

Agriculture by Rosa Tennenbaum and Suzanne Rose

European farmers take to the streets

Faced with falling prices, rising costs, and bankruptcy, farmers are protesting—but not yet in the United States.

Protest actions of all sorts—demonstrations, street blockades, the occupation of offices and government ministries—have erupted in the past few weeks, as worldwide agricultural production collapses. In the forefront of the agrarian protests in Europe have been the farmers of Russia, Poland, and France.

The collapse in Russian food production is the most dramatic. Farmers have been mobilizing against the agricultural policy of the government of President Boris Yeltsin and Acting Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar. Beginning on Aug. 6, farmers' protests were held throughout Russia. Tractor caravans were used to blockade St. Petersburg and Moscow. They demonstrated outside of government buildings in Moscow, calling for subsidies to cover the price increases for fertilizers, fuel, and farm machinery.

In the cities of the Volga region, farmers announced that they would refuse to sell their grain and other produce to the state, in protest against the low prices they are receiving. The price-cost gap is bankrupting Russian agriculture. The agricultural machinery industry is also undergoing bankruptcy and collapse. The largest combine producer in the country has had to stop work because of financial problems. Meanwhile, the food consumption of the Russian people is declining. Per capita consumption of meat has dropped to the level of the 1950s, and undernourishment is becoming widespread.

The Polish crisis is equally dramatic, and the farmer protests there

have become the leading edge of the struggle against the takeover of eastern Europe by the International Monetary Fund bankers. The Union for the Self-Defense of Polish Farmers has made specific demands that the government break with the London-centered financial institutions which have been looting the country with their "free market reforms" and the IMF's devastating austerity package. Despite heavy police and "special forces" deployment against their demonstrations, they have not stopped mobilizing. The slogan in their central office is, "Either the banks finish us off, or we finish them off."

In France, a new farm movement called Land Coordination has been organizing and carrying out farm protests for weeks. In response to their protests against the huge cut in grain prices under the recently approved "reform" of the Common Agriculture Program (CAP), the government passed a billion-dollar aid program. This was angrily rejected by Land Coordination, at the same time that the French Farmers' Union, the official farmers' organization, praised it. The farmers said they want prices that cover the cost of production, not charity. Land Coordination intends to carry out protests across Europe in the coming months.

Swedish farmers are also protesting the CAP-imposed price reductions for grain, while Danish farmers have sent a list of demands to the government which have been getting banner headlines in the press. One out of every three farms in Denmark is

facing bankruptcy due to drought-caused harvest damage, and farmers are demanding \$2 billion worth of government aid to deal with the drought crisis. They say that if the government does not come up with this amount, it will have to pay seven times as much in unemployment compensation.

Thanks to the firm control of U.S. farmers, so far at least, by impotent and establishment-backed farm organizations, U.S. farmers have been meekly accepting "market driven" price reductions and massive liquidations of family farms, 6-700 per week. Although the Bush administration has just concluded a "free trade" agreement with Mexico and Canada which will destroy independent farming, by removing government support for agriculture, the official farm organizations have chosen to back the "lesser of two evils," the "free trader" Bill Clinton.

Farmers' Union President Leland Swenson, whose political action committee endorsed the Clinton-Gore campaign on Aug. 7, treats the agricultural economic collapse from the standpoint of a social worker, rather than a political leader. He praised Clinton for recognizing the "suffering" of rural America in his campaign acceptance speech.

It will not be the foundation-funded farm organizations which lead the protests in the United States, just as it is not the state-funded bureaucrats of the farm organizations in Europe who are leading the protests there. European farmers are now touring the United States with the Food for Peace campaign, which supports the policies of independent presidential candidate Lyndon LaRouche, to bring to the grass roots the message of the politicized farm movements in Europe, which are developing in response to the crisis.