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Socialist Voice #239, April 3, 2008

Farmers Seek Defenses Against the Giants of Agribusiness

By John Riddell

Around the world, farm income is plummeting, pushing farmers off the land and into destitution. At the very same time, soaring food prices are putting tens of millions onto starvation diets.

Welcome to the bizarre world of capitalist agriculture, where the drive to boost profits of giant transnational corporations is imperiling the production of our means of survival.

Suzanne Weiss and I sought insight into this crisis by talking to farmers who live close to us — in Grey County, 200 kilometers north-west of Toronto. We had been invited there to report on farming in Venezuela to the local unit of the National Farmers Union. Our hosts took time to give us an education in Grey County agricultural economics.

“What is the one single measure that would do the most to help farmers in Ontario?” I asked Rae MacIntyre, president of the Grey County local of the National Farmers Union (NFU).

“Open up food markets to local producers,” he replied. “That would transform the situation.”

MacIntyre’s stress on “local food” reveals how much ground has been lost by Grey County’s 160 NFU members — and their 50,000 farmer colleagues across Ontario — during recent decades of big-business attacks on farmers and degradation of the food system. The challenge before farmers is no longer merely low prices for farm products. They are now almost entirely excluded from grocery-store shelves.

Check out your local supermarket: almost every food product has traveled 3,000 kilometers or more to reach the store.

Exploited producers

But more is at stake. Farmers are working people, exploited by big-business profiteering. Despite the supposed advantages of large-scale farming, Canada has very few capitalist factory-farms worked by hired labour. The great majority of operations are “family farms,” where family members do most or all of the work.

Some working farmers employ seasonal labourers under the government’s oppressive migrant-labour programs. Defense of these workers must be a top priority of the labour movement as a whole. But the primary blame for this shameful system falls on the government that designed it, and the capitalist market that requires it.

Farmers are self-employed and must get by on what their products fetch on a hostile market. Many farmers have been subjugated by onerous contracts with giant corporate customers. They are exploited by big-business suppliers, buyers, and banks just as workers at General Motors or WalMart are.

The last two decades of cutbacks, layoffs, and concession contracts, which wage workers know as “neo-liberalism,” hit farmers with extra severity. In that time, 25% of Canada’s farms disappeared.

‘No more buying local’

Our Grey County hosts, mostly beef and lamb producers, told us that most of their potential corporate customers had stopped buying from local producers, seeking to cut costs through giant contracts with foreign suppliers. Shawn, who runs a sheep farm, had just lost his marketing contract with a grocery chain that was cutting out local producers. Another NFU member had lost his contract for pumpkins. The buyer told him frankly: “No more buying local.”

Jon Radojkovic, a Grey County grower of shiitake mushrooms told us he has given up trying to sell them to Toronto distributors. Instead, he finds his customers through a local bartering network.

Like most Grey County farmers, Rae MacIntyre raises beef. Not long ago, “there was a slaughterhouse in every county,” he says. That’s all gone now; the only significant purchaser is the corporate goliath, Cargill, which has an abattoir in Guelph, MacIntyre says. Most Ontario beef is sold into the U.S. for whatever it will bring, and these days that’s next to nothing.

Grey County used to be a major supplier of apples. Now few apples are sold, MacIntyre says. “Juice apples ... are often composted or used for animal feed.” Many of the apples we see in stores are flown in from China. The same applies to apple juice and apple sauce, despite the misleading “made in Canada” labels on the packaging.

“Many good farmers have given up,” says Radojkovic. “They were proud and happy; now they have lost hope — killed by low prices.”

The average farm in Canada represented an investment of \$1.3 million in 2006 — more per worker than in any other industry. Yet the average farmer’s “net market income” from this

massive investment was only \$13,000. And more than two-thirds must be set aside to provide for depreciation of buildings and equipment.

The NFU calculates that Ontario farmers' real return on their investment dropped to zero in 1991, and has declined since to "negative \$15,000 per farm" in 2006.

Meanwhile, farm debt has more than doubled over the last two decades. With income levels so low, such debts can usually be repaid only by selling the farm.

Farmers try to compensate by taking off-farm jobs. Small and mid-sized Ontario farms get 90% of their income that way. Even farms with the highest sales get more than a quarter of their total revenue from off-farm jobs.

Given the disastrous economic conditions, few young people are stepping forward to replace Canada's aging farm work force. In twenty years, the number of farmers under 35 years old is down 62%.

Corporate profiteering

The sickness in Canada's farms is rooted in the way the proceeds of agriculture are divided between farmers and workers, on the one hand, and capitalist corporations on the other.

In Canada's hog industry, between 1988 and 2002, and despite inflation, farm-gate prices (including inflation) fell 5% from 1988 to 2007. Packinghouse workers' wages rose a bit, but much less than inflation. Yet the price of pork to consumers went up 39%.

In 2005, the NFU noted that wheat farmers were getting five cents from each loaf of bread, the same amount as thirty years earlier. The income of supermarket workers has been under sharp attack. But the share of each loaf that goes to corporate millers, bakers, and grocers rose from 38 cents to \$1.35.

In 2004, which the NFU says was the second-worst year for farming in history, the corporations living off the farmers had their most profitable year ever. The corporations are appropriating every penny of the profits of farming — indeed, more than 100%, since farmers are unable to cover their costs from farm-product sales.

'The problem is market power'

How do they get away with it?

"The problem is market power," a Farmers Union document explains. On one side are the "huge transnationals with only two or three competitors" — on the other side, "individual farmers competing in a global market against a billion other farmers." In such conditions, agribusiness can set prices at will — whatever level best drains the farmers' resources without shutting down cultivation completely.

