

Farmers' Union Aims and Organization

I HAVE TRIED TO SHOW the origin of the Farmers' Union movement from the local and the farmer's point of view. Now I shall attempt to show how the whole is knit together on a national basis.

In 1929 a handful of men met at Sångä-Säby, now the Idea School of the movement, to draw up plans for a farmers' union.

In order to publicize the new organization, many lectures were given, and later a weekly journal was started. In order to raise funds for the movement, many of the pioneers guaranteed loans to the organization. However, more money was needed, and out of this came the much criticized "Oil Affair."

The executive committee sold editorial space in the union's journal to an oil company. Naturally, the opposition to the movement was indignant about this, and made much to-do about it. They were quite right, but what else could the executive have done? Now, we can criticize their methods, but at the same time I think we should be grateful to them

for keeping the organization running until a regular income was established from the members' fees.

At first, the leaders thought that the union should have jurisdiction over all marketing operations. Co-operatives were considered unnecessary. However, they soon discovered that the union was not organized to handle the problems of collecting, distributing, and processing farm products. There were violent discussions at the union meetings about the advisability of establishing co-operatives. Finally, a rule was passed that one of the most important aims of the movement was to establish co-operatives and support them in every way.

RULES AND STRUCTURE

Rules are necessary in any organization, but they are not very entertaining reading, and at first I did not intend to discuss them. In order to get a picture of the whole, I am giving the essential points.

In the local branches of the Farmers' Union every member has the right to vote, irrespective of his acreage or delivery capacity. At the annual meeting a chairman, secretary, and treasurer are elected. Delegates to the district branches are also elected. These local delegates constitute the annual meeting of the district branch, which in turn elects an executive as well as delegates to the county branch and to the union.

The county branch annual meeting consists of delegates from the district branches, who elect a county executive and also delegates to the union.

The county branch does most of the work and carries a paid staff — at least a secretary, but there also may be one or two typists. In the county branch there is a register of all members (also all nonmembers who ought to be acquired as members). This register also records whether the farmers belong to the different co-operatives. It is quite a task to keep the register up-to-date, and this is done by working closely with the co-operatives.

Delegates to the annual meeting of the union constitute the highest authority of the Farmers' Union. Previously, these meetings took place once a year, but they are now generally held once every two years. I suppose we will have to call them "conferences" in the future. Extra meetings can be called when important questions arise. The union conference elects a president and vice-president — but I will return to the union and its headquarters later.

There is a question within the Farmers' Union whether both district and county branches are necessary; in some sections they only have the latter, and I personally think that is the best plan for the future.

Membership Fees

Fees are calculated roughly according to the acreage of each member. They have to pay about five cents per acre. The amount is so divided that the local branch keeps one-third for its expenses; one-third is handed to district and county branches, the major portion going to the county; and one-third goes to the union.

Fees are usually collected by the local dairies, to which most of the farmers belong, by deductions from the farmers' accounts. This is a good system, because it is difficult to run about and collect money from individuals.

In many respects the structure of the co-operatives is the same as that of the union. Co-operatives get the necessary capital by small deductions from the accounts — in the packing plants two-tenths of a cent per pound, in other co-operatives something corresponding. Farmers hardly notice these small sums, but in the long run they form considerable amounts. On the whole, the financial position of the farmers' co-operative movement is very good. The co-operatives generally started with nothing and had to borrow from the banks. Most of them have now paid back all their loans, and besides have capital of hundreds of thousands or millions of kronor, depending on their size and annual turnover.

Qualifications For Voting

Within a co-operative the highest authority is the annual meeting, where each member has the right to vote. Should the co-operative be a large one, it is necessary to recognize districts where the members can elect delegates to the annual meeting. The principle, however, is quite distinct: One man, one vote, independent of delivery or acreage.

There are a few exceptions to this rule. I know, for example, of one packinghouse co-operative where the right of voting is according to the quantity delivered. Previously, there were more of that kind,

but they are rapidly changing. There is a popular saying in this country among the organized farmers: "It is the man who ought to vote, not the beasts."

I can understand big farmers wanting the voting right according to a scale, because of their larger responsibility and greater production. On the other hand, the system of one man, one vote has proved favorable in many respects, and would seem to be more democratic.

The annual meeting elects an Executive, including a chairman and vice-chairman. The Executive has to engage the managing director and other employees necessary for running the business. The co-operative markets its products in the home district and places the surplus at the national union's disposal for selling in the bigger towns (in the respective branch — dairy, packinghouse, eggs, etc.). The annual meeting also elects delegates to the national union (relative branch).

There may be in the dairy organization, for example, an intermediate station between the co-operative and the national union, known as the district union. Delegates also must be sent there from the co-operative.

