Contract-workers in Swedish Agriculture in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries:  
*A Comparative Study of Standard of Living and Social Status*  

Christer Lundh & Mats Olsson

**Introduction**

During the interwar period there was a very intense debate in Swedish media on the living standard and social status of contract-workers (*statare*) in agriculture. A contract-worker was a married farmhand who was employed on a yearly basis and received a wage consisting of money, food and housing.¹ In the public eye, contract-workers came to represent the very symbols of the desperation and resignation that befell a highly exploited lower class with no legal rights. This was brought about not least by the social journalism of the 1930s, mainly Ludvig Nordström’s travelling broadcasts, which received considerable attention. The principal message in his radio reports, made from the Swedish countryside, was that the standard of housing and hygiene was contemptible. The reports were compiled into book form and published with the title “Filthy Sweden” (*Lort-Sverige*).² The public picture of the contract system was also affected by fiction writers. In the 1930s the so-called proletarian literature’s own genre came into existence with narrations set in a rural-worker environment. These authors most often had their own experiences of this milieu, and some of them must be counted among the great Swedish authors of the twentieth century. Ivar Lo-Johansson, who most starkly depicted the occupational group’s social and economic conditions, had the most influence on the public’s understanding of the contract-work system.³

What then were the essential features and key concepts that characterised this interwar picture of the contract-worker? Thematically, we can divide these into three sub-groups.

- The working conditions were often seen as bad, in terms of wages, work times and tasks. The occupation of contract-worker was the way out for the worst off, for those who had no other alternative. The general belief was that contract-workers were treated like they

² Nordström 1938.
³ Besides his major novels, Ivar Lo Johansson wrote a political pamphlet against the contract-worker system (Lo-Johanssson 1939).
had no legal rights, often moved when their one-year period expired and were poorly organised from a labour union perspective.

- Their housing situation was regarded as being very poor. The barracks-like rural family dwellings that the estate owners built for their contract-workers were unpleasant, crowded, draughty and dirty.

- The family situation was depicted as chaotic, partly because the contract-worker families were rumoured to have an unusually high number of children, and partly because contract-worker wives were contract-bound to carry out work for the employer, which resulted in neglect of the contract-workers’ homes. The children’s schooling also suffered as a consequence of the frequent moving from place to place.

The aim of this paper is to study the picture of the contract-workers’ living conditions and social status in Scania (Skåne), the southernmost province of Sweden, from the late nineteenth century until the 1930s. We are particularly interested in the following questions:

- What were the contract-workers’ conditions like when it came to work, housing and family?
- Were their living standard and social status lower than other comparable worker categories?
- To what extent is the dismal picture of contract-workers painted by interwar literature corroborated?
- Did the contract-workers’ living conditions and social status change over time and if so in what way?

The main source for this study consists of the Scanian autobiographies contained in an ethnologic survey of 1938. For comparisons with the conditions for other worker categories, references have been made to studies based on other ethnologic investigations, and supplemented with official statistics.

The ethnological survey was made in 1938. A questionnaire (no. 82) was drawn up by ethnologists at the Nordic Museum (Nordiska Museet) in Stockholm, which was sent out to a network of local informants in the Swedish countryside. Aided by the questions, the informants recounted their own experiences or interviewed others with experiences of the contract-worker system and recorded the answers. These autobiographies were then sent to The Nordic Museum where they were catalogued.

For the purposes of this paper, sixteen Scanian autobiographies from the survey have been used, all written between 1938 and 1941. In most cases they take up the contract-worker system as it was in the latter part of the nineteenth century, but often with comparisons up to the 1930s. Since most of the informants tried to follow the listed questions, the material is fairly well-structured, which facilitates comparisons of the various autobiographies.

Some of the authors had themselves been employed as contract-workers at some point in their lives, and some had worked as unmarried maids, farmhands or crofters, and were thereby in direct contact with contract-workers. The descriptions concerned several of the old Scanian

---

4 Three of the autobiographies were printed in Olsson 1985, p. 14–15, 17–20 and 34–43.
landed estates, or their satellite units (see appendix 1). Many of the accounts have attached drawings of the position of the contract-workers’ homes in relation to the other farmyard buildings, supplemented by their own plan drawings of the home’s interior.

The authors of two of the autobiographies were large-scale farmers on estates established in the 17 and nineteenth century: Arendala east of Lund, and Borggård in present-day Staffanstorp. These authors had thus been employers of contract-workers, and when their autobiographies are referred to below they are called the “employer narrations”.

**Background**

The transformation of Sweden into a modern industrial society began in the countryside. The end of the eighteenth century witnessed the start of an agrarian transformation that would multiply the returns to agriculture, at the same time as breaking up the old peasant society. Concurrently, a new work organisation was introduced on the larger estates. The old corvée system was gradually replaced with wage labour, and in the latter half of the century a special form of employment, the contract-work system (stataresystemet), was introduced and survived until 1944.

In Scania, where the feudal organisation was more deeply entrenched and the corvée system for peasants more developed, the contract-work system was often not implemented until after 1830, but thereafter the expansion of large estates ensured that it became more extensive. In fact, there were more contract-workers in Scania than in any other Swedish region in 1890.

In the second half of the nineteenth century the large estates contained several types of work organisation with the result that different employment forms existed simultaneously. Apart from contract-workers, we can identify five worker categories.

First, there were peasants and crofters who paid rent in the form of work on the manorial estate. In the middle of the nineteenth century these workers comprised 65 percent of the total work force engaged in agricultural production on the estates in Scania. The peasants’ corvée obligations subsisted for long in Scania, but were generally transformed into money rents towards the end of the nineteenth century. Crofters with corvée duties existed well into the twentieth century, until 1944 to be precise, when rent legislation decreed that rents in Sweden would henceforth be paid in money.

Second, there were unmarried farmhands and maids on both small and large farms. Servants were employed on a yearly basis, received wages in the form of money as well as board and lodging, and, unlike contract-workers, were included in the master’s household. From the middle of the nineteenth century the significance of the servant system for farming decreased and the twentieth century saw a change in that servants began to be used mainly for housework. Thus, the occupation of servant became increasingly dominated by women.