Farmers' incomes can be stabilized in two ways, the NFU points out: (1) government subsidy programs that "transfer money from taxpayers" and (2) programs to enable farmers "to extract

money from the marketplace.” The farmers` union strongly advises a focus on enabling farmers to gain more market power.

“If farmers are more powerful, they will be more profitable,” the NFU concludes.

Unity in marketing

Farmers have long sought to achieve market power in the same way as workers — by joining together in order to impose a higher price for their product.

Workers do this through unions, which establish “market power” by bargaining collectively to set wage levels.

Farmers have sought to establish agencies — under their own or government management — that exercise control over the marketing of farm produce. The NFU points to the merits of existing plans of this type, such as the Canadian Wheat Board or Ontario’s egg and milk marketing boards.

In recent years, such “supply management” plans have come under government attack, and some have been shut down. New marketing agreements of this type are banned by the North American Free Trade Agreement. NAFTA clears the decks for agribusinesses to combine worldwide in giant transnational monopolies, while preventing the world’s atomized and oppressed farmers from uniting in self-defense.

Imagine a law banning collective bargaining by unions, and you’ll have some idea of the effect NAFTA has on farmers.

Hostile governments

Governments in Canada could ignore the NAFTA provisions, citing the need for food products to conform to local environmental and health regulations. But their policies cater to transnational corporations and are hostile to smaller family-based farms.

“The Ontario government wants land and farming to be in a few strong hands,” Rae MacIntyre comments. Leafing through government documents, he reads out some examples of this attitude:

- A government leader says, “I remain committed to working with industry leaders.” Rae’s comment: “That means Cargill.”
- “\$1.5 billion in aid to livestock producers.” Farmers will not see a penny of that, he says. This aid goes only to farms that have been profitable for three years running, which excludes almost all family farms.

Rae points to other government programs that exclude farmers with off-farm income — which again cuts out the vast majority who need help the most.

He recalls the statement of Ontario Deputy Agriculture Minister Frank Ingratta in 2004 that “We could produce all the product we need from 10,000 large highly mechanized farms” rather than

the present 57,000. Despite Ingratta's later denial, many farmers believe that the "10,000 farms" goal corresponds to current government policy.

Official programs with praiseworthy goals are blocked by bureaucratic methods. Several of the Grey County farmers express frustration with government staffers who are long on talk and promises but unwilling to take action. Meanwhile, the government has been creative in thinking up new regulations that make farming more difficult and shift inspection and other costs onto the farmers' backs.

NFU program

The Farmers Union proposes an array of measures to help working farmers resist corporate profiteering. Among them:

- Encourage supply management and take initiatives to implement it internationally.
- Establish price supports to guarantee that farmers receive their cost of production.
- Break the monopoly of corporate suppliers of seed, fertilizer, and other farm inputs by funding creation of farmer-owned co-ops.
- Ban corporate farming as well as corporate contracts that dictate where farmers buy inputs and sell their product.
- Provide young people who want to farm with access to the land through community land trusts and land banks; ease the mountain of debt that now prevents sons and daughters from taking over the family farm.

None of this needs to increase the cost of food to consumers, the NFU points out. Farmers receive so little of the food dollar that the cost of increasing their share can be absorbed by corporate processors and retailers without price increases.

Consumer awareness

In recent years, a new ally for working farmers has appeared: the ecologically minded consumer. Many such consumers now visit Grey County as tourists. "Tourists have new tastes," says NFU member Lillian Burgess. "They prefer fresh local food. When buying food, they ask, 'Where was it grown.'"

This new interest in local food has a Third World feel, Burgess says. Impoverished locals have to buy cheap, at the franchised groceries, but "tourists are willing to pay more."

The rise of "food tourism" reflects concerns felt by a growing number of consumers about the impact of corporate methods on food supply:

- Locally grown food is prized by many consumers as fresher, tastier, and healthier; many seek direct contact with the farmer.
- Air-freighting food around the world when it can be grown locally generates damaging and unnecessary carbon emissions that contribute to global warming.

- Agribusiness imposes industrial farming methods that are unhealthy and unsustainable.
- Environmental degradation and the diversion of food to fuel are placing the security of world food supplies in jeopardy, as has been eloquently explained by Fidel Castro and other leaders of the Global South.

World outlook

According to a United Nations report, retail prices for food worldwide in 2007 were 40% higher than in 2006. The price of rice, wheat, and corn doubled. (*Globe and Mail*, March 29) The long-term impact on farmers is uncertain. Those producing grain for the world market may benefit. But farmers buying grain for fodder will pay more. The big winners will be the agribusiness giants. And the big losers are the world's poor — many of them farmers.

The National Farmers Union has been alert to these threats. On May 9, 2006, it wrote the United Nations, noting that the world body's own reports show a decline in the "area of arable and permanent crops" since 2001. Grain stocks are the lowest since 1975. "In five of the last six years," it notes, "our global population ate significantly more grain than farmers produced."

The NFU seeks to develop an international response to this crisis as part of its participation in the international farmers' organization *Vía Campesina* (Farmers' Way).

Local-food initiative

Given the scope of the challenge, the Grey County NFU members' focus on the local-food issue is quite modest. It concedes that for now, local farmers have been driven from mainstream supermarkets and must focus instead on niche markets. But winning the chance to provide consumers with a local-food alternative could be vital for these farmers' survival.

Wayne Roberts, a Toronto-based ecologist active in efforts to promote local food, points out how easily such a transition could begin. "Two simple actions by the Ontario government would transform the situation," he says.

