

The End of Agrarianism:

The Fight for Farm Parity in Alberta and Saskatchewan, 1935-48

David Monod

FOR MANY FARMERS IN western Canada, the inter-war years were decades of discontent — decades born in depression and marked with suffering, insecurity, and social upheaval. Except for a brief period in the mid-1920s, when agriculture experienced a significant though short-lived recovery, the prices of grain and livestock were in steady decline after 1919. The impact of this prolonged price depression on the western farmers was devastating as it affected all sectors of their economy; incomes declined sharply while mortgage indebtedness, interest payments, taxes, and labour costs remained high. There were many causes of this crisis, but part of the explanation lay in the changing nature of the industry itself. With the growing use of mechanical equipment, the farmers' capacity to produce increased at a rate faster than the power of the population to consume. Consequently, prices declined precipitously and unmarketable surpluses became chronic. Mechanization did, however, carry with it certain unassailable advantages: it freed the farmer from a reliance on expensive and transient labour, regularized operations, and in the long term allowed for the reduction of production costs per acre. At the same time, it tied the farmer to the modern economy, with its compulsion to find more income to obtain fuel, machinery, and equipment, and dragged farmers forever into the orbit of the dominant industrial culture.

Those who rejected mechanization came to suffer for their failure to adapt. Farmers who lacked the capital, or who did not have the acreage to profit from industrialization, or whose land was too uneven for the early tractors, binders, and combines to negotiate, found themselves in an increasingly tenuous position. Unable to reduce their overheads, these marginal producers nonetheless had operations too small for them to realize a sufficient income in a time of depressed prices. To the agricultural experts, the most widespread problem was insufficient acreage. In fact, by the mid-1920s, the issue of the intensity with

David Monod, "The End of Agrarianism: The Fight for Farm Parity in Alberta and Saskatchewan, 1935-38," *Labour/Le Travail*, 16 (Fall 1985), 117-143.



MAP 1

Alberta and Saskatchewan:
Showing Points Referred to in the Text

Source: T. Weir and G. Mathews, *Atlas of the Prairie Provinces* (Toronto 1971), 31.

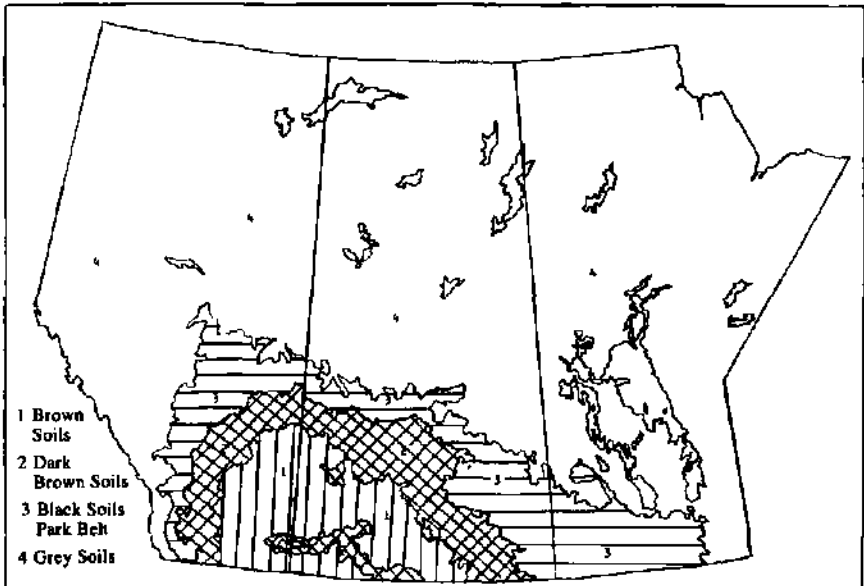
which a farmer should apply labour and capital to the soil was coming to be expressed in terms of the number of acres a producer could till. Mechanization was becoming a problem of farm size, for it was widely argued that under the impact of the new technology a farm of under one-half section (320 acres) was by definition an unprofitable production unit.¹ This correlation of profitability with size was borne out by the emerging pattern of rural depopulation within the prairie region. In the early 1920s, drought conditions and lower yields throughout large areas of the West insured that farms too small to benefit from economies of scale were unable to remain in operation. In the Palliser's Triangle area alone, 6,500 farms, or 37 per cent of the total number, were abandoned between 1920 and 1925. Of these vacated farms, well over half were a quarter-section in size and only 5 per cent were larger than 480 acres.² By 1926, the average farm in the drought area was twice the size of the average

¹ S.C. Hudson, "Factors Affecting the Success of Farm Mortgage Loans in Western Canada," (Ottawa 1935), 36.

² W.A. Mackintosh, *Prairie Settlement: The Geographical Setting* (Toronto 1934), 116-7.

western farm and even this figure obscures the tremendous extent of some of the larger units.³ Drought and the natural flatness of the land had transformed the southern prairie into the heartland of large-scale commercial farming. To the north, in the dark brown soil region, the pattern of small holdings survived briefly, but over the next ten years the effects of mechanization and price depression were working to eliminate the self-sufficient producer. By the outbreak of World War II, marginal production predominated only in the "Park Belt" area of black soil, which stretched like a ribbon of archaism from the foothills of the mountains through Edmonton and Prince Albert, down to the Manitoba-United States border.

The small farmer was disappearing from the landscape of the prairie. Between 1926 and 1941, the amount of land held in quarter-section farms declined from 17 per cent of the total acreage to 13 per cent. By 1941, farmers who operated over 480 acres made up 39 per cent of the western farm population, but owned almost 60 per cent of the total cultivated acreage.⁴ Of vital importance was the fact that through its effects on operator's profits, size of unit operation was an important factor in determining the success of farm loans. Banks and trust companies tended to tighten credit in periods of finan-



MAP 2

Soil Zones in the Prairie Region

³ O.E. Baker, "Agricultural Regions of North America: The Spring Wheat Region," *Economic Geographer*, 4 (1928), 427.

⁴ *Census of Canada*, 1921, Volume V, Table 3; and *Census of Canada*, 1941, Volume VIII, Part II, Table 3.

cial crisis, making them more reluctant to renegotiate old loans or extend new ones to smaller, less financially secure farmers. In 1929, 12.8 per cent of overdue loans on farms under 200 acres were foreclosed, while only 5 per cent of debtors owning over 480 acres suffered a similar fate. Prior to the establishment of the Debt Adjustment Board, conditions were even more pronounced, for 23.3 per cent of debtors owning less than 200 acres and 14.2 per cent of those operating over three-quarters of a section were foreclosed. Not surprisingly, a somewhat higher proportion of the loans on the larger farms were also in good standing with their creditors.⁵

Increasingly, small and large farmers were becoming like two different classes in the countryside. While the "commercial farmers" moved to adopt the methods of industrial capitalism, the marginal producers clung to the old techniques of the agricultural frontier. While large farmers became involved in the modern economy — buying with cash, bringing urban conveniences into their homes, diversifying their investments, and modelling their organizations on the Canadian Manufacturers' Association — the predominantly eastern European small farmers stuck to the well-worn grooves, their world bounded by the country store and the local meeting hall. To progressive farmers, the marginal producer was a symbol of stagnancy, and was characterized as "personally impractical, unenterprising and unambitious with regard to wealth, ease and worldly advantage." They did not want "better food, better clothes or to do . . . [more] than the minimum of work."⁶ They were the "dirty, ignorant, garlic-smelling, non-preferred Continentals," and lacking in a sense of industry, they were regarded as obstacles to the advance of commercial agriculture.⁷ "My idea is that the sooner we get rid of this kind of rubbish the better," wrote one Saskatchewan progressive. "The more we help such people the longer they will be a curse to the community and the more unpaid debts they will leave when they go down."⁸ In attempting to cast agriculture in an industrial mould, large farmers were brought to argue that it must conform to the same laws of concentration, rationalization, and mechanization as urban industries. The idea thus emerged that a basic problem of agriculture was that too many farmers were attempting to scratch out an existence from the soil and that it would be to their own best interests and to the best interests of agriculture for them to go to the cities for their livelihood. As C.W. Peterson, editor of the *Farm and Ranch*

⁵ George Edwards, "The Problem of the Quarter Section Farm," 3. George Edwards Papers (Saskatchewan Archives Board [SAB]).

