

# The state and the farm worker: the evolution of the minimum wage in agriculture in England and Wales, 1909–24

by Alun Howkins and Nicola Verdon

## *Abstract*

Whilst the legislative history of British agricultural policy in the early twentieth century has received considerable attention from historians, the evolution of the minimum wage in agriculture and the formation of the Agricultural Wages Board has been largely ignored. This article aims to rectify this neglect. It argues that there were three distinct phases of development, which, whilst overlapping to a certain extent, were ultimately shaped by different political, social and economic imperatives. It will show that the first phase, 1909–14, was overshadowed by the rhetoric of the newly formed trades boards and was ultimately unsuccessful. The second phase, 1917–20, was dominated by wartime concerns over food and labour supply and resulted in legislation in 1917 and 1920. The final phase, from 1921 to 1924, shifted the focus to the desirability of a living wage in agriculture, which was finally enshrined in the Agricultural Wages Act of 1924.

A good deal has been written about the complex legislative history of British agricultural policy in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Much of this has centred on the meaning and impact of state control and decontrol of agriculture between the Corn Production Act of 1917 and the repeal of the Agriculture Act in 1921. The 1917 act introduced, amongst other things, guaranteed prices for wheat and oats and a minimum wage in agriculture directed by a central Wages Board. The latter has been described by Peter Dewey as an ‘innovation for which there was no precedent’ and ‘a revolutionary development for agriculture’.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the 1921 repeal has been consistently delineated as a government ‘betrayal’, although the identity of the main victim of this action has changed over the years. To Edith Whetham it was the farming community who suffered. Andrew Cooper questioned this, arguing that farmers welcomed repeal with ‘a sigh of relief’ and, if anything, it was the ideal of agrarian reform that was betrayed. Most recently Edmund Penning-Rowsell has suggested that farmers were actually instrumental in fashioning the settlement of 1921, and ‘[i]f anyone was betrayed it was the farm workers,’ who received nothing in compensation for the abolition of the Wages Board.<sup>2</sup> We wish

<sup>1</sup> P. E. Dewey, *British agriculture in the First World War* (1989), p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> E. H. Whetham, ‘The Agriculture Act, 1920 and its repeal – the “Great Betrayal”’, *AgHR* 22 (1974), pp. 36–

49; A. F. Cooper, ‘Another look at the “Great Betrayal”: agrarian reformers and agricultural policy in Britain’, *Agricultural Hist.* 60 (1986), pp. 81–104 (quotation from p. 81); Edmund C. Penning-Rowsell, ‘Who “Betrayed”

to add to this body of literature by turning attention specifically to the important question of the evolution of the minimum wage in agriculture and the formation of the Wages Board, a subject which has hitherto received only scant attention in the historiography.

In 1909 the Liberal government passed the Trades Board Act after which wage regulation was introduced into a range of industries, and much has been written about the impact of the wages boards on wages and conditions.<sup>3</sup> However, our concern here is not with the effects of the boards but rather with the way in which their principles came to be applied to an area well outside their original purview: the wages and conditions of agricultural workers. We want to suggest that there were three distinct phases in which the notion of a minimum wage in agriculture was discussed (and in two cases implemented) and that these were the result of different political, social and economic imperatives. In the first phase, 1909–14, debate was dominated by the rhetoric of the 1909 trades board legislation and influenced by a liberal and ameliorative agenda. The first section of the article will focus on this period, providing an overview of pre-First World War developments and campaigns, which were ultimately unsuccessful. From 1917 to 1920 the arguments were framed by a different agenda, dominated by wartime concerns over food production and labour supply. The second section will analyse the debates during the implementation of the Corn Production Act of 1917 and its successor, the Agriculture Act of 1920. The third and final phase of the campaign, from 1921 to 1924, shifted the focus of debate to the desirability of a living wage under a more social democratic programme. The third section of the article will briefly examine the repeal of the Agriculture Act in 1921 before we move on in the fourth part to analyse the dominant arguments in the approach to the passing of the Agricultural Wages (Regulation) Act of 1924.

## I

In 1909, as a result of many years campaigning, the Liberal government of Asquith passed the Trades Board Act. This was based ‘on the general principle ... of establishing wages boards which should fix minimum time and piece rates for home workers, and that it should be an offence to pay or offer lower rates.’<sup>4</sup> The original act referred to only four trades: ready-made and wholesale tailoring, paper box making, machine-made lace and net finishing, and chain making. In 1913 five new trades were added: sugar confectionary and food preserving, shirt making, hollow ware and tin box making.<sup>5</sup> A provisional order for a board in sections of the laundry trade was rejected by parliamentary committee. All the wages boards shared a roughly common structure

Note 2 *continued*

Whom? Power and politics in the 1920/21 agricultural crisis, *AgHR* 45 (1997), pp. 176–194 (p. 193).

<sup>3</sup> The still classic accounts are two studies by Dorothy Sells carried out in the inter-war period: *The British trade boards system* (1923) and *British wages boards: a study in industrial democracy* (1939). For more recent material, but which is still reliant on Sells for the administrative history of the act, see T. J. Hatton, ‘Trade boards and minimum wages, 1909–1939, *Economic Affairs*, June 1997,

pp. 22–28 and Robin Gowers and Timothy J. Hatton, ‘The origins and early impact of the minimum wage in agriculture’, *ECHR* 50 (1997), pp. 82–103.

<sup>4</sup> British Parliamentary Papers (hereafter BPP), 1922 (Cmd 1645), *Report of the committee appointed to enquire into the working and effects of the Trades Board Act* (hereafter Cave report), p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> A board for cotton and linen embroidery was restricted to Ireland.

consisting of representatives of the employers, workers and additional ‘appointed members’. Members could either be elected or appointed by the Board of Trade. The nine trades brought under the act before the First World War were covered by thirteen trades boards – eight for Great Britain and five for Ireland. They covered, in all, about half a million workers.<sup>6</sup>

The establishment of the boards in the pre-First World War period was a response to both elite and popular demands for control of what were called the ‘sweated trades’.<sup>7</sup> These were overwhelmingly urban, although it should be noted that shirt making, especially in Ireland, and chain making were largely rural. These trades were seen within the context of a more general perception of a crisis of the cities, particularly London, heightened by a range of social surveys which suggested a high degree of poverty and social deprivation, and which was linked by contemporaries to notions of physical and racial degeneration. The ‘sweated trades’ were dominated by ‘home-work’, the system whereby part-finished goods were brought to the ‘home’ of the workers who then worked on them in or near their domestic space. The vast majority of workers in these trades were women. Although not made explicit in the acts, it is clear that there was a notion that women (and children) were unable to defend themselves via trade organization. In the words of the Cave Report of 1922, these were ‘the poorer and more helpless class of workers’. This is also clear from the fact that originally it was suggested that the ‘problem’ could be dealt with by an extension of the Factory Acts, many of which were designed to regulate the employment of women and children.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, although the 1909 act was specifically restricted to a number of trades, the Board of Trade was permitted to apply its provisions ‘to any other trades’ where:

the rate of wages prevailing in any branch of the trade is exceptionally low, as compared with that in other employments, and that the other circumstances of the trade are such as they render the application of this Act to the trade expedient.<sup>9</sup>

Discussion inside and outside parliament drew the attention of the newly formed farm workers union to the whole question of trades boards.<sup>10</sup> In January 1909, before the Trades Board Act became law, the Executive of the Eastern Counties Agricultural Labourers and Small Holders Union agreed to send a motion to the annual Council of the union calling for the setting up of an arbitration panel, where ‘the employers and the labourers be equally represented with an outside “Chairman” and they shall have power to consider all questions in this area of wages and conditions of work’.<sup>11</sup> The employers refused and in 1910 George Edwards, secretary of the union, proposed a motion at the Trades Union Congress (TUC) meeting in Ipswich ‘that it be an instruction to the Parliamentary Committee to take steps at once to have the agricultural

<sup>6</sup> BPP, 1922, Cave report, pp. 5–7.

