Sugar Beet Labor: Not so Sweet

Objectives

1. Provide a history of labor, in terms of how labor has developed over time and how processes have changed.
2. Identify themes and discuss the problems of child labor and migrant labor.
3. Discuss the current labor dispute of American Crystal Sugar’s workers and the implications of the strike.

Summary of Findings

Historical Summary of Sugar Beet Labor

Consumption and production methods of sugar have radically changed over time. In the 1800’s, shortages of sugar and high prices prevented most from consuming sugar often. This shortage inspired the French to produce cheap, low quality sugar from beets. Although inferior, beets turned out to be an ideal base crop, providing scraps for animal feed, and yielding a tax-free income. Over the years, driven by exponential sales, techniques for refining the quality of sugar rapidly accelerated, allowing beet sugar to match the quality of cane sugar.

The sugar industry in the United States developed in the early 1900’s, predominately in the Midwest regions of Minnesota and North Dakota. Migrant labor, from the start of the industry, has been used as a viable work force. Whole families in particular were contracted because contracting a family unit cut costs and families were more likely to stay for the entire season. However, as technologies developed and the industry gained strength, the power of a worker and working conditions changed drastically. A worker in the 1960’s said, “Within a decade, a new technology… converted sugar beets from a labor intensive crop based on migratory labor into one requiring skilled machine operators and considerable capital investment in such specialized machinery as harvester combines, … seed drills, cultivators, loaders, and other equipment”. As mechanization increased, Genetically Modified Beets became available, and less and less labor was necessary, workers began to lose control.

Historical Use of Child Labor in Sugar Beet Fields

When sugar beet labor became necessary in the early 1900’s, the lack of government regulation put many children at risk. No government laws existed to protect children working in agriculture: children were presumed to be protected by their parents.

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1 White and Deadly: Sugar and Colonialism. Page 160.
2 White and Deadly: Sugar and Colonialism. Page 163.
or take care of themselves\textsuperscript{4}. The children were not properly equipped, weather conditions were often horrid, and the health of working children often deteriorated rapidly. Injuries occurred often, including scythes hooked into the leg during a process called “topping”\textsuperscript{5}. Families often valued financial considerations over the welfare of their children and ignored compulsory education laws during beet season. School attendance for children workers was remarkably different than that of other school children and the so-called “beeters” were taught differently and separately. Consequently, children beet workers fared far worse in school than other children\textsuperscript{6}. With entire family units contracted, child labor continued, and by 1920, 52\% of Nebraska field workers were aged 5-15\textsuperscript{7}. In 1934, the Jones-Costigan Act was designed to limit and regulate child labor, fix minimum wages, abolish child labor and regulate working hours. The act was not, however, entirely successful, although the legislation was a step in the right direction\textsuperscript{8}. At least for some time, programs continued, despite this interference of the government. One such program was the “Youth Job Club”. This program, however, was soon dismantled as teenagers would not perform the farm work. Ultimately, the industry got rid of the program because the children preformed “a little slower” than the adult migrant workers\textsuperscript{9}. Thus, it seems that economics, not morals, dismantled child labor efforts. Child labor dramatically decreased over time, no thanks to government regulation, parental intervention, or ethical reasoning.

\textit{The Roots and Problems of migrant labor}

Migrants have been a viable source of labor for sugar beets since the introduction of the crop in the 1800’s. In Europe, growers exploited cheap labor by employing migrant workers from Ukraine, Poland, and Russia\textsuperscript{10}. When the crop arrived in the United States, immigrants from China, Japan, the Philippines and Mexico were often used. Out of convenience, as time went on, Mexican migrant workers and migrants from Texas became one of the most important sources of labor for the sugar beet industry. These workers, in most cases, were recruited by company agents who negotiated deals with the workers directly (instead of the growers negotiating directly with the company)\textsuperscript{11}. These agents often recruited entire families to work as family units were less expensive and more inclined to remain at work. As no regulation existed for migrant housing (and the sugar beet work force is largely dependant on migrant workers), housing conditions were often awful and in many situations housing was not provided\textsuperscript{12}. However, as the industry progressed, labor relations with the contracting companies improved. Circa 1940, high

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\textsuperscript{4} Children in the Fields. Page 176.
\textsuperscript{5} Children in the Fields. Page 184.
\textsuperscript{6} Children in the Fields. Page 197.
\textsuperscript{7} North for the Harvest. Page 34.
\textsuperscript{8} Beet Sugar in the West: A History of the Utah-Idaho Sugar Company 1891-1966. Page 132
\textsuperscript{9} North for the Harvest. Page 133.
\textsuperscript{10} White and Deadly: Sugar and Colonialism. Page 169.
\textsuperscript{12} Roots of Success. Page 32.
demand for workers helped migrants negotiate better contracts, eventually leading to improvements in and acquisition of running water, electricity and ventilation. All of this was supported by the federal security administration addressing concerns of migrant health, education and housing. Despite these improvements though, the main complaints of migrant workers, including wages and housing, were largely unaddressed. Reports indicate that even with the improved conditions, most workers still lacked indoor plumbing. Conditions for migrant workers were not helped by the lack of government regulations or industry interference.