⁶ William Scott, *Ukrainians: Our Most Pressing Problem* (Toronto 1931), 26. This criticism was not peculiar to small farmers but characterized bourgeois attitudes to plebeian cultures everywhere. See Hans Medick, "Plebeian Culture and the Transition to Capitalism," in Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones, eds., *Culture, Ideology and Politics* (London 1983), 88-113.

⁷ Patrick Kyba, "Ballots and Burning Crosses: The Election of 1929," in Norman Ward and Duff Spafford, eds., *Politics in Saskatchewan* (Don Mills 1968), 115.

⁸ J.P. Jensen to A.J. McPhail, 29 December 1922, Saskatchewan Grain Growers' Association Papers, B2 II 14, SAB.

Review and prominent exponent of the new industrial ethos, once stated, "the smaller the proportion of the population engaged in agriculture, the more economically will farm commodities be produced . . . and the greater will be the prosperity of the individual farmer."⁹

While large farmers moved into organizations such as the wheat pools and the Canadian Federation of Agriculture (CFA), the more desperate producers adopted the tactics of agrarian unionism and civil disobedience. They patterned their militancy on the examples of trade unionism and urban insurgency. In the early 1920s, the small farmers established the Farmers' Union of Canada and organized penny auctions and resistances to foreclosures and evictions as a means of defending their homes against their creditors. Later, in the 1930s, they organized local "defence units" and under the leadership of a handful of communist agitators, struck for security of tenure, a moratorium on debt, and a guaranteed wheat price. Finally, in the mid-1930s, they turned to the United Farmers of Canada (UFC) and rallied behind a demand for the legislation of farm parity. In 1946, frustrated by the federal government's continued refusal to guarantee them a minimum subsistence income, the small farmers of Alberta and Saskatchewan staged a 30-day "farm strike." The strike was Canada's largest direct expression of agrarian unrest; at least 60,000 farmers were active participants, and at its height the action interrupted deliveries of produce to almost every local point outside the Palliser's Triangle area. Unfortunately, when the strike ended, the marginal producers were forced to concede defeat. It was to be their last effort. By the time the enumerators tallied up the 1951 census returns, there were very few of them left on the land.

Clearly, though the vocabulary of small farm dissent was borrowed from the trade union movement, there was a wide gulf separating the agricultural producer from the urban worker. The western farmers were distinguished from the urban workers in that they were independent producers and sellers of commodities. Though the farmers and the proletariat in a capitalist setting both experienced a reification of every aspect of their lives, they each had their own understanding of the nature of that alienation. The agriculturalists, in their role as property owners, were confirmed in the abstraction of their labour since it was the instrument of their own existence as a class. The workers, in contrast, saw only destruction in their commodification in that it highlighted their own impotence and the reality of their class subjugation. To this extent, the farmer and the worker were class enemies; cash was the nexus of their objective relationship both at the production stage and at the processing level. If farmers felt they shared a grievance with workers, it arose not from an ideology of producer values, but from a conviction that both groups were being impoverished by the same forces. As Marx noted, mechanization and mortgage indebtedness were as much factors in the "enslavement by capital" as was the objectification of labour. Hence the dictum: "the relations of production of every society form a whole."

⁹ C.W. Peterson, *Wheat: The Riddle of Markets* (Calgary 1930), 12 and 87.

This is not to suggest, of course, that small farm protest was in any way self-conscious in a revolutionary sense. The marginal producers were, by nature, resistant to the forces of capitalist modernization and consumerism. They were a pre-industrial fragment in a modernizing world, and their protest represented what Jackson Lears has recently styled "culturally conservative radicalism." Tenaciously clinging to traditional thought patterns, they could never lay claim to a consistent ideology above their clannish, conservative, non-competitive belief in self-sufficiency. The real basis of their struggle was fear of change; it was fear which pressed them in the early 1930s to resist the bankers and the sheriffs, and it was fear alone which drove them onto the highways in the 1946 delivery strike.

1

AGRARIAN ORGANIZATIONS IN western Canada had been everywhere on the defensive since the onset of the Great Depression. In both Alberta and Saskatchewan, the swing towards independent political insurgency which characterized the 1920s had severely sapped the energies of the farmers' associations, leaving them particularly unsuited to the task of fighting the effects of the agricultural collapse of the 1930s. Membership in farm organizations remained well below its immediate post-war level. In Alberta, membership in the UFA had declined steadily from 37,721 in 1921 to only 14,486 just ten years later. In Saskatchewan, the situation was even more serious; the United Farmers of Canada (Saskatchewan Section) had never been able to match the size of its precursor, the Saskatchewan Grain Growers' Association, and by 1931 its own membership had declined from 45,000 to only 28,000.¹⁰ With the failure of political dissent in Saskatchewan in the 1934 provincial election, many activists began to feel that it would be "years before we can elect a government in support of our program and in the meantime, some organization must speak for the movement."¹¹ Led by George Bickerton and Frank Eliason, a handful of militants renounced the political entanglement and returned to the UFC(SS), intent on salvaging what remained of the farm organization.¹²

The task before them was a difficult one, however, for the union had been all but moribund since the movement turned political in 1931. By 1935, the financial situation at the UFC office had become "unbearable;" the rent on the office space was overdue and its secretaries were bringing the union before the Debt Adjustment Board for non-payment of salaries.¹³ Surprisingly, despite

¹⁰ United Farmers of Alberta, *Minutes of Annual Conventions*, 1921-31, United Farmers of Alberta Papers, Glenbow-Alberta Institute (GAI); *Canadian Annual Review*, 1919-31; further information on UFC(SS) membership was gleaned from letters in United Farmers of Canada (Saskatchewan Section), UFC(SS) Papers, B2 VIII 1, SAB.

¹¹ F. Eliason to C.M. Emery, 3 January 1935, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 VIII 1, SAB.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ F. Eliason to G.H. Williams, 16 October 1934, George Williams Papers, SAB.

these problems, the union did not collapse; it simply changed. Lacking the funds to provide publicity, organizers, or "adequate services" to a full-fledged lodge structure, Secretary-Treasurer Eliason developed an alternate strategy for rebuilding the UFC's local base that was not only practical but also cost-efficient. Borrowing heavily from the example of communist front organizations, he urged producers to establish "defence units" which would operate "along the lines of immediate struggle," organizing penny auctions and local resistances to "fight foreclosures and evictions."¹⁴ For Eliason, the value of the defence units was that they were able "to stand on their own feet" while at the same time winning recruits to the UFC who would eventually be numerous enough to form themselves into local lodges.¹⁵ Under Eliason's organizational tutelage, the UFC struggled to expand its small farm base. The core of the union's support, which in its CCF days had lain in the large farm areas of southern Saskatchewan, moved northward into the Park Belt, and a new region of strength developed in the area north and west of Saskatoon.¹⁶ Simultaneously, pressure began to develop from the new membership for the executive to commit itself to the struggle for a radical downward revision of farm debt which had been initiated in the early 1930s by the communist Farmers' Unity League. In response, the leadership of the UFC demanded a guaranteed minimum wage for agricultural producers and called for a general rural debt amortization.¹⁷

While Eliason struggled to rebuild the union's structure, George Bickerton moved to develop a programme which might appeal specifically to the marginal producers. Becoming president of the UFC(SS) in 1935, he immediately turned his fervid imagination to the problem of protecting the farmers against the ravages of mechanization and competition. His solution, which he derived in part from the price support provisions of the McNary-Haugen bill and in part from his own ideal view of family farming, was a muddled theory which blended parity pricing with a guaranteed cost of production. Parity, in its pure form, was the pegging of the price of farm commodities to a level correspondent with that of selected other goods.¹⁸ In theory, parity approached the

¹⁴ F. Eliason to T. Bardal, 5 February 1935; J.A. Bergerson to F. Eliason, 7 March 1935, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 VIII 1, SAB.

¹⁵ F. Eliason to H.A. Anslow, 5 March 1935; F. Eliason to J.A. Bergerson, 14 March 1935, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 VIII 1, SAB.

¹⁶ G.H. Herbert to F. Eliason, 4 October 1935, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 VIII 1, SAB. See also J.F.C. Wright, *This Time Tomorrow: The Louise Lucas Story* (Montreal 1965), 81-3.

¹⁷ F. Eliason to A. Hergott, 29 August 1935, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 IX 75; Attorney-General of Saskatchewan to George Bickerton, 1 December 1934, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 IX 75, SAB.