<sup>7</sup> A recent overview of the history of sweated trades is provided in Shelia Blackburn, *A fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work: sweated labour and the origins of minimum wage legislation in Britain* (2007).

<sup>8</sup> BPP, 1922, Cave report, pp. 5–6.

<sup>9</sup> BPP, 1909, (Cmd 118) *Bill to provide for the establishment of trade boards for certain trades*, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> The ‘new’ union had been formed in 1906 in

Norfolk as the Eastern Counties Farm Labourers and Small Holders Union. In 1909 its membership was small and restricted mainly to Norfolk. In 1912 it became the National Agricultural Labourers and Rural Workers Union.

<sup>11</sup> Museum of English Rural life, Reading (hereafter MERL), SR NUAW/BI –1, Eastern Counties Agricultural Labourers and Small Holders Union, EC Minutes, 16 Jan. 1909, minute 23.

labourers included in the sweated trades act of 1909.<sup>12</sup> The motion was carried, and remained TUC policy until 1914. It was also adopted by the Labour Party in 1912.

By 1914 the demand for a wages board for agriculture had found wider support. The publication of the 'rural' volume of the Liberal Land Enquiry in 1913 concluded that 'in order to secure to the labourer a sufficient wage, it is necessary to provide for the fixing of a legal minimum wage, by means of some form of wage tribunal' and this became one of the central planks of the subsequent Land Campaign.<sup>13</sup> However, this was not simply a matter of political belief. Ian Packer argues that the Liberal Party, and Lloyd George in particular, not only saw the land as the last bastion of aristocratic privilege, but also as a convenient diversion from potentially 'unpopular policies' like Home Rule and National Insurance.<sup>14</sup> It could be argued that trades boards occupied a similar place in the broader Liberal strategy, acting to diffuse industrial conflicts, particularly after the bitter strikes of 1910–12.<sup>15</sup> As Chris Wrigley concludes of these years, 'both legislation and industrial intervention were aimed at national efficiency and social harmony'.<sup>16</sup> The outcomes of the Land Campaign may suggest this view is correct. Despite Lloyd George's public commitment, little was actually achieved, especially in regard to a wages board. F. E. Green, looking back from the end of the Great War, described Lloyd George as 'Harlequin in the great land campaign pantomime which was frequently put on for one night only when the populace became restive, and taken off again immediately the plaudits of the crowd rose to fever height'.<sup>17</sup> Against this, Packer argues this stalling of progress was largely due to lack of parliamentary time.<sup>18</sup> Whilst this may be partly the case, there were clearly other issues at work. Firstly it seems likely that many within the Liberal Party were unwilling to uncouple the issue of the wages board from the issue of land reform, which was seen as the ultimate solution to inequality in rural areas. This was certainly the position held by two Norfolk MPs, Sir Richard Winfrey and E. G. Hemmerde, both of whom saw themselves as 'friends' of the labourer, and relied on his vote.<sup>19</sup> Secondly, as Packer's study shows, there were sections within the Liberal Party who were worried about alienating the farming interest.<sup>20</sup> Finally, there were those within the party who remained 'hard-line' free traders, and believed that any intervention in the labour market was both undesirable and impossible.

Others thought differently though. The failure of the King's speech at the opening of the 1913 session of parliament to make any mention of a national minimum wage, and the defeat of a Labour amendment calling for an immediate national minimum wage of 30s., led to disenchantment among sections of Liberal support. In agriculture, as the trade union movement grew increasingly sceptical of the short-term merits of land reform, the desirability of a national minimum became clearer. It is not therefore surprising that G. H. Roberts,

<sup>12</sup> *Trades Union Congress Report*, 1910, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> *The land. The report of the Land Enquiry Committee*, I, Rural (1913) p. 67.

<sup>14</sup> I. Packer, *Lloyd George, Liberalism and the land: the land issue and party politics in England, 1906–1914* (2001), p. 115.

<sup>15</sup> A. Howkins, 'Edwardian Liberalism and industrial unrest: a class view of the decline of Liberalism', *Hist. Workshop J.* 4 (1977), pp. 143–62. See also P. Readman,

*Land and nation in England: patriotism, national identity and the politics of land, 1880–1914* (2008).

<sup>16</sup> C. Wrigley, *David Lloyd George and the British Labour Movement* (1976), p. 59.

<sup>17</sup> F. E. Green, *A history of the English agricultural labourer, 1870–1920* (1920) pp. 191–2.

<sup>18</sup> Packer, *Lloyd George*, p. 122.

<sup>19</sup> Howkins, 'Edwardian Liberalism', pp. 146–7.

<sup>20</sup> Packer, *Lloyd George*, pp. 128–32.

Labour member for Norwich, brought forward a bill in May 1913 to 'provide for the establishment of a minimum wage and the regularization of the hours of labour of agricultural labourers.'<sup>21</sup> Roberts's bill was placed specifically within the framework of the 1909 Trades Board Act. It provided for the creation of county wages boards at the local level, a minimum wage, and maximum hours, all to be observed and ratified by the Board of Agriculture and to be legally enforceable. The bill was discussed only briefly. The most damning attack came from the Conservative Sir Frederick Banbury who, anticipating future attacks on wage legislation, maintained that the objectives of the bill were 'bad' since 'the law of nature cannot be overridden or turned aside by any Act of Parliament' and that the market would always determine wages and hours.<sup>22</sup> The bill did not get a second reading in 1913, nor when it was moved again by Arthur Henderson in February 1914.

