

## The "Grab-a-Hoe" Indians: The Canadian State and the Procurement of Aboriginal Labour for the Southern Alberta Sugar Beet Industry

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**ABSTRACT.** Until recently, the production of sugar beets in southern Alberta was labour intensive and required an extensive labour force to hoe, thin and weed crops. The industry has fulfilled its labour demands by utilizing domestic and immigrant labour. During World War II, farmers procured Japanese and German prisoners of war. When farmers experienced a severe shortage of labour in the early 1950s, the Canadian state, through the Indian Affairs Branch, intervened in the economy to recruit, mobilize and retain Aboriginal sugar beet farm workers from reserves and communities in northern Alberta and Saskatchewan. By the 1960s Aboriginal workers comprised the largest component of the labour force in the industry. Although the IAB held the responsibility for the well being of status First Nations workers, the working conditions of these workers fell well below acceptable standards. Still, for over 50 years, status First Nations and Métis workers provided their labour power to the industry allowing it to accumulate capital and prosper.

**SOMMAIRE.** Jusqu'à récemment, la production de betterave à sucre dans le sud de l'Alberta était une industrie à prédominance de main-d'oeuvre et nécessitait un nombre considérable d'employés pour biner, éclaircir et désherber les récoltes. Cette industrie a répondu à la demande grâce à la main-d'oeuvre domestique et immigrante. Pendant la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, les fermiers se servirent de prisonniers de guerre japonais et allemands. Lorsqu'il y eut une sévère pénurie de main d'oeuvre au début des années 1950, le gouvernement canadien, par l'intermédiaire des Affaires Indiennes, intervint dans l'économie pour recruter, mobiliser et conserver des travailleurs de la betterave à sucre autochtones provenant de réserves et de communautés du nord de l'Alberta et de la Saskatchewan. Dans les années 1960, ces ouvriers représentaient la majorité de la main-d'oeuvre. Bien que leur bien-être soit la responsabilité des Affaires Indiennes, leurs conditions de travail sombra au-dessous des normes acceptables. Cependant, pendant plus de 50 ans, ces travailleurs indiens et métis fournirent leur main-d'oeuvre à l'industrie et lui permirent d'accumuler le capital et de prospérer.

## Introduction

An aspect of the economic history of western Canada that receives little attention is the role that the Canadian state has played in the recruitment, movement, and retention of labour forces for various industries. A good example of Canadian state intervention into the economy to procure a labour force for an industry is the case of the southern Alberta sugar beet industry. During the early 1950s when the industry experienced a severe labour shortage, the state, through its various branches, moved to recruit Aboriginal people from northern reserves and communities in Alberta and Saskatchewan for sugar beet work.

At first, the Aboriginal labour force was small. In 1953 approximately 120 First Nations workers were recruited to hoe, weed, and harvest sugar beet crops (ASBGA, 1964: 17–18). In 1966 when the Aboriginal labour force peaked, however, over 3,000 First Nations, non-Status, and Métis workers were employed by sugar beet farmers in southern Alberta (ASBGA, 1966: 16).

A branch of the Canadian state that was heavily involved in the recruitment of status First Nations workers for the industry was the Indian Affairs Branch (IAB). In addition, the IAB held the responsibility for the well being of status First Nations people in Canada. Yet, during the period when Aboriginal people were the largest component of the work force in the sugar beet industry, the industry came under harsh criticism over the working conditions of its Aboriginal labour force. The purpose of this article is to analyze how the Canadian state intervened into the economy of the southern Alberta sugar beet industry to recruit, mobilize, and retain Aboriginal people for sugar beet work. In doing so, it will be argued that although the IAB held responsibility for the well-being of status First Nations migrant workers in the industry, their working conditions fell well below acceptable standards while the interests of the sugar beet industry were facilitated by the Canadian state.

## Theoretical Considerations

Within the Marxist perspective, capitalist society is understood in terms of its mode of production whereby relations of domination and exploitation are created between the capitalist class and the working class in society. Further, the Marxist perspective argues that the nature, structure, and role of the state in capitalist society is determined by the mode of production (Gough, 1979: 19). Hence, it can be understood that within a capitalist mode of production a fundamental role of the state is to create the conditions for capital accumulation. Moreover, a role of the state is to maintain the relations of exploitation between the classes upon which accumulation is built. However, for the state to function in the interests of capital, it has to be relatively autonomous from the capitalist class (Panitch, 1977: 4). This follows because if individual capitalists were left to relentlessly pursue profit, this could lead to the draining of labour power, class struggle, and conflict thereby threatening the very basis upon which their wealth and accumulation rests. Thus, the role of the state in class struggle is to resolve the issue without revolution while at the same time protecting the interests of the capitalist class. As Panitch (1977: 8) states:

the capitalist state must try to fulfil two basic and often contradictory functions—accumulation and legitimization. This means that the state must try to maintain or create the conditions in which profitable capital accumulation is possible. However, the state must also try to maintain or create conditions for social harmony. A capitalist state that openly uses its coercive forces to help one class accumulate capital at the expense of the other classes loses its legitimacy and hence undermines the basis of its loyalty and support.

