

Impoverishing Our Friend, The Farmer

By HARRY GUNNISON BROWN

The New Deal has carried further than it has ever been carried before in this country, the principle of taking from one class to give to another and then taking from the second class to give to the first. One of the interesting examples is the effort to benefit farmers at the expense of wage earners, through making farm products more scarce and expensive; accompanied by the effort to raise wages forcibly through the wage-hour law.

The wage-hour law is not intended to apply to farm labor. The farmers have many votes. They are pretty well organized. They have an effective lobby. And so it was to be expected that farm labor would be—as it is—specifically exempted from the wage-hour provisions. A farmer can, so far as the new law is concerned, hire men for as little as one cent a day and work them for as long as twenty-four hours a day. This, of course, cannot actually be done, but legal prohibition is not the reason it can't be.

However, the requirement of forty cents an hour in mining, manufacturing, etc. (for the present twenty-five cents minimum rises automatically within a few years to forty cents) must tend, unless offset by inflation or by increased productivity of labor, to decrease employment in the lines where it is enforced. Thereby the law will tend to restrict output and raise the prices of the products of these industries, to the injury of the farmers who must buy such products.

But some of the farmers may be injured in another way. True, the high wages required in manufacturing and mining, by forcing some workers out of these lines and into agriculture, may make even lower than before the wages at which the owners of large plantations and farms can secure hired hands for their work. And especially is this the case since limitation of output in several lines of agricultural production, under the Agricultural Adjustment Act, decreases markedly the opportunities for jobs in these limited lines, and so compels would-be agricultural workers to bid against each other for jobs even more desperately than under normal circumstances. In so far as more labor is thus made available, at lower wages, for the lines of agriculture not being restricted in output—such as the production of sugar, cabbages, radishes, carrots, peas, beans, onions, celery, cucumbers, citrus fruits and other fruits, there tends to be a clear and net loss to many small farmers. The resulting crowding into these lines of men who cannot get work in other lines, must operate in the direction of increasing agricultural products of these kinds and of lowering the prices of such products. And the reduction of wages which must be paid to agricultural labor, is certainly no advantage to small farmers who hire no labor but who work their farms alone or with the aid of their sons. The lower prices of the produce they sell can do nothing for such farmers except to reduce their incomes.

Or, will we avoid this unfortunate consequence to small farmers, by permanently supporting in idleness or in relatively useless work, the (possibly) millions of unemployed whose jobs we take away from them through our wage-hour laws and our agricultural "relief" acts? And who will do this supporting?