Two other bills promoting minimum wage legislation emerged in these years from a more surprising quarter, the Conservative Unionist Social Reform Committee. The first, the Agricultural Employment Board Bill, was presented in May 1913 (just two weeks before Roberts' bill) by J. W. Hills.<sup>23</sup> According to Green, it was a 'poor bill', applying only to a group of 'low wage counties' and lacking any element of central compulsion.<sup>24</sup> Asquith refused the bill government time, and Conservative support dissipated. It was re-presented in April 1914 by Leslie Scott, again supported by the USRC, but lost at the first reading in the House of Commons.<sup>25</sup> Whilst Lloyd George had welcomed the initial bill in May 1913, arguing that if this issue was dealt with broadly, 'without any party appeals, whichever party eventually has to deal with it, it will make an enormous difference in the course and destiny of the country', what is striking about these pre-war efforts to introduce legislation is the general lack of enthusiasm on the part of the Liberal Government.<sup>26</sup>

All attempts at pre-war legislation were framed within the 1909 Trades Board Act. Although the act could in theory be applied to 'any trade', in practice, as we have seen, it was mostly directed at home work, especially the sort in which large numbers of women and young people were employed. Even by 1922, when the acts had been widely extended and covered some 3 million workers, 70 per cent of them were women.<sup>27</sup> These were workers who, it was reasoned, by the nature of their trades, the isolated nature of their work, and perhaps above all their gender, were unable to, or incapable of, organizing themselves into trade unions and take part in the mechanisms of free collective bargaining.<sup>28</sup> The other major impetus for creating a board was that workers in the sweated trades were much lower-paid than those in other industries. This argument was picked up and frequently made by the farm workers and their representatives. For example, at the 1910 TUC, George Edwards argued that farm workers earned exactly the same wages as the women chain makers of Cradley Heath who had appeared earlier on the same day to successfully plead their case. Roberts, who seconded the motion on that occasion, made similar points.<sup>29</sup> However implicit in these debates was also the idea that the farm workers

<sup>21</sup> BPP 1913 (Cmd 182) *Agricultural Labourers (Wages and Hours) Bill*.

<sup>22</sup> *Hansard*, 27 May 1913, col 42.

<sup>23</sup> See Cooper, 'Another look at the "Great Betrayal"', pp. 85–6 for further discussion of this bill.

<sup>24</sup> BPP (Cmd 173), *Agricultural Employment Boards*

*Bill*; Green, *Agricultural Labourer*, p. 200.

<sup>25</sup> *Hansard*, 5 June 1913, col 1035.

<sup>26</sup> *Hansard*, 8 May 1913, col 2285.

<sup>27</sup> BPP, 1922, Cave report, p. 10.

<sup>28</sup> Sells, *British wages boards*, p. 20.

<sup>29</sup> *TUC Report*, 1910, p. 126.

were, like women in the sweated trades, in a vulnerable position. At the 1910 TUC, Edwards argued that opposition to trades unions in agriculture spread right across the rural elites, not just the employers, and the labourer could find ‘all the forces of law against them’. Towards the end of his speech Edwards stressed ‘the need for bringing this suffering class under the protection of the Sweated Trades Act’.<sup>30</sup> Further, Edwards, like Joseph Arch, the national leader of the farm workers in the years after 1870, believed the ‘old’ unions had collapsed because the labourers were unable to organize. His bitterness expressed itself not only at the time, but also in his autobiography, written nearly 25 years later, where he quoted an 1896 article of his verbatim: ‘I have as strong a faith as ever in the justness of your cause and the justness of your claims to live by labour, but I have lost all faith that you will ever manifest manliness and independence enough to claim your right.’<sup>31</sup>

This portrayal of the agricultural workers’ situation was reinforced by Roberts in the 1913 Commons debate. Although he saw trade union organization as the most desirable mechanism for securing ‘a reasonable living’, he referred to the farm labourer as ‘pathetic’ and argued that parliamentary intervention was ‘the right thing’, which would enable ‘depressed groups of workers ... by fixing minimum conditions, ultimately to help themselves to a higher standard of existence’.<sup>32</sup> In this view, the farm worker, like women and children, was incapable of organising himself because of a mixture of factors, social and environmental but also ‘mental’. He was, probably innately, backward and servile. For this reason he was a constant threat to the organized worker of the towns – available as cheap labour or as a strike breaker. If the labourer could not organize himself, and if the TUC had insufficient funds to support the labourers union, a wages board provided the ideal answer.<sup>33</sup> The views articulated by the organized labour movement were analogous. To many of the TUC, the country worker was ‘backward’ and incapable of realising his own interest. The Independent Labour Party, although successful in some country towns, had little success in the villages. The reason, according to the organizer for Southampton, writing in 1909, was that socialist speakers were ‘too advanced’ in their political arguments for the labourers to follow.<sup>34</sup> The following year a letter to the socialist paper the *Labour Leader* argued that the leaflets and pamphlets used by the ILP were unsuitable for farm workers and what was needed were ‘graded leaflets ... containing no hard words ... as simple as a child’s primer’.<sup>35</sup> In 1913 the same publication described agricultural labourers as ‘the most backward class of workers’.<sup>36</sup> As we will see later, such views persisted well beyond the First World War and continued to form an influential, if lessening, component of the campaign for wage legislation in agriculture.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> G. Edwards, *From crow scaring to Westminster* (1922), pp. 92–3.

<sup>32</sup> *Hansard*, 27 May, 1913, col 41.

<sup>33</sup> See George Edwards’s speech at the TUC in 1912.

*TUC Report*, 1912, pp. 164–5.

<sup>34</sup> *Labour Leader*, 9 July 1909.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 Mar. 1910.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 29 May 1913.

## II

Pre-war attempts to introduce wage regulation and a minimum wage in agriculture were ultimately unsuccessful. When the issue resurfaced during the war, it was shaped by rather different concerns and arguments. Following the outbreak of war, the government reached agreement with organized labour in key sectors of industry to suspend industrial action and accept compulsory wage arbitration under the so-called Treasury Agreement, later underpinned by the 1915 Munitions of War Act. In return, the TUC entered politics as a major force as the voice of labour. Increased state intervention in industry, wages, prices, and even rent regulation, fundamentally altered the way in which industrial relations functioned.<sup>37</sup>

Although the general direction of agricultural policy until 1916 had been 'business as usual', there had in fact been a number of government controls introduced, especially in food supply.<sup>38</sup> The formation of the first coalition in 1915 gave signs of change. Lord Selbourne became President of the Board of Agriculture and, as a result of continued threats to imports of wheat, set up a Parliamentary Committee under Lord Milner. The Milner Committee reported in July and October 1915. Its central findings were that home food production, especially wheat, should be increased using a deficiency payment system, and that local committees should be established to 'give farmers a clear lead as to the crops which are considered desirable'.<sup>39</sup> However, there was no provision for a wages board or a national minimum wage, despite some support on the committee. Wages, it was argued, had been rising before the war and would continue to rise as production increased and demand for labour followed. Moreover, there was a feeling that any 'compulsion' in relation to wages would mean that farmers would not respond to guaranteed prices.<sup>40</sup> The findings of the Milner Committee were discussed in Cabinet but not acted on as they 'found little favour' and it was thought they would 'probably not be mooted again'.<sup>41</sup> This was because the U-boat threat to imports was seen to have decreased, there were excellent harvests in Canada and Australia, and the god of the market would solve all.<sup>42</sup> By 1917 however, the situation had clearly changed. First, there was a growing belief in government, and importantly in the country as a whole, that the U-boat menace was now much more serious. Second, the harvests of 1916 were uniformly poor and prices of imports began to rise. Third, there was a belief among some sections of both government and the agricultural community, that land was not being exploited as productively as possible.<sup>43</sup> These factors were sometimes as much matters of conjecture as hard fact, but they played a key part in influencing the opinion of both the public at large and, above all, Lloyd George himself, who had ousted Asquith as head of the coalition in December 1916.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>37</sup> H. A. Clegg *et al*, *A history of British trade unions since 1889* (3 vols, 1964–94), II, chs 4 and 5.

