

Agriculture by Susan B. Cohen

Farmers to educate candidates

Meetings of farmers, with labor in attendance, have resolved to build a movement to tell the politicians what to do.

At a meeting held on Aug. 30 in Montgomery, Ala., more than 250 people voted up a proposal by the American Agriculture Movement for a three-year moratorium on payment of debt on public loans by farmers. The proposal had been announced at an Atlanta press conference four days earlier by Georgia AAM leader Tommy Kersey, who issued a direct appeal to President Carter to act by executive authority to effect the moratorium. The debt moratorium demand is the cutting edge of an organized election-year effort to educate political candidates on urgent farm policy matters, and rally a grassroots farm-labor alliance to keep the victors honest.

A "candidates' night" sponsored jointly by the American Agriculture Movement and the Alabama Banking Association, the Montgomery meeting followed a similar event held in Oklahoma City, Okla. the day before. Attendees in Montgomery included representatives of the Alabama AFL-CIO because, as state AAM coordinator Buddy Rose put it, "Labor has a direct interest in the current farm situation." The meeting was addressed by AAM national president Marvin Meek and several local candidates. Meek set the tone of the meeting when he told every person present to "get involved in politics" at every level, or the American farm sector will go under.

The combination of Carter ad-

ministration policies and the summer-long drought threatens to bankrupt large numbers of farmers—2000 of whom are going out of business every week, according to Meek. Net farm income is expected to drop 25 to 40 percent in 1980 from 1979 levels. Farm debt has spiraled. The impact will not be felt only among farmers, bankers and equipment dealers in rural America.

The AAM proposal for a moratorium on federal farm debt is aimed at giving farm producers the chance to recoup after several years of losses, and get back into the black before resuming payments. It is not a cancellation, the proposal's sponsors emphasize. That would undermine the entire farm credit structure. Rather, a "classwide" payment deferral is deemed necessary. The moratorium proposal is widely viewed as the most effective approach to what may otherwise burgeon into a financial catastrophe, requiring a huge federal bailout operation. Producers argue that the existing provision for granting loan repayment deferrals on a "case by case" basis is inadequate to meet the crisis.

"We expect that he [Carter] will offer us something," AAM leader Kersey said in outlining the proposal, "but we don't want to hear anything trivial, or some sort of tinkering; we need a major overhaul, and we can't wait until Nov. 4. There must be action in Octo-

ber." Kersey said Carter's record does not warrant farmers' support for his reelection.

Sen. Herman Talmadge (D-Ga.), the chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee who faces a tough reelection fight in November, had promised action in June, only to turn around and draft a bill giving Agriculture Secretary Bergland discretionary authority instead of a mandate.

AAM President Meek told the meeting, "In 1977, when we first warned of the crisis ahead, we were considered doomsdayers," he said. "Now we are historians. . . . The policy which led to gas lines is being applied to food production. Soon there will be food lines." Meek insisted, "You've got to become active. You must get involved in the county and state levels. Listen to what your representatives have to say. Get involved. Either we succeed or we might not be here in the future. . . . We have to get people who agree with us elected."

The message was not lost on the candidates. Sen. Donald Stewart (D-Ala.) at the Montgomery meeting, U.S. senatorial candidate Bob Kerr, and congressional candidate Jim Townsend in Oklahoma City, among others, pledged support.

The involvement of representatives of the AFL-CIO in the Montgomery meeting is an important measure of the seriousness of the grassroots drive. Alabama AAM coordinator Rose put it this way in Montgomery: "We intend to go to labor people and work with them. We have common interests—we farmers consume one-third of all the products of labor. If we can't retool because of our debt-credit problem, labor won't work. If they can't work, we lose our market."