

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

Senate holds hearings on hunger

The increases in food relief called for are only nominal, and everybody ignored the need to increase food production.

On Feb. 27, Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, held a full-dress committee hearing on the topic "Hunger in America." Senator Leahy called the hearing to announce "two major bills to dramatically increase food aid to 25 million Americans."

Leahy has scored the Bush administration for the sharp decline in federal food aid for local school districts. Beginning with the fall 1989 school term, the U.S. Department of Agriculture ceased supplying any bulk "bonus" commodities of nonfat dry milk, and of cheese—two high-quality protein items that school districts and other federally assisted programs have had to rely on because of depressed economic conditions. The USDA has none of these commodities, due to a national milk output crisis, and USDA officials say that food relief is not their responsibility.

However, though the Senate hearing heard testimony from child nutritionists from schools and other programs in New York City, Vermont, Virginia, South Carolina, and elsewhere—all reporting a threat of malnourishment of youngsters—the senators only postured, and did not take the kind of urgent actions required. The hearings lasted only two hours.

The nutrition bill introduced in late February by Senator Leahy and Rep. Leon Panetta (D-Calif.) in the House, is called the Mickey Leland Memorial Domestic Hunger Relief Act, after the Texas congressman who died in a plane crash in Africa last year while on a food relief mission. In March, a second bill will be intro-

duced in the Senate by Leahy and by Sen. Pete Domenici (R-N.M.).

Senator Leahy told the hearing, "The administration proposes to cut more than a half-billion dollars from our nation's nutrition programs. I will not tolerate those cuts. I will oppose cuts to school lunch programs. I will oppose cuts to day care feeding programs. And I will oppose the administration's proposed cuts for the nutrition programs in Puerto Rico. The administration is headed in the wrong direction."

The new bills do call for additional funds for the various federal food relief programs—school lunches, Women, Infants and Children Program (WIC), and for the elderly and special institutions. However, because of inflation, the increments of budgetary outlays called for do not amount to any improvement.

It was brought out in committee proceedings that the Bush food and farm bill proposals call for a nominal increase in \$100 million for school lunches, but because of a clause restricting children who may qualify for assistance, local districts stand to lose a net \$300 million worth of federal commodity aid if the bill goes through!

Neither the congressional nor the administration bills deal with relieving the farm crisis. This would require emergency measures to dramatically increase outputs and improve the farmers' financial situation—parity prices to cover farm costs of food production, a stay on farm foreclosures, and low-interest credits to rev up farm output and capital improvements.

Instead, the congressional hunger relief bills call for charity. The sponsors' description of their "anti-hunger initiative" states that among its primary objectives are: "volunteer activities: Support community-based anti-hunger activities and emergency food distribution"; and "child support: Encourage families and individuals who receive government support to seek alternative sources of income through work or child support collections."

An official of the American School Food Service Association told the Senate: "The National School Lunch Program is at a crossroads, both philosophically and financially. The administration is proposing changes to the child nutrition programs that would reduce federal support by \$516 million, with \$235.4 million coming from the School Lunch Program. This reduction in federal funds would be on top of the \$300 million loss in bonus commodities we have experienced over the last several years. . . ."

"In Japan, 98% of all children in elementary school receive a school lunch. In the United States, we still serve 2 million children a day less than we did before the 1981 budget cuts."

Speaking for the American Public Welfare Association's Food Stamp Reauthorization Task Force, Tim Grace of the Illinois Department of Public Aid presented the Senate Committee with a detailed plan to provide more food for those in need—Aid to Families with Dependent Children, food stamps, etc. Grace said that the special national task force was set up last year to formulate how to distribute more food where needed, "so that benefits better serve the needs of vulnerable groups such as the homeless, and access to the program is not hindered by unnecessary barriers to the application and participation process."