<sup>38</sup> For what follows, see Dewey, *British agriculture*, part 1; L. M. Barnett, *British food policy in the First World War* (1985).

<sup>39</sup> BPP, 1914–16 (Cmd 8048), *Interim report of the Departmental Committee ... to consider the Production of Food*, p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6.

<sup>41</sup> Cabinet minutes quoted in E. H. Whetham, *The agrarian history of England and Wales*, VIII, 1914–39 (1978), p. 77.

<sup>42</sup> David Lloyd George, *War memoirs* (2 vols, 1938 edn), I, p. 757.

<sup>43</sup> Whetham, *Agrarian history*, pp. 82–5; Lloyd George, *War memoirs*, I, p. 757.

<sup>44</sup> Lloyd George, *War memoirs*, I, pp. 759–60.

Lloyd George's appointment as Prime Minister 'marked the watershed of wartime agricultural production'.<sup>45</sup> In his first speech as Prime Minister in December 1916, he argued that food production and consumption were central to victory, following a war cabinet special session convened the previous week 'to consider the Food question and the organization of production'.<sup>46</sup> At that meeting was R. E. Prothero, the new President of the Board of Agriculture. Prothero had been a member of the Milner Committee and later made it clear in his autobiography that he had fully supported its conclusions.<sup>47</sup> At the war cabinet meeting it was decided that the principle of a minimum price should operate from the harvest of 1917. Later in the same month it was agreed to use the Defence of the Realm Act to enforce cultivation on unused land and to create local committees under existing legislation.<sup>48</sup> Again, there was no discussion of wages or a wages board since the labour market, stimulated by increased production, was still seen to be able to regulate itself. However, on 14 February 1917, a delegation from the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC, including Robert Walker from the farm labourers' union, approached Prothero with a motion from the 1916 TUC demanding that the government address the issues of low wages and poor housing in agriculture.<sup>49</sup> It is difficult to ascertain what influence this delegation had, but in a memo most likely prepared for the War Cabinet meeting of 15 February, Prothero argued '[a] system of guaranteed prices lasting over a series of years seems to be the only possible means that would restore confidence to the farmer', adding that this guarantee 'should be accompanied by legislation securing a standard wage'.<sup>50</sup> This was very different from the position he, as a signatory of the Milner Report, had adopted a year earlier.

At the War Cabinet held on 17 February, Lloyd George again brought in representatives and experts from inside and outside parliament to continue the discussion on agriculture, but this time with reference to a minimum wage. Although farmers and landlords were represented, workers were not. The conclusions were ominous for labour. Although support for guaranteed prices was widespread, the most that was offered to the labourer was a minimum wage, not a wages board.<sup>51</sup> The discussion was continued on 21 February, when it was decided 'that the immediate establishment of a system of wages boards would distract the farmer from the main object of increasing the produce of the land' and therefore such a scheme 'should be postponed until after the war'.<sup>52</sup> It was this position that Lloyd George outlined in the Commons on 23 February. In what he described as 'a far reaching scheme of state assistance', agriculture was to be encouraged and protected. Minimum prices were to be guaranteed for wheat and oats, rents were to be fixed for the duration of the war, and powers were given to enforce cultivation. For the labourer there was to be national minimum wage of 25s. a week. He went on, 'after the war wages boards can be set up, and the farmer will of course make use of them'.<sup>53</sup> Initial reaction in the Commons, and to an extent the press, was positive. However the farm labourers' union,

<sup>45</sup> Dewey, *British agriculture*, p. 91.

<sup>46</sup> Lloyd George, *War memoirs*, I, p. 761.

<sup>47</sup> Lord Ernle, *Whippingham to Westminster: the reminiscences of Lord Ernle* (1938), p. 279.

<sup>48</sup> Dewey, *British agriculture*, p. 92.

<sup>49</sup> Green, *Agricultural labourer*, p. 251.

<sup>50</sup> The National Archives (TNA), CAB 23/3, Memo to

Lord Milner.

<sup>51</sup> TNA, CAB 23/1, Minutes of the War Cabinet, 17 Feb. 1917.

<sup>52</sup> TNA, CAB 23/1, Minutes of the War Cabinet, 21 Feb. 1917.

<sup>53</sup> *Hansard*, 23 Feb. 1917, col 1602.



now the National Agricultural Labourer's Union (NALU), was less enthusiastic. The union's executive committee noted Lloyd George's speech at a special meeting on 2 March. It recognized the suggested minimum wage as 'a step in the right direction' but still 'unsatisfactory and will be unacceptable unless accompanied by wages boards'. It was also agreed to send a delegation to the government as soon as possible.<sup>54</sup>

For the union and its supporters, the difference between a minimum wage set by an Act of Parliament and a wages board was vital. Firstly the minimum set was already far lower than some counties were getting, especially in the north of England. Second, the union argued that wages would tend towards the minimum if one was established. Thirdly, and most importantly, the minimum set by the act was final and could only be altered by another act. Against this, wages boards acting at county level or national level could constantly modify the minimum by bargaining. Finally, it was also important to the union that boards could look at hours and conditions of work, as well as differential rates of pay.

In the campaign which followed, the union was able to proceed from a much stronger position than it had been in the pre-war period. Although we have no accurate figures, membership was clearly growing nationally, and there had continued to be strikes in agriculture throughout the war.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, the Workers Union had also begun organising in some counties with a degree of success. Most importantly, labour shortages were working in the union's favour, even if they were not pushing up wages as fast as some in parliament thought. As Walter Smith, the NALU president, told a special conference in Norfolk in February 1917, 'never before had the agricultural labourer ... got such a hold or control on their economic position as they had at the present moment'.<sup>56</sup>

The War Cabinet discussed the wages board and the minimum wage next on 3 April, during the final drafting of the bill. It was stressed that this bill 'as drafted' was conceived as a 'temporary measure', with many points 'purposely left vague'. Prothero was asked to consider, alongside Parliamentary draughtsmen, 'the advisability of providing in the Bill for the setting up, after the war, of wage boards by reference to the Trade Boards Act, 1909'.<sup>57</sup> But two days later, when a draft bill was brought before the War Cabinet, the time frame had shifted, with the Board of Agriculture instructed to establish a wages board 'as soon as may be and after consultation with the Minister of Labour'.<sup>58</sup> It is not clear precisely when this decision to proceed without delay was taken. The Lloyd George papers at the Parliamentary Archives shed no light on the issue.<sup>59</sup> Cooper suggests that the acceleration of the policy may have been prompted by debate on post-war reconstruction and in particular the Whitley report recommendation of statutory wage regulation in poorly organized industries.<sup>60</sup> However it may simply have been

<sup>54</sup> MERL, SR NUAW/BI - 4, National Agricultural and Rural Workers Union, EC minutes, 2 Mar. 1917.

<sup>55</sup> See Alun Howkins, *Poor labouring men. Rural radicalism in Norfolk 1872-1923* (1985), ch 6. Union membership rose from 3000 in 1911 to 7100 in 1916 and 103,500 in 1921.

<sup>56</sup> *Eastern Weekly Press* (Norwich), 10 Feb. 1917.