First, "all government-funded institutions could buy local and sustainable food: jails, hospitals, educational institutions, seniors residences, and the like. [The government] would not even have to change a law. Ontario farmers would need five to ten years to catch up with the demand. This is readily doable and cost-effective; it just takes organizing to bring it to the attention of the politicians."

Roberts cites a recent victory in convincing the massive University of Toronto to go over to purchasing local and "sustainable" foods. Such efforts are coordinated through Local Food Plus, which establishes criteria for sustainable food based on positive social and ecological practices.

Roberts's second proposal concerns the right to farm. As things stand, land is available to aspiring farmers only in the form of large farms that sell for hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars. "The provincial government could make land available to those who wish to farm," he says.

The government owns plenty of idle agricultural land, he says. “They could lease it out in small packets for reasonable prices, with special programs to encourage members of minority groups and new immigrants who may wish to grow products favored by their communities and neglected by conventional supermarkets.”

Labor’s stake

The local-food effort is helping to provide farmers with an influential potential ally — the ecological movement. Farmers deserve determined support from the labour movement as well. Working people have a lot to gain from the availability of local-food at grocery stores and from ecologically sound and sustainable agriculture.

It is also a question of solidarity. Working people who are employed need to stand together with farmers, fishers, truckers, and other independent producers who are exploited by the same corporations and face the same enemy.

John Riddell is co-editor of Socialist Voice and a member of Socialist Project.

Socialist Voice #240, April 8, 2008

RCMP Attacks Peaceful Rally at UBC

Students Demand Dropping of Charges and Public Inquiry

The following two press releases were issued by Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, in response to a violent assault and mass arrests by Canada's national police force on a political protest/cultural rally at the university on April 4. Police jailed about 25 students, charging 19 with obstructing a police officer and one with assaulting a police officer. They were released the following day after a lengthy bail process.

SDS is vigorously protesting the police action and has launched a public campaign to defend the arrested students, including a public meeting for Friday, April 11.

For more information on the campaign in the coming days, go to the group's website. Media contacts at SDS are: Steven Klein, UBC student and witness of the arrests, 604-xxx-xxxx; Tristan Markle, Vice President, Administration of Alma Mater Society (student union), 778-xxx-xxxx; Margaret Orłowski, UBC student, 604-xxx-xxxx

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Police Brutality At Knoll Aid

Press Release, April 5, 2008 — Late yesterday, a peaceful celebration in defence of public space at the University of British Columbia (UBC) was violently quashed by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. All the events discussed herein have been either captured by camera or can be corroborated by multiple eyewitness accounts.

On Friday, April 4, UBC students loosely associated with Trek Park and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) held "Knoll Aid 2.0," a musical celebration of public space on campus. Knoll Aid 2.0 was part of a larger campaign against the commercialization of campus, the demolition of the grassy knoll, and the development of a \$40 underground bus-loop. Knoll Aid 2.0 was an overwhelmingly peaceful event and featured local musicians, free food, and three simultaneous petition drives. It was attended by primarily UBC students.

Knoll Aid 2.0 began at noon. At around 8:00/8:30 pm, RCMP and the Fire department arrived at the area known as "Trek Park" (a liberated space near the grassy knoll) because some students had created a small bonfire. Citing a bylaw violation, the RCMP approached one student, Stefanie Ratjen in a rather aggressive manner and began speaking with her. After a dialogue, the contents of which are still unknown, Stefanie was grabbed by an RCMP officer and thrown to the ground, pinned, and handcuffed. Her face was shoved in a puddle of mud while an RCMP officer sat on top of her.

After this uncalled-for act of police aggression, fellow students came to her aid. One musician was immediately arrested for questioning the RCMP officer's treatment of Stefanie. For approximately two hours, students formed a chain to protest RCMP action and several students

attempted to peacefully negotiate the release of Stefanie and the musician (whose name at this point is unknown). During this time, approximately 30 RCMP cars with officers from across metro Vancouver came to UBC. Campus security was also present and threatened to discipline students if they did not cooperate with the RCMP.

Police officers systematically attempted to break the human chain students had formed by pushing, shoving and kicking. RCMP officers randomly arrested any student present at the scene including Bahram Norouzi, who was arrested in the middle of a CTV interview. At around 10:30 p.m., approximately 25 students were arrested and detained. They were brought to a detention center at Main St. and Hastings St. where they presently remain.

This press release would like to draw attention to the conduct of the RCMP. A university is intended for students, not the police. Upon entering student space, the police should have had the decency, at the very least, to deal with students in a respectful and dignified manner. Instead, RCMP officers were highly aggressive and belligerent. RCMP officers committed gross abuses of power by, for example, threatening to release dogs on students and pointing taser guns at students that were already pinned down to the floor. The actions of RCMP officers are testament of police misconduct, if not brutality.

- We demand the release of all students arrested and demand that all charges be dropped.
- Furthermore, we demand an inquiry of the RCMP's actions in relation to this event and the treatment of students.
- Lastly, we demand that UBC administration defends student's rights to a peaceful protest.

To repeat, this was a peaceful celebration/concert in defence of public space. The RCMP had no right to violently quash a peaceful student protest.

Signed,

Trek Park for the People
Students for a Democratic Society
Student Environment Center
Social Justice Center

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Musical Concert Against Commercial Development at UBC Ends in Mass Arrests; Students Demand Public Inquiry

Press Release: April 5, 2008 — UBC students are calling for a public inquiry into the behaviour of the RCMP and UBC Campus Security following mass arrests at a musical concert against commercial development at the university. The event, KnollAid 2.0, was meant to be an awareness-raising musical concert against the planned construction of a poorly planned underground bus loop and the commercialization of the centre of campus.