Third, day-wage earners were employed when extra labour was needed, for example during harvesting and threshing. These were traditionally recruited from cottars and crofters in the

---

5 A satellite unit (plattgård) was a large, commercial farm, owned by an estate but managed as a separate corporation.
7 Morell 2001, p. 70.
area, who did not have enough land to produce for their own subsistence. They lived in their own homes and worked as labourers on a daily basis for a daily money-wage.

The fourth employment category was migrant workers, who were employed seasonally, and came, for example, from woodland areas in the region. At the turn of the last century, especially in connection with the expansion of sugar beet production, labour from as far as Poland, Belarus and Ukraine was substantially used on several large estates in Scania.8

The fifth group comprised agricultural workers who were employed until further notice with cash wages and own housing. They had about the same employment terms as industrial workers and corresponded to the modern norms. At the end of the 1930s this category was as large as the contract-worker group.9

While all these worker categories existed concurrently in the latter half of the nineteenth century, some belonged to an older epoch and some to the future. Day-wage earners and seasonal workers were complementary workers who did not compete with the yearly employed labour force. They were needed in times of work peaks and were paid only for the work they did. In pace with the mechanisation of agriculture in the twentieth century the need for these labour categories declined, even though they still existed.

The corvée duties carried out by tenant farmers and crofters belonged to an old type of work organisation on the large estates, with a history dating back to medieval times. Their work was made use of mainly in the fields, but they could also be used to maintain buildings, improve the land, and build fences and roads. The yearly-employed unmarried farmhands could also be used in the fields on similar tasks, but were also given work related to the farmyard and livestock. Maids’ duties were mainly connected to the household and livestock.

Hence, it may be said that the contract-worker group was a substitute for these two older systems of labour supply, the corvée system and the servant system. Contract-workers took over the work tasks that were previously carried out by peasants and crofters with corvée duties or by unmarried farmhands, and contract-workers’ wives took over part of the work done by maids.10

In the twentieth century modern farm workers began to replace contract-workers as the most important labour group on large estates, mainly through a gradual modernisation of contract-workers’ employment conditions. A definitive end was put to this process with the abolition of the contract-work system in 1944.

When the contract-work system was introduced in Scania in the middle of the nineteenth century, over 90 percent of the population lived in the countryside, with less than 10 percent engaged in industry and handicrafts. The industrial breakthrough and an increased urbanisation changed the composition of the population in this respect. At the turn of the

---

8 Utlänska jordbruksarbetare i Sverige år 1907, Olsson 1989. In questionnaire no. 82 from the Nordic Museum there was even a special point if any of these foreign so-called “galizians” later on were employed as contract-workers. None of the narrators knew of any such cases, but knew about the “galizians”. That it actually occurred that seasonal workers from Eastern Europe married and stayed as contract-workers in Scania is indicated in other autobiographies, e.g. in M 13733, Folk Life Archives, Lund. See also Hansson and Saltarski 2002.

9 Furuland 1975, p. 45. This modern type of agricultural workforce is seldom mentioned in autobiographies from the 1930s, nor did the ethnologists pay any attention to them in their questionnaires.

10 For an example of how this process was completed 1870-1900 at a single estate, see Olsson, Lars 2002, p 17-20.
century the rural population had declined to 75 percent and about half of the population made their living from agriculture. When the contract-work system was abolished in 1944, half of Scania’s population lived in the cities. A third of the population got their incomes from agriculture, a third from industry and a third from the service sector. Contract-workers constituted only a small minority of the rural population.12

**Employment terms and wages**

All the autobiographies show that in the nineteenth century the contract-workers were normally employed on a yearly contract that ran from 1 November to 24 October the following year. Those who moved thereafter had a free week before the next employment beginning on 1 November. The information in the autobiographies regarding the form and duration of contracts varies. What they have in common is that the new employment agreement was made in June, July or the beginning of August, and confirmed with an advance payment of 2 or 5 Swedish crowns (kronor). In several cases it was shown that if either of the parties wanted to give notice of termination, it had to be done before a certain summer date, otherwise the contract was automatically extended for another year.

In most cases the contracts were in written form, in the twentieth century at least. In one case (Västerstad) special mention is made that written contracts were only used exceptionally in the 1860s, when there was reason for suspicion. The employer narrations contain several examples of attached contracts and the narrators emphasise that there were two copies, one for each party. In contracts written in the 1920s and 1930s (Borghård and Björnstorp) there are examples referring to the existing collective agreement between the Federation of Swedish Forestal and Agricultural Employers (Lantarbetsgivarna) and the Swedish Agricultural Workers’ Union (Lantarbetarförbundet), and one of the employer narrations contains a national agreement attached in its entirety. Right up to 31 October 1945, when the contract-work system was abolished, the yearly contract remained the normal one for contract-workers.

The wage in all cases was made up of a money part and a part in kind. The money was mostly paid regularly over the year, but there were variations in which the employer held back parts of the wage until the end of the contract period. While the remuneration in kind was quite stable, the cash part of wage varied considerably, both over time and from farm to farm. The description of the wage changes found in the autobiographies concerns the cash wage, for example from 50 crowns in 1840 to 200 crowns in 1880 (Böketofta).

Payment in kind can be divided into three categories; food, housing and land. When it came to food, grain was paid out monthly and milk daily. The quantity of grain, given in 12 of the 16 narrations, varied between 1 000 and 1 400 kilograms per year. It consisted of rye and sometimes a little wheat for the household, and of barley and mixed grain that the contract-workers mostly used as feed for one and sometimes two pigs per family per year, and for some chickens. The same division between food for humans and animals was the intention behind the daily division of full-cream milk and skimmed milk, usually 2-3 litres of each. In some places large families received extra rations of full-cream milk. Moreover, there were Christmas rations such as sausages, meat, wheat and rice.

---

11 BISOS Folkräkningen 1900.
12 SOS Folkräkningen 31 december 1945.
Most of the families were given a gardening plot and often, in addition, a specified number of metres of the farm’s arable land on which to grow potatoes. Furthermore, the contract-worker was given firewood, peat and later coal by the employer (with regard to housing, see below).