Besides the two basic functions of formulating policies that will create capital accumulation and social harmony, the state also performs a coercive function. This means the state has the legitimacy to use force to maintain or impose social order. Yet, the state seldom uses its coercive function to facilitate capital accumulation and legitimize social inequality because social control is maintained through state welfare policies. State policies such as welfare programs not only serve to reduce working class conflict, they also facilitate the reproduction of labour power and maintain the non-working population (Gough, 1979: 49).

In capitalist society, the movement of individuals into available working positions usually occurs on the basis of market mechanisms alone. In some instances, however, the state fulfils its accumulation function by intervening into the economy in order to facilitate the flow of workers into available job positions.

Another theoretical framework that provides insights to the discussion presented in this paper concerns the function of racism. Within capitalism, racism functions as a means of reducing the cost of labour. To understand how racism does this it is important to underscore that in capitalism the maximization of profits depends on the dirty work at the production level being done at the lowest possible cost (Bolaria and Li, 1985: 19). However, because the accumulation of wealth creates increased economic activities and opportunities for upward mobility, it becomes difficult to keep pools of workers confined to jobs where they perform dirty work at low rates of pay. The solution to this dilemma was to define the subordinate groups in society on the basis of their skin colour and other physical attributes. In effect, an economic value became associated with skin colour. As Bolaria and Li (1988: 20) explain:

As the physical characteristics of a group are repeatedly paired with dirty work, the social standing of the group gets to be defined, in part by the work it does. Over time, the cultural and physical characteristics of a subordinate group become inseparable from its work role and its subservient position. Race, as superficially defined by skin colour, takes on a social meaning and significance.

The dominant group has the power to define racially subordinate groups on the basis of skin colour and other physical and social characteristics that serve to justify their exploitation and performance of dirty work. Moreover, the dominant group uses its position to assert an ideology that it is superior in comparison to other racially defined groups in society. Hence, it can be understood that the utility of racism is rooted in the economic benefits it secures for the dominant group in capitalist

society. As a number of studies indicate (Satzewich, 1991; Laliberte, 1994; Wallerstein, 1983; Castles and Kosack, 1973), immigrant and migrant workers are used by capitalist societies as a source of cheap labour and racism serves to lower the cost of their labour even more.

### **The Southern Alberta Sugar Beet Industry**

Climatically, southern Alberta is noted for its long hot summers and its low annual levels of rainfall. However, following the introduction of irrigation to the area in the early 1900s, farmers were able to grow a variety of specialty crops. Thereafter, the area became well known for its crops of corn, sugar beets, and more recently for its potatoes. Sugar beet country in southern Alberta extends from the west around Lethbridge, Picture Butte, and Coaldale, east to the towns of Burdett and Bow Island, and north to areas around Vauxhall. The hub of sugar beet country is the town of Taber where Roger's Sugar refinery is located for processing sugar beets into sugar. Prior to the increase of machinery and chemical weed controls in the 1970s, sugar beet cultivation was labour intensive. Hoeing and weeding was tedious, back-breaking stoop labour and workers had to sweat many long hours under the hot summer sun for every acre of sugar beets produced. In addition, sugar beet work paid relatively low wages. As a result, few workers sought out sugar beet work if they could find jobs in other areas of the economy.

The sugar beet industry in southern Alberta began in 1902 when a Latter Day Saint named Jesse Knight from Provo, Utah built a sugar beet processing factory near Lethbridge. However, even with a tax exemption and subsidies from the federal and provincial governments, the company was not a financial success and consequently in 1914 it was closed and moved to the United States. One of the main reasons for the closure at the time was the shortage of cheap labour for sugar beet work (Thompson and Seager, 1978: 154). Nevertheless, in 1925 the industry was revived in southern Alberta after sugar beet farmers convinced the Utah-Idaho Sugar Company that they had solved their labour problems. What the farmers did at the time was enter into an agreement with the federal government and the CPR whereby the government would facilitate the transfer of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe to southern Alberta if the farmers guaranteed work for them once they arrived. Following the agreement, farmers were able to procure sufficient labour to meet its needs and hence, sugar beet production in southern Alberta went quite smoothly. Even during the Second World War when labour was in short supply, farmers, with the assistance of the federal government, were able to utilize Japanese-Canadians, German prisoners of war, and conscientious objectors from internment camps to hoe, weed, and harvest their sugar beet crops (ASBGA, 1964: 17). At the end of World War II farmers once again used European immigrants for sugar beet cultivation.

The sugar beet industry of southern Alberta can be characterized as consisting of three classes (Thompson and Seager, 1978: 158). At the top of the class structure there is Roger's Sugar which is the processor of sugar beets. Although ownership of Roger's Sugar has changed hands over the years, it has been virtually the only buyer

of sugar beets for the entire harvest of southern Alberta farmers. In effect, Roger's Sugar has a virtual monopoly over the purchasing and processing of sugar beets that allows it to set the contract price it will pay farmers for their sugar beets (Laliberte, 1994: 40). Farmers form the middle class in the system. They enter into contracts with the processing company to deliver a certain quantity of beets with a certain pre-defined sugar content. Farmers are then responsible for fertilizing, planting, and harvesting the sugar beets. At the bottom of the class system are the sugar beet workers who are hired by farmers on a seasonal contract basis. Although the details of the contracts vary from season to season, they specify a fixed amount to be paid to workers for each stage of the job (Thompson and Seager, 1978: 158).

