

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

The Democrats' 'show of concern'

Once the demonstrations were over, farmers left Washington, D.C. with less than nothing.

Fields are going unplanted, herds are shrinking, and farmers are going bankrupt by the thousands thanks to the staged "show of concern" in Washington, D.C. earlier this month. For one week, the media gave prominent coverage to American Agriculture Movement (AAM) farmers who went to lobby Congress and the White House for help. The Senate and House of Representatives passed farm credit relief bills—attached to African relief authorization—and sent them to President Reagan. He vetoed them. The Speaker of the House said nothing more could be done. The show was over.

The farmers went home with less than nothing.

At this time, there are minor state-level maneuvers to pass some emergency relief measures for farm banks, and there is a class action suit in North Dakota to get relief from the Farmers Home Mortgage Administration (FmHA). But the catastrophe proceeds.

The standing relief program of the administration—enacted last fall and updated inconsequentially in February—authorizes \$650 million in debt relief to those farmers for whom FmHA or commercial bankers agree to forego some debt payments. Few rural banks are in a position to do that, and therefore much less than the original authorization has been used.

The March Senate and House measures raised the total authorization to around \$1.85 billion, and lessened the conditions for participation.

In either case, what is offered amounts to only what is termed, in the language of the International Monetary Fund, a "bridge loan"—to nowhere. What is actually required is a package of War Mobilization Board-style measures including an overall farm debt moratorium coupled with issuance by the Treasury Department of low-interest farm production credits through the rural banking and farm credit system. The objective must be to regroup the collapsing farm sector to resume maximum output for emergency food to Africa, and to ensure food security and output at home.

However, not one congressman had the sense or morality to take this approach. For his part, President Reagan stuffed his foot in his mouth the day he vetoed the congressional emergency legislation, saying that fewer than 4% of farmers "are in need of immediate help." Agriculture Secretary Block had to apologize for Reagan the next day in the Senate, saying he was "mis-quoted" in the press.

Montana's Sen. John Melcher—distinguished for the one merit of recognizing the need for more, not less, food production—attacked Reagan's intransigence and said, "This means war and there won't be any prisoners." However, no Democratic congressman used the occasion to initiate any constructive measure. Instead, they cynically used the farmers' presence to attack Reagan's other policies, such as the Strategic Defense Initiative. Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) said that Reagan wants "arms not farms."

A featured speaker at the first AAM farm rally in Washington on March 4 was Texas Agriculture Commissioner Jim Hightower—a spokesman for the 1984 Mondale nuclear-freeze drive. Hightower is one of the phoniest "friends" the farmer ever had. He is a radical environmentalist whose self-proclaimed "Farm Policy Reform Act of 1985" calls for *mandatory* farm production controls and a National Conservation Reserve to lock up farm land. Hightower's collaborator in this proposal is none other than Jim Nicholls, the agriculture commissioner of Minnesota, where Cargill, Inc. and the Swiss-based oligarchic interests are directly pulling the strings.

The farmers who went to Washington to rally and lobby were simply used as media bait for the whole stage-managed operation. Reporters and cameras crawled all over the events. The *Washington Post* claimed the March 4 rally had 2,000 people; the actual number was 700. At the rally March 6 in front of the Capitol Building, the Democratic senators dominated the occasion, by symbolically signing the Senate and House emergency bill that Reagan was soon to veto. Led by Rep. Jim Wright (D-Tex.) a string of senators—senators Exon (D-Nebr.), Boren (D-Okla.), Melcher (D-Mont.)—sounded off against Reagan. After 30 minutes of these speeches, the crowd marched to the White House, to hear a speech by Minnesota Governor Rudy Perpich, an instrument of Control Data Corp. and Cargill.

Meanwhile, many farmers made contact with the Schiller Institute farm contingent on hand to enlist people in an international rally for April 13 to link farmers with civil rights, labor, scientists, military representatives, and other layers, even whole nations, in the battle to end the IMF collapse.