertan even warned R. B. Bennett of the danger that the growers, although “not fundamentally red”, would become easy converts for the radical Farmers Unity League.<sup>20</sup> The F.U.L., organized in 1930, was the Communist Party of Canada’s “mass organization” devoted to the Western farmer. The League was never made a priority of the party, which concentrated on the urban industrial worker, but it was an active and vocal critic of the established farm organizations as well as of capitalist agriculture. The League found most of its members among non-Anglo-Saxon farmers in the northern park belt, where it was responsible for organizing several farm delivery strikes and for preventing evictions with large demonstrations. With the price of beets declining, the F.U.L. moved to establish a foothold in Southern Alberta.

But it was not the *petit bourgeois* growers who provided receptive audiences for the Communist organizers, it was their beet workers. Squeezed by Rogers Sugar the growers squeezed the final link in the chain, the beet worker. Between 1931 and 1934 the contract rate for beet labour declined from \$21 an acre to \$17, despite the fact that the productivity of each worker, as measured by the number of tons of beets produced on each acre, increased. The worker’s share of the farmer’s return from the beet crop was reduced from an average of 38.6% in the 1925-30 period to 28.3% between 1931 and 1934, and during the autumn of 1934 rumours spread that the Growers’ Association intended to make further wage cuts in 1935.<sup>21</sup> This reduction in wages would have been bad enough in normal times, but because of the glut of farm workers available and the masses of urban unemployed, it was impossible for beet workers to supplement their incomes with harvest work. It is not surprising that the initial impetus for organization came from the Communist Party. Communists had been active in the coal fields of the Lethbridge and Drumheller areas and as early as 1928 there were complaints about “agitators” trying to “discourage men from accepting [sugar beet] work on the regular contract basis.”<sup>22</sup> The F.U.L. conducted a series of rallies in the beet growing areas over the winter of 1934-5, rallies directed by George Palmer, an English war

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Russell to J. S. Stewart, 27 March 1933, f.2.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, J. Sutton to R. B. Bennett, 8 March 1934, f.10. On the F.U.L. see Ivan Avakumovic, “The Communist Party of Canada and the Prairie Farmer: the Interwar Years” in David J. Bercuson, ed., *Western Perspectives I* (Toronto 1974), pp. 78-87.

<sup>21</sup> This is a weighted average, calculated from contract rates in Glenbow, BSP, f.1-4. Rumours of further cuts are reported in *The Beet Worker*, 11 May 1936. Various copies of this paper may be found in Glenbow, BSP.

<sup>22</sup> Glenbow, C.P.R. Collection, James Colley to C. A. Van Scoy, 30 June 1928, f.727.

veteran who had been active in the One Big Union and was now the Party's chief propagandist in the frustrating debate against Social Credit fantasies in the Alberta countryside.<sup>23</sup> Palmer found the going slow with the growers at whom his work was aimed, and as wage labourers, beet workers were constitutionally excluded from membership in the F.U.L. Instead, the workers were organized into the Beet Workers' Industrial Union which affiliated with the Workers' Unity League.

The president of the new B.W.I.U. was Peter Meronik, a Ukrainian coal miner from Lethbridge, a Communist and former organizer for the Mine Workers' Union of Canada. Blacklisted in coal, Meronik made a living teaching music, and helping out on his father's beet farm near Coaldale. According to Meronik, when the beet workers "found out I had a little bit of union history they asked me if I'd be their President to present their demands." Meronik brought to the job the firm conviction that only through higher productivity and better co-operation between worker and farmer could a higher standard of living for the beet labourers be obtained. As he admitted, this approach sometimes came into conflict with the "gut" reaction of the labourers against their immediate oppressors:

[with] the beet workers [it] was always "Fight the farmer! Fight the farmer!", and I was trying to teach them to educate the farmer. . . . Well, having a background as a grower on our farm . . . I seen that the fight wasn't between the growers and the beet workers, it was a fight with the sugar company that was getting excessive profits.<sup>24</sup>

The strategy of the B.W.I.U. was predicated upon this basic assumption of a unity of interest between farmer and worker. While withholding, or threatening to withhold the labour of its members from the farmers, the union nevertheless appealed to the latter to join with it in a joint struggle with the sugar company, the "real" enemy which the union could not confront directly. These tactics reflected the prevailing ideological conceptions of the Communist Party in the 1930s, which considered the bulk of the farming population to be a potentially revolutionary class. This was the rationale behind the formation of the Farmers' Unity League. As the Party moved into the Popular Front era in the mid-thirties, even the "middle class" came to be included among the progressive forces in society, an ideological twist which could not help but reinforce the idea of farmer/labour unity against monopoly.

The decision to appeal to the growers for unity against the sugar company perhaps doomed the B.W.I.U. to failure from the moment of its creation, for there is little to suggest that the Communist Party's assessment of the potential militancy of the growers was realistic. The only beet growers who sympathized with the Communist-led F.U.L., and thus with the

<sup>23</sup> *The Worker*, 11 May 1935. Palmer ran as a Communist in Drumheller in the provincial election of 1935.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Peter Meronik by the authors, 19 June 1977, at Coleman, Alberta. A transcript of this interview is available in the Glenbow Archives.