Over much of the history of the southern Alberta sugar beet industry, farmers received low returns for their sugar beet crops. The low return for sugar beet crops was linked to the price of sugar on the world market. During periods when there was a world surplus of sugar, it was dumped on the world market by sugar producing countries at low prices. Since Canada dealt on the international sugar market, the price it paid for domestically produced sugar was based on the low price of sugar set by the international market. This meant that domestic sugar producers such as Roger's Sugar, had to sell its sugar to Canada based on the low price of international sugar which, in turn, meant that it had to purchase sugar beets from farmers at a very low price. Consequently, farmers had no recourse but to be "price takers" because they had no control over the domestic price of sugar in Canada (Laliberte, 1994: 42).

Sugar beet farmers also had no control over the spiralling increases in the costs of production. In particular, the cost of machinery, fertilizers, and herbicides increased dramatically over the years that adversely effected the profit margins of farmers (ASBGA, 1976: 2). In response to the increase in the cost of production, farmers turned to technological innovations that increased the yield of sugar beets per acre and, to technology that increased the amount of sugar content in beets. As well, farmers responded to higher production costs by increased mechanization and chemical weed control that reduced the amount of hand labour needed in beet production (ASBGA, 1974: 13). As a result, farmers were able to increase their profits and offset the rising costs of production to some extent.

As the previous discussion indicates, over the years, sugar beet farmers in southern Alberta experienced a number of problems that hindered the viability of producing profitable sugar beet crops. These problems included procuring sufficient workers, low returns for their crops, and a lack of control over the increased costs of production such as machinery, fertilizers, and chemical weed controls. In effect, the only aspect of the production process that farmers had any control over was their labour force. Hence, farmers put the "squeeze" on the costs of labour in order to increase their profit margins.

### **The Canadian State and the Recruitment of Aboriginal Workers**

In the early 1950s, the flow of unskilled immigrants to Canada dwindled which caused sugar beet farmers to experience a severe labour shortage. It was at this time

that the Canadian state intervened into the economy in order to recruit Aboriginal people from northern reserves and communities in Alberta and Saskatchewan to work in the southern Alberta sugar beet fields. When the state moved to recruit Aboriginal people as a labour force for the sugar beet industry, the Federal-Provincial Farm Labour Committee (FPFLC) was responsible for all matters related to agricultural manpower in Canada. In particular, the FPFLC was responsible for identifying, recruiting, and relocating workers needed in agricultural sectors throughout Canada. The FPFLC, initially called the Federal-Farm Labour Committee, was established through the Federal-Provincial Agricultural Agreements. These agreements date back to 1942 when the Federal-Provincial Farm Labour Program was created to facilitate co-operative action between local, provincial, and federal agencies in finding solutions to war time farm labour problems (Brown, 1956: 2). Thereafter, the agreements were signed each year between the federal Minister of Labour and the provincial ministers of agriculture. In the 1950s, control over labour matters in Canada was transferred from the Department of Labour to the Department of Manpower and Immigration. It was the responsibility of the Department of Manpower and Immigration to provide assistance and funds, on a 50–50 cost sharing basis with the provinces, to carry out the provisions of the agreements. The provisions included the recruitment and movement of agricultural manpower, advertising, research, promotion of improvements in working and living conditions, expenditures for construction of new housing, renovation of existing buildings and, expenditures for the operation of camps for workers (Edmonds, 1969: 2–3).

In the mid-1960s, the Federal-Provincial Farm Labour Committee changed its name to the Federal-Provincial Agricultural Manpower Committee (FPAMC). The FPAMC consisted of a joint committee of both federal and provincial representatives. The federal part of the FPAMC consisted of the chairman of all the Provincial Agricultural Committees, officers of the Department of Manpower and Immigration, and representatives from other interested federal departments and farm organizations. The provincial part of FPAMC consisted of provincial agriculture committees composed of a senior officer of the provincial departments of agriculture, representatives of the Department of Manpower and Immigration, and other members appointed by the ministers of agriculture for the provinces. The provincial committees were in charge of assessing the labour requirements for the upcoming year. This information was then passed to the Canada Manpower Centres (CMC) of the Department of Manpower and Immigration and they carried out the recruitment, referral, and movement of workers with the assistance of provincial agencies (Laliberte, 1994: 83).

Another branch of the Canadian state that was highly active in the recruitment of labour for the southern Alberta sugar beet industry was the Indian Affairs Branch (IAB), currently referred to as the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND). The IAB held responsibility for the well being of status First Nations people in Canada. One of its objectives was to find employment opportunities for First Nations people so that they could improve their standard of living. Thus, in the early 1950s when immigrants were no longer available for sugar

beet work, it was the IAB that conceived of the idea to use status First Nations people as a source of labour for the industry (Edmonds, 1969: 7). Thereafter, the IAB worked closely with the FPAMC to procure status First Nations people for work in the southern Alberta sugar beet industry.

