

Agriculture by Robert L. Baker

Cartel monopolizes U.S. seeds supply

The "intellectual property rights" clause proposed by GATT would have devastating effects on farming worldwide.

In all the world's great religions and cultures can be found in some form the wise injunction to save some of your harvest, to prepare for the planting of the next year's crop. However, under the sweeping "intellectual property rights" clause of the Uruguay Round of negotiations of the U.N. General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), this practice is to be denied to farmers, and to whole nations.

The "intellectual property rights" argument serves the interests of a select group of chemical, pharmaceutical, oil, grain, seed, and livestock breeding companies, such as Cargill, British Petroleum, Monsanto, and Pioneer, which is bent on almost total control of what food is produced, who gets to eat, and who doesn't. These companies specialize in brand-name and numbered high-producing hybrid seeds for corn and certain other crops. And they are now securing patents for genetically engineered varieties of grain. For example, Monsanto recently obtained a patent for a new strain of wheat. Any farmer or nation interested must pay to make use of advances that would augment their crop. Moreover, any farmer or nation stands to be fined and ruined if found to be in violation of the monopoly privileges of the cartel of seed control companies.

In India, the offices of Cargill, Inc. have been repeatedly attacked over this issue. Indian activists point out that in their nation it is anathema that there be private control exerted over living things, e.g., plant life. In

late July, Indian farmers protested at the Cargill building in Navalgund against the cartel seed control policy. The protest leader, who is head of the farmers' union, characterizes himself as a "follower of Mahatma Gandhi," and says that Cargill uses its "clout to impoverish Third World farmers. . . . Cargill wants to install a patents regime in genes, plants, and all farm inputs to gain control of a nation covertly."

Until now, Indian farmers have been getting seeds stocks from the agricultural universities, multiplying them for their own use, and selling them to other farmers. This sharing of seeds was the lifeline of the Green Revolution. Now, the cartels want to cut that lifeline and force the farmer to buy the seeds he needs every year from the company.

Look at the extent to which the tight cartel of such companies, mostly Anglo-American based, has come to dominate U.S. seed stock supplies, and those of many other nations.

Iowa-based Pioneer Hi-Bred International, Inc., the largest seed company in the world, boasts that it possesses the largest single proprietary pool of germ plasm in the world from which to develop new hybrid corn seed. Founded in the 1930s by Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace, Pioneer today controls about 40% of the U.S. market, and dominates many markets abroad. For example, it controls 32 to 58% of the market in Spain, Austria, and Italy. In France, Pioneer controls about 32% of the seed corn market. In Hungary

and Egypt, it has 90% of the market. And it has aggressive efforts under way to expand its market share in Brazil, Thailand, and other Third World countries. Its most aggressive initiatives have been largely in Ukraine and Hungary.

Sitting on the board of directors of Pioneer is Herman H.F. Wijffels, chairman of the board of the Netherlands-based Rabobank, the world's largest agricultural bank. Pioneer's next closest competitor in the United States has 9% of the U.S. domestic market.

During the 1980s, two London-based multinational giants, British Petroleum (BP) and Imperial Chemical, Inc. (ICI), went on a buying spree, and, working together, they consolidated some of the largest seed companies in the United States.

ICI purchased the Iowa-based Garst Seed Co. in October 1985, and went on to consolidate an additional four major U.S. seedstock companies under the Garst name.

BP acquired Edward J. Funk and Sons seed corn company in December 1986. By October 1989, BP had consolidated five other major U.S. seed companies under the Funk banner.

Then, in October 1990, BP sold Edward J. Funk and Sons to ICI's Garst Seed Co. Thus, in less than five years time, 11 of the largest U.S. seed companies were consolidated into one that is owned lock, stock, and barrel by the London-based giant ICI.

The boards of directors of British Petroleum and International Chemical, Inc. overlap the boards of of such well-known international institutions as the Bank of England, Deutsche Bank AG, S.G. Warburg Co., Barings Bank, and the European food giants Nestlé S.A. and Unilever, to name a few. The boards also include the former head of the U.S. Federal Reserve System, Paul A. Volcker.