B.W.I.U., were small operators, some of whom were tenants, who did their beet labour themselves.<sup>25</sup> The only articulate radical among the more successful growers was W. H. Childress of Iron Springs, whose name is to be found in the ranks of the most efficient beet producers, Class One of the "Fifteen Ton Club".<sup>26</sup> An article by Childress appeared in the Communist Party's newspaper *The Worker* in early 1935. Childress described the beet industry in Alberta as a "sugar swindle" in which farmers, beet workers and sugar factory workers were annually fleeced by the C.P.R. and the Rogers Sugar Company.<sup>27</sup> But only a tiny minority of his fellow growers could have been prepared to accept Childress' analysis or to share his views on co-operation with the workers. Nor was the Rogers Sugar Company — not the most popular of institutions in Southern Alberta — about to sit idle while a working class organization led by the Communist Party challenged its hegemony by appealing to the grievances of the beet growers. The Company actively worked to divide grower and beet worker to enable itself to emerge ultimately with its control of the industry intact.

The B.W.I.U. presented its demands for \$22 an acre for beet labour and improved living quarters to the Growers' Association at its February Convention. The Growers' original tactic was to deny that the B.W.I.U. existed and to offer beet workers, on an individual basis, a continuation of the \$17 rate that had been in effect in 1934.<sup>28</sup> Peter Meronik's claim that the Union had the support of the "vast majority" of the 2,500 beet workers is substantiated by what happened next. Unwilling to work any longer at starvation wages, hundreds of beet workers refused to sign their individual contracts for the 1935 season. Reports of roving mobs of trade unionists tramping through the countryside enlisting or intimidating other workers into their ranks spread throughout the area. Even more alarming were stories of striking workmen making threats against persons and property. One Taber man wrote the Premier that rebellious "Roumanians, Bulgarians, Slaves [sic] and some others" were "threatening to do away with anyone who attempts to go to work . . . and to burn any farmer's home who hires any other labour." Bleakly he predicted that "From the present outlook it is doubtful if the beets will be

<sup>25</sup> Details of radical activity among the growers are sketchy. From press reports of F.U.L. meetings it appears that the workers got their greatest degree of grower support from those areas north and west of Lethbridge which were furthest from the factory in Raymond. These were the areas that had the largest percentages of growers with less than 15 acres of beets and the smallest percentages of growers with 3 acres of beets and more. Authors' calculations based on BSP, "Division of Growers By Acreage Classes", f.9.

<sup>26</sup> *Lethbridge Herald*, 18 March 1936. Membership in the "Fifteen Ton Club" was an honour bestowed by the Growers' Association and the *Herald* upon those farmers who raised more than 15 tons of beets to an acre.

<sup>27</sup> W. H. Childress, "Rich Spoils in Alberta Handed to Big Capital", *The Worker* 20 April 1935.

<sup>28</sup> Glenbow, BSP, J. Sutton to Hon. F. S. Grisdale, 29 April 1935, f.10.

planted at all this year!"<sup>29</sup> Another "concerned citizen" fearfully noted the fact that "there is no doubt that some of our police are in full sympathy with the strikers."<sup>30</sup> Both correspondents urged that punitive action be taken, at least against the ring leaders of the operation. Although the local daily, the *Lethbridge Herald*, thought it wisest not to report the strike in its columns, it constituted in fact a social crisis in the countryside.<sup>31</sup> On May Day, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police was dispatched to Iron Springs to supervise a "monster demonstration" of the beet strikers, and the Growers' Association instructed its members to evict all recalcitrant labourers from their shacks by 4 May.<sup>32</sup>

The power of eviction was one of the most effective weapons in the hands of the growers. Being thrown out of shelter, regardless of how humble, was a hard blow indeed for a family, and most of the beet workers had wives and children. Individual farmers, however, seem to have been reluctant to carry out the order to evict their labourers. Many growers, no doubt, had satisfactory personal relations with their workers, while others feared the future consequences of poisoning their labour relations by taking draconian measures. According to Meronik, those who did "had a hell of a time getting beet workers" after they had dispossessed their staff, and for this reason the power of eviction does not seem to have been widely used. Nevertheless, 4 May 1935 did not pass without incident. According to the account in *The Worker*, several evictions and numerous acts of vandalism were carried out by "fascist gangs of 150, made up of storekeepers, school teachers, preachers, elevator men, reactionary, exploiting farmers, and two R.C.M.P. men." It is unfortunate that we have no means to corroborate this interesting description of the class nature of the opponents of the beet workers in the community.<sup>33</sup>

Once it became obvious that the B.W.I.U. could not be simply ignored the tactics of the Growers' Association changed. Shouting "Communism", they "dragged the red herring over the whole situation" and appealed to the Provincial Government to protect them.<sup>34</sup> Ted Sundal, representing the Growers, wrote piously to the Alberta Minister of Agriculture that "we do not deny the rights to organize on fundamental lines, but most of our growers believe the affiliation is a branch of the Communist Party", and so were reluctant to enter into any contractual agreement with it.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, a

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, T. H. Harris to Premier Reid, 27 April 1935, f.10.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, J. Gagan to Attorney General, 13 April 1935, f.10.