<sup>57</sup> TNA, CAB, 23/2, Minutes of the War Cabinet, 3 Mar. 1917.

<sup>58</sup> TNA, CAB, 24/8 Corn Production Bill, p. 3.

<sup>59</sup> Nearly all extant correspondence from this time is between Lloyd George and Addison, the Minister of Munitions, and does not appertain to the Agricultural Bill. See Parliamentary Archives, LG/F/1/3/10-16. Our thanks to Andrew King for his assistance with this material.

<sup>60</sup> Cooper, 'Another look at the "Great Betrayal"', p. 93 (fn 34).

pragmatic, with the dating in the original draft left deliberately ambiguous, thereby allowing the government room for manoeuvre.

Prothero brought the bill before the House of Commons for its second reading on 24 April. He began by insisting that this was 'a national measure; it is not proposed in the agricultural interests; it is proposed in the interests of every citizen of the United Kingdom'.<sup>61</sup> He, like Lloyd George, insisted that there was a food crisis looming in the near future and it could only be met by increasing home production of cereals. To that end prices would be guaranteed for six years from the passing of the act. This was, in his words, a 'bargain between the nation and the farmers'.<sup>62</sup> When he moved on to the minimum wage, like Lloyd George in February 1917, but much more explicitly, he uncoupled the relationship between the minimum wage and guaranteed prices. He argued that agreement for the absolute necessity of raising agricultural wages 'for the national welfare' was unanimous but there had previously been division on the 'remedy' for low wages.<sup>63</sup> These centred on those who wanted a wage board and those who did not. He confessed:

that for my part I heartily dislike the application of wages boards, which have been tried in the small industries and mainly industries in which women take part, to a complicated and varied industry like agriculture. I dislike it. I dislike the principle, and I see practical difficulties in its application. I have put this forward so often that I know those arguments better than I do the arguments in favour. But I have honestly come to the conclusion that there is no other way in which to affect the object. Regarding it as I do as a matter of absolute national importance that wages should be raised, I adopt the method which seems to me the only one which will achieve that object.<sup>64</sup>

Having outlined the nature of the wages board, its relationship to the county wages committees and the timescale involved, Prothero returned to the need for the boards in the case of agricultural workers. Here he revisited the arguments of the pre-war period, claiming that although wages had risen during the war, this could only be short term since labourers were 'wholly unorganized', 'scattered about and almost isolated' and therefore needed 'some local authority which can step in and deal with these men'.<sup>65</sup> He conceded that there would be difficulties in setting up the boards in wartime but concluded 'I think if they are constituted now in what we suppose to be a lull of party feeling that they may be framed on the right lines and upon lines that will make them useful to the country'.<sup>66</sup>

Although Prothero sought to uncouple the minimum wage and the guaranteed price, others, especially among the farmers, saw them as tied together. In early July 1917 Lord Selborne, speaking to the National Farmers' Union (NFU), firmly linked price guarantees and a minimum wage together as the basis for a permanent post-war policy for agriculture.<sup>67</sup> When the bill was discussed in the House of Lords, Lord Hindlip made an explicit connection between guaranteed prices and the minimum wage: 'if they were going to compel the farmer to cultivate his land

<sup>61</sup> Hansard, 24 Apr. 1917, col 2251.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, col 2257.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, col 2261.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, col 2261.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, col 2261–2.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, col 2263.

<sup>67</sup> *The Times*, 11 July 1917, p. 8.

up to a certain standard of perfection and also pay a minimum wage', he argued, 'they must continue the guaranteed price, and the guaranteed price must be sufficiently high for the farmer to make a profit'.<sup>68</sup> No government Minister moved to deny this link. At best there appears to have been confusion as to the relationship between the guaranteed price and the minimum wage, an uncertainty which again suited the government as it allowed both views to exist side by side.

The Corn Production Act passed into law on 21 August 1917. It was formed of four parts, relating to prices, wages, tenant rights and government control of cropping and land use. The first two parts, which guaranteed prices for wheat and oats until 1922, and fixed a minimum rate for labourers, enforceable by a system of inspection and fines, are relevant here. The act also established a central Agricultural Wages Board for England and Wales, complemented by district wages committees in every county, with powers to enforce local minimum wages and hours, piece rates and overtime rates. It took several months for the county wages boards to be created, and in the meantime the minimum of 25s. a week for male workers was enforced. Thereafter the minimum rate was to be decided by the wages board on the basis, as Sir Daniel Hall, Permanent Secretary to the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries, put it in 1919, of 'a certain minima necessary for the security of the worker' and 'the minimum living wage below which a working-man should not be compelled to sell his labour'.<sup>69</sup>

In 1920 the main provisions of the Corn Production Act were extended permanently under the Agriculture Act. A four-year notice clause of termination was included. Although there were lengthy deliberations over the bill in both Houses of Parliament, the issue of wages and the wages board did not command much attention in 1920. Where the minimum wage was discussed, it was firmly linked to the guaranteed price. J. A. Seddon maintained 'It is an irrefutable fact that one hangs upon the other', a claim reinforced by Sir Arthur Boscawen, the Minister of Agriculture, who argued, 'If you interfere with farming to the extent of having an Agricultural Wages Board it follows of necessity, to my mind, that you must give guaranteed prices to farmers'.<sup>70</sup> The act itself stated that should the act 'cease by order of Council' *all* the provisions of the act of 1917 shall 'cease to be in force'.<sup>71</sup> This clear linking of the board to the guaranteed price proved to be vital later. In the meantime, whatever the arguments, the results of state intervention for the agricultural labourer were clear: by the middle of 1920 the wages of an ordinary male worker, which in January 1917 had stood at 23s. 6d., had risen to 46s. a week.<sup>72</sup>

The Corn Production Act and its immediate successor, the Agriculture Act, had many common elements with the pre-war discussions of wage regulation. The notion of the necessity of a board to determine wages for a group of low-paid and poorly organized workers clearly comes from the 1909 legislation. However the assumed relationship, albeit an ambiguous one, between agricultural prices and wages was unique, and a result of the specific circumstances of the emergence of the act in 1917. The main purpose of the 1917 and 1920 acts was to increase the production of cereals and, to many observers, the award of a minimum wage for workers

<sup>68</sup> *Hansard*, House of Lords, 9 Aug. 1917, col 304.

<sup>69</sup> BPP, 1919, (Cmd 345) *Interim report of Royal Commission on Agriculture*, p. 3.

<sup>70</sup> *Hansard*, 9 June 1920, cols 443 and 552.

<sup>71</sup> BPP, 1920, (Cmd 242) *Bill to Amend the Corn production Act of 1917*, p. 1.

<sup>72</sup> Alan Armstrong, *Farmworkers: a social and economic history 1770-1980* (1988), p. 167.

was simply a *quid pro quo*, or even an afterthought. To others, especially those in the union, the minimum wage was their right and had no link with agricultural prices. In this view the accident of its birth was neither here nor there; the claim to a minimum wage derived from the specific situation of the workers. By the end of our second period of minimum wage legislation in agriculture this claim was also being linked to the notion of a living wage. This was a departure from other pre-war boards and was to become central to debate during the third phase of the campaign in the period after 1921.