PRESIDENTS OF THE UNION

The position as president of the Farmers' Union was an outstanding one. Usually the president was the center of the movement, and when it came to fighting of some kind he was always in the middle of the battle.

The first to hold the presidency for a long run

of years was C. G. Johansson, Lövnäs. His importance as a leader of the movement can hardly be overestimated, and I think it worth while to try to give a portrait of him. He was a small farmer from the county of Dalarna, which is famous in Swedish history for its love of freedom. He had shown his capacity for the work by organizing the big co-operative dairy association in his own district.

During one of the most stormy annual meetings of the union the acting chairman entirely lost control over the audience. Lövnäs was then vice-chairman of the conference, but we did not know much about him at that stage. He took the chair, and through the strength and firmness of his manner was able to quiet the representatives and bring the conference to a happy end. It became clear to all of us that he was the man we needed as president of the union; and at the next conference, six months later, he was elected.

Lövnäs was not a man of book learning. He had acquired his knowledge from life itself. When speaking to official groups he was quick to claim the farmers' rights, and he was successful because the farming group was solidly behind him.

Lövnäs was a bit of a demagogue, and often oversimplified problems. One of his favorite sayings which always drew thunderous applause was, "I want the Swedish flag to stream over farmers' homes without any debts."

This sounded very well, but as any farmer knows, it is impossible and not even desirable. Under such

conditions how would it be possible for a young man to start farming? Most of the farmers in Sweden are owner farmers, and consequently need a comparatively big amount of capital investment.

Lövnäs was a first-class debater. It was a pity for any poor fellow to go up against him in a discussion when he was in good form. I know that myself from bitter experience!

Lövnäs and the union's vice-president had given interviews to two different newspapers belonging to different political parties. In their announcements these gentlemen had been quite opposite to each other concerning an essential question within the movement. There had been an awful fuss about that, and during the conference I went in to the attack, particularly against Lövnäs. I criticized very strongly the lack of co-operation between the two most prominent men of the union. If I may say so, I made one of the best speeches in my life. Standing on the platform and looking out over the audience, I felt how they started listening, how the interest was steadily increasing, and how the majority completely agreed with me. At the end of my talk there was a lot of applause, and some delegates came straight up to me saying, "Splendid!"

After that came Lövnäs. The audience was dead silent, one could hear a needle fall on the floor. Everyone was curious about how the president would defend himself. He did it in his own way. First a few words against my attack, then he turned his speech to other things.

He was a first-rate orator and actor, and so brilliant was his performance that the audience forgot my arguing a few minutes earlier. When he finished the big hall shook to thunderous applause. No one asked to speak, the affair was settled and Lövnäs had won a complete victory.

After that defeat my own position at the conference was not very agreeable. But I think that Lövnäs in the future took some notice of my criticism.

In spite of this I liked Lövnäs very much. We all knew he did a splendid job in the service of the union and the farmers of Sweden. I may have pointed out some of his faults, but I am sure you will be able to read about his good qualities between the lines. When it came to government committees with lots of figures, statistics and investigations, Lövnäs failed. Arguing with economists and professors was not his line.

Bernhard Ekstrom

A man of quite another type is our current president, Bernhard Ekström, not nearly so self-conscious, but with rather a tendency for understatement. He was a successful farmer from the county of Småland, in the poorer part of south Sweden.

Ekström received only an ordinary school and farmers' school education. However, he studied a lot after leaving school, and was well aware of the value of education. Ekström is a giant of a man, rather modest, and formerly somewhat shy. However, he has overcome his shyness through the many speeches

he has made to farmers — and certainly he can persuade them as no one else can.

On one occasion a group of farmers refused to deliver their milk to the dairies because of a price dispute. The government asked Ekström to enter the negotiations after the efforts of union officials had failed.

Ekström spoke to the irritated farmers, outlining the problems facing both sides, and the rules that should be observed in conducting negotiations. Because of their faith in Ekström, the farmers followed his advice, and the dispute was settled peacefully.

Lundgren and Svensson

A man of still another type is the union's former general secretary, G. Lundgren. He too is among the pioneers and has been in the service of the movement almost since the start. He is both able and clever, but rather a hard man. He knows well the business of negotiating with the timber companies about hauling and cutting. He is stubborn and obstinate, and he does not think that anything is worth having unless it is part of the Farmers' Union. He and I have often had differences, but I still recognize that he is of utmost value to the union and the farmers — and what is worth a good deal, he has a strong sense of humor!

Lundgren is still in the service of the union as a specialist on certain questions such as tenants' leases and negotiations between truck gardeners and canning factories.

