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This is an author produced version of a paper published in:

#### **Scandinavian Journal of History**

Citation for the published paper:

Lundh, C. ; Olsson, M. (2011) "Contract-Workers in Swedish Agriculture, c. 1890s–1930s: a comparative study of standard of living and social status". *Scandinavian Journal of History*, vol. 36(3), pp. 298-323.

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# Contract-workers in Swedish Agriculture, c. 1890s–1930s: A Comparative Study of Standard of Living and Social Status<sup>1</sup>

Christer Lundh and Mats Olsson

Christer Lundh, Department of Economic History, University of Gothenburg

Mats Olsson, Department of Economic History, Lund University

*ABSTRACT: In the political and medial discourse of the 1930s the contract-work system (stat/ar/systemet) was depicted as a relic of pre-modern society and contract-workers (statare) as the highly exploited lower class with no legal rights, low incomes, miserable housing conditions and a chaotic family life. This picture has dominated Swedish social history ever since, and the main argument of this article is that it has to be modified. With regard to the material standard of living, e.g. employment terms, working conditions, wage levels and housing conditions, contract-workers were no worse off than other worker groups in the countryside. On the contrary, the contract-work system had its own rationality and advantages. It made it possible for young couples without land or a croft to marry and establish their own household since housing was included in the payment, and the yearly employment and large proportion of in-kind payments provided income security. However, the political discourse of the twentieth century was based on the growing importance of the town and industry. The more regulated employment conditions, higher wages and better housing for industrial and urban workers became the yardstick by which the contract-workers' situation was judged. Agriculture was an economic sector in decline and the contract-work system appeared to be outdated. The abolition of the contract-work system in 1945 was definitive confirmation of the victory of modernity.*

## Introduction

During the 1920s and 30s (hereafter referred to as the interwar period) there was an intense debate in the Swedish media about the living standards and social status of agricultural contract-workers (*statare*). A contract-worker was a married farmhand, employed on a yearly basis, who received a wage consisting of money, food and housing.<sup>2</sup> In the public eye, contract-workers came to represent the very symbols of desperation and resignation of a highly exploited lower class with no legal rights. This was highlighted not least by the social journalism of the 1930s, especially Ludvig Nordström's travelling broadcasts, which received considerable attention. The principal message in his radio reports, broadcast 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'

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<sup>1</sup> A previous version of this paper was presented at the *Round Table Session 18: Working Lives: Labour History and Autobiography at the 20th International Congress for the Historical Sciences*, 3–9 July 2005, Sydney, Australia, and at seminars of history and work science, University of Gothenburg, in 2006. The authors are grateful for the comments of participants in these sessions and acknowledge financial support from *Riksbankens Jubileumsfond* for the research project 'The Contract-work System in Agriculture in Scania, 1800–1950'.

<sup>2</sup> Furuland, *Statarna i litteraturen*, 24. The word '*statare*' could be derived from '*stat*' that refers to the in-kind part of the payment.

(*Lort-Sverige*).<sup>3</sup> The public picture of the contract system was also affected by fiction writers. In the 1930s the so-called proletarian literature genre came into existence with narratives 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 depicted the occupational group's social and economic conditions most starkly, had the most influence on the public's understanding of the contract-work system.<sup>4</sup>

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 subgroups. Firstly, the working conditions were often seen as poor, in terms of wages, working hours 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 as if they had no legal rights, often moved when their one-year period expired and were poorly organised from a labour union perspective. Secondly, their housing situation was regarded as very poor. The barracks-like rural family dwellings that the estate owners built for their contract-workers were unpleasant, crowded, draughty and dirty. Thirdly, the family situation was depicted as chaotic, partly because 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 the neglect of the contract-workers' homes. The children's schooling also suffered as a consequence of the frequent moves from place to place.

The aim of this study is to investigate contract-workers' working conditions, housing situation and family context in Scania (*Skåne*), the southernmost province of Sweden, from the late nineteenth century until the 1930s. More specifically, we seek to find out the extent to which the dismal picture of contract-workers, painted by the interwar literature and public debate, is supported by a study based on contemporary quantitative and qualitative sources. Thus, while it is important for this study to establish the standard of living, daily life organisation and social status of contract-workers, it is also important to make comparisons between periods and with other agricultural occupational groups (and to some extent industrial workers). Our study is organised into five sections dealing with employment terms and wages, work organisation and tasks, the role of contract-workers' wives, and the housing situation and social status of contract-worker families.

We use both quantitative and qualitative sources for the study. With regard to wage averages, included in-kind payments, household income, cost of living and housing conditions, we rely on official statistics, either annual wage statistics, special investigations of occupational groups for single years, or censuses. The main source for this study, however, consists of the Scanian autobiographies contained in an ethnologic survey of 1938. For comparison with the conditions for other worker categories, reference has been made to studies based on other ethnologic investigations, or to the official statistics.