¹⁸ Parity's best analyst was John D. Black, whose *Parity, Parity, Parity* (Cambridge 1942), has never been excelled. Note that while parity had several meanings, the closest to Bickerton's belief was American senator George Peek's notion of a guaranteed price regardless of surplus. See Gilbert Fite, *George N. Peek and the Fight for Farm Parity* (Norman 1954).

issue of pricing not from the perspective of the cost of production but from the angle of relative exchange value, for "the farmer is not worried about wheat going down to fifty cents a bushel, he is worried about the great difference there is and will be between his fifty-cent wheat and the goods he must buy in order to grow his product."¹⁹ A parity formula sought to equalize the purchasing power of both the consumer and the producer by establishing a base period (usually taken to be 1909-14), and then determining the relative worth of goods in relation to each other. Prices would then be adjusted according to the relative scale so that changes in the cost of one commodity would immediately be counterbalanced by an upward or downward revision in the price of the others.²⁰ This was the basis of Bickerton's theory, though he confused the issue by looking both backward and ahead. Drawing upon the tradition of agrarianism — the lost promise of the frontier — the farm union theorist asserted that the government had the obligation to guarantee the cost of production to all farmers. Parity, in this sense, came to mean not only that the value of the farmers' product would keep pace with the industrial economy, but also that the producer would be assured his right to farm. "Parity means that before your steer is ready for market, you know what you will get for him. It means that in Spring when you are planning your seeding you will know just how much you will get for your rye, oats, wheat, flax, barley, or anything else you plant. The farmer will be in the position to plan for his future knowing that economically he is secure."²¹ Obviously, there was some incompatibility between the two notions of parity and cost of production which, for all Bickerton's complicated calculations, was never resolved. But the theorist, like the people for whom he wrote, existed in two worlds. Armed only with the tools of a home-grown philosophy, Bickerton was no more able to resolve the conflict of past and future than were his supporters. Though no one really knew what Bickerton was demanding, his formula, with its intricate arithmetic and overblown promises, provided at least a guarantee of survival for the small farmers. In 1935, the UFC adopted parity as its official policy and Bickerton backed the demand with the threat of an "agricultural revolt" on the Prairies.²² The threat was a sincere one, for within a year of their return, Bickerton and Eliason attempted to organize a delivery strike to protest against depressed grain prices.²³ Unsuccessful though the organization's first strike call proved to be,

¹⁹ "Transcript of UFC Broadcast," 7 October 1946, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 X 66, SAB.

²⁰ For a critique of the base price model, see R.L. Tontz, "The Origin of the Base Price Concept of Parity: A Significant Value Judgement in Agricultural Policy," in *Agricultural History*, 32 (January 1958), 3-14.

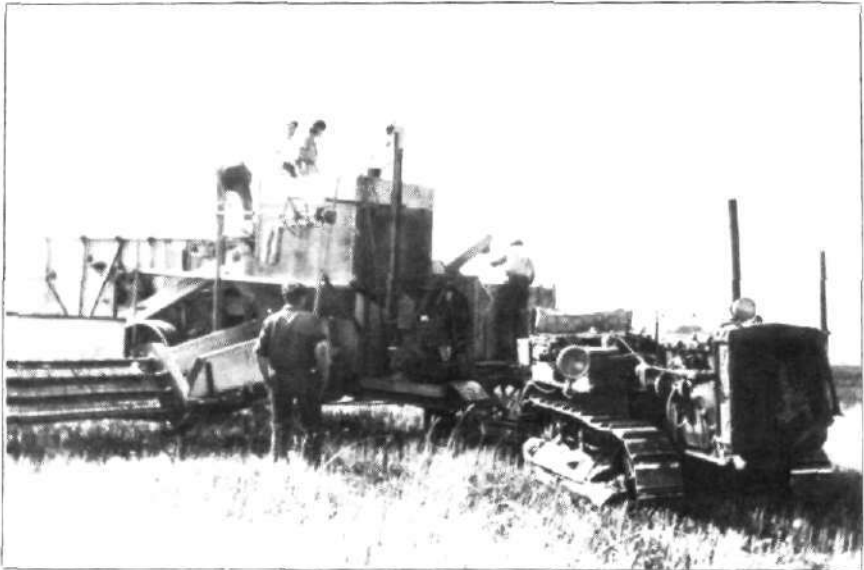
²¹ "Transcript of UFC Broadcast," 10 October 1946, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 X 66, SAB.

²² *Western Producer*, 25 July 1946.

²³ *Ibid.*, 5 and 10 September 1946; *BC Worker's News*, 31 August 1936; two notices outlining strike procedures dated 31 August and 3 September 1936 are contained in UFC(SS) Papers, B2 X 66, SAB.



Farmer pickets at Olds during Alberta Farmers' Union delivery strike, blocking Mountain View Livestock Co-op yard, Sept. 23, 1946. From Glenbow Archives, Calgary, Alberta, no. NA-1197-1.



Holt model 26 combine, with 20-foot cutting bar, operated by J. Moore Wilson at Ensliegh, Alberta, 1928. From Glenbow Archives, Calgary Alberta, no. NA-1688-3.

it set the pattern for future developments and won new allies for the small farmers of Saskatchewan.

To the west, in the farm lands between Lloydminster and Edmonton, the demand for a militant non-political farmers' union had been gathering momentum for several years. The cause of the discontent lay in the fact that in the eyes of most poor farmers, the provincial agricultural association, the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA), had become an organization representative only of the most prosperous grain growers of the southern prairie. The UFA "don't want to help no poor farmers," commented one Vegreville farmer, it just "wants to make farmers in the northern part of the province carry the ones in the south."²⁴ Convinced by the UFA's refusal to support two local delivery strikes in northeastern Alberta in 1933 and 1934 that the organization was hostile to the small producers, and alienated by the collapse of the Farmers' Unity League and the rise of Social Credit, many militants turned to the notion of establishing a separate protest movement pledged to the strategy of direct action. On 4 September 1938, some 200 farmers gathered in the Willingdon town hall and established an Alberta section of the United Farmers of Canada [UFC(AS)] pledged to avoid all political entanglements and to support a parity formula for achieving agricultural security.²⁵

II

WORLD WAR II BROUGHT economic stability, but unlike its predecessor, it did not stimulate a boom on the prairie. Rather, it was a time of adjustment, of slow growth, and of increasing tension between the small and large producers. With respect to western agriculture, it all began long before the war's outbreak. In 1938 and 1939 the West produced the first of a series of excellent wheat crops, and in 1940 the farmers' crop was a record 500 million bushels. This bumper harvest added 400 million to an already unprecedented carryover, rocketing the wheat surplus upward to 700 million bushels at the start of the August 1940 crop year. Unfortunately, the unexpected elimination of the markets of northern and western Europe had limited prospective sales to only 185 million bushels and consequently, the federal government was compelled to induce a reduction of the wheat crop so as to prevent an unmanageable surplus of unmarketable grain. In August 1940, the government passed the Wheat Board Amendment Act which limited sales to the Wheat Board on an acreage basis. The individual farmers' quota was set at 65 per cent of the 1940 acreage and bonuses were offered to those producers who summer-fallowed or converted to oats or barley. The reduction plan succeeded; the farmers sowed the smallest wheat crop in almost two decades. But timely rains and mild temperatures increased the surplus to almost 600 million bushels. In February 1942, the

²⁴ C. McGowan to F. Eliason, 17 February 1941, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 VIII 106, SAB.

²⁵ N.F. Priestly and E.B. Swindlehurst, *Furrows, Faith and Fellowship* (Edmonton 1967), 165-8.

farm organizations organized a "March on Ottawa" to demand a consistent policy of agricultural reconstruction. Reluctantly, the King government responded by establishing a fifteen-bushel production limit per authorized acre and closing the Winnipeg futures market. The initial Wheat Board payment was raised from 70 cents to 90 cents and then to \$1.25 in order to compensate the farmers for their loss. Wheat acreage on the prairie had by 1943 declined by 42 per cent and a marked diversification into other lines of production had been effected.²⁶

Under the government control programme, the price of agricultural goods increased substantially, but when correlated with the small farmers' costs of production, they still remained depressed prices. According to George Bickerton, in the 1944 crop year parity could be defined as a \$1.86 minimum wheat price.²⁷ While the price level set by the government board was sufficient to afford security to the large farmers who had both lower production costs per acre and a larger wheat crop, it was below the level necessary for the small farmers to be lifted out of the depression. In the very provisions of its legislation which set limits on production per acre rather than on total output per farm, the government was encouraging extensive over intensive agriculture. For the marginal producers, the government's policies, "tend[ed] to perpetuate poverty" rather than to ameliorate it.²⁸ Naturally then, farm organizations split over the question of whether to support the Liberals' programmes. Organizations which represented the interests of the commercial farmers, such as the wheat pools, the United Farmers of Alberta, and the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, endorsed the government's wartime initiatives. It was they who had organized the "March on Ottawa" and the UFC had only joined them in the hope of wringing out some more substantial concessions.²⁹ The UFC in both Alberta and Saskatchewan attacked the results of the march and demanded that the Liberals either legislate parity or else remove entirely its restrictions on price movements. As Bickerton stormed at the president of the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, "I am coming to the place where I believe that were the government to get off the job . . . and take their dam' peg away and [allow] prices to rise to what level they would, I think we would all be much better off."³⁰

As with the Wheat Board and the minimum grain price, the acreage reduc-

²⁶ Information on wheat production is derived from G.E. Britnell, "The War and Canadian Wheat," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, 7 (1941), 397-413; Britnell, "Economic Effects of the War on the Prairie Economy," *ibid.*, 9 (1945), 373-87; C.F. Wilson, *A Century of Canadian Grain* (Saskatoon 1978), 629-782; Britnell and V. Fowke, *Canadian Agriculture in War and Peace* (Stanford 1962), *passim*.