By the early 1970s the process of recruitment, movement, and retention of Aboriginal people for sugar beet work was well established. Sugar beet farmers would assess their labour needs for the upcoming growing season and forward their requests to the provincial agricultural committee of the FPAMC in Alberta. This information was passed on to the CMC in Lethbridge, Alberta which then passed on the request for workers to its offices near reserves and Metis communities in northern Alberta and Saskatchewan (Steele and Zacharias, 1971: 8). Letters and application forms were sent to the Chief and Band Council on reserves requesting workers. In addition, officials from the Alberta Sugar Beet Growers Association (ASBGA) travelled to reserves to encourage First Nations people to migrate to the beet fields. However, the most effective tactic the Canadian state used to induce Aboriginal people to migrate to southern Alberta was to terminate social assistance benefits on northern reserves and in Metis communities during the summer when the need for hand labour in the sugar beet fields was the greatest. In a study on Aboriginal labour in southern Alberta's sugar beet industry, Ferguson and Lipton (1969) state:

One of the most unsavoury aspects of the situation beet workers find themselves in is that they are recruited for work in the fields under conditions of compulsion or forced labour. At least two federal government agencies and the welfare departments of two provincial governments (Alberta and Saskatchewan) are complicit in this process. Canada Manpower working in co-operation with the Federal Department of Indian Affairs recruits the Indians for work in the fields from as far away as northern Saskatchewan. And "co-operate" the Indian Affairs Branch does. The Indian Affairs Branch has the policy of stopping welfare payments during the summer, for all reserve members but those on permanent welfare. The result is reserve members must leave the reserve during the summer months to find work.

Once their welfare payments were terminated, the Aboriginal people had basically no other option but to migrate to the sugar beet fields to seek employment as their chances of finding jobs near their homes were slim at best.

To transport the workers, the FPAMC hired chartered buses to move workers between northern reserves and communities and the southern Alberta sugar beet industry. Upon arrival at the reception centre in Lethbridge, Alberta, FPAMC officials registered the workers and allocated them to farmers. Interestingly, it was the practice of the FPAMC and the ASBGA to use a number of tactics designed to retain Aboriginal workers once they were employed in the sugar beet fields (Laliberte and Satzewich, 1999). For instance, while workers were provided with free housing (ASBGA, 1957: 11) and work training programs (ASBGA, 1970: 13), the FPAMC and the ASBGA also covered the costs of inviting Aboriginal workers as guests to the annual stampedes in sugar-beet country (ASBGA, 1956: 8).

The pool of status First Nations workers that was recruited and mobilized by the FPAMC and the IAB was referred to as the "sponsored movement" (ASBGA, 1963: 16). By the mid-1970s, however, most status First Nations workers migrated to southern Alberta on their own and consequently, the sponsored movement was suspended. Since non-Status First Nations and Metis workers migrated to the sugar beet fields each season outside of the sponsored movement, the industry referred to them as "freelancers" (ASBGA, 1964: 15).

### **The Indian Affairs Branch and Aboriginal Workers**

In Canada, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) holds responsibility for the well being of status First Nations people. In 1966 the DIAND became a separate federal department. Prior to that, however, the responsibility for First Nations people fell under the authority of the IAB which was merged with the Department of Citizenship and Immigration (Satzewich and Wotherspoon, 1993: 37). An objective of the IAB was to improve the standard of living of First Nations people. One of the ways it sought to accomplish this was by introducing First Nations people to suitable employment positions and ensuring that a positive social environment was provided. These objectives were reflected in the reports submitted by federal IAB officials who attended the annual National Agricultural Manpower Committee meetings held in Ottawa. In particular, the reports contained instructions on how agricultural employers could increase the retention of Aboriginal workers. In 1966, for example, at the annual Committee meeting federal IAB representative, D. Jackson (1966: 1) stated, "our report is a resume of observations, conclusions, and recommendations indicating the steps which might be taken to help the Indian workers remain on the job." To accomplish the latter, Jackson's recommendations instructed employers to establish and maintain personal contact and interest in the worker; provide properly equipped accommodations of an acceptable standard; provide facilities to Aboriginal workers so they could board themselves according to their individual tastes in food; provide the workers an opportunity to rest after a difficult 3-4 day trip to the south; promote an orientation to the new work setting and community; instruct Aboriginal workers adequately to preferred harvesting techniques; define conditions of employment and rates of pay; recognize the dependence of Aboriginal people on Aboriginal leadership; exempt employees from operations when the field or weather conditions are unsuitable; consult with leaders elected by Aboriginal workers in matters affecting or involving them; provide transportation facilities for shopping, recreation and sight-seeing; and, waive charges for accommodations when workers are unemployed due to factors beyond their control, such as weather conditions (Jackson, 1966: 2).

The report also indicated that agricultural employers could keep First Nations workers on the job by ensuring that the earnings for agricultural work matched those for other jobs in the labour market such as tree planting, fire fighting, pulp cutting, and guiding (Jackson, 1966: 2). To enhance the recruitment of workers, Jackson's (1966: 2) report suggested that First Nations workers experienced in agricultural employment should be used to assist in the recruitment process. In addition, it was suggested that films on harvesting operations should be shown to aid recruitment.