The ethnological survey was made in 1938. A questionnaire (No. 82) was drawn up by ethnologists at the Nordic Museum (*Nordiska Muséet*) in Stockholm, and 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.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Nordström, *Lort-Sverige*.

<sup>4</sup> Besides his major novels, Ivar Lo-Johansson wrote a political pamphlet against the contract-worker system (Lo-Johansson, *Statarklassen i Sverige*).

<sup>5</sup> The ethnological survey *Statarna*, questionnaire 82, 1938. For more details concerning the included estates/farms, see Appendix 1.

For the purposes of this study, sixteen Scanian autobiographies from the survey have been used, all written between 1938 and 1941.<sup>6</sup> 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.

As a source for historical study, the autobiographies are similar to other ethnographic material. They contain good information about the *prevalence* of specific phenomena but give no information about the *frequency* of phenomena. Therefore, complementary information from official statistics is necessary to describe averages and distributions. The strength of the autobiographies is in the detailed information about the organisation of work, housing conditions and household context; topics that are not so well covered in the official investigations. Also, the ethnographic material includes important information about the opinions and values in the investigation area in the 1930s.

Some of the informants 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 thus in direct contact with contract-workers. The descriptions concerned several of the old Scanian landed estates, or their satellite units.<sup>7</sup> 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 house's interior.

Six autobiographies were written by female informants. The authors of two of the autobiographies were large-scale farmers on estates established in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: Arendala east of Lund, and Borggård in present-day Staffanstorp. These authors had been employers of contract-workers, and when their autobiographies are referred to below they are called the 'employer narratives'.

## 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 (*stat/ar/systemet*), was introduced and survived until 1945.

In Scania, where the feudal organisation was more deeply entrenched and the *corvée* system more developed, the contract-work system was often not implemented until after 1830, but thereafter the expansion of large estates ensured that it became extensive.<sup>8</sup> However, since Scania specialised in crop production, which favoured seasonal labour, the relative importance of the contract-worker system became less than in the regions surrounding Stockholm.<sup>9</sup>

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.

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<sup>6</sup> Three of the autobiographies were printed in Olsson, *Skånska statare och lantarbetare berättar*, 14–15, 17–20 and 34–43.

<sup>7</sup> A satellite unit (*plattgård*) was a large, commercial farm, owned by an estate but managed as a separate corporation.

<sup>8</sup> Möller, *Godsen och den agrara revolutionen*, 77–91; Olsson, *Storgodsdrift*, 286–292.

<sup>9</sup> Olsson, 'Storjordbruk, statare och andra'.

First, there were peasants and crofters who paid rent in the form of work on the manorial estate.<sup>10</sup> In Scania, in the middle of the nineteenth century, these workers comprised 65 per cent of the total workforce engaged in agricultural production on the estates. The peasants' corvée obligations existed for a long time 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.<sup>11</sup>

Second, there were unmarried farmhands and maids on both small and large farms.<sup>12</sup> 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 labourers were employed when extra labour was needed; for example, during harvesting and threshing.<sup>13</sup> These were traditionally recruited from cottars and crofters in the area, who did not have enough land 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.<sup>14</sup> 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 used substantially on several large estates in Scania.

The fifth group comprised agricultural workers who were employed until further notice with cash wages and their own housing. They had roughly 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.<sup>15</sup>

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 labourers and seasonal workers were complementary workers who did not compete with the annually employed labour force. They were needed at 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.

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<sup>10</sup> For a description of the *hoveri* system of Scania, see Olsson, *Storgodsdrift* and 'Manorial Economy and Corvée Labour'.

<sup>11</sup> Morell, *Jordbruket i industrisamhället*, 70.

<sup>12</sup> For a description of the Scanian servant system, see Lundh, 'Servant Migration' and 'The Social Mobility of Servants'.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion on day labourers, see Lundh, 'Introduktion', 10–18; Sommarin, *Det skånska jordbrukets ekonomiska utveckling*, 95–6. See also Granlund, 'Drag ur de skånska husmännens levnadsförhållanden' and 'De obesuttna'.

<sup>14</sup> See *Utländska jordbruksarbetare i Sverige år 1907* and Olsson, 'Skånska godsägare och galiziska roepigor'. In questionnaire no. 82 from the Nordic Museum there was even a special point if any of these foreign so-called 'galizians' were employed later on as contract-workers. None of the narrators knew of any such cases, but knew about the 'galizians'. It is indicated in other autobiographies that seasonal workers from Eastern Europe did marry and stay as contract-workers in Scania, e.g. in M 13733, Folk Life Archives, Lund. See also, Hansson and Saltarski, 'Galizierungar'.

<sup>15</sup> Furuland, *Statare*, 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.