²⁷ Bickerton's calculations of parity are contained in UFC(SS) Papers, B2 IX 208, SAB.

²⁸ "Resolutions on the Price Ceiling's Policy," Unifarm Collection (UC).

²⁹ James Napier McCrorie, "The Saskatchewan Farmers' Movement: A Case Study," (Ph.D. thesis, University of Illinois, 1972), 227-9.

³⁰ G. Bickerton to J. Wesson, 15 April 1941, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 VIII 116, SAB.

tion plan was also more harmful to the small producers than to the large. With their limited incomes and their small outputs the marginal farmers lacked the capacity to endure a 35 per cent reduction in their acreage.³¹ Moreover, since farms in the black soil region had a higher yield per acre than did those in the south the small farmers felt the effects of the production restrictions even more grievously. The bonusing scheme was also of little benefit to the quarter- or half-section farmer, who, "with a cultivated acreage of fifty to one hundred and fifty acres . . . cannot increase his coarse grains or summerfallow as he has generally been a heavy coarse grain raiser over the years." Since the bonusing plan would "increase coarse grain production," the government clearly hoped that the price "would be reduced to the vanishing point . . . leading to an increase in stock raising."³²

Arguably then, harsh price and output controls were imposed by the policy-makers specifically to increase stock production and drive the non-competitive farmers away from wheat. The industrialization of agriculture was, for many agronomists, a consequence of inviolable laws and those who could not adjust were best advised to either change their line of business or move to the city. Dairying and hog raising were, when combined with the sowing of crested wheat, sweet clover, or alfalfa, regarded as the most profitable enterprises for the small acreage farmer. As early as 1930, the *Western Producer* observed "the present trend in the great industry of farming is towards mechanization . . . let us say, large scale farming; farming that reduces the cost of preparation of the soil, makes timeliness possible, and is directed by a management that is as conscious of loss of time as of loss of money. There will be plenty of room for the smaller units where power cannot be used . . . producing fruit, dairy, hogs, vegetables, seed and other speciality items."³³ Certainly, the marginal producers came to appreciate the advice, for during the war years they began experimenting with mixed farming. In Alberta's most significant small-farm region, to the east of Edmonton and in the Park Belt lands to the north and west of the provincial capital, there was, by the end of the war, a higher concentration of livestock per acre than in any other grain producing sector of the province. In 1946 there was a provincial acreage of one hog for every 114 acres, but in the small farm belt there was three times that concentration. Similarly, by war's end there were roughly two cows per acre in this area for every one that grazed over the rest of Alberta.³⁴

Thanks to the government incentives and restrictions, the small farmers were being forced to abandon their traditional reliance on grain production. Hogs were the primary beneficiaries of this wartime planning, for the strong British demand for bacon was matched by the commissariat's extraordinary

³¹ *Western Farm Leader*, 18 August 1939.

³² *Ibid.*, 18 August 1941.

³³ *Western Producer*, 17 April 1930.

³⁴ *Census of Canada*, 1941, Volume VIII, Part II; and *Census of Canada*, 1946, Volume VIII, Part IV.

fondness for Spam. Between 1939 and 1943, the number of pigs in western Canada more than tripled, and in 1942 and 1943, the cash income from hogs in Alberta was greater than that from wheat.³⁵ The dairy industry also expanded during the war. As with hog raisers, the producers of dairy goods benefited from steady markets and increased demands. Economic stability and government incentive programmes brought better qualities of dairy cattle, increased mechanization, and expanded the number of cheese and butter factories across the West. By developing improved methods of production, the volume of dairy products increased between 8 and 12 per cent from 1939 to 1944, though the overall number of milch cows actually declined.³⁶

Driven by government policies towards livestock and dairy agriculture, the small farmers were nonetheless confronted by a capricious central marketing strategy. Encouraged by the minister of agriculture to produce hogs in 1941 and 1942, the farmers were then presented in fall 1943 with an announcement that the government would provide bonuses of ten cents a bushel on oats and fifteen cents on barley for grain delivered through the elevators. The object of this strategy was to encourage mixed farming in eastern Canada and the government pursued this goal by permitting the Quebec and Ontario livestock producers to buy western coarse grains at a price less bonus and freight. This allowed the easterner to realize a margin of profit five or six dollars per hundredweight greater than that of the western hog producer, a situation made only more difficult by a 1943 trading agreement with Britain which lowered pork prices. Many small farmers realized that it was more profitable for them to sell their coarse grains than to feed them to their depreciated hogs, and from spring 1944, pork production in western Canada spiralled downwards.³⁷

For a time in the early war period, it had seemed as though the small producer was going to survive in western agriculture as a mixed farmer. Already by 1943, however, one of the vital supports underlying their new economic status had been knocked out from under them. Within three years the government was also going to drive them out of the production of wheat. Deprived of price inflation by the ceiling's policy and chased from one line of business to another, most small farmers recognized their own vulnerability. Despite the wartime moratorium on evictions, thousands of small farmers, realized that they could not continue under existing conditions, voluntarily

³⁵ For an analysis of the war's impact on prairie agriculture, see John Herd Thompson and Ian Macpherson, "An Orderly Reconstruction: Prairie Agriculture in World War Two," *Canadian Papers in Rural History*, 4 (1984), 11-32. Also of interest is B.H. Kristjanson and J.L. Anderson, "Hog Production in Northeastern Alberta," *Economist Annalist*, (November 1943), 77-80; and Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Handbook of Agricultural Statistics; Part II: Farm Income, 1927-57* (Ottawa 1958), 54-5.

³⁶ B.A. Campbell, "Dairy Industry in Wartime," *Economic Annalist*, (August 1944), 52-7.

³⁷ H.E. Nichols, "Memo on Hog Production," March 1946, H.E. Nichols Papers, Box 9, file 70, GAI.

liquidated their assets.³⁸ The Department of Agriculture knew that farm returns were inadequate, but unwilling to inflate food prices during the war, there was little that could be done. Instead of offering the farmers higher prices, the decision-makers instead promised the West compensation for depressed agricultural incomes in the form of "guaranteed floor prices" for the "post-war transition period." Late in 1944, J.G. Gardiner, the minister of agriculture, introduced the Agricultural Prices Support Act, which was designed "to ensure adequate and stable returns for agriculture by promoting orderly adjustment from war to peace conditions and to secure a fair relationship between returns from agriculture and those from other occupations."³⁹ Under the provisions of the act, a revolving fund of 200 million dollars was established for the purpose of supporting the prices of farm goods and insuring that "when the war ends . . . the farmers do not suffer."⁴⁰

Circumstances were never to allow the support act to prove its usefulness, however, for within a year the policy of the King government had changed from one designed to establish floor prices to one favouring contractual arrangements.⁴¹ The hallmark of this policy was the United Kingdom-Canada Wheat Agreement, signed in the summer of 1946 and presaged by an official declaration of a \$1.55 export price ceiling in September 1945. The wheat agreement secured for the annual sale to the British government 160 million bushels of Canadian wheat from the crop years 1946-8 at \$1.55 a bushel, and further contracted the sale of 140 million bushels for the period 1948-50, at a price of \$1.25 for 1948-9 and \$1.00 for the following crop year.⁴² Complementing this export arrangement was a programme of internal price stabilizations which established a minimum domestic price of \$1.00 a bushel on wheat for the first half-decade of peace. Though the Wheat Board subsequently lifted its payment to \$1.25 a bushel, the minimum guarantees remained in effect.⁴³

The response of farm organizations in western Canada to the Dominion's post-war policies was chaotic. The Canadian Federation of Agriculture (CFA), representing the larger farmers and their organizations, endorsed the bilateral wheat agreement and supported the price restrictions imposed by the federal government. According to H.H. Hannam, the president of the CFA, the stabilizations policy "typifies what organized agriculture, through the Federation, has been urging upon the Government for a long time," and privately he noted that farmers feared "instability more than they feared any loss from the pres-

³⁸ "Draft Address by Hugh Allen Before the UGG Annual Meeting," 7-8 November 1945, Hugh Allen Papers, Box 1, item 87, Public Archives of Alberta (PAA).

