

A Packinghouse worker writes

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE FARMERS

PROPERTY OF INSTITUTE
OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS
214 CALIFORNIA HALL

1946?

Dear Friend:

You're probably wondering why we packinghouse workers are going out on strike.

It's undoubtedly hard to understand. Especially since you've heard so much about the "high wages" we're supposed to be getting.

We wish it were all true.

High wages would make strikes unnecessary. And nobody wants a strike. Nobody wants it less than the packinghouse workers.

We Recognize Your Problems

But "high wages" in the packinghouses are a myth. The same kind of a myth that we've been hearing for years about farmers.

We've been told that farmers have no problems. That they are wallowing in war-created wealth. That every farmer is a small capitalist with a stranglehold on the public, milking endless profits out of the people, jacking up prices on food and manipulating the markets.

Most of us know differently. We know that the farmers suffered through an almost continuous 25-year depression after World War I. And that the last few years have done a little but not much toward providing the farmer with a fair break.

We know also that the farm outlook is not too good. We've read where the Department of Agriculture predicts a 15 per cent drop in farm income. And Henry Wallace points out that national farm income will drop by three billion dollars in the coming year.

Trusts' Smoke Screen

It's interesting that both of these falsehoods—"high wages" and "farm prosperity"—come from the same source. They come from the propaganda mills of Big Business.

It's a smokescreen to hide the fact that Big Business is the real profiteers. And in their financial statements and in their books can be found the real answers to the problems which both the workers and

farmers are facing. (That's why it's suddenly become such a question of "principle" with Big Business to refuse to allow GOVERNMENT AGENCIES—not Unions—to examine their financial records.)

Here is the key to the menace of a market collapse which the farmers are confronted with. And here also is the crux of the wage slashes that have forced the workers to take strike action.

Common Interests

Farmers and workers have the same basic interests. They are concerned most with keeping up buying power. They are the chief customers for each others' products. Farm prices are hitched to workers' wage levels like a team to a plow.

But somewhere between the two stands the Meat Packing Trust. Their game is to play one against the other. They build profits out of cutting farm income, rigging the market, forcing breaks in the livestock prices. At the same time, they profit out of cutting workers' wages.

They play a two-faced game. They cry to the farmers that they can't pay fair prices for stock because their labor costs are so high. They turn to the workers and tell them they can't pay living wages because the farmers are demanding such high prices for livestock.

Packer Profits

What are the facts? In 1944, the Big Four packers' profits—even after paying nearly 80 million dollars in EXCESS PROFITS taxes—were two and one-half times their pre-war profits. Dividends to the multimillionaire families who own most of the shares in Armour's, Swift's, Wilson's and Cudahy's shot up. And enormous additions were made to surplus.

What about 1945? The reports are not all in yet. But already we know that every one of the Big Four who make up the Packing Trust did so well that many millions of dollars in excess profits will be paid. Extra dividends were paid. Packer common stocks on Wall Street have soared in 1945. All of this was accomplished with hog slaughter at half of 1944's and lamb slaughter down too!

What is the packers' outlook for 1946? Bigger profits than ever before in history. Slaughter volume will be above 1945, the Department of Agriculture states. The Meat Packing Trust will no longer have to pay excess profit taxes. A friendly Congress took care of that for them. Paying labor at time and one-half for overtime will soon be at an end. Labor productivity will take a big jump as it did after the last war. And the packers are banking on paying livestock farmers less, while charging civilians more for meat than they could the army.

During the war, nobody complained much. There was a job to do and we all pitched in. There were no strikes or stoppages in the packinghouses.

The Army and Navy awarded "Excellent in Production" banners in nearly every large packinghouse. The War Food Administration gave 14 "Achievement" awards to the industry.

The war is over. And we have the glory. But the packers have the cash—and want more.

Dollars and Cents

They say that when you talk to a farmer you have to speak in dollars and cents. Alright, here's the situation with the packinghouse workers. During the war while living costs kept going higher and higher, we did not receive any wage increase. The only way we could pay our rent or meet the higher prices for food and clothing was to work many hours overtime. But now the packers tell us that they want to save money by eliminating overtime after 40 hours. That means a cut in take home pay of 30%.

