

Agriculture by Nigel M. Gleeson

Australian farmers fight back

The cartels which are moving to dispossess family farms in Australia, now have to reckon with an international coalition.

At 5:00 a.m. on Nov. 4 at Mount Morris, a central Queensland cattle and sheep station in northeastern Australia, Elders Pastoral, a large rural-based cartel company, moved their trucks onto the property of Adrian and Julie Warner and removed all their livestock. The pre-dawn sweep was the followup to an interest rate hike which had raised the Warners' debt from A\$85,000 to A\$100,000 (US\$57,000 to US\$67,000).

The seizure took place under false pretenses, and came out of the blue about two weeks ahead of a court date scheduled to settle the farm debt issue on Nov. 18. Since then, the Warners have lost the court case, and the banks now have official custody of the property.

In many respects, the Warners' case is not unusual. Thousands of Australian farmers are burdened by impossible debt, and cartel food companies, insurance companies, banks, and other entities are moving to dispossess them, making way for vast collective, factory farms. The Bureau of Agricultural Economics admits openly that the average farm income is negative. At present, the average Australian farm posts a \$30,000 negative annual income.

But the Warners stand out in one respect. They are leaders in a national drive to restore the Australian economy and to restore hope and development worldwide. Before the raid on their property, the Warners had hosted a farm organizing meeting in Charleville. The very day of the Elders raid,

Julie Warner had gone on a live radio show to denounce the assault on farmers everywhere, and to rally people to fight together. She began receiving phone calls from all across Australia.

Julie Warner stressed that while she and Adrian had been hit by this seizure of stock, they are both "looking at the fight on a much broader scale. . . . One has to fight on a national and global basis if you are going to win. . . . You can't get bogged down with your own problems, no matter how bad they might be."

Among the immediate causes of the farm crisis in Australia are the near-total failure of wheat crops in the eastern states, and a continued depression in the wool market due to a government policy of high interest rates, regardless of cost. In addition, there are new restrictive environmentalist laws.

Last year, sheep prices went through the floor, and farmers were advertising thousands of sheep to give away. The federal government decreed a "sheep kill"—a scheme whereby they paid farmers 81¢ a head to shoot their sheep, rather than send them to such countries as Ethiopia and Somalia. At the same time, they paid out \$1.1 billion in overseas aid!

In addition, in some places the average loss of stock due to drought alone in the past year has been estimated at 40%. Within the span of the last two years, Australia has seen the destruction of an estimated 40 million sheep because of immoral government policies and general collapse.

During this time period, federal

government support for drought-stricken farmers amounted to only \$9.5 million, which was used either to destroy stock, or else went directly to the banks in the form of debt repayments.

"But never mind, this will all be turned around with free trade," according to the government. This, despite the fact that Australia's dollar reached a new five-year low in November of 67.5¢ to the U.S. dollar, and its foreign debt rose dramatically. With only 17 million people, and the second-largest debt in the world, Australia "enjoys" the highest per capita debt in the world.

Australia already has a virtual free trade system, which has destroyed the economy. Under this type of trade practice, for example, the private slaughterhouses in Queensland which have been shipping beef halfway across the Pacific Ocean, are now being told by the Bush administration that the United States doesn't want their produce anymore—Australia can keep it. However, the latest offer from U.S. free trade food brokers is that the United States will think about buying more Australian beef—if the price is dropped 25%!

There is a prediction of an 80% drop in sugar prices in the near future. Sugar prices are currently below \$135 a ton, which doesn't even cover the cost of production.

Orange farmers in Mildura, Victoria are also saying that their industry will cease to exist if the flood of cheap imports from Brazil is not stemmed.

It is in this context of free trade that the big insurance companies are seizing prime land in conjunction with bank foreclosures on farmers. The reality of the crisis situation is highlighted by statistics showing that 10 to 12 years ago Australia had 150,000 farmers, whereas it now has fewer than 50,000 producing farms left.