The contract-workers’ employment and wage forms are strongly reminiscent of those that applied to unmarried domestic servants for centuries. The relationship between these employment categories is also evident in the fact that contract-workers were sometimes referred to as “contract farmhands” and their wives “contract maids”. The employment conditions for servants were regulated in the special Servant Acts from the seventeenth century and onwards and by more general terms in legislation before that. The fact that the formal norms of the servant system were still applied in the nineteenth century is confirmed in the ethnologic investigations that were carried out in Scania, among other places. When a servant was employed for the first time, it was confirmed by an advance payment. Servants were employed for a year at a time, from 1 November to 24 October the following year. If anyone wanted to give notice of termination, it had to be done during a special period in the summer, otherwise the employment continued for a further year. Those who were going to change employers at the end of the employment year moved out during the free week. In principle the wage form was the same for contract-workers as for servants; a part was paid in cash and a part as board and lodging as well as products, e.g. cloth, clothes and shoes. At the beginning of the nineteenth century a relatively small part of the wages was paid in cash, but increased during the course of the century. Servants did not receive a part of their wages in the form of food, since they ate at the master’s table, but there were instances when farmhands were given the right to grow potatoes for making schnapps.

Unlike the servants, contract-workers had their own household and did their own cooking. It was therefore necessary for a relatively large part of their wages to be in the form of grain and milk as well as other staple foods. Receiving a part of the wage in this form was also a hedge against strong fluctuations in the price of grain – similar wage forms existed for the same reasons for certain mill workers before the industrial breakthrough. One of the autobiographies emphasises that the fact that such a large proportion of the wage was in the form of money was a guarantee for the well-being of the wife and family of men who had alcohol problems. He, unlike normal wage earners, could not waste all his wages on alcohol. It may be worth pointing out that housing was included in the employment terms for all worker categories in the countryside, except for day-wage earners. In industry too, it was common that a job offer included an offer of a company dwelling.

However, in terms of employment and wage forms, there are not as many similarities in comparisons with other labour categories. Peasants and crofters, who were obliged to carry out corvée duties for the landowner, had rental contracts with longer duration, often 10 to 15 years in the second half of the nineteenth century. In their cases too-short contract periods might have discouraged them from maintaining the buildings and improving the farming. Their security of employment was also greater, as were their possibilities of raising their

14 Questionnaire LUF 105, Folk Life Archives, Lund.
16 Lundh 2002a.
17 Bagge, Lundberg & Svennilson 1933/35.
18 Lundh & Olsson forthcoming.
standard of living by means of their own efforts. For day-wage earners and seasonal workers it was the opposite. Decreased demand for labour because of a harvest failure was a hard blow for those who earned their living as day-wage earners.20

Comparative wage examinations for the year 1890 confirm this picture. The yearly wages, including payment in kind, of contract-workers in Scania, is estimated to have been 470 crowns, unmarried farmhands 413 and day-wage earners 447 crowns. The yearly wage for day-wage earners has been estimated for 300 days a year, which is probably unrealistically high for this worker category. At the same time, unskilled industrial workers in Scania earned 500-700 crowns a year, including payment in kind.21

Figure 1 about here

Using the information contained in the census carried out in 1935/36, a comparative study was conducted on family incomes for the various social groups. As shown by figure 1, it seems that the contract-workers’ income security was relatively good – as long as they were employed. While the family income for the lower quartile contract-workers amounted to 1 046 crowns a year, it fell short of 600 crowns a year for smallholders and other farm workers. It is noteworthy that in this lower quartile the contract-worker families in fact had a higher average income than peasant and industrial worker families. On the other hand, the median incomes, and in particular the higher quartile incomes, of peasants and industrial workers were considerably higher than those of contract-workers.

Of all the groups, contract-workers showed the least variation in family income. On one hand their possibilities of getting higher wages were extremely limited, on the other hand there were few extremely low-paid among them. This, in its turn, was due to the fact that they were employed on a yearly basis with a large and rather unchangeable proportion of in-kind payments.

Work organisation and tasks

The agrarian labour market was strictly segmented, first according to gender, and within each gender according to age and skill. A general feature was that men and women worked in different spheres. The men took care of the horses and worked in the fields in the summer and threshed grain in the winter, while the women worked in the household and were responsible for the milking. In the farm household the master was the head of the farmhands, while his wife was in charge of the maids. Farmhands and maids were divided into categories according to age and skill. This division was part of the Servant legislation up to 1830 but, in practice, remained throughout the nineteenth century.22

The first farmhand was the oldest, over 22 years old, and skilled in the most difficult manly tasks, e.g. sowing by hand, repairing implements and carpentry. He also drove the first team of oxen or horses and supervised the work of the other farmhands. The second farmhand was younger, 16 to 22, not quite so skilful, and could carry out tasks meant for grown men, e.g. ploughing. On larger estates there were sometimes more farmhands of second farmhand rank and even younger farmhands that were assistants to the older ones. In corresponding fashion

20 Lundh 2002b; Wohlin 1908.
21 Lundh forthcoming.
there was division of the maids. The first maid, who was the oldest, around 20, carried out the milking and was responsible for feeding the animals (except the horses). She, together with the mistress of the house, led the housework and helped in the fields in the summer. The second maid was younger and usually worked in the household under the supervision of the mistress and took care of the children.23

On smaller farms the peasant himself, in his capacity as owner and employer, took responsibility for the accounts and planning and led the daily farm work, sometimes with the help of a second farmhand, while his wife supervised the maids. On estates and satellite units there was a larger and more hierarchical work organisation. The owner was not normally engaged in estate production, which was the job of an estate manager, and it was not unusual for him to own a few estates without physically participating in their running. The manager normally had the help of a bookkeeper. In addition, there were several supervisors who led the daily production work, a foreman for the field work, a man in charge of the animal stalls, foresters to take care of the woodlands and hunting, a gardener, carpenter, blacksmith and several other artisans that were needed for production or building work. In cases where the owner lived on the estate, several personal servants were included in the master’s household, e.g. a coachman, a valet, a housekeeper, a governess, a nursemaid etc.24

The labour force engaged in grain production in Scania in the first half of the nineteenth century consisted mainly of peasants and crofters who carried out corvée duties, and day-wage earners during the summer peak working periods. Some estate owners began replacing the corvée obligations with money rents, or withdrawing the tenant farmer’s land and carrying out grain cultivation themselves with the help of yearly-employed contract-workers.25 Thus, contract-workers landed a long way down the occupational hierarchy and worked under supervisors in different areas. When it came to the various types of tasks and “occupational designations” within the contract-worker group, the connection with the servant system is obvious, precisely like the connection of the wage and employment forms.

