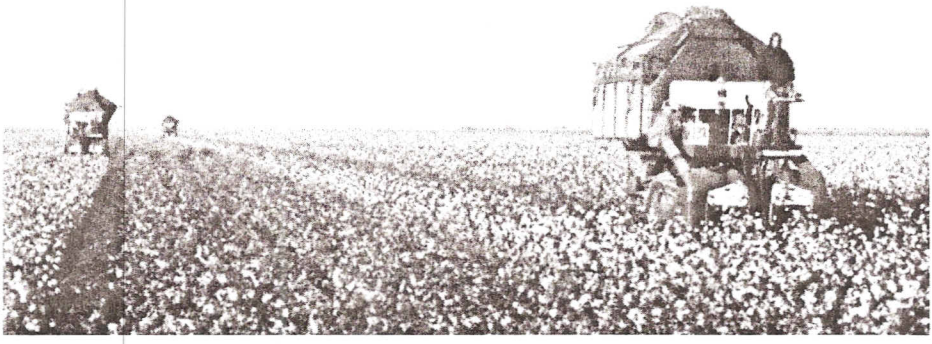

Cotton harvesting in the San Joaquin Valley. The plants had been defoliated by aerial spraying. (*Courtesy of Agricultural Publications, University of California, Berkeley.*)

shakers for fruits and nuts. For the more delicate fruits there were machines that could lift a human picker into the branches of the tree and swing him or her rapidly among them.

A major factor encouraging the further advance of a mechanized, highly capitalized agriculture, concentrated in high-income-per-acre crops, was the growth of the income of the average American family. With this increase came ever-greater demand for fruits, vegetables, dairy products, poultry, and eggs—all California specialties.

"Farm Fascism" in the 1930s

California growers had discovered very early that the cost of labor was the only cost of production that they could usually keep down, and they had kept it down, with all the economic and political power at their command.

Since the early American period, farmland values in California had been capitalized on the basis of the availability of cheap, unorganized migratory labor, much of it alien and nonwhite—Chinese, then Japanese, and later Filipino and Mexican. Thus, the historic cheap-labor surplus, by helping to keep land prices high and farm mortgages heavy, had kept the small farmers' return on their own labor to a low level while maintaining the profits of the large farms that employed the bulk of the hired workers.

In 1933 and 1934, when the Communist party organized a series of agricultural strikes and made a determined effort to unionize migratory farm labor, the forces of agribusiness launched an all-out countercampaign through a new organization called the Associated Farmers of California. The funds for its support came largely from the California Packing Corporation; the Southern Pacific Railroad; the Industrial Association of San Francisco; Southern Californians, Inc., a group of industrial employers; the Holly Sugar Corporation; and the Spreckels Investment Company. The Pacific Gas and Electric Company also made common cause with the large growers because their needs for power to pump irrigation water made them some of its best customers. Most of these big-business concerns tried to keep their contributions to the Associated Farmers confidential in order to maintain the image of a "farmers' organization."

Throughout the state, units of the Associated Farmers worked in intimate cooperation with local law enforcement officials. Most county sheriffs were allied with agribusiness interests. In some counties, migratory workers could not be employed unless they were registered with the sheriff's office, and the Associated Farmers provided the sheriff with lists of "agitators" and "dangerous radicals," including all persons known to have been members of unions. Such people not only were denied employment but were frequently ordered out of the county as well.

When a strike threatened, growers or their managerial employees were often made special deputies, though they did not always wait for this legal authorization and often acted simply as armed vigilantes. In the strike of the AFL lettuce packers' union at Salinas in 1936, agribusiness groups recruited a "general staff," which supplanted the sheriff and the chief of police. Colonel Henry Sanborn, an Army Reserve officer and publisher of an anticommunist journal, was employed as coordinator of all antistrike forces, including the local law enforcement officers as well as a so-called citizens' army armed with shotguns and pick handles. The chief of the state highway patrol and a representative of the state attorney general's office gave their approval to this arrangement.

The Associated Farmers also aided in many prosecutions not only of Communists but of almost any other agricultural strike leaders under the state criminal syndicalism law.

Among the justifications used by the embattled growers in their extreme resistance to any form of labor unionism were two arguments that had some color of validity during the darkest years of the great depression in 1933 and 1934. At that time it was often true that growers could not have paid higher wages without raising the cost of production above the prices that the crops could be sold for; it was also true that the main attempts to organize migratory farm laborers were then in the hands of the Communist party. But agribusiness interests continued to repeat these arguments in later years when prices and profits had risen greatly and when radical influence was no longer substantially involved.

In the middle and later years of the 1930s, dispossessed families from the Dust Bowl region came into California at the rate of more than 100,000 persons a year, most of them to swell the supply of migratory farm labor. People of Anglo-American ancestry, working in family groups, now made up the bulk of the state's migratory labor force for the first time, and as a result, the public interest in the plight of farm laborers increased somewhat, though only temporarily. Carey McWilliams's *Factories in the Field* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath,* both published in 1939, helped to stimulate this interest. McWilliams's book included a chapter on the activities of the Associated Farmers and their allies entitled "The Rise of Farm Fascism."

During the administration of Governor Culbert L. Olson, McWilliams was chief of the state division of immigration and housing, and in that capacity he made himself a thorn in the flesh of agribusiness by inspecting private farm-labor camps and denouncing their vile conditions. The annual convention of the Associated Farmers passed a resolution describing McWilliams as "California's Agricultural Pest Number One, outranking pear blight and the boll weevil."

In 1939 and 1940 the La Follette committee, a subcommittee of the United States Senate Committee on Education and Labor under the chairmanship of Senator