Students have been outraged at the lack of meaningful consultation and undemocratic actions of the UBC administration in developing this space. The focus of the musical concert was the grassy knoll, a centre of social life at UBC that is slated for destruction by the administration.

As the concert wound down, Campus Security, the RCMP, and the Fire Department arrived and successfully put out a bonfire that had been created by some of the concertgoers. In the process, Campus Security and the RCMP arrested two individuals for allegedly interfering with the firefighters. Students peacefully protested what they saw as the wrongful arrest of one of the individuals by locking arms with her and sitting down. They then convinced the police officer to remove her handcuffs and she was released.

Immediately after, students surrounded the police cruiser and attempted to convince the police officer to release the other student who was being detained.

Over the course of the next two hours, well after the original situation with the bonfire was under control, over 18 police vehicles and 30 police officers descended on UBC campus. They included members of the Vancouver Police Department, Richmond RCMP, and Transit Police. These reinforcements verbally threatened to use police dogs and tasers to disperse the protestors.

Around midnight, they descended upon the protestors peacefully protesting in front of the police cruiser. They indiscriminately arrested many bystanders, including an individual who stumbled upon the scene while biking home. They trained tasers on students who were already being forced into the ground by multiple police officers. One individual was handcuffed and detained immediately after giving an interview with CBC news. Observers were shocked at the confrontational attitude and brutal tactics of the police.

Since then, the RCMP has attempted to cover up its behaviour by distorting the timeline of events and outright lying. RCMP spokespeople are claiming that police backup was called because they were unable to put out the bonfire. In fact, the additional RCMP detachments were called well after the original situation was under control.

They are claiming only one individual was arrested while they were putting out the bonfire. In fact, two individuals were arrested but one was released.

They are claiming that the situation was dangerous until the additional officers came and made the mass arrests. In fact, the RCMP officers on the scene stood around and exchanged friendly chatter with students while they waited for two hours for reinforcements.

They are claiming that they issued multiple verbal warnings. In fact, not a single warning was issued in the two hours that the RCMP waited for reinforcements. Immediately before the arrests, they asked a student to issue a verbal warning before issuing one themselves.

Only a public inquiry can establish why the RCMP is distorting the events of April 4th in this manner.

Students are demanding that the UBC administration initiate an internal inquiry into the behaviour of Campus Security. At the concert, many witnessed them using force while assisting

in the arrest of the two students. When witnesses asked them about it afterwards, the Campus Security officers denied any involvement. Campus Security has a long history of harassing and intimidating students peacefully protesting the commercialization of campus.

Socialist Voice #241, April 18, 2008

The Ontario Mining Act, Political Prisoners and the Right to Say “NO”

Support is growing for Robert Lovelace of the Ardoch Algonquins, jailed for opposing uranium mining on their land in eastern Ontario, and for the six members of the Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug (KI) First Nation, jailed for opposing platinum and uranium exploration on their traditional lands in northwestern Ontario.

- *On April 9, more than 400 people turned out for a Toronto rally in support of Lovelace and the KI 6. The event was sponsored by 22 organizations, including 12 indigenous groups, the Toronto and York Region Labour Council, the Council of Canadians and the Canadian Federation of Students.*
- *Four days later, 200 attended a fund-raising event organized by the Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid that raised \$2,000 for Lovelace and other Ardoch Algonquin victims. A highpoint of the evening was the reading of a statement of support for Lovelace and the KI 6 from a grassroots organization in Palestine.*
- *On April 14-15, the Executive of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs held a 24-hour fast in Vancouver to show their outrage at the arrest of members of the KI band council.*
- *The Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs cancelled a meeting with the Manitoba Cabinet as a protest against the actions taken by Ontario against KI.*

The article below, written by Joan Kuyek of Mining Watch Canada, provides important background on these cases and the attitude of the Ontario government towards mining profiteers, community integrity, and indigenous rights. It is reprinted in Socialist Voice with permission from The Bullet, a Socialist Project newsletter.

KI is urging supporters of these political prisoners to contribute the Ardoch defense fund. Cheques payable to “Chris Reid In Trust for Ardoch Algonquin First Nation” should be mailed to: Christopher M. Reid, Barrister & Solicitor.

The Ontario Mining Act, Political Prisoners and the Right to Say “NO”

By Joan Kuyek

In February 2008, the leadership of the Ardoch Algonquins were sentenced for contempt because of their unwavering opposition to uranium exploration on their traditional territory in eastern Ontario. Bob Lovelace, a university professor from Queen’s University and an Ardoch spokesperson, was sentenced to six months detention and fined \$25,000 (with further costs against himself and other community members pending). Chief Paula Sherman was fined \$15,000. Leaders of the Shabot Obaadjiwan First Nation also face contempt charges.

On March 17th, the Chief and five members of the Council from Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug (KI) in far northern Ontario were sentenced to six months in jail for their peaceful opposition to drilling for platinum on their traditional lands. Charges against former KI spokesperson John Cutfeet will be heard on May 5. The Aboriginal leaders say it is their responsibility to protect their lands from drilling.

Non-native property owners in southern Ontario have also been charged with contempt. They are protecting their own lands from mineral staking, as well as supporting the indigenous struggle. On March 18th, the Superior Court in Kingston dismissed charges against three of them, including Frank Morrison, but the next day, six other “settlers” were charged with contempt just for being in the vicinity of the mine site. Their charges have not yet been heard.

Why is there a growing outcry?

