

## Agriculture by Margaret Sexton

### Farm protests explode as GATT stalls

*With the streets of Paris blocked by tractors and enraged farmers, what French politician would sign this rotten deal?*

**T**he ministers of agriculture, economics, and foreign affairs of the European Community met in Brussels, Belgium on Sept. 20, and reached an agreement to accept the formal framework of the 1992 "Blair House Accord" with the United States, on reducing EC farm exports—but allowing the specifics to be open to "interpretation." According to informed European insiders, this so-called compromise is really being viewed as the death knell for the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade's (GATT) seven-year-old Uruguay Round negotiations.

Contributing to the demise of the Uruguay Round are French farmers, who in cities all over France have mounted a new round of protests since mid-September against GATT, using tractors to block traffic on major arteries. On Sept. 15, over 15,000 farmers and fishermen protested in Paris, mounting a traffic blockade that began at 3 a.m., and roved throughout the city, causing massive traffic jams.

Elsewhere in the country, textile workers, small shop owners, and craftsmen also staged protests.

President Laigneau of Rural Coordination (CR), which organized the actions, regards this as a first big victory for the farmers. "Last year, the blockades were also a success, but we were completely isolated from the rest of the working community. This time we were able to involve other branches of industry that are victims of free trade just as we are," he told the press.

CR's protests are directed against EC agriculture reform and its massive

price cuts, as well as against the Blair House compromise. CR is demanding that France veto the agreement. The compromise would have Europe cut its farm exports by 21% within six years, and would guarantee the grain cartels increased imports of grain substitutes like soybeans and corn gluten.

CR decries the "lie of overproduction, while we even have hunger in Europe," and denounces the "free-trade ideology that will ruin all economic sectors." In a press release, CR warns that "GATT means that all over the world, working conditions will worsen, hundreds of millions of children in the Third World will be enslaved, and unemployment and misery will face tens of millions of workers in the industrialized countries."

CR is demanding parity prices, fair prices that cover the costs of production and modernization, especially for the developing countries, "where people have to work 10 to 12 hours a day just to get a bowl of rice. If we paid them fair prices they could support and build up their own economy," CR says, adding that "it must . . . be the right of all peoples to protect their natural resources, their culture, their agriculture, their economic activities, and their legislation."

Certainly, farmers in India agree: More than 30,000 staged an anti-GATT rally in Delhi on Sept. 17.

That the farm protests struck a nerve, is shown by the number of EC high officials shuttling to other capitals to point fingers of blame. On Sept. 16, it was reported that French President François Mitterrand had reiter-

ated that France will not sign the Blair House Accord. German Economics Minister Rexrodt then flew to Paris to meet with French Agriculture Secretary Jean Puech, after which Puech said there were no differing views concerning Blair House between France and Germany, while Rexrodt saw some room for "flexible interpretations" of the agreement.

Indicating that Germany was playing the role of negotiator, Chancellor Helmut Kohl also went to France to discuss the situation with President Mitterrand.

On Sept. 16, French Prime Minister Edouard Balladur demanded a renegotiation of the agreement with the United States. France was backed by Spain, Italy, Greece, and Portugal; Ireland and Belgium also raised strong arguments against the agreement.

The other EC countries are supporting Blair House, especially Great Britain. On Sept. 19, British Prime Minister John Major, while on a four-day trip to Japan, warned France against being intransigent, and wrote to Prime Minister Balladur to express his annoyance at France's opposition.

A British official was quoted in the press as saying, "GATT is the number one concern of the EC in the next few months and developments on this issue are far more important than on peripheral issues."

Britain also pledged, said an official, to "bring extra pressure on France to make sure the EC is not hampered in its attempts to get a GATT deal."

But after the Sept. 20 vote, informed sources now say that the new Blair House "interpretation" will take talks well past the final Dec. 15 deadline for acceptance of the remaining parts of the GATT accord, at which time, they say, it will be respectfully buried, with France having agreed to accept the "blame" for its demise.