

Agriculture by Robert L. Baker

The fraud of 'rural development'

The new line coming from agriculture bureaucrats is to finance farm communities—"without money."

As American rural communities face a crisis that is becoming much worse than the Great Depression, congressional inquiries and fact-finding hearings are taking place around the nation to discuss what to do.

"Rural development," a term that has become popular with the rise of the "post-industrial society," is currently the buzzword in once financially strong farm communities. The types of "development" being discussed by legislators will not rebuild rural America—far from it. Most of the "development" being discussed amounts to nothing more than make-work projects or retraining programs to help the rural population make the transition from being proud owners of independent family farms, businesses, and supporting services, into a cheap labor pool for large conglomerates.

"We're not interested in discussing agriculture," a spokesman for the House Agriculture Committee, Jim McDonnell, told an activist for the Food for Peace organization, when she called to arrange to testify at hearings on "rural development" held in Clarksdale, Mississippi early in August. The hearings were part of a series sponsored by the Agriculture Committee to prepare the 1990 Farm Bill. McDonnell said the hearings would focus on "innovative" ideas for rural areas, "unconventional" ideas which would revitalize rural America. This usually means providing services for tourists, like bed-and-breakfast inns.

McDonnell said that parity prices for farm products (prices that cover

production costs, plus profit enough to allow reinvestment in modernization) were not relevant to rural development—even though the largest industry in the United States is agro-industry. When asked if Congress wants to hear what kinds of infrastructure need to be funded in rural areas, McDonnell responded, "No, we are not asking Congress to rebuild infrastructure. That would cost money. We are looking for innovative ways of financing it without money, like through secondary markets."

"Rural America is passing through a time of significant trial . . . and rural development programs . . . must be targeted," said Iowa Gov. Terry Brandsted in his address as lead-off witness at an Aug. 10 hearing of the House Agriculture subcommittee.

Leaders of the panel said that rural areas stand "on the threshold" of development. But, Rep. Glenn English (D-Okla.), chairman of the panel, admitted, "There is not a great deal of new money." He warned that declining population in rural areas means reduced representation in Congress and state legislatures, thus making it hard to marshal forces in defense of those areas. Roughly 17% of those living in rural communities exist below the poverty line, compared to 13% in urban areas. Representative English emphasizes, "This really is a downward spiral." In October, the committee will begin drafting rural development legislation.

Hearings at Marshalltown College in Iowa the first week in August, which were presided over by Rep. David Nagle (D-Iowa) and Sen. Kent Conrad

(D-N.D.), were characterized by a commitment to austerity and a flight from reality. There was no discussion of the extreme drought conditions threatening the crops for a second year, nor serious consideration of the water emergency which continues in the southern half of Iowa. One ingenious proposal was for everyone in the community to contribute \$1 to improve local conditions. The testimony was devoted almost exclusively to private volunteer, non-governmental self-help efforts to improve the economy.

When one state representative tried to raise the issue of parity pricing as the basis for rural economic development, she was cut off by the chairman, "This hearing does not involve agriculture."

Testimony at the hearing by Food for Peace representatives cited dangerously low food stocks, and called upon Congress to implement Lyndon LaRouche's emergency national economic recovery program. "This hearing is sponsoring the opposite and very dangerous view. It is the mistaken opinion of some lawmakers, enforced by various think-tanks and media, that resources and population have to be eliminated from rural America due to budgetary constraints," said one spokesman.

Buttonholed by Food for Peace representative Wayne Johnston, farmer from Mississippi, during the break, Representative English disagreed about the need for a national economic recovery program. "We're only talking about rural America here," he said. He was very skeptical of Johnston's view that a parity price was needed for rural recovery.

Agricultural historian Hiram Drache maintains that the number of farms could soon amount to less than half of the present total, under current policies.