

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

40,000 farmers demonstrate in Ottawa

London and Washington are turning the screws for free trade, but Canadian and Australian farmers reject it.

On Feb. 21, some 40,000 Canadian farmers and supporters rallied on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, in one of the largest demonstrations in Canadian history. Farmers were protesting the possibility that Canada's supply management program, its so-called marketing boards, would be abolished under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).

Talks in the five-year-long "Uruguay Round" are still under way, and the United States is on a rampage demanding that a new treaty be rammed through that would disallow national supports for agriculture. The next negotiating session is set for the end of March in Geneva, and a 450-page draft treaty, by GATT General Secretary Arthur Dunkel, is on the agenda.

With or without a global treaty, Anglo-American interests have worked through the world food cartel companies (Cargill, Louis Dreyfus, Continental, ConAgra, Archer Daniels Midland, Bunge, Garnac/André, and others) to subvert the national marketing boards in Canada and Australia. The boards for such items as wheat, wool, milk, were historically mandated to buffer the farm sector from low prices—which the cartel insists be accepted. However, the Canadian Wheat Board is so insolvent that it went to Wall Street last year seeking short-term, high-cost financing. The Australian Wool Board has been destroyed in all but name.

The U.S. anti-farmer position represents the Anglo-American clique associated with the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, the agencies that support free trade and

"alternative," i.e., low-price, low-technology agriculture, in order to extract more loot.

However, farmers in Canada and Australia have been demonstrating their dissatisfaction with the Anglo-American overlords. Even U.S. farm organizations, while more abject and passive, have also stated opposition. A January release by the Denver-based National Farmers Union said, "American farmers are telling the President and the Congress that a new framework for the agricultural negotiations under the GATT will do them more harm than good. NFU leaders say their 'worst fears will be confirmed' if the new text agreement prevails."

Three busloads of U.S. farmers joined the Ottawa demonstration, saying that the United States needed marketing boards.

Canadian and Australian elected officials are caught between continuing their obeisance to Anglo-American dictates, or taking the political heat at home.

The day before the rally, Canadian International Trade Minister Michael Wilson met with European Community Agriculture Commissioner Ray MacSharry, who had refused to consider the option that Canada be allowed to maintain its marketing boards. The EC and the Anglo-Americans are at loggerheads over the latter's demands that the EC gut their farm sector.

A few days before the rally, Jacques Proulx, president of the Union des Producteurs Agricoles, had asked Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney to pull Canada out of GATT

if the agreement would not allow Canada to retain its marketing boards. Mulroney responded by ranting that 103 of 108 countries had signed the deal, and that Canada would be a pariah if it did not also sign.

Finance Minister Mazankowski appealed to the farmers on behalf of the Mulroney government: "We are not your enemy; we are your friend," he told the crowd, which did not receive him well. Opposition leaders Audrey McLaughlin (NDP), Jean Cretien (Liberal), and Lucien Bouchard (Bloc Québécois) spoke in favor of the farmers.

The Canadian farm journal *Western Producer* reported on the grim situation in Australia in its Feb. 1 issue. "The Australian agricultural economy is in a state of virtual collapse, according to the Australian High Commission . . . Farm sales in 1991-92 will total Can \$240 million. Three years ago the total was \$3.9 billion.

"The number of farmers has dropped to less than 100,000 from 125,000 a few years ago. This year Australia may have to import wheat, since production is expected to fall 35% to 9.78 million tons. Barley will be down 11%.

"Nevertheless, the Australian government continues to pursue its policy of cutting or eliminating subsidies to agriculture and pulling back government involvement in the sector. Claiming support from the major farm groups, it has said it is intent on forcing Australian agriculture to become efficient and to live or die by the market.

"The chief bureaucrat responsible for agriculture policy suggested last fall that the Australian Wheat Board lose its privileged place in the grain marketing system. Geoff Miller said the vision for the future was an end to the wheat board monopoly and the growth of a private company jointly owned by farmers and private companies."