

Agriculture by Suzanne Rose

'Hunger Forum' is short on solutions

At least 20 million Americans are going hungry, and 12 million of them are children, admits the USDA.

The proceedings of the U.S. Department of Agriculture-sponsored "Hunger Forum: Agenda for the Future," convened June 17 by U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Mike Espy, have finally reached the light of day. Some 135 pages of proceedings were released to the public in mid-December, more than six months after the fact. The tardy release and lack of publicity given to the proceedings shows the reluctance of the administration to commit serious resources to the steadily worsening crisis of poverty and hunger in the United States.

There were 75 panelists from all areas of public food policy, including recipients of government programs, public and private sector program coordinators, policy analysts, personalities, elected and appointed government officials, farm organizations, and consumer agencies. They presented a devastating picture of the extent of poverty and hunger in the United States.

But unfortunately, the solutions offered were of the band-aid variety, with some clearly intended to encourage further the deindustrialization of the U.S. economy and descent into unemployment and chaos. The policymakers who gathered in Washington limited their outlook to increasing funding for low-income food assistance programs such as Food Stamps, the School Lunch Program, the Women's, Infants, and Children (WIC), and to discussing proposals for reforming the welfare system, many of which would further damage the industrial base by encouraging the use of the poor for slave labor.

The problem of the collapse of

production, including food production, was not addressed. The Agriculture Department meanwhile continues its policy of closing down independent family farmers, claiming that too much food is being produced—while all over the world, people are hungry. The forum participants treated hunger not as a problem of the economy, but as one of "inadequate access to food," or lack of purchasing power for an adequate diet.

This is in contrast to the approach taken by physical economist Lyndon LaRouche, who calls for a crash program for development of infrastructure, agriculture, and productive industry, financed by a national bank. LaRouche's program includes parity prices to farmers, to allow them to make a fair profit that will allow for upkeep and modernization of their equipment.

A consensus among the Washington panelists was that a growing, intolerable, and undocumented poverty exists which is causing the reappearance of hunger on a wide scale in the United States. Secretary Espy and others presented statistics of the growing need. "One child in five lives in poverty," he said. The number of Food Stamp recipients has grown to 27.4 million people, and yet many millions more are eligible. At least 35 million people live below the poverty level, and 20 million Americans are hungry.

Larry J. Brown, director of the Center on Hunger, Poverty and Nutrition of Tufts University, said that there has been a 50% increase in hunger since the Harvard-based Physicians Task Force on Hunger in

America reported in 1985 that 20 million people are going hungry. He said, "Earlier this week we released state by state data which revealed that more than 12 million American children experience chronic hunger." This includes bread-basket states. "Minnesota has more hungry children than West Virginia," he said. These figures are larger than the populations of many of the countries of which President Truman spoke in 1949.

As if to underline the growing similarity of parts of the United States to the so-called Third World, one panelist noted that Oxfam, the British International Relief organization, has opened up Oxfam America to bring relief to U.S. rural areas. Yet, last spring, the U.S. Congress eliminated its standing Committee on Hunger, which spotlighted the growing problem.

A repeated theme was on the need for "micro-enterprises," and to permit "self-employment," as part of a welfare reform or anti-poverty effort. As one participant explained, "Credits, waivers, loans, grants, community reinvestment . . . legitimize often thriving marginal economies, and build on them. Let's legitimize and support what's happening in our communities now."

One speaker, John David Arnold, executive director of the PPEP Micro Project, acknowledged that the origins of this idea can be traced to the so-called informal economies of impoverished Third World countries—the home-based cottage industries and the street vendors and drug pushers found in places like Mexico City. Said Arnold, "When we went to start our micro program, we had to go to Mexico to bring in from a Third World country the technology on how to run a micro-business program because there were really no models here in the United States."