On the large estates the *corvée* duties carried out by tenant farmers and crofters belonged to an old type of work organisation, 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 annually employed unmarried farmhands could also be used in the fields for similar tasks, but were also given work related to the farmyard and livestock. Maids' duties were mainly connected with 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 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.<sup>16</sup>

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

When the contract-work system was introduced in Scania in the middle of the nineteenth century, over 90 per cent of the population lived in the countryside, with less than 10 per cent engaged in industry and handicrafts. The industrial breakthrough and increased urbanisation changed the composition of the population in this respect. At the turn of the century the rural population had declined to 75 per cent and about half of the population made their living from agriculture.<sup>17</sup> When the contract-work system was abolished in 1945, half of Scania's population lived in the cities. A third of the population obtained their income from agriculture, a third from industry and a third from the service sector. Contract-workers constituted only a small minority of the rural population.<sup>18</sup>

### **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 of the following year. Those who moved thereafter had a free week before their next employment began 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 at the beginning of August, and confirmed with an advance payment of two or five Swedish 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 in exceptional cases in the 1860s, when there was reason for suspicion. The employer narratives 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 (Borggård 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*). One of the employer narratives 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 norm for contract-workers.

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<sup>16</sup> For an example of how this process was completed in the period 1870–1900 at a single estate, see Olsson, '*I Sockerkapitalets tjänst*', 17–20.

<sup>17</sup> *Folkräkningen 1900*.

<sup>18</sup> *Folkräkningen 31 december 1945*.

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 kronor in 1840 to 200 kronor in 1880 (Böketofta).

Payment in kind can be divided into three categories: food, housing and land. When it came to food, grain was paid monthly and milk daily. The quantity of grain, given in 12 of the 16 narratives, varied between 1,000 and 1,400 kilogrammes 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, 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.

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 as '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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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 this 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 vodka.

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 given 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.<sup>22</sup> One of the autobiographies states 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, as, unlike normal wage earners, they could not waste all their wages on alcohol. It may be worth pointing out that housing was included in the employment

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<sup>19</sup> Servant Acts of 1664, 1686, 1723, 1739, 1805, 1819 and 1833.

<sup>20</sup> Questionnaire LUF 105, Folk Life Archives, Lund.

<sup>21</sup> Winroth, *Tjenstehjonsförhållandet*, 134–146; Lundh, 'Servant Migration in Sweden', 59–60.

<sup>22</sup> Lundh, *Spelets regler*, 49–50, 67.

terms for all worker categories in the countryside, except for day labourers. In industry too, it was common for a job offer to include an offer of a company dwelling.<sup>23</sup>

However, in terms of employment and wage forms, there are not so many similarities with other labour categories. Peasants and crofters, who were obliged to carry out corvée duties for the landowner, had rental contracts with longer durations, often ten to fifteen years in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup> In their cases shorter contract periods might have discouraged them from maintaining the buildings and improving the farming.<sup>25</sup> Their job security was also greater, as were their possibilities of raising their standard of living through their own efforts. For day labourers and seasonal workers it was the opposite. Decreased demand for labour owing to a harvest failure was a hard blow for those who earned their living as day labourers.<sup>26</sup>

Comparative wage examinations confirm this picture. In 1865–1945, the yearly wages — including payment in kind — of contract-workers in Scania, was on average 20–25 per cent more than the value of cash pay and board and housing of unmarried farmhands.<sup>27</sup> However, farmhands had a larger part of their payment in cash up till the interwar period (i.e. after World War I). In 1865–1913, contract-workers earned about the same as day labourers.<sup>28</sup> During World War I, the nominal wages of contract-workers increased more than those of day labourers', since contract-workers' payments were, to a large extent, in kind and food prices rose rapidly in this period. In the interwar period contract-workers earned about 10 per cent more than day labourers. However, compared to unskilled industrial workers in Scania, contract-workers were earning less. The nominal industrial wage was about a third higher up till World War I and 60 per cent more in the interwar period.<sup>29</sup> In conclusion, contract-workers did not earn less than other agricultural worker groups. They were short of cash but the in-kind wage form protected them during periods of rising food prices. Even compared to urban and industrial conditions, lower rural food prices and housing costs, the in-kind wage form and annual employment contracts must have been competitive to some extent in times of price fluctuations and industrial unemployment.

[Figure 1 about here]

Using the information contained in the census carried out in 1935/36, a comparative study was conducted into 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 of contract-workers amounted to 1,046 kronor a year, it fell short of 600 kronor a year for smallholders and other farm workers. It is noteworthy that in this lower quartile the contract-worker families had, in fact, a higher average income than peasant and industrial

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<sup>23</sup> Bagge, Lundberg and Svenilsson *Wages in Sweden*, 33–37.

<sup>24</sup> Lundh and Olsson, 'Tenancy contracts in Scania', 130–134.