If we are to work on a 40 hour week or less most of us will barely earn \$30 a week. Most of us will earn less. From that kind of earnings take away income tax, social security tax and other payroll deductions and you can see what we have left.

City living is an expensive business. Very few of us can afford to own our own homes, all our food must be bought at stores, we have to pay for our transportation in order to go to work, and clothing costs are sky-high. All of us would like to set some money aside for the days when we are too old or sick to stand the fast pace of working in the packinghouses. But, on the wages we earn, very few of us can have any savings.

Wages and Manpower Shortage

Even before V-J Day, we've taken a drastic cut in wages. No, hourly earnings weren't cut. But during most of 1945 the number of hours were reduced.

That was mainly because hog marketing was cut in two in 1945. (We know that this was brought about by the packers hammering down your hog prices in 1943-44. And they did that in large part because of labor shortages in the packinghouses. Those shortages could have been cured by higher wages!)

Most of us before 1945 had worked 48 and more hours during the war. Now we're fast approaching the pre-war norms of 38 and 40 hours work. That means a cut in take-home pay of at least 30 per cent.

For some days during last November farmers in many markets again took a licking on their prices because of labor-shortage bottlenecks in the plants. The same thing is almost certain in the early months of 1946. Do you see one of the reasons why packers like labor shortages? What they "lose" in overtime rates, they more than make up in lower livestock prices! And all the time they know that a substantial wage increase would provide them with PLENTY of labor.

During the war, often more than one member of the packinghouse worker's family took a job. In most cases this was because of the need to eke out the family income. And in all cases there was the patriotic motive to help win the war. Now the women are going back into the home and the children are back in school where they belong. But that also cut the income in almost every packinghouse worker's family.

We Don't Want a Strike

Each one of us faced a personal crisis. Through our union, we went to the packers and asked for a 25-cent an hour raise to make up partially

for the cut in our living standards. You know the answer we got. The same answer you get when you ask for a cent a pound more for your hogs or your cattle or your lambs.

During the last months we've discussed, negotiated, arbitrated, and pleaded with the companies for a just settlement.

We've used every possible method we know of in order to avoid a strike. We have presented wage demands, but we've also indicated that we are willing to make compromises.

We've asked for 25-cents an hour. And we've even stated that we'll take 17½ cents now and negotiate the rest later.

The highest packer offer is 7½ cents an hour increase!

The only course left for us is to take strike action.

We realize that a strike may mean some hardship for you. We assure you that we would gladly have avoided it. The strike will mean a period of extreme hardship for those of us who depend on the Meat Trust for jobs to feed and clothe our families.

We have tried to protect you to some extent by giving you advance notice of when the strike will take place. In that way, we're hoping that you will not be caught with livestock in transit. We also will do everything we can to take care of your livestock in the yards while we are out on strike. But a good deal depends on the cooperation of the packers.

We Need Your Cooperation

We ask you, too, not to fall for phoney propaganda that the "poor" packers will lower prices paid for livestock as a means of paying us higher wage rates. We maintain that the packers CAN—and MUST pay BOTH the livestock producers and the packinghouse workers enough for decent family living.

Well, we're not asking you to fight our fight—even though the maintenance of living standards and buying power is your fight as well.

But you can help shorten the strike. How? By putting whatever pressure you can on the packers for a fair settlement.

We ask you to send them letters and postcards. Pass resolutions in your organizations. And let your Congressman and Senator know too. (Some of them, as you well know, have been plenty fooled by the Packing Trust.)

Make it clear to the packers and to your elected representatives in Congress that you have a stake in this fight.

What helps the worker helps the farmer.

Very truly yours,

A Packinghouse Worker

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION—WRITE

UNITED PACKINGHOUSE WORKERS OF AMERICA (CIO)

205 West Wacker Drive

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

ANDever 5670