According to the autobiographies a male contract-worker was expected to carry out any type of manual work within agriculture – in the fields and meadows, barns, gardens and woods. It was also the case that contract-workers, especially the wives, had to help with the laundry and cleaning in the employer’s household.

On larger estates there were several adjacent occupational groups, with a certain hierarchy that was reflected in the wage-setting. According to the autobiographies, this hierarchy appeared to differ somewhat from one workplace to another and perhaps also over time. Still, in most cases, three categories were considered to be highest on the ranking scale. These were first farmhands who drove the first pair of horses during ploughing, the first groom with a certain responsibility for the work in the stables and the carpenter who repaired the estate’s implements and was therefore an artisan. On smaller estates without direct production-supervision there could be a working foreman who was in charge of the work on the farmyard. The estate coachmen also belonged to the top level. The supervisory and administrative staff in agriculture was not counted as contract-workers, even though they were paid in exactly the same way; in money, in kind and housing.

24 Lundh forthcoming.
Barn and stable personnel were further subdivided on certain estates, according to their standing, into second and third grooms, but such a hierarchy did not appear to be present among the field workers. The narrations do not contain information on whether agricultural mechanisation had left its mark in the form of specific contract-worker jobs (tractor driver, dairyman, machine minder, etc).

The daily working hours varied over the year. Information in the autobiographies from the late nineteenth century indicates that summer working times started between 4 and 6 and finished between 19 and 21. With a deduction of 2 to 2.5 hours for meals, daily working hours were in general 12 to 13 hours in the summer. From the 1890s onwards there is one indication that the working day was shortened from 12 to 11 hours (Arendala). At the beginning of the twentieth century the effective summer working day at Borggård was 11.5 hours. In the 1920s it was 10 hours, which corresponded to the national agreement.

Winter working times were in general a few hours shorter. On Saturdays most farms worked full-time, but in the twentieth century there were examples of shorter working days, and four holidays a year, Christmas eve, Twelfth Night, Easter eve and Midsummer eve, were half working days. On some farms contract-workers had a free day in the spring and a day in the autumn to plant and pick their own potatoes.

Time off work was even more limited for those who worked with the livestock. Milkmaids and grooms started the day earliest, often at 03.30 to 04.00. As recently as in 1920 grooms were only free every third or fourth Sunday. The autobiographies give a rather concordant picture of the working times in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, and only a couple of the narrations give an account of the changes in the twentieth century that had any connections with the regulation of working times according to agreement.

Before the industrial breakthrough the working times in general were very long. The Servant Acts of the eighteenth century stipulated that working times should be from four in the morning to nine at night with three breaks for food, as well as a break on Sundays from the end of high mass to early in the evening. These rules indicate a possible workday of 13-15 hours and a working week of 80-90 hours. The working times for other groups were also long, e.g. for journeymen (14 hours a day) and building workers (12 hours a day).26

Although there was no regulation of working hours in the nineteenth century, the long working times lived on. In the countryside the length and allocation of working times were a result of farming’s own rhythm. In the summer longer days were worked, especially during intensive harvesting. Personnel responsible for the animals had to work inconvenient hours to perform certain tasks, e.g. milking. In ethnologic reports on servants’ conditions, these disadvantages are often pointed out. Not even on Sundays, which were free days, could milkmaids, or farmhands with responsibility for the horses, be away from work to visit friends and relatives. However, it is said that the conditions in this respect were better on larger estates than smaller ones, since there were more servants on the larger estates who could take turns doing the Sunday work.27

When it comes to the length and allocation of working times, there were probably no great differences between the contract-workers and other employment categories on larger estates.

27 Dribe & Lundh 2002.
Contract-workers and day-wage earners worked together on the fields and regular care of the livestock had to be arranged irrespective of whether the farm had contract-workers or unmarried servants as employees. The work tasks and tradition, not the employment form, determined the working times.

Along with the industrial development and growth of trade unions and collective agreements in the industrial sector, there came more regulated working times and a gradual shortening of the working day that reflected the increased productivity in various branches of industry. For example, manufacturing industry shortened the working week from over 60 hours in the 1890s to 57 hours in 1905 and 52 hours in 1919 through collective agreements. The legislated general shortening of the working day for industry in 1920 further reduced normal working hours for industrial workers to 48 hours a week, i.e. 8 hours of work per day, apart from breaks, from Monday to Saturday, with “Sundays free.” The agrarian sector also reduced the daily working hours, despite the fact that rural workers were organised into trade unions several decades later than their industrial counterparts. In 1910 it was estimated that a day’s working time (excluding breaks) in the agricultural sector in Scania was 10 hours in the summer and 9 hours in the winter.

**Contract-worker wives**

Contract-work was a male occupation through and through, in accordance with the established gender work division in the farming of those days. Nevertheless, the employment form presupposed that the contract-worker had a wife who could run her own household, and, at least in some cases, perform work for the employer.

To what degree it was obligatory for the contract-worker women to participate in the farm’s work, and to what extent such work was remunerated, vary considerably in the autobiographies. One of them says that “no contract-worker obtained [1897-99] employment on any farm, and would not now either [1938], if he did not have a wife who was capable of taking part in all the work that arises from root-vegetable cultivation, milking and harvesting” (Tunbyholm). This generalisation is obviously incorrect. Five of the other narrations maintain that the wives’ work was not obligatory, but could arise, and when it did they were paid per milk cow or per working day.

According to seven of the autobiographies the employer demanded the unconditional work of the contract-worker’s wife, especially milking. One of these mentions that no particular payment was made for milking, but two state that payment was indeed made.