<sup>31</sup> W. A. Buchanan, editor and publisher of the *Herald*, was a member of the Board of Directors of Canadian Sugar Factories.

<sup>32</sup> *The Worker*, 4 May 1935. There is a copy of the eviction announcement in BSP, f.10.

<sup>33</sup> *The Worker*, 7 May 1935.

<sup>34</sup> The quotation is from the interview with Peter Meronik.

<sup>35</sup> Glenbow, BSP, Ted Sundal to Hon. J. S. Grisdale, 3 May 1936, f.10.

spokesman for the Lethbridge Northern Irrigation District argued that the "main point at issue" was not the workers' demands for \$22 an acre, but recognition of the Workers' Unity League.<sup>36</sup> In reply, the B.W.I.U. accused the growers' leadership of taking a "Kulak stand of aligning themselves with the sugar company" and reiterated its "standing invitation" to all growers to "unite with the workers . . . in their own interest."<sup>37</sup>

The two sides did ultimately come to terms before the onset of the thinning season. The B.W.I.U. was not formally recognized, nor did it sign a collective agreement with the Growers' Association or gain check-off privileges. Nevertheless, the strike had wrenched important concessions from the growers. In the Taber-Barnwell district strikers signed individual contracts which provided for a basic pay rate of \$19 an acre, a two dollar increase, with extra work such as irrigation to be paid for by the farmer on a daily basis. In the Raymond area, the workers signed for \$19 an acre, with no special payment for extra work. The strike was at an end by 20 May. *The Worker* admitted that "had they [the strikers] been successful in uniting the growers with them . . . much more could have been achieved", but claimed that "many growers are saying that the strike has been an example which can be copied."<sup>38</sup>

The strike had most certainly put the fledgling beet workers' union on the map. During the summer the B.W.I.U. called a "Harvesters' Conference", attended by representatives from the miners, farmers, and unemployed, who pledged themselves to initiate the ambitious task of organizing labour in the wheat fields.<sup>39</sup> The Communist Party itself scored direct gains from the beet strike. *The Worker* reported the founding of a new branch in Iron Springs in August, attributing the growth of Party influence in the area to its "good work" of the previous spring. Although no Communist candidate ran in the provincial election of that summer in the Lethbridge area, beet workers from Turin were reported to have attended a fund raising picnic for Pat Lenihan, candidate in Calgary.<sup>40</sup>

The beet workers lost no time in preparing for 1936, calling on the Growers' Association for talks even before Christmas. The local at Picture Butte wrote to the sugar company itself requesting direct negotiations. One wonders how many farmers would have agreed with the reply of company spokesman George Wood, who denied any interest in the matter, saying that "the growers themselves have full control of the rates which they will pay."<sup>41</sup> The B.W.I.U. had no intention of simply withering away, as its

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, L. C. Charlesworth to Gridale, 9 May 1935.

<sup>37</sup> B.W.I.U. Circular, "To All Workers" in BSP, f.10. This was the position taken by the Agricultural and Cannery Workers Union, W.U.L., which conducted a small scale attempt to organize Ontario beet labour at the same time.

<sup>38</sup> *The Worker*, 21 May 1935.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 August 1935.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-22 August 1935.

<sup>41</sup> Glenbow, BSP, Nick Wilwerth to T. G. Wood, 16 January 1936 and reply, 21

opponents hoped it would. The new union, of course, suffered from many organizational problems, compounded by the agricultural context in which it functioned and the fact that its membership was scattered over an area of hundreds of square miles. During the first year of its existence, the union was said to have "functioned in a very loose manner, and many members failed to pay their dues . . . [and] the centre had to carry on under very difficult conditions." Meeting in convention on 16 February, B.W.I.U. delegates resolved to strengthen and consolidate their organization, to open an office in Lethbridge, and to raise annual dues to \$4.20 in order to "bring the union out of financial difficulties and to build the union on a sound basis." During the next two months, a "100% improvement" in the union's affairs was reported, along with an increase in membership.<sup>42</sup> According to Meronik, the B.W.I.U. enrolled 1,800 beet workers of a total labour force of approximately 2,500. In a circular entitled "Beet Growers, Protect Your Crop", the B.W.I.U. laid down its position towards the farmers in 1936. The tract concluded:

Last year we won an increase in wages because we organized and fought for our demands, while you were left holding the bag. You lost out . . . while the sugar company was able to sit back and feel that they had pulled a fast one over the growers.

This year we propose that all growers unite with us. Our demand is \$22 per acre for labour and \$7 per ton for beets. We ask you to . . . present a united fight against those who have in the past so politely robbed you of your beet crops, while the producers were left with a meagre existence.

