

## Dateline Mexico by Carlos Cota Meza

### Rural Producers Forum expands

*Farmers' protest movement grows in Mexico as economic conditions continue to deteriorate.*

As part of the national mobilization launched by the Permanent Forum of Rural Producers (FPPR), a new state chapter was established on May 27 in Mexicali, Baja California Norte. The FPPR was founded in April in Ciudad Obregón, Sonora, at a meeting attended by rural producers from numerous Mexican states, to demand relief from a rapidly worsening agricultural crisis, and enactment of emergency measures that would turn unpayable debt into credit for recapitalizing the bankrupt sector.

The Mexicali meeting was attended by the national coordinators of this new movement: José Ramírez of Jalisco, Adalberto Rosas and José Mendivil of Sonora, and Alberto Vizcarra, national leader of the Ibero-American Solidarity Movement (MSIA).

The Baja California Norte founding meeting was held at the Michoacán de Ocampo collective farm, or *ejido*. The 180 collective farmers who attended are in desperate straits, given that their 11,000 plots are about to be seized by the Rural Credit Bank (Banrural) of the federal government, and by commercial bank creditors, because of inability to meet payments. Also present at the founding meeting were three local congressmen, leaders of several peasant organizations, and an official representative of the state government.

This was the FPPR's first meeting in a state ruled by the National Action Party (PAN), and where the ruling PRI party has been defeated both in the state congress and in a majority of

municipalities as well. However, the population is aware that this new political situation has not brought them any closer to resolving problems which for them are matters of life and death.

Despite the popular image of the Mexican collective farmer being "protected" by the federal government, the truth is that the *ejidatario* has historically been cornered by bureaucracy, corruption, and political manipulation, preventing the development of his individual initiative and keeping him in backwardness. Now, these same farmers, many of them elderly and with most of their children emigrated or illegally in the United States, find themselves in a situation in which they are being asked to comprehend how it is that for every 80 pesos they owed Banrural, they have paid 60, and still owe 120.

In the face of the desperation expressed by many farmers attending (including a few who walked out of the meeting to protest that the forum had no "magic formula"), the FPPR coordinators explained that the issue goes beyond the question of personal problems. Jalisco coordinator José Ramírez presented a working report on how to organize a nationwide movement to impose a new economic policy against usury. Sonora's Alberto Vizcarra argued the need to organize simultaneously in different parts of the country around the FPPR's proposed declaration of voluntary bankruptcy.

Adalberto Rosas, an FPPR founder and also a presidential candidate from the PAN party, told the farmers:

"I am a grower, and all my life I have lived from this activity." He explained how he had come to understand the urgency of forming a new movement, given the total disrepute into which the traditional agro-business leaders have fallen. "The business leaders privately agree with our proposals, but they have not yet gone public with their support, either because their boss won't let them speak, or because they lack the courage."

What began virtually as an informal gathering of collective farmers concluded with 60 of the growers present signing the FPPR's national declaration. In addition, several state coordinators of the movement were named. Eduardo Andrade Cisneros, leader of the Regional Committees of the CNC of Baja California (CNC is the largest farmers organization in the country), told the Mexicali Forum attendees that the FPPR's fight "is a relevant response" and that he intended to support it. He added, however, that the CNC did not agree that "the problem of the debt should be placed in the hands of the courts. . . . The federal government, the cause of these problems, should totally forgive the agricultural debt, which is unpayable, and whose generation is neither the financial nor administrative responsibility of the producers."

For more than three days, the print media, radio, and television were "taken over" by the statements of the FPPR. Some local headlines read: "Agro should be helped for national security reasons; when we stop producing, we will end up in the hands of the gringos," and "The government should recognize its error and change course." The radio, in particular, led its news reports for two consecutive days with coverage of the FPPR event, and invited the FPPR coordinators to man an open microphone on several talk shows.