The two employer narrations differ when it comes to the contract-worker wives’ work. Borggård had no work obligation, but Arendala had milking duties three times a day according to contract: a maximum of 15 cows, each milking took about two hours and the payment for this was 10 öre at the end of the nineteenth century. The payment level was similar on other farms, e.g. Barsebäck 33 öre a day for 10 to 12 cows, in Sällerås 10 crowns a

---

28 Isidorsson 2001, p. 51–57. Note however that the decline in working hours was not as large in practise, since the concept of “gross working hours” was abandoned for a “net working hour” concept, i.e. breaks for rest and eating were not included in the working time anymore.

29 Till belysning af landarbetarenas arbets- och löneförhållanden i Sverige år 1910.


31 One Swedish crown (krona) is equivalent to 100 öre.
month for 10 cows. The men’s wages were 12 to 13 crowns a month. Against this background it is not so surprising that the women’s work in some of the narrations is described as sought after. It was also seen as a possibility of earning some extra money especially since the husband’s cash wages were not particularly high.

Several of the autobiographies draw attention to the fact that women had a hard time as contract-workers’ wives. They were first out of bed for the first milking at four in the morning. They were also last to go to bed at night. In between they had to do two 2-hour milking sessions, be responsible for the family’s meals, look after a family often large, take care of the kitchen garden, do the washing and cleaning, not to mention the corvée duties during the farming seasons. As if all this was not enough, they often had to the washing and cleaning in the master’s household as well.

According to the contemporary debate and social reports, the women’s work was devastating for the care of the home and the contract-workers’ social situation. In the same vein, one of the informants says that the wives were often milkmaids on the farms and went to work as much as possible. The children then had to look after themselves, with the consequences for cleanliness and tidiness that this implies (Böketofta).

At times it is difficult to distinguish between what in the autobiographies is a description of unreasonable and trying work conditions, and indignation over the fact that the women on the whole worked outside the home. The social debate in the 1930s was already strongly influenced by the housewife ideal. Even a radical writer like Ivar Lo-Johansson was horrified that “the principle that the family should be able to live on the husband’s income, and that the wife’s task should be to devote herself to the home and children, has practically never existed among contract-workers”.32

**Housing**

In the 1930s the quality of contract-workers’ housing attracted attention in both newspaper reports and literature. The questionnaire of the Nordic Museum contained several questions about housing and all but one of the 16 autobiographies contain information about it.

When the housing standard of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century is described, 11 of 15 do so in a negative manner. Normally, two to eight contract-worker families lived in the same house. They often shared a hall and in some cases two families shared a kitchen. At times there was no hall, and one stepped right into the only room “with the weather and wind”. Each family usually had only one room and often no separate kitchen or other space, so that cooking and storage took place in the same room in which the family slept. In most cases the floor was of compressed clay or brick.

The assessment of the contract-workers’ housing standard shows considerable variation in the autobiographies. Four are of the opinion that the housing was not so bad, while three maintain that it was bad but did not differ from what was normal for the area. Five thought that the housing was bad compared to how others without property, such as cottars and crofters, lived. Three describe the housing as bad, but make no comparison.

---

32 Lo-Johansson 1939, s 125. See Leffler 1997.
In most of the autobiographies the housing standard of the 1920s and 30s is compared to that of older times. In the interwar period a certain minimum housing standard was written into an agreement between the Swedish Agricultural Workers’ Union and the Federation of Swedish Forestal and Agricultural Employers. Two rooms and a separate kitchen, or one room and kitchen with at least 35 sq. m. living space (in Scania 33 sq. m.), became the norm, as did the pantry/cecellar and sharing of the washing house and earth closet. The housing was to be sound and in good condition, and it must have a good heating system.33

It is difficult to form an opinion, based on the autobiographies, as to whether the contract-workers’ housing standard was worse than that of other worker categories in the countryside. Similar negative opinions on housing standards in the countryside in the nineteenth century are found in other ethnologic examinations, e.g. regarding servants.34

When it came to the building technique and material, contract-workers’ housing did not differ from other housing in the nineteenth century, apart from the corps de logies of the nobility. When the contract-work system was introduced at an estate, existing cottages or crofts were often used as housing for the contract-workers. These houses had been built by the village community in traditional fashion on a wooden foundation, with a half-timbered structure, walls of clay reinforced by straw and thatched roof. From the middle nineteenth century, when new contract-worker long houses were to be built on an estate or satellite unit, a newer building technique was used e.g. brick walls and a stone foundation. The building work was done by artisans and the house plans were drawn by architects or a master builder. The new houses were thus both bigger and more functional than the old houses. They often had two rooms, a cellar, outhouse etc. The housing standard for farm workers was raised further in the 1930s when the Swedish parliament passed a law enabling property owners to get special assistance to improve existing houses or special loans to build new ones.35

The gradual improvement of the newly-built contract-worker houses must thus have created substantial heterogeneity in the total housing collection. There were new, light, well-ventilated and functional small apartments with diverse extra space, as well as older houses from the nineteenth century with a considerably lower standard. This variation may be an explanation for the conflicting picture of contract-worker housing in the autobiographies. However, this difference in housing standard was not confined to contract-workers. It must have been the same for all the social groups in the countryside who could not afford to pay for renovation or new construction.

Crowding was a characteristic of all landless groups in the countryside. Peasants often had two or more rooms apart from a kitchen, while cottages and crofts often consisted of a room and kitchen with a pantry. It was not unusual that, for payment, beds or a room were let out to individuals or families, which further increased crowding. Farmers often had several unmarried servants living in their households. On smaller farms the maids often slept in the main building in a space near the chimney for the sake of warmth in winter, while the farmhands had a common room in the stable. Up to the beginning of the twentieth century, when heating radiators began to be installed in farmhand rooms in Scania, the only source of warmth in winter was the body heat of the men and animals.36 On estates with a large number of unmarried servants there were corresponding large dormitories for the respective sexes.

---

33 Riksavtal 1922, §10.
34 Questionnaire LUF 105, Folk Life Archives, Lund.
When the estate employed temporary seasonal workers, e.g. during sugar-beet harvesting, they were given lodging in the same type of housing as that of the contract-workers.\(^{37}\)

It thus appears as if the contract-workers’ housing standard could not have differed much compared to the other groups in the countryside, apart from well-off landowners and public officials with large official residences e.g. priests. Can this picture be supported in official statistics? And how did the contract-workers’ housing standard compare to that of industrial workers?