Let our slogan be: FOR UNITY OF GROWERS AND LABOURERS TO MAKE THE SUGAR COMPANY PAY!<sup>43</sup>

Initially, there were signs of a more positive relationship between workers and farmers. A workers' committee composed of Meronik, John Beluch of Barnwell, Secretary of the B.W.I.U., and two other workers, Andy Konti and Joe Semoly, met with Ted Sundal and Phil Baker of the Growers' Association on 22-24 February 1936. The agreement which they reached, presented in the form of recommendations to the upcoming annual convention of the Growers' Association, represented real gains for the workers. The representatives agreed on a wage rate of \$21.50 an acre for the ten ton yield, and a scale ranging from \$1.95 to \$2.70 a ton for those who chose to work on a tonnage basis. Irrigation and extra work was to be paid for at a daily wage, although rates were not laid down. Ten per cent extra would be paid if the beets were planted in narrow rows. The proposed agreement also provided for improvements in working and living conditions, and a grievance procedure which would bring representatives from both sides together in case of local or individual disputes. The contract, however, was still to be signed by workers on an individual, and not a collective basis.<sup>44</sup>

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January 1936, f.4.

<sup>42</sup> *The Beet Worker*, 11 May 1936.

<sup>43</sup> B.W.I.U. Circular, "Beet Growers Protect Your Crop", BSP, f.4.

<sup>44</sup> Glenbow, BSP, "Recommendations for 1936 Labour Contracts", 24 February

The draft agreement was a model of the sort of farmer/labour co-operation which had been the original objective of the Union. The workers' hopes were dashed, however, by the attitude of the members of the Growers' Association. Their convention "absolutely rejected" the contract proposal in a "lengthy and sometimes stormy discussion." Although a faction led by W. H. Childress held out for ratification of the original proposal, it was defeated and the rate reduced to \$20 an acre. Even this reduced rate was accepted with difficulty. The convention also elected Phil Baker to the presidency after he supported an attack on a contract which he himself had helped negotiate. The new executive seemed to be more anti-labour than its predecessor. Denunciations of the sugar company, standard rhetoric at previous conventions, were replaced with platitudes about the "straightforward" and "friendly" relationship between the Growers' Association and Canadian Sugar Factories. The new villain was the B.W.I.U.<sup>45</sup>

The decision to renege on the agreement with the beet workers demonstrated the stiff-necked resistance of many farmers to collective bargaining with a labour union, but it also reflected the work of the sugar company to prevent any *rapprochement* between growers and labourers which could be catastrophic to its interests. During 1935-36 E. T. Rogers made two significant concessions which won the support, if not the affection, of the growers for the sugar company. Although the company did not formally grant a higher price for beets, it agreed to the introduction of the "50-50" split, a form of profit sharing in which beet growers were guaranteed half of the value of the white sugar produced by Canadian Sugar Factories.<sup>46</sup> Under the new system, to take effect on the 1935 crop, growers received an initial payment which was almost as high as the old price for beets and a bonus payment later in the winter when the sugar had been marketed. This arrangement would probably have been enough to detach the growers geographically close to the factory in Raymond from any possible alliance with labour. But to sweeten the pot Rogers agreed — after tax concessions from the Alberta Government — to establish a new factory at Picture Butte, north of Lethbridge.<sup>47</sup> Any chance of a worker-grower common front against the sugar monopoly was now dead.

Despite the drastically different situation, the leaders of the B.W.I.U. did not give up hope for a peaceful settlement. They warned the Board of Directors of the Association that the growers' stand "will only lead to deadlock which will . . . impair co-operation", and suggested that "if the beet growers do not consider they can pay a higher wage . . . because of low prices for beets, our union is prepared to back the just demands of the growers

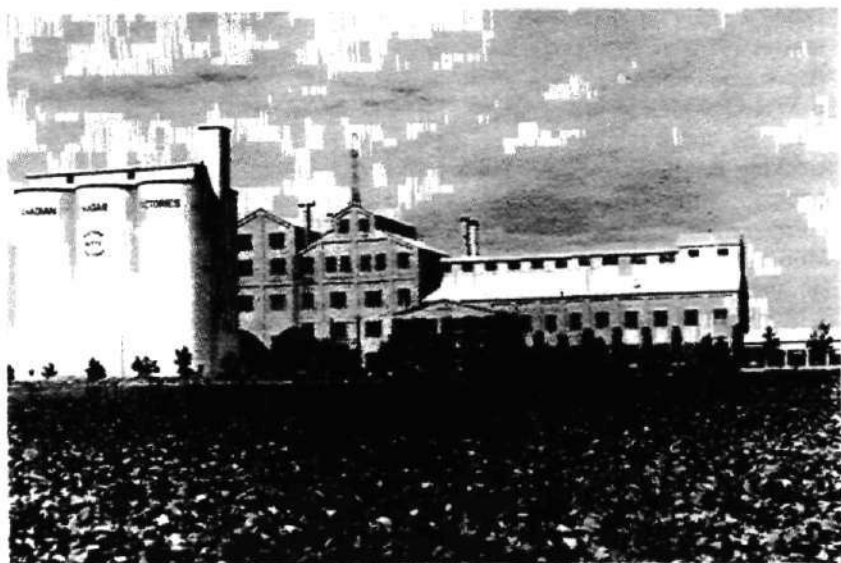
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1936, f.4.

<sup>45</sup> *Lethbridge Herald*, 28-29 February 1936.

