Coolie Crop for Californianos

By Frank Chodorov

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First came the forty-niners to California. Out-mortgaged farmers, under-waged workers, venturesome youth whose economic horizon in a monopolized world seemed too crushingly close, were lured by the free and rich land that lay across the continent. Labor is a most fluid force. It rushes to high wages like a river to the sea. Nothing can stop it, neither oceans nor mountains, privation nor tomahawks, laws nor custom house officials. Urged by its unsatiable desire to make a better or easier living, labor o'er-vaults every obstacle save one—the title deed in fee simple. However, that obstacle, in the form of Spanish and Mexican grants, the forty-niners did not recognize in California; but they brought the homespun variety with them, to frustrate the aspirations of future migratory laborers.

Then came the tramps. But, between the gold prospector and the vagrant worker, California had undergone the alteration common to all new countries—the mutation under the law from a free to a confiscatory economy. The agricultural part of the State, its largest section, had been divided into predatory ranches. Thirty per cent of large-scale agricultural operations in the United States are in the California valleys. From homesteading farms, through purchase, merger and foreclosure, the ownership of the land underwent a gradual centralization. Today a holding of 2,500 acres is ordinary. A most important fact is that while the area of the State under cultivation has not been increased since 1885, in the last five years (during the "depression") holdings in excess of 1,000 acres have increased 37 per cent, while those under fifty acres have decreased.

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The way to operate such large agricultural tracts profitably is to have on hand always an abundant supply of cheap labor. Since the land of the State was confiscated not long after the gold rush the supply of cheap labor has always been abundant. At first they came from the failures among the gold-rush immigrants, mainly the late arrivals. These migratory field and shed hands made possible the earliest development of the agro-industrial fruit ranches, which were given added impetus by the development of rail transportation and the refrigerator car. As technological improvement increased the productivity of this land the tendency to larger holdings was accelerated, and therefore the opportunity for labor to employ itself on it was blocked. Wage-slavery was the necessary result. "Fruit tramp" became the name of a trade and a calling for thousands.

Then came the Chinese coolies. Prior to 1860, 40,000 of these Oriental laborers, fleeing from their submarginal existence in the homeland, had migrated to California to work in the mines. Racial troubles—that is, economic struggle with other workers who seize on racial differences as a plausible reason for their low wages—drove them out, and they took to the railroads and eventually to the ranches. Labor contractors began playing the yellow against the white, which was possible since neither had access to the soil, and the inevitable result was subsistence wages. By the turn of the century many of the Chinese had saved enough money to return to the land of their forefathers.

Then came the Japanese—the "yellow peril." In 1907, 30,000 entered the port of San Francisco and they were rushed to the ranches in the valleys. This new supply of cheap labor, however, proved too shrewd, too venturesome to be complacently adjusted to the wage-slave system that had been perfected on these fruit-growing factories; they bought land. Exclusion laws followed. As a result of the controversy they colonized their own lands or moved to the cities.

Then came the Mexicans—or, rather, they were imported to augment the supply of cheap labor. But, while at first these workers seemed quite happy with a dollar a day, for various reasons the Mexicans became restless. During the twenties, when it was first observed that the Mexicans were getting out of hand, Filippinos were brought in. But they quickly became enamored of the cities, and those who remained on the land centered their activities in the asparagus fields and the rice marshes.

A new labor supply was needed. And the gods who protect the landlords brought on the dust-bowl refugees—the poor farmers who had been eking out a living on marginal land by overworking it, until it became completely unproductive dust and was blown away. In search of a living, like the slaves out of Egypt, they are migrating to western valleys where, while they know all the land is pre-empted, at least there is no dust to fill their lungs. Choking is perhaps a less uncomfortable way of dying than starvation.

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The Americans are coming—and they are Americans, by several generations of birth, by education, by traditions. Yet they are being conditioned to an even lower economic status than the foreign-born migratories who proceeded them; for the Chinese and Mexicans were men, while whole families of Americans labor in sheds and fields for a family-wage of between $1.20 and $1.50 a day. The most fortunate of them live in government camps (shades of Hitler and Stalin) where for ten cents a day they are given a platform on which to pitch a tent. Others live in rented shacks, for which they pay, on an average, $8 a month. The next lower group live in ranch camps, where sanitation facilities are limited and water must be carried long distances. Finally comes that group whose homes are in hovels on the banks of irrigation ditches beneath cottonwoods. To such low lev-

els has the "independent American farmer" been reduced by our system of land tenure. Not peasants—coolies.

"They could be one of the great assets of California if given land and the self-respect that goes with it," said a government agent in one of the resettlement camps. But, so long as absolute private ownership of land persists, they will obtain neither land nor self-respect.