

## Agriculture by Marcia Merry

### ***Country: propaganda for despair***

*The message of the movie would prevent any effective action by farmers, while American agriculture is shut down.*

**O**ne movie you should have missed in 1984 is *Country*, starring Jessica Lange and Sam Shepherd as Jewell and Gil Ivy, who are losing their farm in Iowa. Released last summer, the film was the kick-off for the current network-media campaign around "the plight of the farmer."

Jessica Lange, star of *King Kong* and *Tootsie*, foreswore make-up last year in order to look like a farm girl for TV talk-show audiences, becoming the "Jane Fonda" of the farm-plight movement.

The film portrays a farm family confronted with bank orders from the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) to pay up their loan arrears in 30 days or sell out. Their 180-acre farm has been in the wife's family for 100 years; her father still works the farm with the younger generation. With farm prices so low, the family has no means to pay. The bank moves in to take the crop proceeds, sell the equipment, and foreclose on the land.

The wife resists, the husband temporarily turns to drink and despair—but then, the family stays together and keeps fighting. You do not see the outcome.

The scenes are affecting because they were shot on farm location, and accurate down to the pick-up truck and the grain elevator. But that's where the accuracy stops.

Dramatically thrown on the screen at the end is a report that a federal court has ordered the FmHA to cease arbitrary foreclosure actions and adopt new rules of conduct. Theater audiences

feel a thrill of satisfaction that people like Jessica Lange who resist the heartless Fed and banks will prevail.

In truth, the stay on the FmHA has stopped nothing. Over the course of 1984, the policy of the farm debt-holders and credit supervisory agencies combined has been to withdraw credit from the farm sector—at a time when prices for farm products are running below half the costs of production. Forced liquidations, foreclosures, and voluntary sell-outs have decimated the farm sector. Former farm families are staying in old school houses, shacks, and relatives' spare rooms. Rural churches are running food programs. Farmers still in operation are donating food to their destitute neighbors.

Crop and livestock output, the national hog and cattle inventory, are plunging drastically. The winter-wheat seeding in Nebraska is down almost 20% from last year. Planting weather was perfect, but there were far fewer farmers, with far less money for seed, fertilizer, and fuel.

Required in the next three-months at the latest are emergency measures to restore the family-farm structure, and emergency production credits to resume farm output.

That is a demand of the Schiller Institute, with which, each day, hundreds of new farmers are linking up. Its program is to rebuild American agriculture to feed Africa and the world, to develop beam-weapon technology to strengthen the Western Alliance, and use the spin-offs to devel-

op the world through high-technology projects. The Schiller farm group conducts phone "trees" with branches now criss-crossing every farm region, arming farmers with the latest strategic news and coordinating action with civil-rights, labor, military, and other layers ready to mobilize for emergency farm measures.

The backers of *Country* are promoting a different approach: "Be brave . . . resist . . . stay local . . . love the land." The movie was designed by David Ostendorf, the Midwest head of the Rural America Foundation, which is in the orbit of the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS), with close ties to the Soviet Union. Among its favorite "issues" are the nuclear freeze, "rural gay-men's rights," solar energy, and gasohol. Rural America is running interference against a farm mobilization on a strategic level.

There is a Rural America "Hot Line" for farmers, in Nebraska funded with Ford and Field Foundation money. The idea is to fixate the caller on strictly individual "legal rights."

The dramatic peak of the film comes in a scene where the banker has been temporarily foiled by Jessica Lange, who organized surrounding farmers to go for a "penny auction"—bidding only pennies for the Ivy's equipment. The banker gets in his car, leans out the window and leers at Jessica: "I'll be back. I'll take your equipment and sell it in the next county. . . ." Jessica stares back and shouts, "You can take my livestock. . . . You can take my equipment . . . but if you think you are going to take my land, you better have something more than a piece of paper."

Some city audiences may cheer the drama. They smell the blood. But the purpose of *Country* is to incite farmers to ineffective violence, despair, and ruin.