<sup>25</sup> Lundh, 'Contractual Relations', 338–339.

<sup>26</sup> Lundh, 'The Social Mobility of Servants', 65–66. See also Granlund, '*De obesuttna*' and Wohlin, *Torpare-, backstugu- och inhysesklasserna*.

<sup>27</sup> The official statistics report farmhands' cash wages 1865–1945 and the value of board and lodging 1912–1945. For the period 1865–1911, the value of board and lodging was calculated based on its share of the total payment of farmhands in 1910–12. (*Till belysning af landtarbetarens arbets- och löneförhållanden i Sverige år 1910; Arbetarettillgång, arbetstid och arbetslön inom Sveriges jordbruk år 1911; Arbetarettillgång, arbetstid och arbetslön inom Sveriges jordbruk år 1912.*)

<sup>28</sup> The annual wage for day labourers has been estimated on 295 days a year, based on the assertion that a year's work consisted of 300 working days with a deduction of 5 days for holidays and illness (Sommarin, *Det skånska jordbrukets ekonomiska utveckling*, 118–119). To the extent that the factual unemployment is underestimated with this assumption, the earnings of day labourers are overestimated.

<sup>29</sup> Lundh, '*Statarnas löner och levnadsstandard*', 127–137.



worker families. On the other hand, the median incomes, 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 who were extremely low-paid among them. This, in its turn, was a result of the fact that they were employed on an annual basis with a large and rather unchangeable proportion of in-kind payments. As we shall see below, the wives paid a high price for this form of low-cost payment, and thereby for the profitability of the contract-work system.

### **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.<sup>30</sup>

The first farmhand was the oldest, over twenty-two 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, sixteen to twenty-two years, 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 there was a division of the maids. The first maid, who was the oldest, around twenty years old, 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.<sup>31</sup>

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.<sup>32</sup> 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 fieldwork; 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.<sup>33</sup>

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, as well as day labourers 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

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<sup>30</sup> Dribe and Lundh, 'People on the Move', 69. See also the Servant Acts of 1664, 1686, 1723, 1739, 1805.

<sup>31</sup> Dribe and Lundh, 'People on the Move', 69–70; Granlund, 'Arbetsorganisation: Landsbygden', 76–79.

<sup>32</sup> *Inspektor* in Swedish sources.

<sup>33</sup> Olsson, *Storgodsdrift*, 265.

themselves, with the help of annually employed contract-workers.<sup>34</sup> Thus, contract-workers came 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, just 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, the contract-work system included 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 the 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 were not counted as contract-workers, even though they were paid in exactly the same way; in money, in kind and with housing.

Barn and stable personnel were further subdivided on certain estates into second and third grooms, according to their standing, but such a hierarchy did not appear to be present among the fieldworkers. The narratives 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 a.m. and finished between 7 and 9 p.m. 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 collective agreement between the Swedish Agricultural Workers' Union (*Svenska lantarbetareförbundet*) and the Federation of Swedish Agricultural Employers (*Svenska lantarbetsgivarnes centralförbund*).

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 and Midsummer's 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 3:30 to 4:00 a.m. As recently as 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 at the beginning of the twentieth century, and only a couple of the narratives give an account of the changes in the twentieth century that had any connection with the regulation of working times according to the collective 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 4 a.m. to 9 p.m., 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

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<sup>34</sup> Olsson, 'Manorial Economy and Corvée Labour', 493.

for other groups were also long, e.g. for journeymen (14 hours a day) and building workers (12 hours a day).<sup>35</sup>

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.<sup>36</sup>

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. Contract-workers and day labourers worked together in 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.

With industrial development and the 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, the 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.<sup>37</sup> The agrarian sector also reduced 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.<sup>38</sup> However, the agrarian sector was not included in the legislation of shorter working weeks in 1920.

### **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.<sup>39</sup>

To what degree it was obligatory for the contract-worker women to participate in the farm work, and to what extent such work was remunerated, varies considerably in the autobiographies. One states that:

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<sup>35</sup> Adlercreutz, *Kollektivavtalet*, 107–108, 110; Boëtius, *Gruvornas, hyttornas och hamrarnas folk*, 203.

<sup>36</sup> Dribe and Lundh, 'People on the move'.

<sup>37</sup> Isidorsson, *Striden om tiden*, p. 51–57. Note, however, that the decline in working hours was not as large in practice, 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.

<sup>38</sup> *Till belysning af landtarbetarens arbets- och löneförhållanden i Sverige år 1910*.

<sup>39</sup> Olsson, 'Den vita piskan', 59–61.

... 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 narratives 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 for milking. One of these mentions that no particular payment was made for milking, but two state that payment was indeed made.