<sup>46</sup> For a discussion of the operation of this contract, see Canada, Restrictive Trade Practices Commission, *Report Concerning the Sugar Industry in Western Canada* (Ottawa 1957), p. 48.

<sup>47</sup> Glenbow. BSP, f.3.



*Canadian Sugar Factories second Alberta factory, Picture Butte, 1936. (Glenbow-Alberta Institute)*

to the limit."<sup>48</sup> The Association was not interested in any such offer, yet by capitulating to the growers on the wage issue, the B.W.I.U. was able to come to yet another tentative agreement by late March. It included clauses concerning working conditions satisfactory to the union, provided for a basic rate of \$20 per acre, with similar tonnage increases for those on volume contracts.<sup>49</sup> If ever a union was prepared to sacrifice its immediate demands in the interests of "co-operation", it was the Communist-dominated Beet Workers Industrial Union of 1936.

Yet even this did not appear to be enough for the growers. Sure of the support of the company, they were determined to provoke a fight in the course of which the B.W.I.U. could be destroyed, and the previous *status quo* restored. The second contract agreement had not been finalized, and in further discussions the growers' representatives dragged their heels over a contentious clause permitting scrutiny of individual contracts by union officers to prevent deviation from general norms. On 7 April, Baker made a speech in which he decried "agitation" in the beet fields, and "impossible demands" on the part of the workers.<sup>50</sup> That same week the sugar company distributed \$28,000 to 800 beet growers, as an extra bonus for the 1935 crop.<sup>51</sup> On 14 April, B.W.I.U. representatives were turned away from

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, Peter Meronik and John Beluch to Growers' Association, 17 March 1936.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, "Recommendations for 1936 Labour Contracts", 21 March 1936.

<sup>50</sup> *Lethbridge Herald*, 7 April 1936.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 11 April 1936.



Baker's office, with the weak explanation from Russell that the two sides had met as often as was necessary.<sup>52</sup> It was obvious that the leadership of the Association had set its face against coming to any formal agreement with the B.W.I.U. which would be binding on its members. To the union leaders there was "no doubt that this policy has been instigated by the sugar company, working through their henchmen in the Beet Growers' Association." The company, they maintained, "recognizes the dangers which lie in the co-operation . . . between beet growers and labourers." To prevent this, Peter Meronik concluded, "the sugar company would like to see a fight between labourers and growers."<sup>53</sup>

That fight now became unavoidable. Raising demands that the original offer of \$21.50 be honoured, priority for work be given to local labour, no discrimination be shown against union members, and the B.W.I.U. be given the right to scrutinize all contracts, union leaders prepared for another strike.<sup>54</sup> At the May Day celebration at Lethbridge, Meronik called for solidarity amongst the beet workers, who were to be put to the test in the next few days, when contracts for the 1936 season were supposed to be signed. Encouraged by the success of 1935, the majority refused "until such time as a settlement is reached between your Association and ours." Although announcing that the union intended "to retain the sympathy and good feeling" of the growers, Meronik declared to Growers' Association Secretary W. F. Russell that "we have tried hard to develop co-operation . . . but it seems to us that you would like the co-operation to be a one sided affair."<sup>55</sup>

The first priority from the growers' point of view was the procurement of enough "scab" labour to smash the strike before the beet crop could be damaged. In early April, Russell had requested the aid of the Provincial Department of Labour in recruiting non-union beet workers, cynically explaining that the B.W.I.U. had been responsible for sabotaging the negotiations.<sup>56</sup> Any labour that would be forthcoming from Alberta, however, would most likely be drawn from the ragged ranks of the urban unemployed, and would not have included "specialists", skilled beet workers. An official of the sugar company, Frank Taylor, tried to line up a group of experienced Belgians who were living on relief in St. Boniface, Manitoba. Taylor advised Russell to take 100 to 200 of this group, "as a possible source [of] . . . additional labourers, as these Belgians would make a very good break up in the general [ethnic] type."<sup>57</sup> Publicly the Canadian Sugar Factories threatened the union with the prospect of 400 Belgians coming into the beet fields. Most of the 450 scabs who arrived, however, were not experienced beet workers but unemployed city dwellers.

<sup>52</sup> B.W.I.U. Circular, "To All Sugar Beet Growers", BSP, f.4.

<sup>53</sup> *The Worker*, 1 May 1936; *The Beet Worker*, 11 May 1936.

<sup>54</sup> *The Worker*, 5 May 1936.