The present general secretary of the union, N. A. Svensson, was formerly a farmer and a lawyer. This type of background fits him quite well for an officer in our movement. Svensson has taken a great deal of interest in farmers' international activities, and his knowledge of languages and economic and social conditions has been of great value to us.

At headquarters we have a rather large staff because of the amount of work handled by this office. Every member of the union is registered, and reports are sent to and come from the branches. There is also "R.L.F.-tidningen" (the Farmers' Union journal), a weekly paper dealing with happenings within and outside the movement.

The members of the Union's Executive are all farmers, large or small and representing all parts of the country.

ACTIVITIES OF THE FARMERS' UNION

Many problems fell within the scope of a county branch. People frequently asked for support in differences between themselves and insurance companies, machine firms, etc. Many times our people were wrong and we could not do anything. But we had quite a job convincing them they were in the wrong at the moment. On certain occasions we had to settle differences between farmers or groups of farmers.

There are, however, events of more common interest, which ought to be mentioned.

Foreign Oats Cause Dispute

In 1932 Sweden had a surplus of grain because there was no restriction on imports. Previously we had been able to dispose of part of our oats and barley by feeding hogs for export. However, England put a quota on imported bacon in order to protect her own farmers, thus cutting sharply our export market for bacon.

In the face of this surplus of oats, some private businessmen conceived the idea of buying oats from Germany, who also had a surplus. Because Germany granted extensive export subsidies on her oats, the Swedish businessmen could afford to undersell our domestic oats. Some farmers therefore thought it was wise to buy the cheaper German oats for feeding their hogs.

One day a merchant was unloading a shipload of oats in the harbor of Halmstad. This was reported to the county branch of the Farmers' Union and we thought it a good idea to demonstrate against the unnecessary import, against the merchant, and against our fellow farmers engaged in this business. We rang up some of our members and ordered them to take their ancient motor cars and meet at the harbor of Halmstad. Quite a few came. The merchant was standing on the vessel, we on the quay, and we told him what we thought about his business. I am afraid I told him some other things too.

The merchant's trucks drove like mad through the town to get rid of us, for each truck was accompanied by an old car with a crew of four sturdy

Farmers' Union men. The oats buyers were told what the Union thought about their using imported grains when the country was full of home grown which could not be sold. They argued with us, but we saw in their faces that they really felt ashamed.

This oats demonstration attracted enormous attention in the newspapers and elsewhere. Although we did not think we had done very much, we were called rude names, and it was said that methods like this were not for farmers.

Let us see what was actually happening. Farmers had already tried many times, by resolutions and deputations, to draw the government's attention to the bad state of farming, but without much success. In this instance we were speaking to our Socialist government in a language they ought to understand better. We were applying just a little of the methods used by the trade unions (from which the Labor Party has sprung). In due time a scheme was put into action, covering all agricultural production and combined with an import control. This made things not quite satisfactory, but at least bearable during the worst period of the agricultural crisis.

That affair had some aftereffects. I was brought into court for injury to the merchant's honor, and was fined 800 kronor. The sum was collected within a few days by the farmers of Halland. Of course I did not like the judge very much after that, but was surprised to see him saluting me in a friendly way when we met. To a friend of mine he observed that it was a pity the law should be like that, for, in fact, Gullander was right.

The Union Fights Imported Wood

A similar event occurred six months later in a neighboring county. A big wood pulp mill preferred to import their wood from Finland when the forests of the district, with men and horses, lay idle. A meeting was called to discuss the matter and people met in large numbers. The manager of the factory was also invited — and he came. I cannot help admiring that man. It was not an easy task to argue against all these farmers and peasants, for everyone spoke with vigor and there was quite a lot of demagogism, particularly when the union people and the leaders were talking. There was a perpetual “Hear, Hear!” and applause.

The manager, however, was met at first by an icy silence and then often interrupted by abuse. In reality, he was more worth the applause than anyone. He said: “Well, gentlemen, I am in the employ of the company, and have to take care of the interests of the shareholders. Also, the Finnish wood happens to be cheaper than the Swedish. It isn’t my business to consider the social side; I am, so to say, the servant of capitalism. But I quite understand your point of view and I wish it could be arranged somehow, so that cutting and hauling could start again in our forests.”

In due time even this affair was settled through a government scheme.

LAND PROBLEMS

Among the worst things we had were troubles between farmers of different sized farms. On some

of the big farms there were a number of small tenants who had to pay their rent with work. The quantity of labor for such a tenancy was fixed by very old rules. During the course of time the price of the land in general rose, but the cost of labor was rising much more. The tenants from such an estate came up to our office and asked if we were willing to support them in their demand for a new agreement. We, on our part, went up to the squire and proposed negotiations. He was one of the very few relics from feudal times, and told us he was going to negotiate with his tenants himself and did not need any help. "Well," we said, "you can try, but we shall probably see you again."