³⁹ Andrew Hebb, "Decontrols and the Farmer," *The Canadian Forum*, 27 (December 1947), 200.

⁴⁰ *Edmonton Bulletin*, 25 January 1945.

⁴¹ Andrew Hebb, "The Frustrated Farmer," *The Canadian Forum*, 26 (July 1947), 79.

⁴² Wilson, *A Century of Canadian Grain*, 578-9; Hazen Argue, "Canadian Wheat Policy," *The Canadian Forum*, 26 (October 1946), 151.

⁴³ Wilson, *A Century of Canadian Grain*, 857.

ently low price level."⁴⁴ For large, mechanized farmers, the long-term price-fixing formula was acceptable because it allowed them the security of being able to predict the value of their produce for an extended period of time. Granted this security, they could then reduce their production costs through further mechanization, thereby enjoying a fixed return with declining overheads.

In contrast to Hannam and the federation, the leaders of the UFC did "not agree with the contract our Government signed with Great Britain." The union opposed the agreement on two grounds. Firstly, the \$1.55 contract price was 25 per cent below the existing world market price of wheat, meaning that the "farmers of Canada were subsidizing the people of Great Britain to the extent of fifty cents a bushel."⁴⁵ Furthermore, the UFC opposed the policy because it failed to meet the obligations of the Agricultural Prices Support Act, which promised to establish a parity relationship between farming and industry. "We are not interested in higher prices alone," argued Bickerton, "we want the price of the goods the farmer has to buy set and maintained in relation to the price he receives for his product."⁴⁶ The UFC provided the policy-makers with two options: they could either increase the price of agricultural goods to the parity level, or else they could lower the cost of the items the farmers had to buy.⁴⁷ The militants expressed only censure for the CFA and the wheat pools. "Personally," wrote Frank Eliason, "I am convinced that the Federation will never amount to anything." R.J. Boutillier, the secretary of the Alberta section of the UFC, echoed his sentiments. "The wheat pools take the same attitude of shielding the Government's assinine actions" as the CFA, he complained, "and instead of taking their gloves off and arriving at a definite [conclusion on] policy, they always suggest to wait until the situation clarifies itself."⁴⁸

For the small farmers, the situation was clarifying itself all too swiftly. As one observer later remarked, the farmers "are of the opinion that one of the policies of the Federation is to urge low income farmers to leave the farm . . . but the Union, while recognizing that the agricultural population is declining, believe every possible effort must be made to help those who stay on the farm to enjoy a reasonable income."⁴⁹ Clearly, economics were at the heart of the

⁴⁴ *Western Farm Leader*, 2 August 1946; Wilson, *A Century of Canadian Grain*, 869.

⁴⁵ "Transcript of UFC Broadcast," 10 October 1946, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 X 66, SAB. Another UFC official added the criticism that the provisions of the agreement began to take effect when wheat prices were high and ended at a time when world surpluses would again be replenishing: "In other words, it leads us to the edge of the precipice and leaves us there." *Western Producer*, 3 October 1946.

⁴⁶ "Transcript of UFC Broadcast," 10 October 1946, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 X66, SAB.

⁴⁷ F. Eliason to H. E. Nichols, 28 September 1945, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 VIII 7, SAB.

⁴⁸ F. Eliason to J. Gray, 11 February 1947, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 VII 1; R.J. Boutillier to G. Bickerton, 18 February 1948, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 IX 6, SAB.

⁴⁹ "Confidential Report Submitted to the Canadian Federation of Agricultural Executive Meeting," 7-8 May 1962, Hugh Allen Papers, Box 1, item 84, PAA.

matter. While the sale price of wheat was being constrained by Dominion policies, and while the value of their hogs and livestock was suffering from the reduced post-war demand, "decontrols" were lifting the restrictions that had been placed upon the goods which they had to buy. In the winter of 1945-6, two cents were added to the price of gasoline, farm machinery prices increased by 125 per cent, and there was inflation in the costs of cotton goods, lumber, and furniture.⁵⁰ It was becoming "quite apparent that we were drifting further away from parity instead of obtaining our objective."⁵¹ According to George Bickerton, inflation was making a price "adjustment of around 20 percent necessary if [the small farmers] are to continue at a decent standard of living."⁵² Not surprisingly, the Liberal cabinet was not particularly interested in the UFC's economic reasoning. As Finance Minister Isley informed Bickerton, "most Canadians, like most other citizens, are willing to avoid the sort of wild boom and following depression we had after the last war . . . and are willing to continue to exercise the self-restraint which is essential if we are to achieve a smooth transition to satisfactory peacetime conditions."⁵³ The government, countered the militants, was willing "to turn agriculture into a war casualty."⁵⁴

III

A POPULAR REVOLT WAS rising to give substance to the strange economic visions of George Bickerton. Farm union membership swelled; the UFC(AS), which in 1942 changed its name to the Alberta Farmers' Union (AFU), grew from 1,800 members in 1940 to 8,800 in 1942 and to over 20,000 by 1945. In the last year of the war alone, the UFC(SS) increased its membership by almost 25 per cent to an impressive 32,000.⁵⁵ At the November 1945 convention of the AFU, the mood of the farmers had been vividly revealed by their electing a full slate of militants to the union's executive. The new president, Carl Stimpfle, was an unknown property outside of his home town of Egremont, and his sole qualification appears to have been a confused speech in which he pledged himself to renounce all his political loyalties and distribute a strike ballot to the union locals at the first opportunity. The surging current of militancy was best reflected by the executive's one appointed member, its dynamic young secretary, Bob Boutillier, who declared bluntly that for the leaders of the AFU, a

⁵⁰ "Notice to all Directors and Sub-Directors and Secretaries, AFU Locals," 3 June 1946, UC.

⁵¹ "Transcript of Radio Address by Arnie Milsap," 27 September 1946, UC.

⁵² F. Appleby to D. Gordon, 4 May 1946, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 VIII 41, SAB.

⁵³ James L. Isley to C. Stimpfle, 4 May 1946, UC.

⁵⁴ "Report of the Inter-Provincial Farmers' Council," 27 July 1947, UC.

⁵⁵ "Memo to Sub-Directors and Committee-Men," (n.d.), H.E. Nichols Papers, Box 7, file 44, GAI; "Radio Address by Carl Stimpfle," 18 November 1946, UC; F. Eliason to S. Sokolotaski, 21 February 1946, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 VIII 7, SAB.

farm strike was "the only way a democratic, live, militant organization can be an active force in agriculture."⁵⁶

Promptly, the new executive moved to fulfill its mandate. In early 1946 the AFU sent a series of petitions to both the federal and provincial governments warning that the farmers would withhold their produce if parity prices were not accorded.⁵⁷ Rebuffed again by the legislators, the AFU then distributed a strike information bulletin to the union locals and evangelists of farm parity canvassed the Park Belt.⁵⁸ On 21 June, a one-day "Farm Holiday" was sponsored by the union; picnics and dances were organized by its locals and the radio carried a special selection of music.⁵⁹ Shrouded in pleasantries, the farm holiday provided local organizers with the opportunity to come into contact with the larger community and thereby publicize the strike idea. As momentum increased in Alberta, the UFC(SS) began demonstrating its interest and support. In early July, Eliason bought 6,000 pamphlets entitled "Organizing Strike Action for Parity Prices" from the AFU and distributed them through the union substructure. Two weeks later, Frank Appleby, who had recently replaced the aging Bickerton as the UFC's president, met with Stimpfle at Lloydminster and "went on record as cooperative" with the Albertans "in the event that we should withhold our produce."⁶⁰

On 8 August 1946, a strike ballot and a petition of grievances were distributed to the membership of the Alberta Farmers' Union. The union's nine-point programme embraced demands related largely to the problem of ending war-time regulations of the agricultural economy. A fact-finding board was requested to determine and implement parity prices; a minimum fixed price of \$1.55 for both domestic and export wheat and floor prices for livestock, dairy, and poultry products were demanded, to be in place until parity could be legislated; all price increases on gasoline and machinery were to be rescinded; an adjustment of freight rates was sought and the income tax was to be reduced.⁶¹ The strike was to begin at midnight, 6 September 1946, and was to continue for a minimum of 30 days unless the government acceded to the farmers' demands.⁶² Results of the voting revealed a strong pro-strike sentiment. Thirteen of the 19,000 ballots distributed were completed, of which 88 per cent were in favour of withholding produce, though only 4,000 supported continuing the strike after 30 days, even if necessary.⁶³

⁵⁶ R.J. Boutillier to F. Eliason, 10 January 1946, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 VIII 7, SAB.