There is a growing outcry across Ontario, demanding an end to mining’s privileged access to land, and the right of affected peoples and communities to be able to say “no” to mineral exploration and mining development. A loose collaboration of groups from the Aboriginal, environmental, social justice, anti-poverty, development and human rights communities have come together to demand that the Ontario *Mining Act* be changed. There are weekly rallies and protests across the province.

At least 11 other First Nations in northern Ontario have called for a halt to staking and drilling on their traditional territories;

Twelve municipalities and 2 counties in southern Ontario have supported requests for a moratorium on uranium exploration and mining in the Ottawa River Watershed.

The Ottawa City Council passed a resolution on February 27, 2008 petitioning the Province of Ontario and Premier Dalton McGuinty to initiate an immediate moratorium on uranium mineral prospecting, exploration and mining in Eastern Ontario and the Ottawa River watershed until such a time that all environmental and health issues related to uranium mining and native land claims are resolved. The City also asked Ontario to undertake an immediate comprehensive public review of the *Mining Act*.

No less a voice than the Environmental Commissioner of Ontario (ECO) called for reform of the *Mining Act* in his December 2007 report.

The ECO stated, “[t]he existing regulatory structure treats public land as freely open to mineral exploration. The consideration of other interests, such as protection of ecological values, is reactionary, and the question of whether mineral development may be inappropriate is not answered upfront. Instead it is assumed that mineral development is appropriate almost everywhere and that it is the “best” use of Crown land in almost all circumstances.”

What is Free Entry?

The free entry system is a method of granting mineral rights and giving the mining industry free access to lands in its search of minerals. It is the system of mineral tenure in place throughout

Canada with the exception of Alberta. Ontario's *Mining Act* allows exploration activities, including felling trees, blasting and drilling, trenching and the construction of temporary roads and shelters, without any public consultation or environmental assessment. When and if an economically viable mineral deposit is found, there is no effective bar to the development of a mine.

Free entry is an old European concept based on the right to minerals regardless of who owns the surface rights. The *Mining Act* of Ontario was passed in 1873 and was developed at a time when picks and shovels were used for mining. Technology has changed dramatically over the years, but the system has not. It gives individuals and mining companies the exclusive right to Crown-owned mineral substances from the surface of a mineral claim downwards.

There are three primary rights associated with the system of free entry:

- The right of entry and access on the majority of land
- The right to locate and have a claim recorded without consulting land users;
- The right to acquire a mining lease with no discretion on the part of the Crown.

The *Mining Act* free entry system fails to recognize First Nations on a nation-to-nation basis and as treaty partners and violates First Nation constitutional rights to consultation and accommodation prior to government decisions being made that might affect their interests.

What are some of the demands?

The collaboration of groups that have come together to end Free Entry and secure justice for the political prisoners are demanding that the provincial government:

- Stop allowing the staking of claims and mining leases, and/or exploration that violates constitutionally protected Aboriginal rights, including the right to consultation and accommodation;
- Comprehensively reform the *Mining Act* (including the free entry system) in consultation with Aboriginal peoples and with other affected stakeholders to reconcile differing land values prior to exploration and prospecting, ensure the protection of the natural environment, incorporate the right of affected peoples to say "no" to mineral exploration and development, and recognize Aboriginal and treaty rights. Replace it with a permit system.
- Undertake an independent and effective environmental assessment of each stage of mineral activity. Include an assessment of the cumulative impacts of proposed exploration and mining projects. Incorporate public participation and provide funding to intervenors to make this effective.
- Enter into good faith negotiations with the KI and Algonquin peoples to ensure their rights are fully respected and that the land in dispute is withdrawn from staking.

- Grant an amnesty for any persons charged with contempt in these case, and release Lovelace, and the KI6 from jail.

What are the underlying economic issues?

When the mineral industry talks about “sustainable mining,” they neglect to tell us that

- most mines last less than 15 years,
- mining is in fact a waste management industry, leaving behind as much as 30 tonnes of waste rock and toxic tailings for every ounce of gold it extracts, which will have to be monitored and managed forever
- the local community may get some jobs and contracts from the mine, the government may get something in taxes, but the profits will overwhelmingly flow to major shareholders of the company
- Local communities bear the brunt of the environmental and health costs during and after the mine, and are often ill equipped to protect their interests.

Although it may create short-term capital infusion for desperate communities, mining does not provide a sustainable base for the development of local economies. The government investments that are required to open new mines and keep mines operating, would be better spent on remediation and closure, on sustainable, closed-loop and import-substitution economic development for remote communities, on research and support for metals recycling, and on caring for the health concerns of affected residents.

Where mining does take place, it must be made to better serve the development needs for an entire region, through effective land use planning and decent resource rents.

At present, the greatest government investment in communities where mining is declining is in keeping the mining sector going through subsidies; through finding a new ore body; and/or through re-mining tailings and waste rock etc. Once a region commits to one mine, it is committing to mining as long as ore can be found. The mining industry advocates for planning policies that “sterilize” areas of significant mineral potential from development other than mining. In the long run, as the environment becomes more polluted, everyone comes out worse.

The junior mining industry which does most of the exploration, is, in fact, only mining investors, and provides more jobs and economic stimulation on Bay Street than it does in the north. Most rich deposits have already been depleted; the cost of developing new mines is spiralling out of control; and credit is very hard to find. The only companies able to build new mines now are large multi-nationals that have been able to benefit from high commodity prices, and have cash to burn. Increasingly, they are using their wealth in mergers and acquisitions.

This is not a pretty picture, and is likely to get worse.

