

Farmers on 'paritycades' told that fight for higher prices isn't enough

by Alan Ogden in Baltimore

"We have to look at why our livelihoods have been destroyed. I'm sick of hearing criticisms about how Reagan or that former President messed up again, while we sit around and drink coffee. It's you and me. *You* didn't do anything all these years to stop it."

The speaker was Tom Kersey, president of the Georgia chapter of the American Agriculture Movement (AAM). Kersey was addressing 200 of his fellow farmers in the Florida panhandle town of Sneads Jan. 14, midway through a five-day "Paritycade" tour through five Southern states sponsored by the AAM. On tour was a "paritycade" caravan of 15 or more cars, trucks, and buses carrying farmers, their spouses, and their children. They came from 11 states, as far away as Nebraska, Colorado, and North Dakota, to press conferences, rallies, and meetings—reviving the farmers' movement that sent thousands to Washington, D.C. in 1979 to demand a parity price for farmers—a price that guarantees they receive in payment at least their cost of production.

This time, however, there were some important differences from the period three years ago. Since Paul Volcker instituted his high interest-rate "shock treatment" at the U.S. Federal Reserve in October 1979, the number of farmers being forced off the land has risen to a shocking 2,200 per week, and farm conditions have begun to resemble those of the last Depression.

And this time, some farmers were telling each other, even 100 percent parity prices would not be enough to turn the situation around. A political movement, they said, is essential.

"Farmers need a three-year debt moratorium plus 1 to 2 percent interest rates," said Tom Kersey in Florida. "We must do everything necessary to change policy making in Washington. Farmers must give up their image of themselves as the kind of people who have to drive '56 Chevy pickups" and begin a new career.

"I hate to use the world 'politician' in mixed company," said Kersey, "because I have always thought that a politician

was the only thing lower than a son of a bitch, but we need to save our nation. Farmers have to run for all kinds of offices and have to start within 60 to 90 days, because if we don't do this now, we may not even *have* an election in 1984, because our system is on the brink of collapse now."

Tom Kersey's proposal that farmers run for office picked up on an idea that had been put forward just a few days before by Lyndon LaRouche of the National Democratic Policy Committee, when he talked to AAM farm leaders at their Nashville convention. LaRouche told the farmers that this is no ordinary depression, but the most serious crisis in centuries. Next year, he said, the government's deficit is likely to reach between \$200 and \$400 billion, and production will drop another 15 to 20 percent, so "you must stop seeking out politicians and become politicians."

Days later, LaRouche joined the farmers on the paritycade in Unadilla, Georgia. Before a crowd of 350 farmers in a school gymnasium, LaRouche explained, "It does no good to protest to Washington that family farms are getting wiped out. This is the policy of the Department of Agriculture—that the laws of supply and demand will drive excess farmers off the land, and the European aristocrats will buy up the land. Secretary Bergland called this policy 'equilibrium economics.' We need a movement to change this country."

The "Paritycades" are being led by two of the founding members of the AAM, Alvin Jenkins of Colorado and Darrel Fillingim of Texas. The "Southern Breadbasket" Paritycade traveled through six states of the Deep South, stopping for press conferences, rallies, and meetings with farmers in Columbia, South Carolina; Atlanta and Unadilla, Georgia; Tallahassee, Sneads, and Jay, Florida; Hattiesburg and Jackson, Mississippi; and Monroe and Rayville, Louisiana. At some points along the route in Florida and Mississippi, the caravan was given a county police escort by patrol cars and motorcycles.

Another "Paritycade" through the Midwest took place in

December, and more are planned for the Northwestern and Northeastern states. Some of the rallies have been quite large; 300 or more farmers attended meetings at stops in South Carolina and Georgia.

Building a movement

Both AAM and NDPC literature was sought out and read by the farmers who were touched by the "Paritycade." By invitation, a representative of LaRouche traveled the entire length of the Southern Breadbasket tour and was introduced before the mass meeting in Rayville, Louisiana, as having accompanied the paritycade "teaching us about LaRouche."