Many attempts to control and improve living conditions for migrants were often destroyed by company hiring practices. Several American Federation of Labor organizers recalled that many of their attempts were unsuccessful as growers preferred to hire undocumented Mexican workers “whom they could control”. Because of this, conditions in the Midwest were reportedly better than the conditions under Jim Crow like laws in Texas. In fact, migrant workers often reported that they got their best wages from sugar beet fieldwork. However, in order to cross the United States border from Mexico, one worker recalled that “they paid the eight-dollar head tax for each member, he and his family were ‘washed like cattle’ and weighed and measured, had their pictures taken, were given a receipt for each head tax, and were then allowed to cross the border”. Over two hundred thousand Mexicans crossed in a similar fashion. Racism and such improper treatment continued over the years, undocumented and unregulated by the industry or the government.

*Hard Labor: the Beet Process*

Harvesting sugar beets originally took a considerable amount of labor. Beets naturally grow in clumps but to be successfully be cultivated they must be weeded through a process called “thinning”. Consequent processes include “hoeing”, “pulling”, and “topping” or cutting off the top of the beet. This work required workers to operate either “in a bending position with both hands on the ground, his head hanging down, or to crawl on the ground with his hands and knees”. As one worker outlined, “every beet must be kneeled to”. Working conditions, twelve to fourteen hour days, and lack of safety precautions made early work in the sugar beet fields particularly unpleasant. One migrant worker exclaimed “I must have gone back to Mexico on my knees.” Technology, however, soon led to a harvesting revolution. Mechanical harvesters severely decreased the amount of labor needed, changing dynamics in labor relations drastically. The reciprocity created from necessity on behalf of the company, growers, and migrant workers essentially vanished.

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14 North for the Harvest. Page 83.
15 North for the Harvest. Page 27.
16 North for the Harvest. Page 24 - 183.
17 A 1941, a farmer detailed his work with pesticides, especially noting how he mixes them with his hands. (Roots of Success. Page 83).
19 Roots of Success. Page 83.
Current Issues: American Crystal Lockouts

While, theoretically, relations between workers and growers have improved over time, the harsh reality of the powerlessness of workers was (and continues to be) discouraging. A 1914 work contract outlined the following:

The grower reserves the right in the event the hand work is not done properly or with sufficient rapidity by the contractor that the crop would suffer thereby, to engage additional help for doing work as cheaply as practicable under existing conditions, and to deduct the expense of the same from this contract\(^\text{20}\).

This contract outlines the lack of worker rights and the ability of the company to do whatever necessary to reap a profit and produce as inexpensively as possible. While working conditions have generally improved over time, it seems that workers today, like workers in 1914, retain little power over their working conditions and job benefits.

Lockouts at the American Crystal Sugar Company (the largest sugar beet producer in the state) constituted the third largest work stoppage in 2011. The strike began on August 1, 2011 and continues today. Union members say that American Crystal Sugar “wants the ability to replace union workers with contract workers, to dismantle seniority, to redefine which workers are ‘year-round’ and entitled to full benefits, and to lower its health care costs for union workers to that of its nonunion workers”. David Berg, American Crystal Sugar’s President says that the long run benefits of the contract in cutting labor costs are worth the union lockout\(^\text{21}\). While American Crystal Sugar offers a signing bonus to union members who consent to the contract’s demands, many union members refuse to submit to the proposal dismantling seniority rights and allowing the company to contract out union jobs to outside firms\(^\text{22}\). The union members have been locked out of American Crystal Sugar’s plants on a strike against the new contract.

However, it seems that in today’s environment of unemployment, the strike is not a useful tool for negotiation. The 1,300 workers involved have been replaced by replacement workers that are, in theory, temporary. However, the strike has afforded an unfortunate economic fate for union members for whom financial calamities have befallen\(^\text{23}\). The union continues to make meager weekly payments to locked-out employees of the Crystal factories, but those minimal funds appear to be the only financial funds workers are receiving\(^\text{24}\). The labor union worker’s ranks have declined over time as many fear that if they strike for too long they will lose their jobs to permanent replacement workers\(^\text{25}\). These workers are employed in American Crystal Sugar processing plants as opposed to the fieldwork I have previously discussed, but the strike and circumstances do not bode well for workers and union success in future. Due to a lack of necessity, the power of workers has essentially become obsolete in today’s workforce.

\(^{21}\) Profiles of significant collective bargaining disputes in 2011.
\(^{22}\) Labor fight in sugar beet land.
\(^{23}\) Strikes have outlived their usefulness.
\(^{24}\) Breaking tradition: Crystal union will fight sugar program.
\(^{25}\) More Lockouts As Companies Battle Unions.
Advanced mechanization and increasing numbers of workers have extinguished the reciprocity between growers and workers and, thus, extinguished the power of workers to negotiate better working conditions. Industry tactics such as hiring undocumented workers and exploiting contracts have been used since the sugar beet industry began and have been extremely effective at keeping industry costs low, and productivity high. What will happen to the industry next, in terms of workers rights, the power of unions, and the power of the industry still remains to be seen.
Sources