As Jackson's report to the National Agricultural Manpower Committee in 1966 clearly demonstrated, the IAB expressed a concern for the working conditions of their First Nations clientele employed in agricultural sectors of the economy. However, during the period when Aboriginal people formed the largest component of the workforce in the southern Alberta sugar beet industry, their relative working conditions fell well below acceptable standards despite the concerns of the IAB for their well being.

### **The Working Conditions of Aboriginal Migrant Workers**

During the period when Aboriginal workers formed the largest component of the labour force in the southern Alberta sugar beet industry, the majority were First Nations people from reserves in northern Saskatchewan. For many of these reserves, it was not uncommon that between 65% and 95% of the band members, including men, women and children, would migrate to southern Alberta during the spring to work in the fields for 6 to 8 weeks before returning to their homes. The workers migrated from such reserves as Witchehan Lake Reserve, Pelican Lake Reserve, Big River Reserve, Thunderchild Reserve, Montreal Lake Reserve, La Ronge Reserve, and One Arrow Reserve (French, 1969: 11–12). Since some of the reserves were located in the far north of the province which caused some First Nations people to migrate over 1,000 kilometres to get to southern Alberta, it was difficult for workers to simply return home whenever they wished to do so.

Once workers applied for sugar beet work, it was a FPAMC regulation that they had to enter into contract agreements with farmers to hoe and weed a specific acreage of sugar beets. Then, workers would hire their own crew to complete the job. The average size of the crew was 10 and was usually comprised of family groups consisting of father, mother, children, and extended members. As French (1969: 9) explained:

The work is done by the contract piece. This means that the worker can set his own hours of work. He may also recruit as many helpers as he desires. Sometimes a single family will be working one piece; other times two or more families will unite to complete a single job... When one contract is completed, the workers are free to go elsewhere to contract other jobs.

Although the details of the contracts varied from season to season, they specified a fixed amount to be paid to workers for each stage of the job. For instance, the "Alberta Cash Labour Contract for Sugar Beet Workers" for the 1968–69 season specified that workers were to be paid \$9 for thinning every one hundred feet of cultivated beet rows, plus an additional \$3 per acre upon satisfactory completion. The contract specified that workers would be paid \$14 for trimming every one hundred feet of beet rows and an additional \$3 per acre upon satisfactory completion (Landon, nd). Payments to workers were made upon the successful completion of each task. In 1969, the average worker could do an acre of sugar beets per day. This translated into earnings of approximately \$17 per day although workers earned more in some cases. However, a worker was not able to work every day during sugar beet season because of poor weather or because of a waiting period between the first and

second hoeing. In 1971 it was estimated that the entire Aboriginal migrant labour force in the southern Alberta sugar beet fields numbered around 2,000 and that it earned a total \$600,000 for hoeing sugar beets. This translated into an average of \$300 per worker for the sugar beet season (Steele and Zacharias, 1971: 18).

Workers that signed a contract to weed and hoe a particular acreage of sugar beets were legally bound to complete the job regardless of the working conditions. For instance, if workers found the acreage to contain more weeds than expected, they still had to complete the job because the contract was binding. In practice, however, many workers did not sign a contract. Instead, they would survey the field to see how weedy it was and then bargain with the farmer until they came to a verbal agreement on the price. Still, even when a contract was not signed, farmers tended to enforce the terms of a contract anyway. In particular, farmers would withhold the additional \$3 per acre for trimming and thinning by citing the “upon satisfactory completion” clause in the sugar beet contract (Steele and Zacharias, 1971: 23). Inevitably, disputes arose between the farmer and the worker over the definition of “satisfactory completion.” The sugar beet contract stipulated that such disputes were to be arbitrated by field men of the Canadian Sugar Factories Ltd. In the view of the workers, however, the field men were too close to the sugar beet industry to be unbiased in the disputes. As Steele and Zacharias (1971: 24) explained:

The field men are closely associated with the industry, they have a good close relationship to the Alberta Sugar Beet Growers Association. The workers cannot believe they are likely to favour Indians or Metis over growers. They suspect that, in the arbitration procedures, a conspiracy of white interest groups may be exploiting them.

In Ferguson and Lipton’s study in 1969 on the working conditions in the southern Alberta sugar beet industry, some Aboriginal workers accused farmers of not paying them their full wages. When asked whether they were short-changed by farmers, one Aboriginal respondent stated:

Yes, I’ve seen a lot of cheatin.’ And a lotta poor Indians got that too—they don’t know the difference. A lotta these farmers, you know, they think the Indians are dumb. (Ferguson and Lipton, 1969)

On the same issue another respondent stated:

There’s a lot of Indians that can’t read or write down here. All they talk is Cree and Chipweyan and a lot of them don’t even read or write—they can’t even spell their name or nutin... They pay them out in cash and Lord knows what happens then. They don’t give a written statement. I know myself I got beat, even on the labour. I still didn’t get my payment from the spring. (Ferguson and Lipton, 1969)

Ferguson and Lipton’s study also found that some farmers were able to exploit the labour of their Aboriginal workers by lengthening the beet rows. This was done when the farmer would measure out a field of sugar beets and then reach an agreement with the worker on the price to weed and hoe it. If the same worker returned

next season to work the same field, he expected it to be the same length. However, what some farmers did was lengthen the rows or they added a few rows to the field and then they expected the Aboriginal worker to accept the same amount of pay for weeding and hoeing it (Ferguson and Lipton, 1969).