There were no direct comparative surveys of the housing standard of urban and rural workers before 1945. The narrations and investigations depicting workers’ housing in the towns show the same variation between relatively tolerable conditions and utter misery as the descriptions of contract-worker housing.

According to surveys of worker housing in Stockholm in the 1890s, three apartment types dominated; one room and kitchen (42 percent), two rooms and kitchen (26 percent) and one room without a kitchen but with a little tiled stove (16 percent). The numbers living in these apartment types were on average 4.5, 5.2 and 2.9 per apartment, respectively.\(^{38}\) Conditions in Stockholm were worsened by an extended system of lodging, but the situation for married and permanently employed factory workers were probably much better. According to a survey of housing conditions for workers at a large mechanical workshop in Stockholm at the beginning of the 1890s, 30 out of 54 families lived in one room and kitchen apartments with an average of 3.3 persons per apartment, and 17 families in two rooms and kitchen apartments with 4.4 persons per apartment. The assessment of the housing standard among Stockholm worker families was that it differed greatly between, on the one hand, a rather large group of permanently employed and well to do factory workers with a good standard of housing and, on the other hand, an equally large group of workers with less secure employment and income conditions and with a considerably worse housing standard.\(^{39}\)

A survey of housing in Malmö in 1913 found that 63 percent of the worker families had only a one-room apartment, 33 percent had two rooms and only 4 percent three or more rooms.\(^{40}\) According to the census of 1920, 72 percent of Malmö’s apartments had electric lights, 7 percent had a bath/shower and 8 percent had central heating.\(^{41}\)

A decisive difference between the urban and country situations was that crowding and inadequate sanitary conditions in the towns led to a substantially higher mortality. While mortality in the countryside was 19.3 in the 1860s, it was 25.1 in a town the size of Malmö and 33.5 in Stockholm per thousand inhabitants.\(^{42}\)

From the end of the nineteenth century onwards the housing situation for workers in towns received more attention in official investigations. At the turn of the century philanthropic initiatives made it possible to build special houses with small apartments of low standard for small families with low incomes. The early worker organisations naturally concentrated on the industrial workers’ conditions and this led to demands for improvement in several

\(^{38}\) Estimated from Gårdlund 1942, p. 380.
\(^{40}\) Ohlsson 1994, p. 20.
\(^{41}\) Ohlsson 1994, p. 21.
\(^{42}\) Gårdlund 1942, p. 386, see also Schön 2000, p. 268–269.
Swedish cities. The social housing policy that was put on the agenda in the 1930s was directed first and foremost towards improving conditions for this growing group. The rural workers’ housing conditions were not paid as much attention until later, and collected measures were long in coming.

*Figure 2 about here*

In figure 2 we can compare the contract-workers’ housing situation with other working groups in 100 municipalities according to the partial census carried out in 1935/6. It is clear from the figure that rural workers were the most crowded. Among contract-workers, other farm workers and forest and road workers more than half of the larger families, those with at least three children in the household, were living in one room and kitchen or less. Not surprisingly, the largest living quarters were occupied by peasants, independent artisans and shop owners.

The survey also classified housing quality, using criteria such as damp, floor quality, walls, ceiling, windows, existence of separate pantry and storage space, water and hygiene. The really bad housing was classified as dilapidated or defective. Over 30 percent of the contract-workers, other farm workers, forest and road workers and smallholders had dilapidated or in some other way defective housing. The contract-workers were not the worst off of these groups. The absolutely lowest quality group, whose housing was considered dilapidated, contained 22 percent of the smallholders, 16 percent of the contract-workers and 13 percent of the peasants. The largest proportion living in dilapidated housing (27 percent) was made up of forest and road workers.

Compared to the contract-workers and most of the other workers in agriculture, the industrial workers’ housing situation was clearly better. As shown by figure 2, their housing was more spacious and of a higher standard. Less than 20 percent of them lived in poor housing conditions, and only 11 percent were classified in the lowest group.

Although the surveys have not given us the possibility of following the change in the different groups’ housing standard over time, we can still draw some conclusions. The contract-workers’ housing situation did not differ greatly from other farm workers and smallholders in either the nineteenth century or the 1930s. The same probably applied in a comparison with industrial workers in the nineteenth century, who were, in addition, exposed to the high mortality risk in the towns. Nonetheless, by the 1930s the housing situation of industrial workers had improved considerably, and the contract-workers, together with other landless rural groups, had lagged behind.

Criticism of the contract-workers’ housing conditions was strong in the 1930s and 1940s, but ironically it was probably the housing question that made the contract-worker system attractive for young people in the countryside in the nineteenth century. Prior to the industrial breakthrough, the agrarian labour market also served as a housing market – offers of jobs and housing went hand in hand. In the nineteenth century there was a scarcity of jobs and housing in the countryside for married families, due, among other things, to the strong population growth. Young people who wanted to marry had to wait until there was a farm or croft vacant, which led to later marriages. The contract-worker system offered new possibilities for family-building – it was possible to get married at a young age and find employment and housing as

---

43 Liedgren 1961.
a contract-worker. As a result of this, among other things, the average marriage age for landless declined in Scania in the second half of the nineteenth century.  

Social status

Several of the autobiographies answered a question on the comparison of contract-workers’ conditions with other social groups. The assessments vary considerably. In one autobiography with strong social pathos the words “contract slaves” are often used to underline the group’s exposure and dependence on the employer. In the same way the designation “corvée-slaves” is used for peasants who paid work rents to the estate in the nineteenth century. It is maintained that “people feared the contract-workers’ houses like they feared hell” and questions are asked about how they could accept such treatment. The authors respond by saying that they “were like reckless animals” and that “it was those with the dimmest of wits that moved into the houses” (Högestad).

One of the autobiographers claims that “the poor money wage and the generally large contract-worker families meant that their main source of nourishment was salted herring and potatoes” If, in addition, the man drank, both he and the family starved. A comparison made is “contract-worker wives with large families are as badly off [still today, 1938] as slaves of the past” (Tunbyholm). Another says “contract-workers were very poor and slept on straw” (Västerstad).

