

Farm Labor in Schleswig-Holstein (1911)

Abstract

This text by a Protestant pastor from Schleswig-Holstein testifies to the heterogeneous nature of labor in the countryside. It also shows the relationship between labor and management in the agrarian sector, where workers had only limited opportunities for self-improvement and enjoyed little protection or rights. Migration to the city was not final, however, because seasonal workers from the city often came to the countryside in times of need.

Source

One can distinguish four different categories of workers:

- a) Local agricultural workers who form the fixed corps of 6–10 men for some machines; it is considered undesirable, however, to stand by a machine as a gang worker.
- b) Local workers from the city, some of whom are dissolute loafers and are feared by the master machinists because of their penchant for strikes and their insolence.
- c) Migrant workers from the East, poorly educated, but diligent and undemanding.
- d) Veterans of the road, shipwrecked characters who once knew better times, from all professions and walks of life, among them a few noblemen and academics who, unless the devil of drink is riding them, work diligently, are willing, and behave unassumingly at the table. Christian salvation work would not find this a hopeless field.

Here [in Schleswig-Holstein] threshing begins at almost the same time as the harvest, and the humming of the “steamers” gradually ceases in November. The threshing season thus comprises the four months of August through November, though it lies chiefly in the two middle months. Compared to former times, the threshing period has shortened progressively. In the late fall, the farm owners of the fens are busy exporting cabbage.

A threshing-machine – also called “outfit” [*Garnitur*] or “train” [*Zug*] – requires 18 to 28 men for its operation, 25 on average. The master machinist and the stoker hold a privileged position. These two share the farmer's table and are given a bed at night. As the chairman of the Association of the United Threshing-Machine Owners stated a few years ago, there were about 170 steam threshing-machines in the four districts (Norderdithmarschen, Süderdithmarschen, Steinburg, and Rendsburg), the operation of which required at least 3,000 workers. Although the number of outfits has risen considerably since then, there was an oversupply of machines last fall, and some of them stood idle for a while.

Here an hourly wage is generally customary, whereas in other parts of the province work is done by day wage. The hourly wage injects even more instability into the work. Moreover, it causes the work day to be unduly extended, since the owners wish to make full use of their machines. According to one police regulation, threshing can only be done until eight o'clock at night, but this regulation exists more on paper, since fines are usually low. Ninety hours of threshing or more per week are probably not unusual! On top of this, there are the moves from one farm to the other, from one village to the other. The workers, however, are paid only for the threshing hours, not for the moves. When free meals were provided, the hourly wage this summer was 25 pfennig; last year it was 30 pfennig, and in 1908 it was as

high as 30–40 pfennig. If the workers have to feed themselves, because some farms are unable or unwilling to do so, they receive a supplement of 10 pfennig per hour, though for that they mostly buy only schnapps and perhaps a little bread. If the threshing is done in the open field, the hourly wage is 5 pfennig more, because some hours are lost due to the morning dew and rain. In addition to the stoker, the feeder [*Einleger*] receives a wage that is 10 pfennig higher.

The work day begins between 3 and 4:30 in the morning. At that time, the water carrier goes to each man at the place in the hay barn where, under lamplight, he had brought him the night before and shakes him awake. The awakened worker brushes his hair and wipes the straw from his face, thereby completing his morning toilet. He does not hold with washing; it supposedly dries out his skin. After first downing one or two large shots of schnapps, he goes off to work on an empty stomach, until morning coffee at five or six o'clock. To prevent a "dry throat," every two hours there is a little "refreshment," which the farmer has to supply if he wants to keep his workers. A round requires about two bottles of caraway liquor.

[...]

Sunday is the stumbling block of these people; they go wild. They are unable to have any money in their hands, and they do not reach equilibrium until complete destitution drives them back to the machine, whereas in the middle of the week they are the best workers and can be led like large children.

Thus one week follows the next. The wage is squandered by Monday morning. Even though rivers of caraway liquor flow in the process, it remains a mystery where all the money goes. Of course, often enough there may be festive wine drinking; they are also very generous in treating others.

In the final weeks of threshing season, the workers take stabs at saving by leaving part of their earnings with the master machinist, sometimes with his encouragement. You see, most of them do want to save, but they all leave our region as destitute as when they came. Within their circle of fellow workers, the temptation and seduction are so great that they simply cannot resist. It happens often enough that they manage to set aside 60 marks; and yet, in the end, nearly all of it is blown and only a pittance put into winter clothes. – And this even though their clothing is usually pitiful. Many go into winter without a shirt on their back, indeed, there have been cases where foreign workers, who may have travelled from far away, saved close to 200 marks and held on valiantly to the end, but then they were seized by temptation, after all.

Source: P[astor] Schlee-Heide, "Wohlfahrtspflege für Drescharbeiter", in *Schleswig-Holsteinisches Kirchenblatt*, Lunden, 12, no. 23 (June 4, 1911), pp. 221–23; reprinted in Jens Flemming, Klaus Saul, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds. *Quellen zur Alltagsgeschichte der Deutschen 1871-1914*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997, pp. 135–37.

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