Throughout the years of 1969 and 1970 the sugar beet industry in southern Alberta came under criticism from a number of groups because of the working conditions of its Aboriginal labour force. The treatment of workers in the industry gained widespread attention in 1969 when the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) aired a film on national television that alleged Aboriginal migrant workers were subjected to a number of indignities (*Report of an Independent Committee*, 1970: 1). This caused representatives from the Canadian Labour Congress, the Alberta Federation of Labour, and the leader of the Alberta New Democratic Party, Grant Notley, to voice their concerns about the working conditions of Aboriginal people in the industry. Consequently, in 1970 an "Independent Committee" was established to look into the working conditions of migrant workers in the sugar beet industry. The committee was made up of representatives of the Alberta Federation of Labour, Indian Association of Alberta, United Alliance for the Advancement of Native People, Canadian Labour Congress, Metis Association of Alberta, and the Alberta Human Rights Association (*Report of an Independent Committee*, 1970: 2). One of the issues that the committee dealt with were the rates of pay for weeding and hoeing sugar beets which it found were "by no means generous." Thus, the committee recommended that the rates of pay should be increased and that the, "Minimum contract rate for hand operations in the sugar beet fields should be set by the FPAMC, and should reflect more immediately increases in the cost of living and wage increases in other sectors of the economy" (*Report of an Independent Committee*, 1970: 15).

During the controversy that developed in 1969 and 1970 concerning the working conditions of Aboriginal migrant workers in the sugar beet industry, housing was a major issue. At the time, the sugar beet contracts stipulated that a habitable house be provided to the worker. This stipulation was also contained in the CMC "Letter of Instruction and Information" given to sugar beet workers. It stated that housing was to be supplied free and that the number of rooms in the houses was dependent on the acres of sugar beets and the number of workers required to handle the contract (Landon, n.d.). The houses were equipped with stove, beds, and mattresses and workers were required to supply their own food, fuel, blankets, cooking utensils, dishes, and working tools. Once the workers were hired the farmer usually provided the workers with an advance to cover the cost of groceries and other essentials. In Ferguson and Lipton's (1969) study, the housing conditions for Aboriginal workers were described as "very poor," where some of the buildings were "shacks" and some "converted granaries" with "dirt floors." The study also noted that none of the houses had refrigerators or storage areas for fresh produce. As a result, the workers were forced to live on canned goods for the extent of their stay in the fields (Ferguson and Lipton, 1969). In 1970 a representative of the Canadian Labour Congress, Henry Tomaschuk, did a report on the working conditions of Aboriginal

sugar beet workers. In his report he described the workers as living in poor housing; much of which was nothing more than granaries or run-down shacks. This prompted Tomaschuk to state, "Most farmers have better barns and pigpens for their livestock" (Tomaschuk, 1970: 20). Similar comments were made in Steele and Zacharias' 1971 study on the housing conditions of Aboriginal workers in the industry. They stated:

our first-hand observations convinced us that many migrant labourers are, in fact, living out their summers in housing that most people would recognize as substandard. In some cases, they're in chicken coops or converted granaries. In one instance, the farmer moved the chickens out just before the workers arrived and, later, the chickens tried to return home for the night. (Steele and Zacharias, 1971: 20)

Immediately following the criticisms of migrant worker housing, the ASBGA requested assistance through the Federal-Provincial agreement to provide farmers with funding to improve worker housing. The request was granted and funding was provided that covered up to 40% of the costs of the improvements. The funding for upgrading worker housing was in place in various forms until 1983 when it was cancelled by the government (ASBGA, 1983: 15).

While the housing conditions of Aboriginal workers was a major criticism of the sugar beet industry in late 1960s, it paled in comparison to the issue of child labour. The use of child labour in the industry came about because of the federal and provincial labour laws that explicitly excluded agricultural workers. At a meeting of the National Agricultural Committee in 1966, an official of the federal Department of Labour, Gil Schonning, summarized the federal and provincial labour laws that excluded farm workers (see Appendix A). In regards to the statutory school-leaving age, Schonning's (1966: 2) summary pointed out that, "In all of the provinces there is a compulsory school attendance law but in many of the provinces exemptions are permitted for employment in agriculture." The summary went on to state that, "No minimum age has been established for employment in agriculture (Schonning, 1966: 2). Since employment in agriculture trumped the provincial statutory school-leaving age and given that there was no minimum age requirement for employment in agriculture, it's understandable how the labour of children came to be used in the sugar beet industry.