### III

In June 1921 the government repealed Part I of the Agriculture Act of 1920, abolishing the guaranteed prices for wheat and oats despite the four-year notice clause, disbanding the Agricultural Wages Board and effectively ending state control of agriculture. Boscowen, the Minister of Agriculture, told the Commons that the government was compelled to implement this course of action by 'absolute necessity, by the financial situation', with several factors since the passing of the 1920 act, including drastically falling prices and the expensive costs of running the machinery of the boards, forcing the government's hand. He went on 'it is quite clear ... that the agricultural policy as laid down in the Corn Production Act and the Agriculture Act cannot stand. We are bound, therefore, as a national necessity, to change the policy'.<sup>73</sup> Repeal was not carried without opposition though. Once again the link between guaranteed prices and the minimum wage proved divisive. During discussions in the Standing Committee, the NALU president and Labour MP Walter Smith, moved an amendment to retain the clause which dealt with the wages board and the establishment of a minimum wage. The union argued that many were 'taking refuge' behind the idea that if the guaranteed prices were abolished, then the wages board had to be too. As the union's voice *The Land Worker* put it in July 1921, 'will they say what is to prevent a special clause being put in the proposed bill to set up a permanent board for the industry?'<sup>74</sup> Boscowen however firmly coupled prices and wages together. He refuted the argument that the wages board stood apart from general agricultural policy and declared that because the guarantee of prices was to be abandoned 'it follows clearly from that that the wages board shall disappear at the same time'.<sup>75</sup> He reminded the House that when the Corn Production Act was extended in 1920 a clause was added 'to the effect that, if the guaranteed prices were to be terminated by Order in Council, the wages board and the whole of Part I should be terminated at the same time'.<sup>76</sup> The wages board system was depicted as being too rigid and coercive, imposing inflexible hours, and being reliant on prosecutions. It was therefore not the best institution to deal with the changing conditions of agriculture and was 'quite unsuitable' to the industry of farming.<sup>77</sup> Labour members vociferously defended the wages board system, pointing out the policy had been previously carefully planned and considered before implementation in 1917, and, as Smith put it, was 'the only means of protection the agricultural labourer had in regard to wages'.<sup>78</sup> For those like Roberts and Edwards, who had

<sup>73</sup> Hansard, 4 July 1921, col 64.

<sup>74</sup> *The Land Worker*, July 1921, p. 9.

<sup>75</sup> *Hansard*, 4 July 1921, col 71.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, col 72.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, col 73-4.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, col 84.

been at the forefront of campaigns for statutory regulation of agricultural wages for many years, the repeal represented 'a most reactionary step' and 'the basest betrayal any government ever committed on any class'.<sup>79</sup>

How far the actions of the government in 1921 constituted a 'great betrayal' of the farmers is now contested. Where Whetham once saw the farmers as being 'bribed into acquiescence', Penning-Rowsell has argued more recently that, in the short term at least, the NFU was not only in favour of repeal but actively worked secretly with the government to secure favourable terms for the farmer.<sup>80</sup> The NALU in contrast, was not only kept out of the discussions prior to abolition, but the news was sprung on them in early June 1921, only days before the proposed appeal was announced.<sup>81</sup> To the union the government's action was 'discreditable', 'panic-stricken' and 'the grossest piece of folly imaginable'.<sup>82</sup> The union refuted all claims put forward by Boscowen. With regard to the costs of running the wages board, it argued that the £88,000 spent between March 1920 and March 1921 represented 'a sum which is absurdly small in comparison with the great advances which the existence of the board secured for the workers'.<sup>83</sup> More importantly the suggestion that the wages board legislation was simply part of the policy of giving guarantees to farmers was firmly rejected. Citing Prothero's 1917 speech quoted previously, Robert Walker, General Secretary of the union, argued that

It is totally untrue to assert that from the beginning the wages board for the workers and the guarantee to the farmers were meant to go hand in hand ... [there is] no connection established between wages boards and corn prices. It was only when the Agricultural Bill was being discussed that the Government accepted an amendment which had the effect of joining the fates of the board and the guarantees together.<sup>84</sup>

So whilst Boscowen saw the 1920 clause as cementing a historic relationship between guarantees and the wages board, which in many ways justified their simultaneous abolition, Walker saw no such thing. To the union, the point of the wages board had been to improve agricultural wages and to act as a safeguard for the health and well-being of the agricultural worker. Walker stated in 1922 that '[i]t was because agriculture was regarded as a sweated industry, and because the money being paid to many of the workers was an outrage, that Ministers, MPs, men of all parties and schools of thought, united in agreeing to the principle of a minimum wage' in 1917.<sup>85</sup> Without it therefore, agriculture was in danger of drifting back to dire pre-war conditions. As the history of the next three years was to show, there was some foundation in these fears.

#### IV

Under the 1921 legislation the wages boards were replaced by voluntary county conciliation committees. Representatives from employer and worker sat on the committees, which were meant to reach agreements on wages and hours and transmit these to the Ministry of Agriculture

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, cols 127–8 and 142.

<sup>80</sup> Whetham, 'The Agriculture Act 1920 and its repeal', p. 47; Penning-Rowsell, 'Who "betrayed" whom?', p. 188.

<sup>81</sup> Penning-Rowsell, 'Who "betrayed" whom?', p. 190.

<sup>82</sup> *The Land Worker*, Sept. 1921, p. 13.; *The Land Worker*,

Feb. 1923, p. 13.

<sup>83</sup> MERL, SR NUAW, DII/4, Press cuttings, 1919–24.

<sup>84</sup> MERL, SR NUAW, DII/2, Press cuttings, 1919–24.

<sup>85</sup> MERL, SR NUAW, DII/I, Press cuttings, 1919–23.

for ratification. Boscowen had recommended these 'as far better instruments to protect the labourer at the present time than the wages boards' and thought the conciliation committees would promote 'peace on the farm'.<sup>86</sup> *The Times* was optimistic, reporting in December 1921 that the committees 'had met with a measure of success that fully justifies their appointment and the confidence expressed concerning the principle of collective negotiation'.<sup>87</sup> The NFU also thought they had 'on the whole acted well'.<sup>88</sup> The union however launched a concerted campaign between 1921 and 1924 against the conciliation committees, seeking to restore the wages board system, and aligning itself closely to the parliamentary Labour Party in order to achieve this. The union's argument in this third phase of minimum wage implementation in agriculture concentrated explicitly on the rights of the agricultural worker to a living wage and fair conditions of employment. As Walker put it in *Labour News* in January 1922, 'Our concern is with the *workers* in agriculture; and no question of profits, costs, or production can stand in the way of the demand we make for a living wage for all upon the land'.<sup>89</sup>

For the union and their supporters, the conciliation committees were a disaster, allowing farmers to pay what amounted to 'starvation' wages. After the repeal in 1921 farmers cut wages drastically. By December 1921 the average weekly wage for an ordinary labourer had dropped to 37s.; by the end of 1922 it stood at just 28s.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, by the end of 1923, only a sixth of the 62 designated districts actually had an agreement in place.<sup>91</sup> The interim report of the Tribunal of Agriculture, which was established to investigate the condition of English agriculture as compared to other European nations, reported in 1923 that:

The conditions required to justify state regulation of wages in this country, as laid down by the Trade Boards Acts, are the absence of effective organization and the prevalence of low wages. Agriculture fulfils both these conditions.