The two employer narratives 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 the contract: a maximum of fifteen cows, each milking took about two hours and the payment for this was 10 öre at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>40</sup> The payment level was similar on other farms, e.g. Barsebäck 33 öre a day for 10 to 12 cows; in Sällersås 10 kronor a month for 10 cows. The men's wages were 12 to 13 kronor a month. Against this background it is not so surprising that the women's work in some of the narratives is described as 'sought after'. It was also seen as an opportunity to earn some extra money, especially since the husband's cash wages were not particularly high. A cost of living survey made by the National Board of Health and Welfare (*Socialstyrelsen*) in 1920 confirms this picture.<sup>41</sup> In Scania, contract-workers' wives contributed on average 11 per cent of the total value of household earnings (including in-kind payments) and 22 per cent of all cash incomes of the household. The corresponding figures for crofters were 3 and 4 per cent, respectively.

Several of the autobiographies draw attention to the fact that women had a hard time as contract-workers' wives. They were the first out of bed for the first milking at 4 a.m. They were also last to go to bed at night. In between they had to do two two-hour milking sessions, be responsible for the family's meals, look after an often large family, take care of the kitchen garden, do the laundry and cleaning, not to mention corvée duties during the farming seasons. As if this was not enough, they often had to do the laundry 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, which had consequences for cleanliness and tidiness (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'.<sup>42</sup>

In relation to the housewife ideal it should be noted that, in agriculture, women's contribution to the total labour output of the household was substantial, even though it was not visible in the early official statistics.<sup>43</sup> Typically, female household members (wives, children, unmarried sisters) worked with domestic duties, milked the cows and helped out in the fields during the harvest season, which in the cases of farmers meant that the work was done on their own family farms. Wives of landless workers on the other hand usually worked in other households as well, for pay on a daily basis, just as contract-

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<sup>40</sup> One Swedish krona is equivalent to 100 öre.

<sup>41</sup> *Levnadskostnaderna på landsbygden i Sverige vid år 1920*.

<sup>42</sup> Lo-Johansson, *Statarklassen i Sverige*, 125. See also Leffler, 'Lillebror eller kamrat'.

<sup>43</sup> Nyberg, 'The social construction of married women's labour-force participation'.

workers' wives.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, whereas the public debate and the autobiographies of the 1930s focused on work for pay outside the own household of contract-worker wives, less attention was paid to their housework. Given the in-kind payment system the contract-worker wives were supposed to do the cooking with more or less unrefined foodstuffs, not in a farm building with annexes and maids like a farmer's wife, but alone in one room and kitchen. The need to look after small children and keeping up with the milking duties added to this stress. The often described destitution of the contract-worker families emanated from such precarious conditions.<sup>45</sup>

## 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 sixteen autobiographies contain information about it.

When the housing standard of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century is described, eleven out of fifteen 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 made 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 poor, 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 described the housing as bad, but made no comparison.

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/cellar and sharing of the wash house and earth closet. The housing was to be sound and in good condition, and it must have a good heating system.<sup>46</sup>

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.<sup>47</sup>

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 grand houses of the nobility (*corps de logis*). 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, with walls of clay reinforced by straw and a 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

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<sup>44</sup> Granlund, 'Drag ur de skånska husmännens levnadsförhållanden', 52–53; Granlund, 'De obesuttna', 53–55.

<sup>45</sup> Lundh and Olsson, 'Statare och statarsystem', 27; Olsson, 'Storjordbruk, statare och andra', 73–74.

<sup>46</sup> Riksavtal vid Jordbruket, §10.

<sup>47</sup> Questionnaire LUF 105, Folk Life Archives, Lund.

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.<sup>48</sup>

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 of 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, but must have been the same for all the social groups in the countryside, that could not afford to pay for renovation or new construction.

Overcrowding 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 one room and a 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 overcrowding. Farmers often had unmarried servants living in their households.<sup>49</sup> Ethnographic research claims that servants of the same sex shared bedrooms which, until heating radiators began to be installed in the twentieth century, lacked heating.<sup>50</sup> Overcrowding was even worse among seasonal workers e.g. during the sugar-beet harvest.<sup>51</sup> In conclusion, there was a social gradient in housing conditions, but overcrowding was common in all social groups, and differences in the housing standard also depended on the age and maintenance of the buildings.

The narratives and investigations depicting workers' housing in the towns show similar variation between relatively tolerable conditions and utter misery, like 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 per cent), two rooms and kitchen (26 per cent); and one room without a kitchen, but with a little tiled stove (16 per cent). The numbers living in these apartment types were on average 4.5, 5.2 and 2.9 per apartment, respectively.<sup>52</sup> Conditions in Stockholm were worsened by an extended system of lodging, but the situation for married and permanently employed factory workers was 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.<sup>53</sup>

A survey of housing in Malmö in 1913 found that 63 per cent of worker families had only a one-room apartment, 33 per cent had two rooms, and only 4 per cent had three or more rooms.<sup>54</sup> According to

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<sup>48</sup> Fernlund, *Gatehus och arbetarbostäder*, 161–171.