Remarkably, one of the authors, himself an employer of contract-workers at Arendala in the period 1880 to 1910 states “there was hardly a folk group worse off than contract-workers. It couldn’t be said that they starved, there was always food, but it was coarse and simple. According to the Servant Act contract-workers were oppressed and there were many surly farmers”. On the other hand, the same author says “the difference between then and now [1941] is so large, that it is better now to be a contract-worker than a farmer” (Arendala).

Some of the autobiographies use the contract-workers’ supposed high fertility to explain their misery. Those with fewer children managed well, but they lived in poverty if they had 10 children or more, “…the biggest families moved more often as a rule, and the mothers were slovenly and indifferent” (Borggård, also in Rössjöholm).

Other autobiographies claim that contract-workers were not worse off than other groups. An informant emphasises the fact that contract-workers had a real yearly negotiating opportunity, giving them the possibility of influencing the wage, and that they “were not regarded to be worse off than others” (Sällerås). Yet another says “crofters with a plot of arable land had about the same living standard as contract-workers, while cottars were worse off” (Hovdala) and “cottars...were a lot worse off than contract-workers” (Rössjöholm). Similarly, one narrator stresses the similarities between smallholders and workers in the countryside and maintains that “contract-workers were never considered to be badly off because they had their payment in kind. A poor worker with many children is at times worse off than a contract-worker” (Spannarp). In the same way, it is claimed that day-wage earners were considerably worse off than contract-workers since they were laid off in winter (Borggård). One autobiography even maintains that “indebted peasants were worse off than contract-workers” (Övedskloster).

45 Lundh 2003b.
According to the prevailing picture, contract-workers often moved when their yearly employment contracts expired. This pattern is contradicted in several of the narrations. Three examples of duration of service are given from Tunbyholm at the end of the nineteenth century; farmhand-foreman 26 years, carpenter 36 years and stable groom 47 years. From Qvesarum a report made in the 1860s states: “After the contract-workers were given a place by the count, they stayed as long as they could, since it was good to be there”, and from Rönneholm that “As a rule people stayed year after year in the same place”. Some moved from Rössjöholm to the mines or some town in the 1870s, but “most stayed on the farm where the contract-workers’ occupation was passed from father to son”. A report from Wrams Gunnarstorps makes it clear that it was in the employer’s best interests to create a permanent body of workers by encouraging contract-workers to stay: “If they promised to stay for the rest of their working life with the old Master of the House, Tornérhjelm, he would grant them a certain old-age support so they didn’t have to worry about their old age.”

All these descriptions refer to the second half of the nineteenth century. It may have looked different in the 1930s. One autobiographer explains the problem of “fleeing the countryside” by saying that “it was the farmers’ own fault, and the low wages and hard work in comparison with other occupations, and the poor housing conditions that in general still exist on most farms, are the reasons” (Tunbyholm).

Every estate in Scania constituted its own little community, with the owners as regents and the subjects formed into a social hierarchy. Managers were next in rank, followed by bookkeepers, servants, governesses, drivers and other skilled workers close to the gentry. For the servants it was more prestigious to work in the master’s household than in farm production. There was also a distinction in rank between employees with the position of foreman and others. This hierarchy is illustrated in figure 3. The estate owner’s own household comprises his own family on the highest level and the occupations on level two. The production personnel are shown on the lower three levels, with the manager in the centre of level three, flanked by two bookkeepers. The occupational groups on levels three and four usually lived in the house and had connections with the corps de logie, while the tenant farmers and crofters lived on their own. The contract-worker group is represented in the figure by farmhands, milkmaids and dairymaids on level four and individual occupations on level three.

In so far as work on the estate was concerned, no rank-distinctions were made between contract-workers and other worker categories. The autobiographies show that in a certain sense all were equals, as estate workforce. In a social context as well, e.g. at the yearly harvest feast, contract-workers participated on the same terms as everyone else on the estate, and even the gentry joined in. But in many other ways it was clear that, e.g. peasants and crofters regarded themselves as a cut above contract-workers. This was due to the fact that social status in the agrarian community was not only determined by wealth, but also by lineage and land ownership. Some autobiographies points out that while working together at the lord’s demesne all were equals, but when the contract-worker approached the peasant’s or crofter’s farmstead, he was regarded as inferior. Such social status differences are also found when the autobiographies discuss marriage. Contract-workers often sought partners among their equals, because it was considered marrying beneath if a daughter of a peasant or crofter married a contract-worker.
Concluding remarks

In the political and medial discourse in the 1930s the contract-worker system was depicted as a relic of pre-modern society and contract-workers as the highly exploited lower class with no legal rights, low incomes, miserable housing conditions and a chaotic family life. This paper shows that this picture has to be modified, mainly when it concerns the conditions in the nineteenth century and partly the situation in the interwar period.

In the nineteenth century contract-workers had almost the same standard of living as the other landless or semi-landless groups in the countryside. The yearly employment was the same for unmarried servants and so were several other rules in the employment contract. The wage form, i.e. consisting of money, food and housing, was also the same for unmarried servants, the only difference being that contract-workers had their own households and made their own food, while the servants lived and ate in the master’s household. The work tasks and times did not differ much from those carried out by other worker categories in agriculture – they were determined by the farm’s production orientation.

The wage level was somewhat higher than for servants and day-wage earners, but lower than for industrial workers. Income security was, due to the yearly employment, the same as for servants, but higher than for day-wage earners and industrial workers. Compared to families where the worker only had a cash wage, the contract-worker was better protected against fluctuations of food prices, since a large part of the contract-worker’s wage was paid in food, and the risk of the family breadwinner drinking all his wages was thereby eliminated.

With regard to housing standards, it is not certain that contract-workers were much worse off than other landless or semi-landless people in the countryside. All the households were crowded and the houses were built with more or less the same technique. As new houses were built with new techniques, variation in housing standards increased, and this led to differences not only between the rich and poor, but also between members of the contract-worker group. Industrial workers in towns also lived in crowded conditions in the nineteenth century, and temporary workers, in particular, had low housing standards.

In terms of social status the contract-workers were a long way down the social hierarchy, together with other groups without property, such as day-wage earners and agricultural workers with more modern employment contracts. Even some labour categories that carried out the same type of work on the estate looked down on contract-workers, for example, peasants and crofters with corvée obligations, because they rented properties. Since contract-workers had no ties with the land, not even a rented croft, they had low social status in the agrarian community. The dream of social advancement for a contract-worker in the nineteenth century was to become a crofter.