Related reading

- *Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug*

- *Ardoch Algonquin First Nation*
- *Free the KI6*
- *Ontario Jails First Nation Leaders; KI Pledges to Continue the Struggle, Socialist Voice, March 21, 2008*
- *Kitchenuhmaykoosib People Continue the Fight for Their Land, Climate and Capitalism, March 20, 2008*
- *Land Rights Not Mining Rights: Free Robert Lovelace and the KI 6, Climate and Capitalism, April 2, 2008*
- *Why Algonquin First Nations Are Blocking Uranium Exploration in Ontario, Climate and Capitalism, October 3, 2007*
- *Native Leader Serving Six Months for Opposing Mine, Dominion Paper, March 16, 2008*

Socialist Voice #242, April 25, 2008

The Foundation of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV)

By Carlos Torchia

Carlos Torchia is a member of the Venezuela We Are With You Coalition and the New Socialist Group.

During the last 15 years the Venezuelan people have greatly contributed to the struggle against capitalism and for a just society.

Firstly, the Bolivarian revolution has shown to the people of the world that it is possible to challenge neoliberalism, which has devastated the lives of millions not only in the Third World but also in the countries of the centre, and to successfully confront imperialism

Secondly, the Bolivarian revolution has restored the idea that socialism is needed to replace savage capitalism, which is threatening to annihilate humankind. The project “Socialism for the 21st Century” is beginning to resonate not only in Venezuela and Latin America but everywhere that people face exploitation, hunger and environmental degradation. The Venezuelan revolution has challenged the reactionary Margaret Thatcher’s slogan TINA (There Is No Alternative – to capitalism).

Thirdly, the foundation of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) should be a key instrument not only for the Venezuelan revolution but also an asset for all of us. Why?

1. The idea of a revolutionary party has been discredited by the negative experience of the Communist parties in building the so-called “real socialism” or state socialism in the former USSR. Non-democratic and bureaucratic socialism was built upon the image and likeness of the party. On the other hand we have witnessed the bankruptcy of the Social Democratic parties, which have renounced the idea of socialism, embracing neoliberalism. The victory of the socialist revolution in Venezuela and other countries needs the presence of a democratic revolutionary party, which should not substitute for the initiative of the people but rather accompany it in building the new society. The foundation of the PSUV is intended as a step in this direction.
2. The foundation Congress of the PSUV seems to have taken into account the experience of the Worker’s Party of Brazil (PT), which became a loose organization formed of various factions, which were in fact parties within the party. In the PT, the party leadership was divorced from its militants and the Brazilian people and had a free hand to move the party to the right, accepting neoliberalism as the only game in town. This type of party cannot be the instrument to help the masses to overthrow capitalism.
3. The anti neoliberal rebellions in Latin America, in Argentina in 2000-2002, and in Bolivia 2002 and 2005, scored formidable victories over the ruling classes, victories that

paralysed their countries and expelled several presidents from office. Yet in the end the social movements were unable to unify all the segmented struggles in one national alternative to overthrow the rule of the capitalist class. This unifying tool, the revolutionary party of the oppressed, was absent in the case of the anti-neoliberal rebellions in Argentina and Bolivia.

The foundation congress of the PSUV

The foundation of the PSUV is a significant step in the task of giving a unified direction to the Venezuelan people in the struggle to resolve the contradiction between capitalism and socialism. That is why a number of different socialist tendencies decided to join the new party.

President Hugo Chávez sensing this urgency, proclaimed: “The PSUV is born, destined to make history.” Assessing the Congress outcome, Chávez said that the foundation of the Party signifies a “revolution within the revolution... [The party] fundamental role is to be...the biggest guarantee of [the revolution’s] permanence”.^[1]

President Chávez called for the creation of the party on December 15, 2006, to unify the revolutionary forces in the country and to integrate in one body the heterogeneous electoral movement that had supported him from the beginning. From April to June 2007, some 5.7 million Venezuelans responded to Chávez’s call to support this party. This was an astonishing development in a country that had no tradition of popular political participation in mass parties, a country in which for 50 years the masses had been excluded from politics that was only the privilege of the elites. This massive response constituted a great achievement of the Bolivarian revolution, at time when in the so-called western democracies people reject participation in party politics.

Cells of 300 or more people formed a local battalion. Seven to 12 battalions in a district came together to form socialist circumscriptions or districts (or communes). From these districts 1,674 delegates to the founding congress were elected.

It can be said that the party was being founded *from below*, even though the initial call was issued *from above*.

The congress sessions were held from January to March 2008. There was a democratic and tense exchange in the discussion of key documents such as the declaration of principles, program and statutes. The congress was a battleground as delegates representing grass roots organizations seeking to deepen the process confronted the bureaucratic and right-wing sectors seeking to put a brake to the revolution. In the end these right-wing forces suffered a setback.

The congress approved a clear *anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist platform*. The right-wing delegates had wanted to eliminate the anti-capitalist stance.

The program discussed by the congress affirmed that

“the aim is to move towards a communal state socialism, with the strategic objective of totally neutralizing the law of value within the functioning of the economy... [The

objective] is to end poverty, giving power to the poor... the people... [to] build a government based on Councils of Popular Power, where workers, peasants, students and popular masses are direct protagonists in the exercising of political power... [promoting] democracy and an assembly-based culture within the party and in all spheres where it is present (communities, work fronts, areas of study, activity etc.)... [to] struggle to make self-government a reality [in] cities, communal councils and communes as the basic political units..."[2]

Tensions appeared also with regard to democratic participation, transparency and the way the congress was conducted, specifically in regard of the election of the leadership. Some delegates said that it was necessary to "profoundly revise the internal processes that during the founding congress have unfolded..."[3]

A heated discussion was also held on the subject of corruption and bureaucracy. In this respect a strong paragraph was included in the declaration of principles: "The inefficiency in the exercise of public power, bureaucratism, the low level of participation of the people in the control and management of government, corruption and widening gap between the people and government, threaten to undermine the trust that the people have placed in the Bolivarian revolution."