⁵⁷ Copies of AFU petitions may be found in the Unifarm Collection, dated 10 March and 14 April 1946.

⁵⁸ F. Eliason to G. Hudson, 31 May 1946, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 VIII 1, SAB.

⁵⁹ *Edmonton Bulletin*, 12 June 1946.

⁶⁰ F. Eliason to R.J. Boutillier, 11 May and 4 June 1946, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 VIII 7, SAB.

⁶¹ Copy of strike ballot, 8 August 1946, UC.

⁶² "Instructions and Guidelines for Organizing Strike Action for Parity Prices," (n.d.), UC.

⁶³ "Results from AFU Balloting," (looseleaf sheet, n.d.), UC.

In Saskatchewan, Frank Eliason was beginning to realize just how little his ten years reviving the UFC(SS) had accomplished. Without money to publicize, organize, or mobilize, the UFC could do little other than offer its best wishes to the Albertans. It could "back Alberta in her strike on a voluntary basis only," Eliason lamented. "That is, we were not prepared to issue a strike ballot soon enough to be in time for this year's crop, but we would publish requests to our farmers and make our requests over the air in our broadcasts for our farmers to hold for their own good and also to back Alberta."⁶⁴ For the AFU, the implication of this was that the UFC could no longer promise to deliver its support with any degree of surety.

Unfortunately, the AFU was not going to win much encouragement in its search for allies from other farm groups in its own province. To the older farm organizations in Alberta, the AFU was simply seeking to polarize agriculture into the forces of reason and of revolution. The problem was that the strike was bad for business, for as Eliason noted sardonically, "it was no doubt a great surprise to them [the Federation of Agriculture's member organizations] to learn that although they had told our [political] leaders definitely that the farmers were satisfied... the farmers themselves... [voted] to strike en masse."⁶⁵ For J.R. McFall, the federation's Alberta secretary, the entire matter was somewhat distasteful. "The publicity this strike is receiving through the press is certainly not doing the farm organizations any good," he complained, "and if they do gain even the smallest concessions, the strength of the Alberta Federation of Agriculture and the CFA will be seriously impaired."⁶⁶ Indeed, "if these boys gain any concessions at all, there will be no holding them." George Church, the president of the UFA, concurred, and though he admitted to be "itching to blast them himself," both he and McFall urged the Canadian federation to do the work for them.⁶⁷ Their appeal was readily answered. The CFA maintained a grim silence throughout the early days of September, and then, in the midst of negotiations with Frank Appleby, Herb Hannam of the CFA told the press that the federation would not endorse or condone the strike in any way, "though it had been requested to do so."⁶⁸

Bleak though the situation seemed, the AFU did not renounce its strike decision. Rather, it again attempted to negotiate, and in late August a small delegation was dispatched to Ottawa. There it discovered a government that was both non-cooperative and patronizing. C.D. Howe, who chaired the cabinet committee which met with the AFU representatives, informed the farmers "if you go ahead with the strike you are going to find the greatest lack of

⁶⁴ F. Eliason to R.J. Boutillier, 5 August 1946, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 VIII 7, SAB.

⁶⁵ F. Eliason to F.S.N. Williams, 30 November 1946, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 X 42, SAB.

⁶⁶ J.R. McFall to L. Hutchison, 5 September 1946, Alberta Federation of Agriculture (AFA) Papers, Box 3, item 41, PAA.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ "Transcript of CFA Press Release (Charlottetown)," 9 September 1946, UC.

interest in Ottawa. The ones starting it, will have to finish it."⁶⁹ Only J.G. Taggart, chair of the politically-castrated Agricultural Prices Support Board, was mildly sympathetic. A shrewd veteran of wheat politics, Taggart agreed that "a parity fact-finding board was a good idea," but he remained skeptical of its political feasibility.⁷⁰ After two days of meetings, the disconcerted negotiators returned to Alberta, convinced that their demands "were not going to be seriously considered without considerable pressure."⁷¹ One week later the delivery strike began.

IV

TO MOST OBSERVERS, it seemed much as though it had begun of its own accord. On the morning of 6 September 1946, Carl Stimpfle, the AFU's president, had called for the curtailment of all deliveries of produce for 30 days, and he had rejected a federal government proposal that the strike be delayed until the return of the minister of agriculture from Europe at mid-month.⁷² But no one really knew what to expect. Just three weeks earlier, a director of the Alberta Federation of Agriculture had confidently asserted that since nothing could be "accomplished by striking except a loss of time and money to the participants, I am satisfied it is a bluff."⁷³ Shortly after Stimpfle issued the AFU's statement, Premier Manning moved to insure that the strike would not take place. Speaking to the province over CJA radio, he urged the farmers to reject the subversive advice of the strike leaders. The proposed strike would, at best, be limited "to a comparatively small number of farmers in one area," he stated, and consequently, it would not "affect the overall picture sufficiently and will only result in unnecessary financial losses to the farmers who are induced to participate."⁷⁴

The next day, knots of determined picketers appeared suddenly on the highways, halting deliveries of produce, throwing logs and threshing machine belts before approaching trucks, dumping cream and grain over the roadsides, blocking all deliveries from Lloydminster to Dawson Creek, from Peace River to Red Deer. In the first week, a pattern of resistance swiftly asserted itself. At Stony Plain, picketers opened the tailgate of a truck and let escape a score of pigs bound for the market. At Wetaskiwin, two strikers were arrested for dumping a strikebreaker's cream on the ground and for resisting an RCMP officer who tried to stop them. The story was the same across Alberta's Park

⁶⁹ "Radio Address by Carl Stimpfle," 5 September 1946, UC.

⁷⁰ *AFU Bulletin*, September 1946.

⁷¹ "Reply to Brief Presented by the Special Cooperative Committee," 5 September 1946, UC.

⁷² *Edmonton Journal and Bulletin*, 4 September 1946.

⁷³ "Observations of Louise O'Neil on the Proposed Farm Strike," 14 August 1946, UC.

⁷⁴ "Transcript of Radio Address by Premier Manning," 6 September 1946, UC.



Mrs. Gregorz Polaszuk and children, outside their log home in Seba, Alberta, October, 1929. From Glenbow Archives, Calgary, Alberta, no. NA-2828-24.



William Konkin hauling water on calf-drawn sled, Vauxhall, Alberta, c. 1940. From Glenbow Archives, Calgary, Alberta, no. NA-2608-1.

Belt. At Viking, two men were fined for dumping grain, and outside Leduc four more were convicted after throwing 1,700 pounds of butter off a truck.⁷⁵ Posters printed by the AFU made their appearance, exhorting the farmers to protest with potent, though painful, poeticisms. "Use your Brain, Hold your Grain," they chanted, "Parity or Poverty," "Remember the Dirty Thirties: They Must Not Happen Again," "Support the Strike, It's Your Fight."⁷⁶

Mid-September saw the strike virtually halting all deliveries of farm produce to the local points in the Park Belt and Peace River areas, and even the major cities were suffering from shortages. Though both Vegreville and Edmonton reported satisfactory deliveries of milk, there were severe reductions in the supply of livestock, eggs, and grains. On 12 September, deliveries to the Edmonton stockyard, which exactly one week earlier had been 375 cattle, 94 calves, and 457 hogs, had dwindled to 88 cattle, 10 calves, and 16 hogs.⁷⁷ The farmers had responded to the strike call beyond all expectations. Membership in the AFU spiralled from 20,000 to 30,000 in the space of weeks.⁷⁸ Northern Alberta had fallen under a state of siege.