Even if it was not socially glamorous to be a contract-worker or his wife, the contract system did have two advantages compared to the other alternatives, which may have contributed to recruiting labour. First, the system made possible marriage for young people who did not own property or could not count on receiving, in the near future anyway, a plot of land through inheritance. The population growth had increased the demand for land, and the existing stock of agricultural properties and crofts was not sufficient for all those who wanted to get married. Compared with the alternatives, i.e. to work as an unmarried servant in a farmer’s household, or to marry and live as a lodger in somebody else’s household, or move to a town or emigrate.
to America, life as a contract-worker probably presented a distinct possibility for a large number of people. Second, the employment and wage form gave income security, which would not have been the case if the choice had been to try and combine marriage with another occupation or migration.

In the interwar period the contract-workers’ living standard improved, for example, in terms of wages, work times and housing. With regard to both income and housing the contract-workers’ position was often better compared to the smallholders, other farm workers and forest and road workers. However, comparison with other landless groups is of less importance since these groups had decreased in numbers at the time. Modern tenancy forms had replaced the corvée system and mechanisation in agriculture had reduced the need for labour. Peasants and crofters with corvée obligations, as well as unmarried servants, had disappeared or considerably decreased in numbers, and the contract-worker group was, together with farm workers, the largest labour group in agriculture. The natural object of comparison was now the group of industrial workers, which increased rapidly in numbers and was well unionised. Their more regulated employment conditions, higher wages and better housing became the yardstick by which the contract-workers’ situation was judged.

In the nineteenth century, contract-workers had low social status in an agrarian context because they were wage earners and lacked a connection with the land. Thus, the traditional values of the agricultural society constituted the norm. During the interwar period contract work was still a low-status occupation, but now not only by the rural method of assessment but also in the eyes of the urban and industrial society.

The industrial breakthrough meant that industry rose above agriculture and the town above the countryside, both in terms of the economical importance and in the political discourse. Lowest in the hierarchy in the countryside was the contract-worker. The labour movement’s politicians and trade unions saw the contract-workers as relics in a socio-economic sector that was in decline, and with an employment and wage form that had roots in an agrarian society but never gained a footing in industry. That the social status differences were largely eliminated in the twentieth century, through a higher standard of living, right to vote, trade unions and social democratic government, could not counteract these facts. This was also an expression of the growing importance of the town and industry. The abolition of the contract-work system in 1944 was definitive confirmation of the victory of modernity.
References

Archives

Folk Life Archives, Lund (Folklivsarkivet)
– ethnological survey ”Herrskap och tjänstefolk”, questionnaire no. LUF 105.
– M 13733.
Nordic Museum, Stockholm (Nordiska Muséet)
– ethnological survey ”Statarna”, questionnaire no. 82, 1938.

Servant Acts

Kongl. May:tz Stadga och Påbudh om Tienstefolck och Legohjon (30/8 1664).
Kongl. May:tz Stadga och Förordning angående Tienstefolck och Legohion (23/11 1686).
Kongl. Maj:ts Förnyade Stadga och Förordning Angående Tienstefolck och Legohion (6/8 1723)
Kongl. Maj:ts Förnyade Stadga och Förordning Angående Tienstefolck och Legohion (2/11 1739)
Kongl. Maj:ts Förnyade Nådiga Lego-Stadga för Hubbohder och Tjiånstehiion (23/11 1833)

Official statistics

BISOS Folkräkningen 1900.
Till belysning af landtarbetarens arbets- och löneförhållanden i Sverige år 1910.
SOS Folkräkningen 31 december 1945.

Literature


Figure 1. Family income for different occupational groups, 1935. (Swedish crowns per year.)

Source: Särskilda folkräkningen 1935/36, table N (p. 25).
Figure 2. Housing standard in non-urban areas for different occupational groups, 1935.

a) The percentage of all larger households (at least three children) within each occupational group that was living in one room and kitchen or less.
b) The percentage of all households within each occupational group with a dwelling that was judged to be dilapidated.
c) The percentage of all households within each occupational group with a dwelling that was judged to be dilapidated or in some other way defected.

Source: Särskilda folkräkningen 1935/36, table Af (p. 46) and table Bo (p. 113).
Figure 3. "The manors" ("Herrgårdarna"). Picture from an exhibition describing the different categories of employees on a typical Swedish manor.

First level: The estate owner and his family.
Second level: Charwomen, french teacher, nurses, chamber maids, housekeeper, first chamber maid, first valet, wine servant, second valet, valet lad, wet nurse, kitchen maids, dishwasher.
Third level: Stable boy, first groom, smith, painter, shoemaker, saddler, woodcutter, gardener, hunter, coachmen, gamekeeper, manager, book-keeper, foreman, first farmhand, horsekeeper, engineer, cooper, housekeeper, brewer, weaver, laundress, roost maid, roost girls.
Fourth level: Milkmaids, dairymaids, first dairymaid, carpenter, carpenter’s assistant, shepard, swineherd, farmhands.
Fifth level: Tenant farmers and crofters with corvée duties.
Appendix A. Autobiographical acts on the contract-work system in Scania, distributed by the name of the estate or farm.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of estate/farm</th>
<th>Archive number of the Nordic Museum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arendala</td>
<td>E U 30811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barsebäck</td>
<td>E U 14608</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Björnstorp</td>
<td>E U 12516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Böketofta</td>
<td>E U 12465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borggård</td>
<td>E U 18727</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Högestad</td>
<td>E U 12003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hovdala, Ellinge, Hässleholm</td>
<td>E U 12634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qvesarum</td>
<td>E U 12460</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rönneholm, Fairyhill</td>
<td>E U 15775</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rössjöholm</td>
<td>E U 18204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sällerås</td>
<td>E U 12131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spannarp</td>
<td>E U 14609</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunbyholm</td>
<td>E U 12028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Västerstad, Amalietorp</td>
<td>E U 12384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrams Gunnarstorp, Berga gård</td>
<td>E U 14609</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Övedskloster, Bjersjölagård</td>
<td>E U 17542</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>