According to General Alberto Muller Rojas, a close ally of President Chávez and one of the party vice-presidents, bureaucratism is the most significant enemy of the revolution, even more dangerous than the imperialist and right wing threats, because tends to create a new class that makes party life (and society) much more rigid. This was exactly what happened in the former USSR.

PSUV Leadership

The great diversity of the party was reflected in the composition of the elected leadership: afro-descendants, indigenous, whites, and youth with a variety of different political positions. The leadership, which was elected for a one-year term, consists mainly of cadres that supported President Chávez from the beginning of the revolutionary process. The elected leadership represents a happy medium between the most radical delegates and the moderate ones. Hugo Chávez was elected president of the PSUV.

The party is rich in currents and tendencies, although they do not constitute factions. (This should mean that all of its militants are bound to the party's decisions.) In the party Marxist, Christian and American indigenous cosmovisions coexist.

The tasks ahead for the PSUV

According to General Muller Rojas, the main task is to organize the party territorially either on the basis of radical geography, which considers a special territorial division that takes into consideration cultural and economic plurality in regions, or following the traditional Venezuelan state territorial division. In any case the party must have a presence in the whole Venezuelan territory.

Second, the PSUV must build an alliance with the Patriotic Pole, even though many of its members are militants of the PSUV. The Patriotic Pole groups political organizations that have their own history, traditions and space, such as the Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV) Fatherland for All (PPT) and the People's Electoral Movement (MEP). According to General Muller Rojas, it is necessary to forge an alliance between the PSUV and the Patriotic Pole in order to push ahead the socialist transformation of Venezuela.[4]

Third, the relationship between Chávez's government and the party is symbiotic. The party is not merely the external support to the Bolivarian government. The party should be the promoter, the driving force of the revolution, in the understanding that the government does not dictate what to do to the party, but rather both government and party should work together and with the social movements.

Fourth, The PSUV should reduce the role of bureaucracy and maximize the role of ad-hoc structures. The political cadres of the PSUV must commit themselves more to "ad-hoc-cracy" than to bureaucracy, when they work supporting governmental plans in health, education or the economic field.

In sum, after the foundation congress PSUV's militants have a chance to build a political party to help the people make irreversible the transition to socialism in Venezuela. This will require breaking the capitalist bureaucratic state and replacing it with the communal state based on people's power, and resisting imperialist intervention. The PSUV's cadres could make a great contribution in restoring the credibility of the concept of a revolutionary party in the eyes of the oppressed of the planet. If the PSUV succeeds in these goals it should be an invaluable contribution of Venezuelan people to the struggle for socialism in the planet.

Pending issues and questions

1. Given the fact, that as General Muller Rojas stated, a party cannot be built in one year, it is understandable that President Chávez has been elected president of the PSUV. However, in the future this situation should change.
2. The same cautionary note would apply regarding the power that the congress gave to President Chávez to appoint five vice-president to the party's leadership (among them General Muller Rojas)
3. It should be clearly understood that the PSUV is not the government and that the party's role should be "the political controller of the objectives of the government and ... keep a watch over it to ensure these objectives are carried out," as the programmatic platform proposed.
4. Five of 15 elected members of the executive committee are women. Will further progress be made in integrating women into the leadership of the party at all levels?
5. What about the presence of the organized working class in the congress?

6. Are capitalist elements still being admitted as members of the party? Are there capitalist elements in the party's leadership?

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Food Crisis (Part One): 'The greatest demonstration of the historical failure of the capitalist model'

By Ian Angus

“If the government cannot lower the cost of living it simply has to leave. If the police and UN troops want to shoot at us, that’s OK, because in the end, if we are not killed by bullets, we’ll die of hunger.” — *A demonstrator in Port-au-Prince, Haiti*

In Haiti, where most people get 22% fewer calories than the minimum needed for good health, some are staving off their hunger pangs by eating “mud biscuits” made by mixing clay and water with a bit of vegetable oil and salt.[1]

Meanwhile, in Canada, the federal government is currently paying \$225 for each pig killed in a mass cull of breeding swine, as part of a plan to reduce hog production. Hog farmers, squeezed by low hog prices and high feed costs, have responded so enthusiastically that the kill will likely use up all the allocated funds before the program ends in September.

Some of the slaughtered hogs may be given to local Food Banks, but most will be destroyed or made into pet food. None will go to Haiti.

This is the brutal world of capitalist agriculture — a world where some people destroy food because prices are too low, and others literally eat dirt because food prices are too high.

Record prices for staple foods

We are in the midst of an unprecedented worldwide food price inflation that has driven prices to their highest levels in decades. The increases affect most kinds of food, but in particular the most important staples — wheat, corn, and rice.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization says that between March 2007 and March 2008 prices of cereals increased 88%, oils and fats 106%, and dairy 48%. The FAO food price index as a whole rose 57% in one year — and most of the increase occurred in the past few months.

Another source, the World Bank, says that that in the 36 months ending February 2008, global wheat prices rose 181% and overall global food prices increased by 83%. The Bank expects most food prices to remain well above 2004 levels until at least 2015.

The most popular grade of Thailand rice sold for \$198 a tonne five years ago and \$323 a tonne a year ago. On April 24, the price hit \$1,000.

Increases are even greater on local markets — in Haiti, the market price of a 50 kilo bag of rice doubled in *one week* at the end of March.

