

## Agriculture by Marcia Merry

### USDA cuts flour for schools

*Free trade policies are shutting down farms while the Bush administration denies even the staff of life to the poor.*

**O**n April 17, officials at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced a cut in the federal supplies of flour provided to the national school lunch program, to soup kitchens and food supplementary programs for infants and the elderly, and for hospitals on Indian reservations, nursing homes, and prisons, effective over the next six months.

The immediate impact of this will include forcing school districts to raise lunch prices, which will throw thousands of children out of the program, intensify the hardship and malnutrition on Indian reservations, and spread more hunger and illness among the poor generally.

Under the new cuts, which will take effect beginning July 4, flour will no longer be available as a USDA bonus for school lunches, and beginning Oct. 1, flour will no longer be available as a bonus for the other programs.

Last year, the USDA provided \$22 million worth of flour to school cafeterias and other food programs as an entitlement, and \$26.5 million more as a bonus. Now the bonus amount, larger than the entitlement in-kind grant, will be eliminated.

Under the entitlement portion of federal food subsidy law, feeding programs are given credits for food commodities, ranging from flour to hamburger patties to canned fruit and other items. In addition, the USDA has made available extra quantities of commodities as a bonus contribution, conditional on how many meals the program provides.

In the past few years, as the De-

pression deepened, feeding programs come to rely on *both* the entitlement food and the bonus commodities, especially the staple wheat flour. Moreover, during the past three years, the USDA eliminated or cut back on such high-quality bonus foods as beef and dairy products. As dependency on public feeding programs has soared, the elimination of the flour bonus will make meal preparation impossible.

Soup kitchens are already stretching budgets and ingredients to the limit. For example, during this past winter, the Zacchaeus Kitchen, in Washington, D.C. near the White House, served cabbage-bean soup as its daily fare, because USDA supplies of beef and dairy products have been canceled.

The major national media played down the news of the cuts in flour, or presented the facts of the matter as merely a "natural" occurrence of low wheat stocks, which today have fallen to the same level as 20 years ago when there were millions fewer mouths to feed at home, and when more pounds of food per capita were being produced worldwide.

The expected U.S. wheat stocks as of June 1 will be 390 million bushels—the lowest since 1974.

Phil Shanholtzer, a spokesman for the USDA Food and Nutrition Service, matter of factly commented to Associated Press that government farm programs have sharply reduced the supplies of flour and other government commodities available for giveaways, either through food credits or outright purchases.

What Shanholtzer is confirming so nonchalantly is that the wheat crisis is no artifact of "natural causes," but rather the predictable consequence of federal cartel-serving farm and food policies over the past 20 years.

First, cropland has been forced out of production under various programs including the Conservation Reserve Program, the annual set-aside USDA orders, wetlands preservation, and many other restrictive decrees.

Second, farmers have been hit to the point of financial crisis and dispossession by the combination of high debts and costs, and low wheat prices enforced by the cartel of grain companies: Cargill, Continental, Bunge, Louis Dreyfus, ConAgra, Garnac/André and others.

The immediate reason why federally controlled wheat stocks are depleted is that large volumes of wheat have been given *for free* to these very companies, to guarantee their profits, while they sell wheat abroad at discount prices to customer nations chosen by the U.S. State Department. This is how the Export Enhancement Program (EEP), set up in 1985 by the same five-year federal food and farm law that created the Conservation Reserve Program restricting use of farmland for food production, works.

The official excuse for EEP wheat donations to the cartel companies is that the practice will retain foreign "market share" for the United States. In fact, it is a food control mechanism, and guaranteed money for the cartel. At the same time that USDA officials announced the cuts in flour for domestic feeding programs, they confirmed that the EEP program will be continued.

A record number of 25 million (1 in 10) Americans are currently getting food relief through food stamps. Millions of these are school-age children who are dependent on school lunches for daily nutrition.