<sup>49</sup> Lundh, 'Households and families in pre-industrial Sweden', 51, 55; Lundh, 'The social mobility of servants', 67.

<sup>50</sup> Svensson, *Böndernas tjänstefolk*, 121. See also Dribe and Lundh, 'People on the Move', 66–67.

<sup>51</sup> Fernlund, *Gatehus och arbetarbostäder*, 169.

<sup>52</sup> Estimated from Gårdlund, *Industrialismens samhälle*, 380.

<sup>53</sup> Gårdlund, *Industrialismens samhälle*, 379–380.

<sup>54</sup> Ohlsson, *I kranens tidevarv*, 20.

the census of 1920, 72 per cent of Malmö's apartments had electric lights, 7 per cent had a bath/shower, and 8 per cent had central heating.<sup>55</sup>

A decisive difference between the urban and rural situations was that population density and inadequate sanitary conditions in the towns led to 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.<sup>56</sup>

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 Swedish cities.<sup>57</sup> The social housing policy that was put on the agenda in the interwar period was directed first and foremost towards improving conditions for this growing group.<sup>58</sup> However, campaigns by the trade unions of agricultural workers and socialist intellectuals, which focused on the inferior housing conditions of the countryside in the 1920s and 1930s — including investigation reports from socialist students in Stockholm and Lund (Clarté), the broadcasts of Ludvig Nordström and novels by Ivar Lo-Johansson — increased public interest in rural housing standards, too.<sup>59</sup>

The first national housing census in 1912/14 included both urban and rural locations. It showed that overcrowding was a common problem, and that housing rents were generally lower in rural areas than in towns. However, the quality of apartments and houses could not be judged from this census.<sup>60</sup> The subsequent housing censuses in the 1920s and 30s focused on urban areas; only in 1945 were rural municipalities included.<sup>61</sup> However, the rural housing situation in 1926/27 was described in a special study of 19 rural parishes, conducted by locally contracted inspectors.<sup>62</sup> Contract-workers were not reported separately in this study but were included in the broader category of agricultural workers. The study indicated that overcrowding was still a problem in the countryside since apartments were small with little head-room. More than one-third of the total number of apartments was labelled by the inspectors as 'old' and only ten per cent as 'newly built'. Thirty per cent of the households in the nineteen parishes were living in apartments that were judged to be cold and damp, and fifteen per cent to be inferior for housing.

[Figure 2 about here]

The partial general census of 1935/6 included information about the quality of apartments of contract-workers and other worker groups in 100 urban and rural municipalities.<sup>63</sup> It is clear from Figure 2 that rural workers were the most overcrowded. 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 a separate pantry and storage space, water and hygiene. The really poor housing

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<sup>55</sup> Ohlsson, 'I kranens tidevarv', 21.

<sup>56</sup> Gårdlund, *Industrialismens samhälle*, 386. See also Schön, *En modern svensk ekonomisk historia*, 268–269.

<sup>57</sup> Liedgren, *Så bodde vi*.

<sup>58</sup> Fernlund, 'Gatehus och arbetarbostäder', 169.

<sup>59</sup> Hellspång, 'Statarnas bostäder', 177–79.

<sup>60</sup> *1912–1914 års allmänna bostadsräkningar*.

<sup>61</sup> *Allmänna bostadsräkningen år 1920; Hyresräkningen år 1924; Hyresräkningen år 1926; Allmänna bostadsräkningen år 1933; Bostäder och hushåll*.

<sup>62</sup> Pettersson and Steenhoff, *Bostadsförhållandena på landsbygden*.

<sup>63</sup> *Särskilda folkräkningen 1935/36*.

was classified as dilapidated or defective. Over thirty per cent of the contract-workers, other farm workers, forest and road workers, and smallholders had dilapidated or, in some other way, defective housing. However, the contract-workers were not the worst off of these groups. The absolutely lowest quality group, whose housing was considered dilapidated, comprised 22 per cent of the smallholders, 16 per cent of the contract-workers, and 13 per cent of the peasants. The largest proportion living in dilapidated housing (27 per cent) was made up of forest and road workers.

Compared to the contract-workers and most of the other agricultural workers, 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 per cent of them lived in poor housing conditions, and only 11 per cent 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 comparison with industrial workers in the nineteenth century, who were also exposed to high mortality risks 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 to 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, owing, among other things, to strong population growth. Young people who wanted to marry had to wait until there was a farm or croft available, 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 a contract-worker.

## **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 autobiographies 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 that:

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 states that, 'the difference between then and now [1941] is so large, that it is better now to be a contract-worker than a smallholder' (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 ten 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 as worse off than others' (Sällersås). Yet another says that: '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 labourers 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).