The report did not recommend a Central Wages Board, but the establishment of six District Wages Boards to cover England and Wales, each having executive powers in their own region, and that these boards should be given powers only to enact minimum wages and grant permits of exemption.<sup>92</sup>

It was against the background of this report, continuing industrial unrest, and the demands of the NALU, that Britain's first (minority) Labour government was elected at the end of 1923. Fulfilling an election pledge, the Minister of Agriculture, Noel Buxton, introduced the Agricultural Wages Bill in April 1924. The reasoning was clear. Buxton argued at the second reading of the bill in June that agricultural wages were 'a blot' on the 'social state' of the country, and the conditions of 'dire poverty' in the countryside had to be removed.<sup>93</sup> The bill provided for the establishment of an Agricultural Wages Committee for each county and a central Agricultural Wages Board for England and Wales. Initially the bill reflected a system which had

<sup>86</sup> *The Times*, 26 July 1921, p. 14; *The Times*, 8 Aug. 1921, p. 10.

<sup>87</sup> *The Times*, 17 Dec. 1921, p. 5.

<sup>88</sup> MERL, SR NUAW, D II/I, Press cuttings, 1919–23.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> HMSO, *Report of proceedings under the Agricultural Wages (Regulation) Act, 1924, for the year ending 30 Sept.*,

1925 (1926), pp. 27–8.

<sup>91</sup> Armstrong, *Farmworkers*, p. 180.

<sup>92</sup> BPP 1923 (Cmd 1842) *Agricultural Tribunal of Investigation: Interim report (Investigation Tribunal)*, pp. 9–10.

<sup>93</sup> *Hansard*, 2 June 1924, col 911.

gained much support within the Ministry of Agriculture, giving the power of fixing wages to the county committee, but allowing the Central Board to confirm or cancel the award and refer it back.<sup>94</sup> This, in the union's view, allowed the serious negotiation to be done at national level by the 'best, most skilled, negotiators' and would moderate the power of farmers at the local level who had successfully dominated the conciliation committees.<sup>95</sup> Against this, the NFU, who, as Penning-Rowsell shows, had developed into highly skilled lobbyists by the early 1920s, argued that any return of the Boards would impose such a burden on agriculture as to diminish output and employment.<sup>96</sup> The main sticking point in parliament was over the power of the Central Board, which was seen by many Conservative and Liberals, as well as the NFU, as autocratic and unsympathetic to local conditions. These views are encapsulated in Conservative MP Sir Henry Cauntley's speech during the second reading of the bill in the Commons. Looking back at the experience of the first wages board he explained:

We had a perfect avalanche of Orders ... All that clogged the industry, and we had this experience, which burnt deeply into the hearts and minds of the men engaged in the industry, that almost all these Orders were issued by the Central Board in London, who had no knowledge of local affairs and who rode rough-shod over any suggestions made the by local boards, and, when these Orders came to be put into operation, they were found to be not suitable.<sup>97</sup>

At the Committee stage the Liberal members voted with the Conservatives, forcing the government to compromise. Under the Agricultural Wages (Regulation) Act, which received royal assent in August 1924, the Central Board was given only an advisory role, with the real power lying in the hands of the local committees.

The union believed that the bill was 'mutilated' and 'spoiled' by the actions of the opposition. It saw a Central Board as essential to co-ordinate the work of the district committees. Indeed Walter Smith, who as Labour MP was involved in the passage of the bill, had urged the Commons to 'hesitate before you place full power in the local committees' because:

There is then no freedom of action for the labourer. He is not in a position to express his mind as he ought to be able to do to get a proper decision. He has not been able to gain experience in conciliation and arbitration. He has not got a trained mind. He is not equipped for the fine arguments that are necessary in order to bring about decisions in this matter. I would suggest to the House that if they want to pass a bill to give to the agricultural worker some machinery to deal with his wages to hesitate before they destroy the principle of some central control.<sup>98</sup>

But the weakest part of the legislation for the union was that a minimum wage below which no committee could go was not specified. After much debate, the union had called for a figure of 30s. to be enacted. Walker stated in May 1924:

<sup>94</sup> Gail L. Savage, 'Friend to the worker: social policy at the Ministry of Agriculture between the wars', *Albion* 19 (1987), pp. 193–208 (p. 197).

<sup>95</sup> MERL, SR NUAW/BI–7, Biennial conference, 1924,

speech by Walter Smith.

<sup>96</sup> Penning-Rowsell, 'Who "betrayed" whom?', p. 188.

<sup>97</sup> *Hansard*, 2 June 1924, col 924–5.

<sup>98</sup> *Hansard*, 2 June 1924, col 1025.

The men's union are asking for a minimum wage which shall, as the bill states, have regard to what will enable a man to maintain himself and his family with a reasonable standard of comfort. This means that such a figure would be established, not in relation to farming prices, but in relation to social standards. It would in effect be an anti-sweating wage.<sup>99</sup>

In the end, the union was confronted with a *fait accompli*, which they well recognized. At the Executive Committee meeting of 13 July 1924 they passed the motion: 'This E.C. under the present circumstances are of the opinion it would be fatal for us to drop the bill altogether at present.' However they were clear as to the reasons why they had been placed in that position and added to the resolution:

... that the bill as now amended is extremely unsatisfactory and [this committee] re-iterates the demand for a wages board as it was, and further, this executive strongly condemns the action of the Liberal and Conservative members who have thus destroyed the reasonable hopes of the agricultural worker.<sup>100</sup>

Although they were not satisfied, the union was 'ready to applaud the work of the government in getting what they have got' and saw this as a definite 'advance' on which to build.<sup>101</sup> The lack of a national minimum wage and the powerlessness of the Central Board continued to be a problem for the union throughout the inter-war period.

The district committees were constituted in October 1924 and charged with three main duties: the fixing of minimum rates of wages for all workers in agriculture, including the fixing of an overtime rate; defining employment which was to be treated as an overtime employment; and defining the benefits or advantages which might be reckoned as part-payment of minimum rates of wages in lieu of payment in cash. The union's vision of a family wage for married men was sanctioned by the 1924 act, which requested that committees fix minimum rates at such a level to 'enable a man in an ordinary case to maintain himself and his family in accordance with such standard of comfort as may be reasonable in relation to the nature of his occupation'.<sup>102</sup> This is not the place to discuss the success or otherwise of the act in any great detail. Briefly while male agricultural wages remained substantially lower than industrial wages throughout the inter-war period, Robin Gowers and Timothy Hatton have estimated 'that the impact of regulation was to raise the wage for agricultural labourers by about 15 per cent in the late 1920s and by more than 20 per cent in the 1930s'.<sup>103</sup> However, because the 1924 act endorsed the notion of a family wage, the District Committees, and the union tended to ignore the plight of women workers in agriculture. Although they remained a crucial component of the workforce in some regions of England and Wales, women continued to endure poor wages and conditions.<sup>104</sup>

The third phase of wage regulation in agriculture, represented by the passing of the 1924 act, was marked by continuities from the earlier phases. The language of the sweated trade was

<sup>99</sup> MERL, SR NUAW SR, DII-3, Press cuttings, 1919-24.

