

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

Harvest disaster in U.S.S.R.

In the Soviet version of a "free-market economy," wheat, fruit, and vegetable crops are rotting in the fields.

The effort to impose Gorbachov's "free-market" reform on the Soviet agricultural economy—an economy which has functioned over recent years, to the extent it has functioned at all, on the basis of a Byzantine system of dragooning "volunteer" labor from the cities—is leading to an even worse crisis. Not only is the harvest in jeopardy, but Soviet newspapers are complaining that the barter arrangements now cropping up will mean starvation for the elderly.

Though the weather was good in the wheat-growing season, the harvest may be down by as much as 30% from what it could have been, because of decrepit machinery, lack of spare parts, fuel shortages, and social dislocation.

As of harvest time in July, the picture for the ripening fruit and vegetable crops was equally grim. There is a breakdown of the crude arrangements which were previously made for the acreage to be planted, and the crops harvested and shipped.

According to accounts in the daily *Izvestia*, thousands of tons of produce are rotting on the ground.

In the July 19 *Izvestia*, V. Konovalov writes that there are similar reports on the vegetable crops coming from all over the country: "The harvest is good, but the vegetables are rotting in the fields, since there is nobody to pick them." The "volunteer" brigades from the cities are not showing up, since factories that once ordered them to go into the country, are now on cost accountability, and refuse to send the labor, or else offer workers only at a price the farms cannot pay.

Near Rostov-on-Don, where the vegetable fields, overgrown with

weeds, were to be harvested before the end of July, there was a crisis as of July 19, because the factories were demanding 3,000-6,000 rubles for each vegetable picker supplied. Also, they were demanding that the trucks loaded with vegetables be routed directly to the factories that supplied the pickers. Anybody who did not work—retirees, for example—would simply not get food. Konovalov asked, "And what about the pensioners, of which there are 300,000 in Rostov?"

Some vegetable farms even tried lining up labor from China! This was reported in the Chelyabinsk Oblast, whence, also, the Chelyabinsk Center for Scientific and Technological Youth Activity was sending students at its expense to practice agricultural work in Israel.

Anticipating the harvest time labor crisis, many farms cut the size of their plantings. In Chelyabinsk, 1,000 fewer hectares were planted in vegetables this season. But even so, the 800 hectares of cucumbers, cabbage, and tomatoes ripened with almost nobody to harvest them. Farmers were forced to start plowing the fields under.

In reporting the youths going to Israel, and the reduced plantings, Konovalov wrote that this would all be laughable, "but the harvest is perishing! How will we feed the country, if production is further cut back in the future? This is a serious problem. For the very system of vegetable production, which had the vice of being oriented to the uncompensated, actually parasitical labor of workers recruited from the city, is now experiencing collapse in various regions of the

country. At the same time, hundreds and thousands of true master farmers, who could raise vegetable crops with a minimum of labor expenditures, and thirsting to obtain land for this, cannot get the land. So now not only parliamentary debates, but the situation in the fields and on the food-store shelves, give strong arguments for a faster implementation of land reform. How long must the peasant wait for it?"

In Volgograd, a major vegetable-growing region, there has been a shrinkage of the area of vegetable crops over the last three years from 16,000 down to 14,000 hectares. This season, only 12,000 hectares were planted.

Over the past three years, the gross harvest dropped from 284,000 to 281,000 tons, and the yields also fell. This year, only 80% of Volgograd's vegetable needs will be supplied by local production.

In Armenia, famous for its peaches, plums, and other fruit tree crops, there has been a disaster in the harvest, for want of labor arrangements. According to Armenian Deputy Prime Minister M. Grigoryan, there could have been 20,000 tons of apricots harvested this year. But thousands of pounds of fruit has ripened, fallen to the ground, and rotted.

Izvestia on July 20 reported that there was a plan to harvest the apricots, use some for local demand, make a pledged contribution to the national food fund, and exchange the surplus for meat and other products. However, none of these arrangements were made on time. No one knew quite how to make the deals. The farms have the "autonomy" to make the contracts, but it is the republic as a whole that wants the meat. Republic officials blame the farms; but while blame was cast, the fruit rotted.