According to the prevailing picture, contract-workers often moved when their year's employment contract expired. This pattern is contradicted in several of the narratives. 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 to 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 Gunnarstorp 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 autobiography explains the problem of 'fleeing the countryside' by saying that: 'it was the farmer's 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. 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 equal, as the estate workforce. In a social context as well — for example, 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, for instance, peasants and crofters regarded themselves as a cut above contract-workers. This was owing to the fact that social status in the agrarian community was not only determined by wealth, but also by lineage and land tenure. Some autobiographies point out that while working together on the lord's demesne all were equal, 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 to be marrying beneath them if the daughter of a peasant or crofter married a contract-worker.

### **Concluding remarks**

In the political and medial discourse in the 1930s the contract-work 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.

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

The nominal wage of contract-workers was somewhat higher than servants' and similar to day labourers'. However, it was significantly below the average earnings of unskilled industrial workers. Income security was, as a result of annual employment, the same as for servants, but higher than for day labourers and industrial workers. Compared to families where the worker only had a cash wage, the contract-worker was better protected against fluctuations in food prices, since a large part of the contract-worker's wage was paid in food. Also, the risk of the family breadwinner drinking all their wages was thereby eliminated.

With regard to housing standards, the contract-workers were not worse off than other landless or semi-landless people in the countryside. Households tended to be overcrowded and the houses were built using more or less the same technique. As new houses were built using 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 overcrowded conditions in the nineteenth century, and temporary workers, in particular, had low housing standards. In the twentieth century, housing standards gradually increased in urban areas as new houses with central heating, warm water facilities and electricity were built. Since this development did not occur at the same pace in rural areas, the urban-rural gap in the housing standard tended to increase.

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 labourers 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 or transfer of a leasing contract. 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; 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 1920s, 30s and early 40s the contract-workers' living standard improved, for example, in terms of wages, working hours and housing. With regard to both income and housing the contract-workers' position was often better compared to 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 number 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 number, and the contract-worker group was, together with farm workers, the largest agricultural labour group. The natural object of comparison was now the group of industrial workers, which increased rapidly in number 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, not only by the rural method of assessment but also in the eyes of urban and industrial society.

The industrial breakthrough meant that industry rose above agriculture and the town above the countryside, both in terms of economic importance and in 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, 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 1945 was definitive confirmation of the victory of modernity.

**Appendix A. Autobiographical acts on the contract-work system in Skåne,  
distributed by the name of the estate or farm.**

<i>Name of estate/farm</i>	<i>Archive number of the Nordic Museum</i>
Arendala	E U 30811
Barsebäck	E U 14608
Björnstorp	E U 12516
Böketofta	E U 12465
Borggård	E U 18727
Högestad	E U 12003
Hovdala, Ellinge, Hässleholm	E U 12634
Qvesarum	E U 12460
Rönneholm, Fairyhill	E U 15775
Rössjöholm	E U 18204
Sällersås	E U 12131
Spannarps	E U 14609
Tunbyholm	E U 12028
Västerstad, Amaliatorp	E U 12384
Wrangs Gunnarstorp, Berga gård	E U 14609
Övedskloster, Bjersjölagård	E U 17542

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– ethnological survey ‘Herrskap och tjänstefolk’, questionnaire no. LUF 105.

– M 13733.

Nordic Museum, Stockholm (*Nordiska Muséet*)

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### Servant Acts

*Kongl. Maj:tz Stadga och Påbudh om Tienstefolck och Legohjon (30/8 1664).*

*Kongl. Maj: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)*

*Kong. Maj:ts Nådiga Lego-Stadga för Husbönder och Tienstehion (15/5 1805).*

*Kongl. Maj:ts Nådiga Kungörelse, angående Flyttningstiden för Tienstehion (24/11 1819).*