<sup>100</sup> MERL, SR NUAW/BI-7, Executive committee minutes, 1924.

<sup>101</sup> *The Land Worker*, Aug. 1924, p. 9.

<sup>102</sup> BPP, 1924 (Cmd 222), *Agricultural Wages Bill*, p. 3.

<sup>103</sup> Gowers and Hatton, 'Minimum wage in agriculture,'

p. 100.

<sup>104</sup> On the position of women workers in agriculture in the inter-war period as a whole see N. Verdon, 'Agricultural labour and the contested nature of women's work in inter-war England and Wales', *Historical J.*, 52 (2009), pp. 109-30.



still resonant. Perhaps surprisingly the notion of the farmworker as unable to organize in his (or indeed her) own interest also remained in the discussions. For many older trade unionists like Edwards, the farmworker was still a 'helpless class' of worker for whom the wages board had been the one protection.<sup>105</sup> As Clare Griffiths's excellent study of the Labour Party and the countryside in the inter-war period shows, these attitudes continued to play a central part in socialist thinking across the whole period.<sup>106</sup> However there were also quite different elements at work in the early 1920s. Crucially the whole notion of the trades board had been changed. While a number of industries were still covered by traditional boards under the 1909 act, a much larger number had been brought into other various kinds of organizations, such as the so-called 'Whitley' councils. Although these were voluntary, they were strongly encouraged and structured by the Ministry of Labour. By 1922 there were 68 trade-based Whitley councils, the vast majority of which included 'the regular consideration of wages, hours and working conditions.'<sup>107</sup> Equally important, by the early 1920s, a number of the best-organized trades had national negotiations and agreements. The most obvious of these were the railwaymen and the miners.

These latter examples particularly appealed to the farmworker. It is very clear from the union paper *The Land Worker* and other sources that, following repeal in 1921, the union saw that the matter lay in its own hands and it was up to the workers themselves to grasp the moment.<sup>108</sup> W. H. Hardwick, speaking at the 1921 TUC, saw that there 'was a spirit of revolt in the countryside at the present time which has never been equally, in my opinion, in the history of this country'.<sup>109</sup> Walker believed there was 'an awakening amongst the workers' by 1923.<sup>110</sup> He argued:

It is now up to the agricultural workers, recognising his present deplorable conditions, to make *his voice heard and his presence felt*, so that even the present Government will be compelled to bow to the inevitable.<sup>111</sup>

Added to this, by the 1920s, the farmworker saw himself as part of the wider labour movement:

It has often been stated that the Labour Party, being a townspeople's party has no message for the agricultural worker, ... Yet, in the first five months of the first Labour government it showed its sympathy with the workers of the countryside by bringing in and passing the second reading of the Agricultural Wages Bill which ... will re-establish the wages committee and the wages board.<sup>112</sup>

Even if, as Nick Mansfield has suggested, local consciousness and deference militated against these kinds of views in areas like the Marches, even the most conservative of farm workers was unlikely to reject the boards. In the Marches, Mansfield notes that the arrival of the wages boards in 1917 was greeted, as in most counties, by the 'astronomic growth' in union membership.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>105</sup> *TUC Report*, 1921, p. 289.

<sup>106</sup> C. V. J. Griffiths, *Labour and the countryside: the politics of rural Britain, 1918–1939* (2007).

<sup>107</sup> BPP, 1922, Cave report, pp. 52–3.

<sup>108</sup> It is also interesting to note that the union paper changed its name from *The Labourer* to *The Land Worker* in 1920 in recognition of this new self-image.

<sup>109</sup> *TUC Report*, 1921, p. 289.

<sup>110</sup> *The Land Worker*, Jan. 1923, p. 1.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, Feb. 1923, p. 9.

<sup>112</sup> MERL, SR NUAW, BVI–3, Biennial conference minutes, June 1924.

<sup>113</sup> N. Mansfield, 'Farmworkers, local identity and conservatism, 1914–1930' in P. Brassley, J. Burchardt and L. Thompson, *The English countryside between the wars. Regeneration or decline* (2006), p. 179.

Further, in his longer study of Shropshire, he argues that the reintroduction of the boards in 1924 halted the decline both in wages and in union membership.<sup>114</sup> The only real exception, and one which remains substantially under-researched, could be in northern England. Here the persistence of hiring by the year or by the six-month term meant that farm workers had considerable bargaining power at the hiring fair which, coupled with regionally high wages, meant that the necessity for unionization had frequently been questioned.<sup>115</sup> This was also the case in the Scottish border region, an area which shared many common characteristics with the north of England. Here, as Richard Anthony has shown, the Scottish Farm Servants Union, dominated by the formidable figure of Joe Duncan, argued that the boards were unnecessary since 'trade union methods' were a better way of raising wages than relying on the state. The SFSU even welcomed the repeal of the Agriculture Act in 1921. Nevertheless by the early 1930s, as wages spiralled downwards, even Duncan changed his mind.<sup>116</sup>

As a result of the changed environment of the early 1920s, the minimum wage arguments which were deployed by the union in 1924 were based not on weakness or an appeal to a government of their 'betters', but were based on the notion of a minimum wage as a right which belonged not to one class of workers but to all workers. This was distinctly different from the appeal of 1909, as it did not seek special 'sweated' status; and different from that associated with the period 1917–20, as it was not linked to the profitability of agriculture. Moreover, although the union had some fundamental reservations about the 1924 legislation, it was an argument that was ultimately successful.

## V

The agreement reached in 1924 lasted until 1948, when another and more secure Labour government gave the union what it wanted – a national wages board with the power to set a national minimum wage for all farm workers.<sup>117</sup> That legislation was part of a wider reforming programme of the 1945 government. The earlier legislation though had no such coherence; rather it was the product, as we have shown, of a variety of forces and different political ideologies and commitments. The arguments around the 1909 trades board legislation were the product of the last great phase of Liberal reforms stretching back, perhaps, to the factory legislation of the 1840s. In contrast, those around the Agricultural Wages Act of 1924 represent the shift to the demands of social democracy for a living family wage for all. The arguments of 1917 (and the subsequent 1920 act) had something of both, but were tempered by the demands of war. We have argued that rather than being a continuous 'history' of debate between the 1900s and 1920s, there were three different phases in which the notion of a minimum wage in agriculture was discussed, and in two cases implemented, and that these emerged due to divergent political, social and economic imperatives across the period.

<sup>114</sup> N. Mansfield, *English farmworkers and local patriotism, 1900–1930* (2001), p. 163.

<sup>115</sup> This was true in the 1870s and seems to have persisted until at least the 1930s. See S. Caunce, *Amongst farm horses: the horselads of East Yorkshire* (1991), p. 216.

<sup>116</sup> R. Anthony, *Herds and hind: farm labour in lowland Scotland, 1900–1939* (1997), pp. 129–43.

<sup>117</sup> BPP 1946–7 (Cmd 3) *Bill to transfer functions of the agricultural wages committees to the Agricultural Wages Board and the Scottish Agricultural Wages Board*, p. 1.