

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

GATT talks resume in Geneva

The free trade rhetoric hides a cartel plan for food control over increasingly short supplies.

In Geneva the first week of April, ministerial level talks on agriculture trade begin among the 96 member-nations of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade—the U.N.-connected trade agency formed in the 1940s. This meeting was scheduled in December 1988, after the ministers, then meeting in Montreal, failed to reach agreement at their “Mid-term Review” session of the four-year Uruguay Round of talks committed to reduce trade barriers to agricultural and other trade—services, labor, patents.

One predictable development in Geneva will be a series of staged battles over how far the United States, the European Community, and the Cairns group of 13 which food-exporting nations (that includes Australia, Argentina, Thailand and Canada) can agree among themselves on implementing “free trade.”

What the GATT secretariat, and complicit national government officials such as U.S. Agriculture Secretary Clayton Yeutter, mean by free trade is the absence of almost any practice traditionally considered the sovereign right of a nation. For example, the following measures are considered “trade distorting” and antithetical to free trade: subsidies to farmers, provision of irrigation water and pesticides to farmers, subsidies of food for the needy, agriculture extension services, import restrictions to prevent food “dumping,” and so forth.

The United States even has a proposal before GATT to prohibit nations from attempting to become food self-sufficient. The U.S. argument is that all nations should be dependent on ac-

cess to the “free market” for their food.

What is not expected to be raised in discussion is how to reverse the drastic decline in world food output per capita, and how to save lives now being lost at genocidal rates. The reality of the world food shortage was never raised at the Montreal talks, which ended in the stalemate between the United States and the European Community over the timing of implementing “free trade.” The U.S. position was to demand a commitment to end all subsidies by the year 2000, and the Europeans instead said to proceed piecemeal, beginning now.

Since December, there have been parrying matches between the United States and the EC. Two rounds of meetings were held, one in Washington, and the second in Brussels, by Yeutter and Carla Hills, who took his former job as trade representative, and their EC counterparts, Agriculture Commissioner Ray MacSharry and chief negotiator Franz Andriessen.

According to the official comments of both sides, there will be some action in Geneva to diminish various trade restrictions (e.g., import quotas). In mid-March, Yeutter said, “There might be a freeze in some areas and an advancement of reforms in others.”

The EC agricultural attaché Jacques Vonthron told participants at the National Governors Conference agriculture meeting March 20, that “negotiations are going fast, and especially on the short-term [measures], which has always been the section Europeans thought were important.” Yeutter and Hills presented the Euro-

peans a package plan in February that called for a “ratcheting down” of “trade-distorting subsidies” in order to reach the goal of eventual elimination.

Smirking at all this diplomatic sashaying are the food cartel companies, whose interests Yeutter, Andriessen, and the lesser players are serving. The whole agricultural “free trade” campaign is an operation on behalf of the companies that rule world food trade: Cargill, Archer Daniels Midland, Continental, Louis Dreyfus, Bunge, Garnac/André, and the rest. These companies want such agencies as GATT to force nations to allow them free rein to control all world food trade, which means they dictate who eats, and who doesn’t.

At the moment, for example, huge quantities of Western grain are going to Russia, while grain is being denied—either for sale or donation—to millions in Africa, in South America, and Asia.

Whatever agreement does or does not occur in Geneva among the 96 GATT member-nations this April, the cartel companies intend to bludgeon any national opposition that arises to their political and monopolistic goals. The New York Council on Foreign Relations, a policy voice for these cartels and related banking interests, has taken the position that the GATT process is too cumbersome and doesn’t matter, anyway. Free trade is being implemented regionally through the new trade “blocs”—Europe 1992, Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, and Australia/New Zealand 1990. Speaking at the March 20 Governors Conference agriculture session, C. Michael Aho, director of economic studies for the Council on Foreign Relations, said he doubted that any multinational farm talks could succeed. He said, “Agriculture is the Beirut of trade negotiations.”