In Saskatchewan, the non-delivery crusade spread spontaneously across the UFC's substructure. Though the union had refused to declare itself officially on strike, and though Frank Appleby was busy trying to negotiate a compromise settlement in Ottawa, farm deliveries had ground to a halt in all areas of UFC strength.⁷⁹ So great was the response of the Saskatchewan farmers to the AFU's strike call that on 15 September the decision was finally reached to declare the UFC's formal participation in the strike.⁸⁰ By mid-month, the strike was "practically solid in the north;" 750 local points had been mobilized and Eliason estimated that over 35,000 farmers were withholding their produce.⁸¹ The pattern of revolt was similar to that in Alberta: patrols would form on highways leading to towns and elevators and all deliveries of farm produce would be stopped. The climax of the strike came in its second week, when word reached the UFC that shippers were moving animals by night from Biggar and Battleford through to the Saskatoon stockyards for sale. Eliason immediately circulated an appeal, and 500 farmers volunteered for picket duty, forming a cordon that encircled not only the yards, but also the railway station.⁸² Elated by their success, George Bickerton declared that "the non-delivery strike is

⁷⁵ *The Albertan*, 9 September 1946; *Edmonton Journal and Bulletin*, 9, 11, and 13 September 1946.

⁷⁶ Copies of posters may be found in the Unifarm Collection.

⁷⁷ *Edmonton Journal and Bulletin*, 12 September 1946.

⁷⁸ "Radio Address by Carl Stimpfle," 18 November 1946, UC.

⁷⁹ F. Appleby to F. Eliason, 6 September 1946, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 X 66, SAB.

⁸⁰ "Strike Bulletin Number 4," 18 September 1946, UC.

⁸¹ "Transcript of Radio Broadcast," 2 October 1946, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 X 66, SAB.

⁸² C. Colbert to F. Eliason, 19 September 1946; F. Eliason to C. Colbert, 23 September 1946, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 VIII 1, SAB; *Western Producer*, 26 September 1946. For

spreading across Saskatchewan like a prairie fire . . . it cannot be stopped."⁸³

But if the strike spread more readily over Saskatchewan, it was in large measure because the forces determined to stop it were less well entrenched than they were in Alberta. In Saskatchewan, the Federation of Agriculture was weaker and less centralized than it was in the foothills province and there was no UFA to challenge the UFC's authority. Furthermore, the CCF had triumphed in the 1944 provincial election and its victory had been engineered largely by the long-awaited defection of rural Liberal voters in the small farm regions of the Park Belt.⁸⁴ T.C. Douglas, the province's gifted new premier, offered the UFC "every facility" for making its demands known in Ottawa, and I.C. Nollet, the provincial minister of agriculture, actually advised Eliason that if packers attempted to force down prices after the strike ended, "a little resumption of picket action . . . might have a salutary effect."⁸⁵ The leaders of the CCF sensed, however, that an open endorsement of non-delivery would be politically inadvisable, despite their quiet approval of the strike. The large acreage farmers of the southern prairie, who had founded and who still formed the backbone of the party, opposed the strike and the socialists could not risk losing their support.⁸⁶ Consequently, the CCF government maintained a paradoxical silence; privately they endorsed the UFC's demands and probably tempered the zeal of the RCMP, but publicly they did nothing more than urge the prime minister to appoint a fact-finding board.⁸⁷ In contrast to the CCF, the Social Credit government in Alberta was neither sympathetic nor supportive of the striking AFU. In two radio broadcasts, Premier Manning blasted the militants as tools of an unnamed political party bent on world domination, a reference to the communist Labor-Progressive Party, and he attacked the strike itself as being "ill-advised from the standpoint of the farmers' best interests."⁸⁸ In order to prove this point, the attorney-general of Alberta ordered the police to assist any farmer who wanted to deliver produce and to charge anyone obstructing a public highway.⁸⁹

Despite the apparent success of the militants in mobilizing the small farmers, the strike was of extremely brittle construction. Clearly, non-delivery was

more on the strike's progress, see *Western Producer*, 19 September 1946, and reports from UFC locals in B2 XIII of the UFC(SS) Papers, SAB.

⁸³ "Transcript of Radio Broadcast," 30 September 1946, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 X 66, SAB.

⁸⁴ S.M. Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism: The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation in Saskatchewan* (Berkeley 1971), 206.

⁸⁵ Telegram: T.C. Douglas to J.C. Voss, 11 September 1946; F. Eliason to T.C. Douglas, 14 September 1946; I.C. Nollet to F. Eliason, 9 October 1946; UFC(SS) Papers, B2 VIII 89, SAB.

⁸⁶ Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism*, 278.

⁸⁷ Telegram: T.C. Douglas to Mackenzie King, 11 September 1946, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 VIII 89, SAB.

⁸⁸ "Radio Address by Premier Manning," 27 September 1946, UC.

⁸⁹ *Edmonton Journal and Bulletin*, 11 September 1946.

most harmful to its advocates, for by withholding their produce, the farmers were depriving themselves of their own much-needed incomes. As the strike wound its way towards its 30-day limit, enthusiasm began to wane and few farmers looked with favour upon its continuance. It was for most farmers a demonstration of resolve rather than an effort to overturn the marketing structure. Even in the initial strike ballot, few farmers had advocated continuing the action beyond 30 days, an obvious indication that they hoped a show of strength would be sufficient to induce the King government to negotiate. It was thus to the Farm Unions' credit that the strike remained so solid throughout the month of September, despite natural and economic hardships which wore down the farmers' will to continue. On 20 September a light snow fell over the Park Belt, and the farmers, fearing the frost, quit the picket lines in large numbers to finish their threshing.⁹⁰ Moreover, the failure of the strike to make inroads into the large farm areas limited its impact, for within two weeks of the initial strike call, most points south of Red Deer that had been mobilized had been reopened. Already discouraged by the weather and by the news from the south, the farmers' resolve was further affected by a bloody confrontation with the police which occurred in northern Alberta. On 27 September, a cattle buyer attempted to drive a hundred head of steers through a picket line which blocked the approaches to the Beaver Siding loading point. Somehow, news reached the local strike committee and over 200 farmers were mobilized to prevent the cattle from crossing a small bridge which lay before the railway junction. A bitter skirmish ensued with the buyer and a mounted escort of thirteen farm workers and eight police using clubs and lariats to drive the picketers away from the crossing. Several farmers were trampled by the terrified cattle, three were sentenced to hard labour and eighteen more received fines totalling \$1,300.⁹¹ Much publicized, the Beaver Crossing incident gave the AFU a reputation for lawlessness and violent action which only served to tarnish its reputation.

Jimmy Gardiner returned from Europe on 20 September, and within a week, he had invited the AFU and UFC to send representatives to Ottawa to discuss their grievances. It was not a propitious time to begin negotiations, for the newspapers were filled with reports that the strike was on the verge of collapse. Despite their apparent weakness, however, the delegation from the striking unions did succeed in winning what appeared to be some notable concessions. Rather than deny the farmers their cherished fact-finding board, Gardiner sought at great length to demonstrate that such an organization already existed in the Agricultural Prices Support Board, though he was hard pressed to explain why its chair, J.G. Taggart, had been ignorant of this dubious honour barely one month before. In compensation for not creating a new agency, the minister of agriculture agreed to expand the existing board and he intimated that a representative from each of the striking unions would be

⁹⁰ *Vermillion Standard*, 26 September 1946.

⁹¹ "Report on the Incident at Beaver Crossing," (n.d.), UC.

appointed. On the other issues of grievance, Gardiner was equally accommodating. He suggested that the discrepancy between export and domestic prices of wheat would soon be eliminated, he promised to review the tax structure, and he agreed to raise the 1945 participation payment on wheat pool certificates by 10 cents, a motion of appeasement to farmers angered by the newly created five-year pool.⁹² Confident that they had won a great victory under difficult circumstances, the farm delegation wired the central strike committees in Alberta and Saskatchewan to "suspend" the non-delivery action as of midnight 5 October.⁹³ "The sacrifices we have made," Carl Stimpfle declared proudly, "will not be forgotten. . . . This history-making strike will be recorded and the 'Powers that Be' will not forget us in a hurry."⁹⁴ In an instant, the farm strike had become a memory.