<sup>55</sup> Glenbow, BSP, Meronik to Russell, 5 May 1936, f.4.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, Russell to Walter Smitten, Provincial Labour Commissioner, 7 April 1936.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, Frank Taylor to Russell, 28 March 1936. Manitoba farmers experimented

The strike breakers were recruited by the Alberta Department of Labour in Calgary and Edmonton and transported to the beet fields in buses chartered by the Growers' Association, protected by the R.C.M.P.<sup>60</sup> Although Communists in the cities printed handbills warning of the situation in the Lethbridge area and urged the unemployed not to serve the "interests of the rich", most of the strike breakers did not know that they were being sent to Southern Alberta to work as scabs.<sup>61</sup> Many would not have cared if they had known. One eager scab wrote to Frank Taylor that he and his son "were not concerned with the so-called strike, but with the opportunity to fill whatever the agreement calls for."<sup>62</sup> Although some of the imported workers protested that they had been deceived, most went to work and although they were "slow, not being used to that labour" the growers were able to increase beet acreage to a record level.<sup>63</sup>

This successful importation of relief recipients could not be countered by the B.W.I.U. Picketing the beet fields was an impossible task, although the strikers demonstrated at the bus depots where the imported workers arrived.<sup>64</sup> While the growers had automobiles, the workers had to rely on bicycles for transportation and communication.<sup>65</sup> The R.C.M.P. patrolled what the *Lethbridge Herald* called the "strike front", work which earned the force a letter of thanks from the Growers' Association to commend its "excellent service" and "cooperation in handling the labour situation in the sugar beet fields."<sup>66</sup> This "cooperation" took the form of telling strikers to "move on" if they attempted to demonstrate at the farms of prominent growers. Only one arrest was made, that of Steve Koleszar who was charged with "intimidation" of scabs working the beets of Growers' Association President Phil Baker.<sup>67</sup>

The Growers supplemented their use of strike breakers and police with a policy of evicting strikers from their beet shacks. The evictions were carried out in a more aggressive manner than in 1935. The most tense moments of the strike occurred in connection with the evictions and threatened evictions of beet workers in the Taber area, the strikers' strongest base. While hundreds of

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with beets in 1933 but did not succeed in obtaining a factory until 1941. This created unemployment among skilled beetworkers in 1936. See J. H. Ellis, *The Ministry of Agriculture in Manitoba* (Winnipeg 1971), pp. 331-11.

<sup>60</sup> Glenbow, BSP, Ernest Bennion to Russell, 18 June 1936; Russell to Smitten, 29 June 1936; Russell to Greyhound Bus Lines, 17 June 1936, f.4.

<sup>61</sup> W.U.L. Circular, "Workers on Strike on Lethbridge Northern", BSP, f.4.

<sup>62</sup> Glenbow, BSP, S. C. Cain to Taylor, 26 May 1936, f.4.

<sup>63</sup> *Agricultural Statistics for Alberta*, pp. 22-23. Since beets were planted by machine this stage of the operation was carried out without reliance on hired labour.

<sup>64</sup> Meronik Interview.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Glenbow, BSP, Russell, to H. M. Newsome, Assistant Commissioner R.C.M.P., 30 June 1936, f.4.

<sup>67</sup> *Lethbridge Herald*, 20 May 1936.

angry strikers demonstrated outside, hearings to determine the legality of the evictions took place in the Taber Courthouse. The arguments soon turned away from the subtleties of the case to the merits of the beet workers' struggle. Speaking for the growers, lawyer B. L. Cooke claimed that "fear of communism or foreign influence, call it what you will" was the main motivation of his clients. On behalf of the strikers, L. C. Hendry, counsel for the B.W.I.U., charged that the labourers had been ready to sign the agreement, "but had got no chance", and added "whether Communist or Hindu did not affect contract matters." In the end the presiding judge approved the eviction orders, but urged delay in implementing them pending further negotiations between the opposing parties. The next day half a dozen families were thrown out of their homes in the Taber area.<sup>66</sup>

The strike had turned into a disaster for the Union, and it made a tactical retreat by announcing its intention to disaffiliate from the Workers' Unity League, in response to employer claims that the W.U.L. lay at the heart of the dispute. The B.W.I.U. announcement stated that the union was expecting to receive a charter from the Trades and Labour Congress, and that communications to that effect had already been sent to Paddy Draper, the President of the T.L.C. This, of course, was no great concession, since the W.U.L. was in the process of dissolving itself at that very moment, yet the union was hopeful that the move would deprive the Growers' Association of an effective rhetorical weapon which had been "poisoning public opinion against the B.W.I.U."<sup>67</sup> The Growers' Association had maintained from the beginning that its objection was to Communism, not to labour unions, and had promised to negotiate if the workers were represented by a "legitimate" union.

But the officers of the Growers' Association were not impressed by the disaffiliation. Sensing that they had their adversary on the run, they refused further negotiations as suggested by the judge, and handed down a simple ultimatum. This demanded that both the union and individual workmen formally renounce any connection "directly or indirectly", with the "Communist Party of Canada." Further, rates for those workers who contracted on a share rather than a straight cash basis were to be negotiated individually. The grower was to "retain the privilege of... hiring or dismissing any unsatisfactory employee." Union officers were to sign immediately, while the strikers were given 24 hours to "negotiate" their contracts with the farmers.<sup>68</sup> Although the leaders of the union disregarded the ultimatum — probably because the growers' threat "to secure other labour" if they did not sign must have seemed rather ludicrous in the light of the scabbing of previous weeks — the end was drawing near. On Wednesday, 27 May, the day after the ultimatum was handed down, Meronik chaired a meeting in Taber at which

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-26 May 1936.

