SO NOW IT'S LETTUCE

In the rich Salinas valley, in central California, we can see thousands of acres of green, luxurious plants growing in a favorable combination of soil, water, sun, wind, and shade. Crop after crop is harvested every summer. These plants, botanically classified as a genus of hardy annual and perennial herbs — Lactuca — or in common usage — lettuce — have been picked by hand for generations, placed in crates, and shipped in specially conditioned cars to all parts of the continent where, seasoned with vinegar, olive oil, French, or Roquefort dressing, they serve as a favorite salad for millions of American families.

The quiet, soothing atmosphere of these lettuce fields when viewed on a fresh, dewy morning, just as the sun is rising, is something to be remembered. But it belies the fact that this pastoral serenity has often been interrupted by labor troubles that have resulted in violence and bloodshed over the years.

Cheap labor has always been a highly prized essential by the proprietors of these vast estates. Mexican workers by the thousands have been imported every year. Some of these arrived through legal channels, as the Congress made allowance for their entry for seasonal purposes. Others were of the wetback variety who came secretly on their own.

There was never much in the way of organized effort on the industrial field. To the large labor unions there was nothing particularly alluring in lettuce field work. They did make casual attempts, but as soon as they found out that the per capita tax was not sufficient to pay the operation costs they gave it up as an investment loss. They were in business to display balance sheets in black instead of red ink in their annual reports.

The smaller unions made valiant efforts to improve the working conditions of these migratory workers, sometimes expending all they possessed in the way of financial resources, but even this was not enough. The economic and political power of the landowners was sufficient to scuttle every union attempt, and for several years past the workers were left at the mercy of their rapacious masters.

In May, 1961, there occurred something resembling a minor revolution in the Salinas valley. The Teamsters' Union was making its initial move to get the lettuce workers under its control, and made demands on the lords of the domain that higher wages would have to be paid.

The pleasant surprise came when the lettuce king of the region — Bud Antle — not only conceded the request of the teamsters, but actually raised the ante, intimating that good, reliable American labor was worth more than the union asked. There are plenty domestic workers available, he averred, and the growers can get them if they pay enough money. The lettuce industry can well afford to pay decent living wages to able and willing American workers without importing a single employee from the outside.

But this display of social magnanimity was really too good to be true, at least sans explanation. The ace in the hole made its appearance shortly after. A new machine was being introduced in the lettuce fields invented and developed by the firm to which Bud Antle belonged.

This mechanical monster, looking like a grasshopper, magnified a million times, has potentialities that will succeed in revolutionizing the harvesting of lettuce. It moves through the fields at the speed of a half-mile an hour. Cutters work along with it, tossing lettuce heads into the hopper, where they are sealed in plastic bags by women who are using a gimmick that looks like a pants presser in a clothes cleaner's window.

This accomplished, a conveyor belt gets into action and moves the plastic - covered bags to nearby trucks where they are crated for vacuum-cooling and shipping.

This efficient machine can wrap the lettuce in a protective skin within a few moments after it is cut. This retains the freshness and flavor on the way to the market.

The wrapping will also reduce the shipping costs for the lettuce, as the heads are closely trimmed before they are sealed in plastic. As it is now each carton of lettuce shipped contains 15 to 25 pounds of useful leaves. In the system to be introduced, there will be a marked increase in the saleable lettuce, and a consequent rise in the percentage of profit derived from the transaction.

The Antle firm leases more than 12,000 acres of farmland in California, Arizona, and Texas. The firm is now the largest grower and shipper of vegetables in the world. They plan to extend their holding by going into the packaging and shipping of fruits as well as vegetables.

The firm has employed as many as 1100 Mexican workers at the peak of the harvesting season. With the introduction of the 40 new machines which will be in the fields by the end of the year, this Mexican army can be left at home. What they will do there is none of Antle's business. He is a capitalist, not a moralist, and only the matters that relate to him and the cash register are worthy of discussion.

This also accounts for his sudden interest in the good and reliable workers of real American stock. With a flock of new machines in the field, those who can properly operate the machines are the only ones worth employing. This lets the Mexican workers out. They are not accustomed to machinery and it would require an apprenticeship of several years to get them into the swing of things so as to function in a profitable way. Why go through the needless ordeal of a long training session when there are plenty able and willing Americans, who are well acquainted with machines and know how to run them, prowling around looking for jobs?

Another industrial tycoon, fifty years ago, King Henry the first of the motor industry, figured out that there were as many brands of labor power as there were of shirts and shoes. The social values of all these brands were determined by the labor time required in their production. He wanted the best brands and was willing to pay a little more than the general market scale in order to get what he wanted.

It is just the same in the case of King Antle of the lettuce industry. He pays a little more for domestic labor, but he gets a lot more back in the form of profits. In fact he has found out that there is no other labor so cheap and effective as that of the home grown product. The Mexicans are much too expensive.

Antle explains that the workers he will hire will be able to make as much as three dollars an hour, with a flat guarantee of a dollar and a half an hour. It must make the officials of the Teamster's Union blush over the modesty of their puny demands. It demonstrated that the "decadent" capitalists have still a few tricks up their sleeves that our astute labor leaders are not able to anticipate.

J. A. MacDONALD

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