When Aboriginal workers migrated to the sugar beet fields many would take along their families, including their wife, children, and other extended family members. Since the worker who signed the contract to hoe and weed a specific acreage of sugar beets was allowed to hire a crew to complete the job, inevitably the worker hired family members, including the children. When the issue of child labour in the sugar beet industry gained widespread media attention, officials of the sugar beet industry blamed the parents for using their children as a source of labour. In 1970, amid the criticism that the province didn't require a minimum age for agriculture work, the premier of Alberta, Harry Strom, echoed the views of the industry when he stated, "child labour in Alberta's sugar beet fields is the fault of the parents, not

the government" (*The Albertan*, 1970). In response to Premier Strom's position, the leader of the New Democratic Party in Alberta, Grant Notley, stated:

When the premier says the problem of child labour is the fault of the parents, he's side-stepping the responsibility of the provincial government in this issue. The premier is technically correct in stating that the workers are independent contractors, and therefore unprotected from labour laws, "but that still doesn't make the plight which results anymore palatable." Provincial laws should be amended to include migrant workers. (*The Albertan*, 1970)

Moreover, critics were quick to point out that it was the low wages paid to workers by the industry that forced the parents to resort to using their own families in order to maximize their earnings (Laliberte, 1994: 132). Such an argument was reinforced in Ferguson and Lipton's (1969) study that stated:

Child labour is another feature of sugar beet work. Most of the Indian families have small children who work side-by-side with their parents in the beet fields. Most of the Indians don't like the idea of their children working in the beet fields, especially the younger ones of six or seven, but feel they have no choice if the family is going to feed and clothe itself. The beet growers cynically exploit the situation as a device to obtain cheap labour.

As a result of the controversy over the use of child labour, the sugar beet industry moved to stem the flow of children migrating with the sponsored workers' movement. Beginning in 1970, for instance, this was accomplished when workers were denied access to the chartered buses if they were accompanied by school age children (*Report of an Independent Committee*, 1970: 5).

Two other issues that warrant mentioning concerning the working conditions of Aboriginal people in the sugar beet industry were unemployment insurance benefits and workmen's compensation. As Schonning's (1966: 2) summary of the labour laws explained, "Employment in agriculture is one of the main categories of employment exempted from provisions of the Unemployment Insurance Act." However, in 1967 unemployment insurance benefits were made mandatory for agricultural workers that worked sufficient time at non-contract work to qualify. Nonetheless, the extension of the benefits excluded sugar beet workers because when they signed a contract with a farmer to perform hand labour on a specified acreage of beets, they were deemed self-employed (Schmidt, 1970). Moreover, when workers signed a contract and came under the definition of self-employed and, if they hired their relatives to fulfil the obligations of the contract, they too became exempt from coverage whether they were paid or not (*Proceedings*, 1966: 11).

Although the labour laws excluded compulsory workmen's compensation for agricultural workers, it was possible for farmers to choose to come under the Workmen's Compensation Act. Still, few farmers chose to come under the Act because of the high costs of the premiums for farm coverage (ASBGA, 1977: 13). Even when a position paper prepared for a "Select Committee to the Legislative

Assembly on Workers' Compensation" advocated that farmers and farm workers in Alberta should be covered by the Act, farmers refused to do so because of the high premiums and because they argued it was their free enterprise right to choose to come under the Act or several other plans that were available (ASBGA: 1981: 13). As recently as 1991 farmers in Alberta still refused compulsory compensation for farm workers due to the high cost of premiums for the coverage (ASBGA, 1991: 19–20).

In light of the relatively poor working conditions in the sugar beet industry, Ferguson and Lipton's 1969 report argued that the only way migrant workers could change their circumstances was to form a worker's union. As the report put it:

The only way things will change for the beet workers will be when they organize and form a powerful union. By organizing they can speak with one voice and be heard. A powerful organization like the Beet Growers Association must be confronted by an equally powerful union in order to balance out the scale. The union should push for, better working conditions, higher pay, improved housing and government benefits such as unemployment insurance and workmen's compensation. (Ferguson and Lipton, 1969).

In reality, however, it was difficult to organize a union among seasonal migrant workers because of the short period of time they spent in the sugar beet fields.

On top of the poor working conditions, Aboriginal people in the industry were victims of racial stereotypes and characterized as unreliable labour. For instance, in 1969 Ferguson and Lipton found that farmers determined the pay rates for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers for completing the same operations in the sugar beet contract to be based on skin colour. The authors stated:

We found the range in pay, the difference between the top and bottom rate for any of the operations, is due to two factors—the dirtiness (weediness) of the fields and the colour of the workers' skin. Indians are paid less than whites. (Ferguson and Lipton, 1969)

In 1971 when Steele and Zacharias interviewed farmers, sugar beet industry officials, and community leaders concerning the attitudes towards Aboriginal migrant workers, they were frequently told that:

Indians were lazy and unable to hold their liquor. Many people felt it was a mistake to open the bars to Indians... Alcohol, they felt, was a major contributor to the social and labour problems that the migrant labour force had created. People agreed that there were many "good" Indian beet workers but they often suggested too that, as a rule, Indians were unreliable and incapable. (Steele and Zacharias, 1971: 10)

There is evidence that suggests non-Aboriginal people in the sugar beet industry held racial stereotypes of Aboriginal people at the time they were recruited as a labour force in the early 1950s. As a result, many sugar beet farmers had problems accepting them as workers. However, in 1961 the ASBGA Labour Report Director, Leith Johnson was able to report:

We have good reason to believe that the grower acceptance of these people is getting better each year, and the goodwill and business relations between the two groups are slowly but steadily improving" (ASBGA, 1961: 13). Yet, the annual reports of the ASBGA indicated that the industry continuously searched for another source of labour other than Aboriginal labour. For instance, in an annual report, Labour Report Director, Leith Johnson stated, "Our Labour Committee has had talks with the Department of Immigration officials ... about bringing in Mexican labour or new immigrants from Europe... We stressed the desperate need of a new source of workers other than Indians, for the following reasons: (1) the growing wide-spread dissatisfaction of growers with Indian workers. (2) Too many farmers discontinuing growing beets for the lack of satisfactory workers. (ASBGA, 1965: 16)

Officials of the IAB were well aware that Alberta farmers characterized Aboriginal labour as unreliable. In response, however, the Assistant Deputy Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, R.F. Battle, argued that the unreliability of Indians as workers stemmed mainly from "inadequate conditions in housing, education facilities, health and recreation opportunities" (*Proceedings*, 1966: 7).