<sup>67</sup> Glenbow, BSP, "Statement of the Central Executive Board of the B.W.I.U. of C. on National Affiliation to the W.U.L. and Relation to Political Parties", f.4.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, Phillip Baker and W. F. Russell to Peter Meronik, 28 May 1936.

the strikers voted with but one dissenting voice, to return to the fields. The next day, the second and last strike of the beet labourers of Southern Alberta came to an end. In a final statement the B.W.I.U. declared that the strikers had gone back to work in order to preserve the basis of "co-operation between growers and workers" necessary to "overcome the problems connected with the raising of beets."<sup>69</sup> Rather than see the crop destroyed and the future of the industry damaged, the Union would "temporarily call off the fight" against the sugar company.<sup>70</sup> Despite this face-saving posture, it was obvious to all parties that the B.W.I.U. had been soundly defeated. Workers went back to the fields, and though over 300 of the scabs stayed on the job, the large acreage of 1936 — planted in response to the "50-50" agreement with the sugar company — provided work for most of the now humble strikers. There is little evidence of any large scale blacklisting of beet workers for their union activities, although there was certainly some discrimination.<sup>71</sup> The man who suffered most from the strike was rebel grower W. H. Childress, who had tried to unify his fellow growers with their workers against the sugar company. Childress was expelled from the Growers' Association and the Rogers Sugar Company refused to contract with him for his beets. He was left with no choice but to give up beet culture.<sup>72</sup>

### III

The Growers were determined to consolidate their victory of 1936 and to crush the last vestiges of trade unionism among their workers. President Baker told the 1937 Growers' convention that "the grower is the one to determine what he can pay labour." "Negotiations with the present organization," he continued, "cannot be carried on."<sup>73</sup> The Growers' Association resumed a policy of ignoring the Union, pretending that it simply did not exist. Steve Varju, Union Secretary, had written to request that the Union Executive be allowed to appear before the convention.<sup>74</sup> The request was rejected on the ground that "the amount of business" made this impossible.<sup>75</sup> This letter of refusal was the last written communication between growers' and workers' representatives. The Union persisted in a one-way dialogue with the Growers' Association until 1942, pathetically clinging to this line of "worker-grower co-operation" to produce "increased yields and incomes." But requests, never demands, for negotiations and discussions of grievances continued to go unanswered. A name change to the Alberta Beet Workers'

<sup>69</sup> *Lethbridge Herald*, 28 May 1936.

<sup>70</sup> *The Worker*, 6 June 1936.

<sup>71</sup> Glenbow, BSP, f.5 contains a report of a grower named C. M. Quam refusing to re-employ a Union beetworker, Andy Saly.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, George Babint to T. G. Wood and Phillip Baker, 1937, f.5.

<sup>73</sup> *Lethbridge Herald*, 26 February 1937.

<sup>74</sup> Glenbow, BSP, Steve Varju to W. F. Russell, 25 February 1937, f.5.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, Russell to Varju, 27 February 1937.

Union, to demonstrate further independence from the Communist Party, had no effect on the growers' determination to treat the Union as if it were not there. In 1937 and again in 1938 the Union tried to invoke Alberta's labour legislation to force the creation of a Board of Conciliation, and appealed to the Alberta Board of Industrial Relations for its support. After correspondence with the Growers' Association, however, the Board accepted the growers' argument that "beet workers should come under the heading of farm labour" and thus be ineligible for any legal protection.<sup>76</sup> With the outbreak of war the Union suffered a blow with the internment of its only full-time organizer, Bill Repka, a member of the Communist Party who was arrested in the general roundup of Communists after Canada declared war. Repka, who describes himself as having been "a small fry in the party organization" feels his arrest was designed more to intimidate the immigrant beet workers than to remove a serious threat to national security.<sup>77</sup>

The Second World War, however, provided the Union with more favourable circumstances in which to operate. Wartime sugar shortages increased beet sugar's share of the domestic market, but the necessary increase in beet production had to be carried out with labour in short supply because of mobilization and the revival of the rest of the prairie agricultural economy. Armed with a charter as local 103 of United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers, a Canadian Congress of Labour affiliate, the Alberta Beet Workers Union reappeared in 1941 to request, "in a spirit of co-operation and good will", negotiations on wages and working conditions.<sup>78</sup> The Growers' Association maintained its "no negotiations" stance and appealed to federal and provincial governments to "protect us from unfair labour demands."<sup>79</sup> The A.B.W.U. refused to disappear. On 14 February 1942, it once again requested negotiations, promising that its members were "prepared to do our utmost towards the war effort by producing vast quantities of sugar beets" if assured of "a decent living wage."<sup>80</sup> Less than a week later, over the vociferous protests of those Southern Albertans who were not associated with the beet industry, the Growers' Association, with the support and encouragement of P. T. Rogers of Canadian Sugar Factories, began to negotiate with the B. C. Security Commission to import more than 1,000 Japanese from internment camps to the beet fields.<sup>81</sup> These indentured Japanese workers unwittingly and unwillingly

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, Clayton Adams to Russell, 23 May 1938, f.5. This decision also had the effect of denying beetworkers coverage by the Workmen's Compensation and Minimum Wage Acts.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Bill Repka by Allen Seager, Toronto, March 1978.