Unbeknown to the militants, however, the government was already devising a method of abrogating the agreement it had just reached. The Federation of Agriculture was pressuring the Liberals not to grant the militants any concessions; as they argued, "if these people and their strike action are given any official recognition, they will attempt to dominate the whole Canadian field."⁹⁵ Having failed to prevent the strike from taking place, the federation was determined at least to prevent the militants from winning at the negotiating table. C.W. Mowers of the CFA bluntly explained the situation to the minister of trade and commerce: "if the government would rather deal with the Federation of Agriculture in an atmosphere of mutual respect and negotiation than with an irresponsible organization ready to strike at a moment's notice, the government should assist the Federation of Agriculture in restoring prestige that has been shaken by the more irresponsible element." In short, "the Federation is in a tough spot and now more than ever before, it needs a major accomplishment to present to the farmers as evidence of the rightness of its method of doing business."⁹⁶ Never a person to miss the opportunity of creating a political debt, Gardiner swiftly delivered the much needed publicity boost to the CFA. In announcing that the Prices Support Board would investigate parity, he was careful to give credit for the decision to the CFA and when two new members were appointed to the board, they came not from the AFU and the UFC, but from the Alberta Federation and its Saskatchewan counterpart.⁹⁷ In recompense, the federation quietly suffocated the parity prices lobby and agreed not to pressure the government to honour its pledges to review the

⁹² *The Albertan*, 11 October 1946; "Radio Address by Carl Stimpfle," 18 November 1946, UC.

⁹³ *Edmonton Bulletin*, 5 October 1946.

⁹⁴ "Radio Address by Carl Stimpfle," 18 November 1946, UC.

⁹⁵ J.R. McFall to C. Groff, 21 September 1946, AFA Papers, Box 3, item 41, PAA.

⁹⁶ C.W. Mowers to J.A. McKinnon, 10 October 1946, AFA Papers, Box 3, item 41, PAA.

⁹⁷ F. Appleby to F. Eliason, 5 April 1947; F. Eliason to F. Appleby, 18 April 1947, (UFC(SS) Papers, B2 VIII 41, SAB; *Calgary Herald*, 29 January 1947.

income tax and equalize price spreads. "J.G. Gardiner," wrote one observer, "appears to have wooed and won the CFA successfully and now it is dutifully functioning as a part of the family compact."⁹⁸

V

AFTER LONG YEARS OF war and depression, the marginal farmers were confronted with a bleak and ominous prospect. All their devices had failed to ameliorate the conditions of their industry and now they were bankrupt not only of funds, but of ideas. The farmers had attempted to diversify their production, but had met only with continuing hardships. They had achieved unity in an effort to modify the agricultural system, but they had won no victories. Squeezed by rising costs and impoverished by inadequate prices, the small unit farmers were now facing their own inadequacy. Industrialization had destroyed them. Because of higher labour costs, they could not compete with the mechanized producers without machinery, and they could not use machinery because their smaller acreage still meant higher area costs. For most, there was no option left but to leave the land.

During the first half-decade of peace, a series of radical changes shook the structure of the agrarian community. The total number of farms in Alberta and Saskatchewan decreased by almost 19,000, falling to an aggregate of 196,333. Both numerically and proportionately, the greatest reductions were in the 160-acre and less farm category, which fell in number by one-third in Saskatchewan and by 25 per cent in Alberta. In the small farm regions of the Park Belt, these changes were even more pronounced. In the area between Edmonton and the Saskatchewan border, there was a 28 per cent decline in the number of quarter-section farms, while in the region between Lloydminster and Prince Albert, the decrease exceeded 30 per cent. By 1961, the decline in marginal production had reached spectacular proportions. In Alberta, the number of 160-acre farms had decreased by 40 per cent since 1946, and in Saskatchewan, the diminution was over 70 per cent. As the number of small farms decreased, there was a predictable growth of the remaining production units. In 1946, the average unit farm in Saskatchewan was 473 acres; by 1951 it was 550 acres, and one decade later, it was 686 acres.

The keynotes of this transformation were an increase in rural mechanization and capitalization and a decrease in the extent of farm diversification. In Saskatchewan, the number of tractors rose by half in the years between 1946 and 1951, and the number of combines more than doubled. To the west, in Alberta, there was a three-fold increase in the number of combines and the number of tractors doubled. As the small farmer disappeared, the proportion of heavily mechanized farms naturally grew. In 1941, only 38 per cent of farmers in the West owned tractors, but within a decade almost 80 per cent of them did. Similarly, the dispersion of combines increased from one on every seventeenth

⁹⁸ S. Smith to F. Eliason, 26 April 1947, (UFC(SS) Papers, B2 XIII A 25, SAB.

farm to one on every third between 1941 and 1951, and to one on every second by 1961. Faced with higher machinery costs and larger overheads, farm capitalization, as measured in terms of total operating costs, rose by 60 per cent in the latter half of the 1940s, despite a decline in the number of production units. Accompanying these trends was a decline in the number of livestock on farms. Between 1946 and 1951, the number of milch cows in Alberta fell from 51,607 to 38,550, and the number of hogs decreased by 10 per cent. In Saskatchewan, where there had been a milch cow on every 111 acres in 1946, there was, within five years, only one on every quarter-section, and by 1961, there was but one for every 200 acres.⁹⁹

The farmers' unions did not long survive the decline in marginal production. The fact of the matter was that the spirit of resistance had gone. There was no militancy left, and with the militancy fled the enthusiasm and the funds.¹⁰⁰ By midsummer 1947, Eliason had only \$800 remaining with which to carry on; barely enough to pay for one-half of the UFC's monthly operating expenses. At year's end, the union was totally bankrupt.¹⁰¹ A few months later, Eliason resigned, his health shattered; by the end of the year he was dead. Bickerton worked through to summer 1948, but then he too retired. The UFC(SS) survived his departure by less than six months.¹⁰²

The AFU declined with equal rapidity. By December 1947, its membership was down to only 16,000, a reduction of almost 50 per cent.¹⁰³ Young R.J. Boutillier, the union's secretary, argued that the decline was a consequence of the executive's failure to force the federal government to live up to its promises. Unfortunately, his common sense proved sufficient to cost him his job.¹⁰⁴ To a large extent, however, the problem came from below, for it was the union's membership and not its leaders who twice rejected calls to resume strike actions in 1947 and 1948. Confidence in the ability of the small farmers to affect their destiny had clearly fled, and as the will to resist declined, the AFU moved apathetically towards collapse. In 1948, a vote to amalgamate the once-militant union with the UFA was held. Less than half the circulated ballots were returned, but of these three-quarters favoured fusion with the UFA.¹⁰⁵ By January 1949 the AFU had broken apart and its lingering elements had been swept up into the mainstream of agricultural organizations on the prairie.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁹ *Census of Canada, Agriculture, Volume VIII, Part II, 1941; Volume V, 1946; Volume VI, Part II, 1951; Volume V, Part III, 1961.*

¹⁰⁰ *Western Producer*, 19 December 1946; and 27 November 1947.

¹⁰¹ G. Lebeau to B. Berezowski, 23 January 1948, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 VIII 1; F. Eliason to B. Berezowski, 6 August 1947, UFC(SS) Papers, B2 VIII 42, SAB.

¹⁰² J.N. McCrorie, *In Union Is Strength* (Saskatoon 1964), 35-6.

¹⁰³ *Edmonton Bulletin*, 12 December 1947.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with R.J. Boutillier, 8 February 1983.

¹⁰⁵ *Edmonton Journal*, 4 February 1948. Voting returns are recorded in the Uniform Collection.

¹⁰⁶ *Edmonton Journal*, 12 January 1949.

Within a decade of the delivery strike, the quarter- and half-section farm was all but gone and the big wheat producer and the northern mixed farmer had been unified in a spirit of commercialism. The old standard of the homesteading family farm had gone, and even the remaining small farmers recognized the need for a new agrarian outlook. The new rural ethos was a business ethos; it embraced technological innovation, it sought to make its labour extend faster and faster over more and more land, it was moved by a desire to increase production, and it thrived on a vision that hard money could be grown through an application of industry to agriculture. The delivery strike represents the small farmers' last attempt to survive in the modern world of industrial production. Its failure marks the end of frontier agriculture, the final recognition that Canadian farming would not continuously support all those individuals sturdy and hard-working enough to survive the harsh climate and wring out their crops from the soil. Pockets of rural backwardness, of poverty, and self-sufficiency persisted, but the progressive society soon transferred most of its social problems, its culture, and its value system, to the more expansive urban environment. Unfortunately, in so doing, agriculture destroyed itself as a distinct social entity. In opting for industry, it had sacrificed its individuality.

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McGill-Queen's University Press

Telos

A Quarterly Journal of Critical Thought

Issue No. 63

Spring 1985

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