The "negotiations" took place in this way. The tenants were ordered up to the estate office. The squire entered, and standing upright they had to listen to a memorandum in ten paragraphs, stating that everything on the estate was all right and everybody content. There was no actual answer but some murmur, which the squire took for "Yes," and so he left the office.

Of course, the tenants ought to have answered in a distinct and clear way that they did not accept his proposals, but such was the spirit on that estate that nobody dared to say anything against the squire.

To make a long story short, the county branch during long and hard negotiations pressed that gentleman, step by step, from his position. We were supported on certain occasions by the county council and the government. The ultimate result was a col-

lective agreement, stating that all tenancies should be paid in cash, and at a price corresponding to the market. The labor was to be paid according to the agreement between agricultural employers and workers.

We had several affairs of the same kind, but it must be admitted that the estate owners generally were very broadminded and practically no troubles arose.

I also must admit that the squire mentioned above has changed during recent times, and I think he now regards social problems quite differently.

Peasants' Rebellion

In this connection it may be worth while mentioning an episode from the history of my own farm. Bårarp is a rather large farm for Sweden, but previously it was larger, almost an estate with a number of small tenants. All that has changed; the tenants have bought their holdings and become owner-farmers. I started as a tenant farmer and bought my place in 1939.

In 1780 there was "a rebellion among the peasants" of the Bårarp estate. In more modern wording it would have been "a strike of the tenants." They thought they had too much work to do, and probably they were quite right. Consequently they stayed at home and refused to do any work at all. The rebellion was suppressed with all the severity of that time, and as a punishment the peasants had to erect four granite wing buildings during their free hours (which were not many). Two of those buildings still

remain as a monument to the methods of solving social problems in those days.

I have told this little story rather frequently to visitors belonging to different political parties, and I always add: "Nobody wants that time back, neither the owner, nor the tenants."

Timber Haulers Strike

In the north many of the smaller farmers' means of livelihood did not come within the scope of agriculture — for instance, those who supplemented their income by timber hauling in winter. These farmers were not receiving a fair deal from the timber companies. The Farmers' Union tried to obtain collective agreements like those which the men occupied in cutting the trees and organized in trade unions had had for a long time. The companies, however, refused to negotiate, saying it was impossible to have collective agreements for the haulers. It came to an open fight. At first the companies cared little, thinking that these small people could not keep on very long with their strike. The companies, however, soon realized that those smallholders in the north were supported by the Farmers' Union. Subscriptions were started all over the country among the union members, although the great majority of them had not the slightest personal interest in timber hauling. Money, grain and feed streamed up to the north by post and rail in order to help our fighting fellow farmers. This was something new in the history of Swedish farming, as north and south had previously always "played off" one against the other.

Further public opinion was against the companies. They at last began to understand that they had come up against something new, and negotiations were started. Both parties made a collective agreement and fixed the prices for timber hauling in a reasonable way.

BUILDING COSTS

In this chapter I have given a few examples from the activities of the Farmers' Union to show how the union was working. On the occasions mentioned, the union was successful, at least to a certain degree. It was not always like that — for instance in our efforts to keep the building costs of the countryside at a reasonable level.

In our country, with its hard climate, it is necessary to have better heat-insulated buildings than in most parts of Europe. We simply have to keep the cattle indoors for seven or eight months of the year. It is therefore quite natural that building costs should be higher than in the more southern countries.

The workers of the building industry, who were organized in very strong trade unions, got collective agreements with their employers and a price-list, fixing the price of every detail in a house. This list was worked out in accordance with conditions in towns. They claimed that the list should be applied also to our farm buildings with their large areas and simpler finish. This resulted in building costs higher than the total value of the farm.

There was a long, hard struggle between the trade unions and our union. We tried different methods,

and for some time they appeared successful. In the long run, however, we had to give up the struggle. I am sorry to say that question is not settled yet, and building costs are still unreasonably high. It may be solved in another way, by prefabrication at the factories with assembly on the building site. However, it seems the building workers have more than a fair deal, for many people want to leave their present jobs and go into that industry.

The Co-operative Spirit

It was important to take care of the farmers' interests in the ways mentioned, but still more important was getting a new spirit, a spirit of co-operation and working together. Farmers' co-operatives had started in Sweden before, about the beginning of the century, but many of them did not survive due to the lack of co-operative spirit at the time. Information and education were required, and as can be seen from what has been said, we adopted the methods previously used by the laborers' trade unions. Many disliked that, but there was no other way. We frequently had to fight against our fellow farmers who did not join our united efforts and even worked against us. The spirit came at last, and the actual success of our co-operatives is largely due to that spirit.