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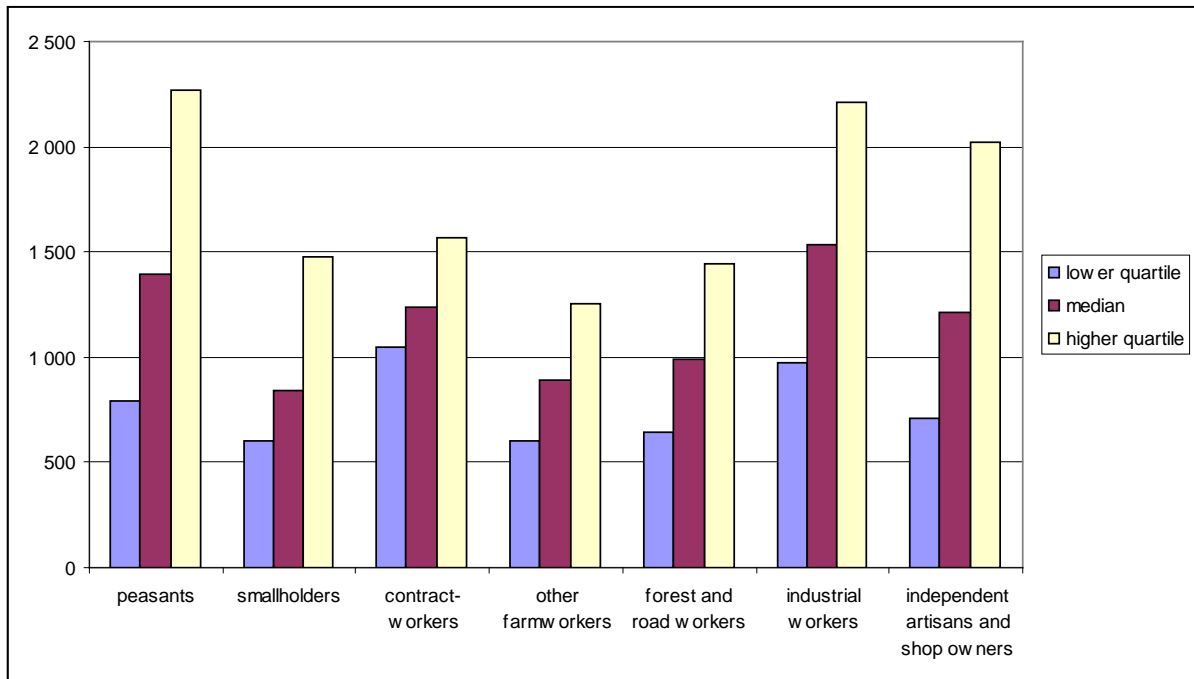
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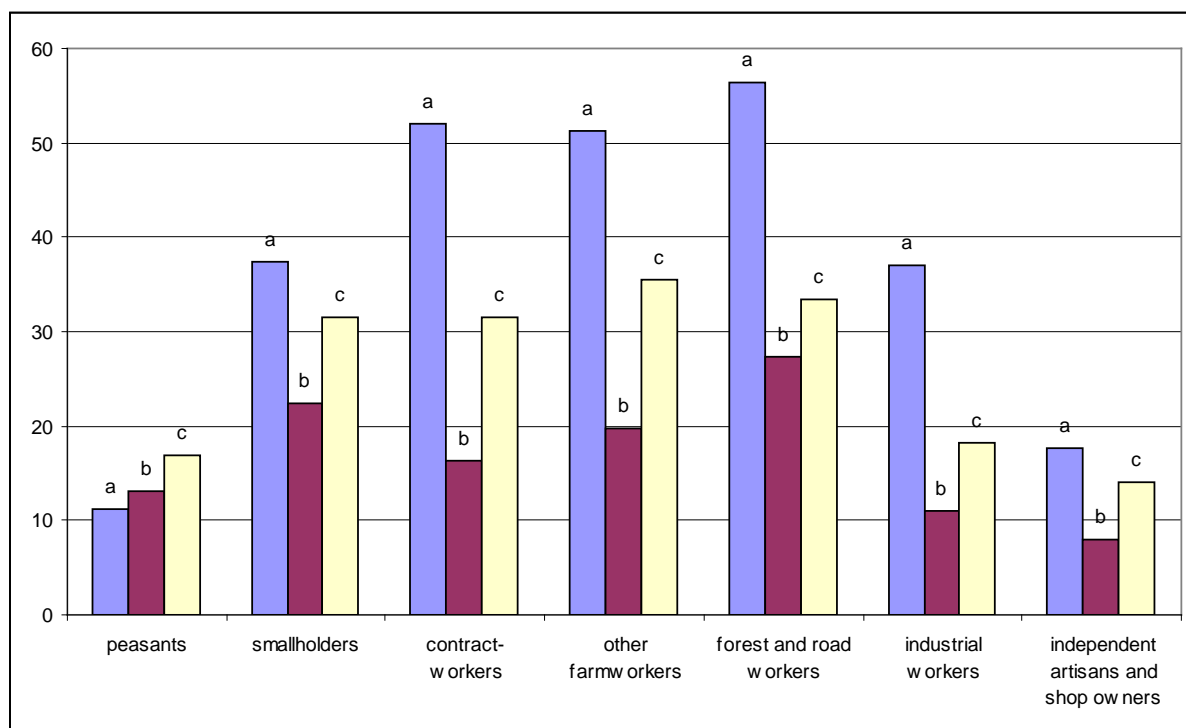


Figure 1. Family income for different occupational groups, 1935. (Swedish crowns per year.)



Source: *Särskilda folkräkningen 1935/36*, table N, 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 defective.

Source: *Särskilda folkräkningen 1935/36*, table Af (46) and table Bo (113).