Many farmers wanted to know what LaRouche proposes to do if the monetary system does collapse before enough of a mass movement can be generated to force a reform that will avert a collapse. An idea of the type of movement which can be built was discussed after an NDPC chapter president in Columbia, South Carolina, who happens to be a local banker as well, explained to the farmers how the banks need the farmer as much as the farmer needs the banks.

A theme repeated by various AAM speakers was that "we no longer have a farmers problem, we now have an American problem," and that one concern must be to fight for our way of life and for the food supply of the world. Paritycade speakers are repeatedly contrasting the policy of the projected massive bail-out of the international bankers, which will cost the economy tens of billions, with the refusal to implement relatively simple and immediately required measures such as farm debt moratoria or moratoria on foreclosures.

Billy Davis, a Mississippi farm leader speaking in Jackson, Mississippi stated that the failing in America has been the failure of its people to stop the systematic destruction of the economy and the nation, even though there were warnings in the Farewell Address of George Washington about the consequences of not excluding the manipulators from our Republic's affairs. The question, he said, is "Do the American people have the moral fitness to deserve to survive?" He called on the audience to "fall on your knees before God," and "since we have lost nearly everything already" to commit themselves to a fight to throw off the policies of the Federal Reserve and the British and Swiss bankers.

Lawrence Freeman, southern regional coordinator for the NDPC, addressing the same rally, declared that "a fight for parity prices is not enough." Freeman told the farmers that in order to save food production and to save the nation, the farmers movement must take responsibility to lead greater political forces in a fight to end the world depression and for a new monetary system based on federalizing the Federal Reserve system and organizing a new world economic order to finance worldwide technological, industrial and agricultural development. He emphasized that we stand at the brink of a world monetary collapse.

"We cannot have land taken out of production while the nation is bankrupt, and there is no such thing as overprod-

uction while thousands of people per hour starve to death around the world," declared AAM leader Alvin Jenkins repeatedly on the tour. "We need a crash development program for agriculture."

Worst farm crisis ever

The crisis in agriculture is a threat to Americans' food supply. An average of 2,200 American farmers per week are being driven off the land—a pace that has continued since 1979 when the Volcker interest rates began to accelerate the already heavily indebted farmers' costs. Meanwhile, average farm prices have continued at record lows.

Although U.S. agricultural productivity per acre is at an all-time high because of applications of technology and science, the average American farmer today is only receiving for his product 55 percent of his direct costs of production! This figure is an all-time low in American history, and farmers are either fighting for extensions on their debts, or being foreclosed, or are selling out. Jenkins emphasized to his audiences that there are now only 350,000 farmers in the entire United States today who are still full-time, that is, who have not been forced to get other employment outside food production.

Younger farmers in particular are being forced into bankruptcy as their reward for their part in producing enough food to feed the entire nation and 75 million people in other lands as well. Too often young farmers are "getting out" by abandoning their farms outright, and even by committing suicide. The average age of the American farmer today is 59 years old.

Farmers in the Paritycade recounted their own information about towns in the Midwest which have closed over 80 percent of their businesses because they had been dependent on farmers' purchases. In the first 13 days of January, they said, 191 farmers filed for bankruptcy in two counties in Georgia alone. Some high-technology grain farmers are selling grain now for less than half the price they were getting a few years ago.

Alvin Jenkins and other speakers repeatedly denounced the latest U.S. government farm policy initiative, the "PIK" (Payment in Kind) program. PIK's twin goals are reducing U.S. food reserves and reducing by 23,000,000 acres the land now under cultivation in the United States. Because of farmers' purchases of implements and other industrial production, AAM leaders predict that this reduction in acreage could reduce demand for industrial production by over \$2.25 billion and cause another sharp increase in unemployment.

"I would be the first to admit," Jenkins told a group of farmers in Florida, "that I might make a little money in the short run if the government gives me surplus wheat to sell. But we oppose this program because it will cost the taxpayer billions by destroying agricultural production, and by hurting my neighbor the steelworker and my neighbor the implements manufacturer."