In the late 1970s sugar beet farmers began to augment their Aboriginal labour force with Mexican Mennonite workers. Still, Aboriginal workers comprised the largest component of the labour force in the southern Alberta sugar beet industry until the early 1980s. By this time sugar beet farmers had increased mechanization and the use of chemical weed controls to such an extent that their need for hand labour was significantly reduced. Today, Mexican Mennonite workers have overwhelmingly displaced Aboriginal workers in the industry. Nevertheless, in 2004 it was found that 20% of the sugar beet crops grown in southern Alberta used seasonal hand labour for weed control purposes and, that a significant portion of the workers were Aboriginal, again, mainly First Nations workers from reserves in northern Saskatchewan (Jones, 2004).

### Summary

As this analysis has demonstrated, in the early 1950s when the sugar beet industry faced a labour shortage crisis, the Canadian state intervened into the economy and quickly procured a sufficient labour force for production purposes through the recruitment, mobilization, and retention of Aboriginal workers for sugar beet jobs. The IAB was the main branch of the state that helped facilitate the recruitment, movement, and retention of status First Nations people from northern reserves in Alberta and Saskatchewan to the sugar beet fields. Interestingly, in the case of the southern Alberta sugar beet industry, the IAB played a contradictory role concerning status First Nations workers. The IAB held the responsibility for the well being of status First Nations people and one of its objectives was to secure adequate employment opportunities for them so they could improve their standard of living. This role of the IAB fitted well with the state's need to create the conditions for capital accumulation. However, while IAB portrayed a concern for the working conditions of First Nations people in the industry this did not materialize. In fact, their

relative working conditions were deplorable and consisted of a lack of labour law protection, poor housing, low wages, and the exploitation of their labour; in some cases their children's labour was also exploited. The exploitation of Aboriginal workers in the industry was justified through racial stereotypes that stigmatized them as drunks, unreliable, and lazy. It's also interesting to note that what flies in the face of the latter characterization of Aboriginal workers is that if it wasn't for their labour during a critical period of the sugar beet industry's history, it simply wouldn't have survived. Nevertheless, what the latter scenario indicates is that when the capital accumulation function of the state came into conflict with the IAB's role, the capital accumulation function took precedence over the well being of status First Nations workers in the industry. Lastly, while hoeing sugar beets was back breaking stoop work performed under long hot summer days, low paying, and the working conditions were extremely poor, Aboriginal people endured in the industry for over 50 years. Under such working conditions it seems likely that one of the ways they coped was through their sense of humour as some jokingly referred to themselves as the "grab-a-hoe Indians."



### Appendix A

The federal and provincial labour laws that explicitly excluded agricultural workers as presented by Gill Schonning, an official of the federal Department of Labour, during a meeting of the National Agricultural Committee in 1966.

*Statutory school-leaving age:* In all of the provinces there is a compulsory school attendance law but in many of the provinces exemptions are permitted for employment in agriculture.

*Minimum age for employment:* No minimum age has been established for employment in agriculture.

*Minimum wage legislation:* Farm labour is everywhere excluded from minimum wage regulations.

*Equal pay:* While most of the provinces have an equal pay law, as a general rule this law does not apply to employment in agriculture.

*Hours of work:* Five provinces have laws which regulate working hours but none of these laws apply to employment in agriculture.

*Weekly rest day:* All provinces except Prince Edward Island provide for a weekly rest day for all or nearly all employed persons except farm workers.

*Annual vacations with pay:* Annual vacations are provided for by law in eight of the provinces. Farm workers are excluded in all provinces.

*Public holidays:* Provincial laws dealing with public holidays generally do not apply to farm workers.

*Fair employment practices:* Farm workers are not included in provincial laws which prohibit discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, religion, and national origin.

*Notice of termination of employment:* Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Quebec and Nova Scotia have legislation requiring an employer or employee to give notice of termination of employment. These laws do not apply to farm workers.

*Workmen's compensation:* Agricultural workers were excluded from compulsory coverage in all provinces until 1965 when the provision of the Ontario law stating that the Act did not apply to the industry of farming was deleted. New regulations will be issued extending the protection of the Act to farm workers. It is proposed to bring these workers under the Act from January 1, 1966.

*Unemployment insurance:* Employment in agriculture is one of the main categories of employment exempted from provisions of the Unemployment Insurance Act.

*Labour Relations:* The Labour Relations Act of Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia exclude agriculture. Agriculture is not excluded in the Acts of Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Under the Quebec Act farm workers are not excluded but the legislation applies only to farms which have three or more employees (Schonning, 1966: 2).

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