<sup>78</sup> Glenbow, BSP, John Beluch to W. F. Russell, 26 February 1941, f.8.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, Phillip Baker to Hon. J. A. MacKinnon, 22 July 1941.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, William Tarasoff to W. F. Russell, 12 February 1942, f.9.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, A. MacNamara, Assistant Deputy Minister of Labour to Russell, 17 February 1942. For examples of local opposition see Phil Baker to Humphrey Mitchell,

drove the last nails into the coffin of attempts to unionize Alberta's beet workers.



*A Japanese family  
in the beetfields, 1945.  
(Glenbow-Alberta  
Institute)*

#### IV

The outcome of the struggles of the mid 1930s calls into question the viability of the radicals' model of a farmer/labour coalition against monopoly. Was it in fact soundly based? The farmers manifestly had failed to take their place shoulder to shoulder with their workers. What had caused their failure to do so — subjective factors which might not have inevitably determined the outcome, or "objective" ones, of conflicting class interest between themselves and the working class? In the former category might be placed the effectiveness of anti-radical propaganda, and its underlying ethnic context. After all, as Frank Taylor of the Canadian Sugar Factories noted, "the Unity League . . . comprises mostly of the Hungarian and South European workers."<sup>82</sup> The farmers, on the other hand, were, by and large, "true" Canadians, Anglo-Saxons, immune to "communism." In a pattern familiar to students of Western Canadian society class lines tended to be strongly reinforced by ethnicity. If this facilitated, in many cases, the organization of the working class by the radicals, it made the prospect of the kind of class alliance which the Beet Workers' Union sought with the farmers all the more difficult to cement.<sup>83</sup> There was, of course, a certain impetus towards the

16 March 1942. Mayor David Elton of Lethbridge led the opposition to the use of Japanese labour, calling the Japanese "ourang-outangs" who would cause problems which outweighed their advantages to the beet growers. *Lethbridge Herald*, 27 June 1942. See also David B. Iwaasa "The Japanese in Southern Alberta 1941-45", *Alberta History*, 24 (Summer 1976), pp. 5-19.

<sup>82</sup> Glenbow, BSP, Frank Taylor to S. C. Cain, 23 May 1936, f.4.

<sup>83</sup> Officers and directors of Alberta Cooperative Sugar Beet Growers were without exception of British Isles, American or Scandinavian descent, as far as one may judge from their names, despite the fact that many small growers were Mennonite or Eastern European. It is interesting to compare a list of A.C.S.B.G. officers with the names of

"united front" amongst some of the more discontented and "progressive" farmers, but if the rank and file could be convinced that the workers' aim was to "bolshelize" them, to drag them down into the ranks of the proletariat, this could be nipped in the bud. The "natural" antipathy of the farmers towards organized labour generally did not hurt the campaign against the beet workers' programme of action. Perhaps this programme was presented in a manner too crude, too dogmatic by the beet workers and their left-wing friends to be effective in reaching the farmer-grower.

On the other hand, although it could be argued that both groups were being "fleeced" by the sugar monopolists, there were objective factors standing in the way of farmer/labour unity. The beet growers belonged to a fortunate group of Prairie agriculturalists that was not ruined economically by the Depression. If their relative prosperity was rather precariously balanced on the backs of the labouring class, it is not to be expected that they would be among the first to want to upset this arrangement. Despite the overall hegemony of the sugar monopolists, it was the farmers who were the actual employers of labour. It was *their* profits that were most directly threatened by demands for higher wages. The union answered that both groups should join hands against the company. Yet where did the path of struggle outlined by the workers lead? To risky, perhaps ruinous confrontations with corporate power or even to the closure of Canadian Sugar Factories? Rogers Sugar by no means depended upon Alberta sugar beets alone for profits. By means of small but significant concessions, the sugar interests were able to keep the farmers in line. The growers' leadership was shrewd enough to turn the labour situation to account, as a bargaining lever, to improve their Association's position in relation to the sugar company. The "50-50" split and the construction of a new plant at Picture Butte provide two important examples of this. Ironically, the agitation by the beet workers, designed ostensibly to unite grower and worker, drew the company and the growers closer together. C. C. Spencer, president of the Growers' Association during the 1935 strike, later commented that "we got closer to *our* company" during the strike and that the Executive decided from then onward "not to buck them on large issues."<sup>84</sup> The most symbolic demonstration of this new grower-company relationship came during the growers' convention of 1940. After the members unanimously re-elected Phil Baker to a fifth consecutive term as president of the Association, they rose, bowed their heads and remained silent to commemorate the memory of the recently-departed president of the sugar monopoly, the late E. T. Rogers!<sup>85</sup>

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members of the "Fifteen Ton Club." Since the smaller farmers, the Europeans, did most of their own work, they qualified for this honour more often than the members of the executive of the Growers' Association!

<sup>84</sup> Glenbow, BSP, C. C. Spencer to Russell, 10 December 1936, f.4, emphasis added.

<sup>85</sup> *Lethbridge Herald*, 21 February 1940.