These increases are catastrophic for the 2.6 billion people around the world who live on less than US\$2 a day and spend 60% to 80% of their incomes on food. Hundreds of millions cannot afford to eat.

This month, the hungry fought back.

Taking to the streets

In Haiti, on April 3, demonstrators in the southern city of Les Cayes built barricades, stopped trucks carrying rice and distributed the food, and tried to burn a United Nations compound. The protests quickly spread to the capital, Port-au-Prince, where thousands marched on the presidential palace, chanting “We are hungry!” Many called for the withdrawal of UN troops and the return of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the exiled president whose government was overthrown by foreign powers in 2004.

President René Préval, who initially said nothing could be done, has announced a 16% cut in the wholesale price of rice. This is at best a stop-gap measure, since the reduction is for one month only, and retailers are not obligated to cut their prices.

The actions in Haiti paralleled similar protests by hungry people in more than twenty other countries.

- In Burkino Faso, a two-day general strike by unions and shopkeepers demanded “significant and effective” reductions in the price of rice and other staple foods.
- In Bangladesh, over 20,000 workers from textile factories in Fatullah went on strike to demand lower prices and higher wages. They hurled bricks and stones at police, who fired tear gas into the crowd.
- The Egyptian government sent thousands of troops into the Mahalla textile complex in the Nile Delta, to prevent a general strike demanding higher wages, an independent union, and lower prices. Two people were killed and over 600 have been jailed.
- In Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, police used tear gas against women who had set up barricades, burned tires and closed major roads. Thousands marched to the President’s home, chanting “We are hungry,” and “Life is too expensive, you are killing us.”
- In Pakistan and Thailand, armed soldiers have been deployed to prevent the poor from seizing food from fields and warehouses.

Similar protests have taken place in Cameroon, Ethiopia, Honduras, Indonesia, Madagascar, Mauritania, Niger, Peru, Philippines, Senegal, Thailand, Uzbekistan, and Zambia. On April 2, the president of the World Bank told a meeting in Washington that there are 33 countries where price hikes could cause social unrest.

A Senior Editor of *Time* magazine warned:

“The idea of the starving masses driven by their desperation to take to the streets and overthrow the ancien regime has seemed impossibly quaint since capitalism triumphed so

decisively in the Cold War.... And yet, the headlines of the past month suggest that skyrocketing food prices are threatening the stability of a growing number of governments around the world. when circumstances render it impossible to feed their hungry children, normally passive citizens can very quickly become militants with nothing to lose.”[2]

What’s Driving Food Inflation?

Since the 1970s, food production has become increasingly globalized and concentrated. A handful of countries dominate the global trade in staple foods. 80% of wheat exports come from six exporters, as does 85% of rice. Three countries produce 70% of exported corn. This leaves the world’s poorest countries, the ones that must import food to survive, at the mercy of economic trends and policies in those few exporting countries. When the global food trade system stops delivering, it’s the poor who pay the price.

For several years, the global trade in staple foods has been heading towards a crisis. Four related trends have slowed production growth and pushed prices up.

The End of the Green Revolution: In the 1960s and 1970s, in an effort to counter peasant discontent in south and southeast Asia, the U.S. poured money and technical support into agricultural development in India and other countries. The “green revolution” — new seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, agricultural techniques and infrastructure — led to spectacular increases in food production, particularly rice. Yield per hectare continued expanding until the 1990s.

Today, it’s not fashionable for governments to help poor people grow food for other poor people, because “the market” is supposed to take care of all problems. *The Economist* reports that “spending on farming as a share of total public spending in developing countries fell by half between 1980 and 2004.”[3] Subsidies and R&D money have dried up, and production growth has stalled.

As a result, in seven of the past eight years the world consumed more grain than it produced, which means that rice was being removed from the inventories that governments and dealers normally hold as insurance against bad harvests. World grain stocks are now at their lowest point ever, leaving very little cushion for bad times.

Climate Change: Scientists say that climate change could cut food production in parts of the world by 50% in the next 12 years. But that isn’t just a matter for the future:

- Australia is normally the world’s second-largest exporter of grain, but a savage multi-year drought has reduced the wheat crop by 60% and rice production has been completely wiped out.
- In Bangladesh in November, one of the strongest cyclones in decades wiped out a million tonnes of rice and severely damaged the wheat crop, making the huge country even more dependent on imported food.

Other examples abound. It's clear that the global climate crisis is already here, and it is affecting food.

Agrofuels: It is now official policy in the U.S., Canada and Europe to convert food into fuel. U.S. vehicles burn enough corn to cover the entire import needs of the poorest 82 countries.[4]

Ethanol and biodiesel are very heavily subsidized, which means, inevitably, that crops like corn (maize) are being diverted out of the food chain and into gas tanks, and that new agricultural investment worldwide is being directed towards palm, soy, canola and other oil-producing plants. The demand for agrofuels increases the prices of those crops directly, and indirectly boosts the price of other grains by encouraging growers to switch to agrofuel.

As Canadian hog producers have found, it also drives up the cost of producing meat, since corn is the main ingredient in North American animal feed.

Oil Prices: The price of food is linked to the price of oil because food can be made into a substitute for oil. But rising oil prices also affect the cost of *producing* food. Fertilizer and pesticides are made from petroleum and natural gas. Gas and diesel fuel are used in planting, harvesting and shipping.[5]

It's been estimated that 80% of the costs of growing corn are fossil fuel costs — so it is no accident that food prices rise when oil prices rise.

* * *

By the end of 2007, reduced investment in third world agriculture, rising oil prices, and climate change meant that production growth was slowing and prices were rising. Good harvests and strong export growth might have staved off a crisis — but that isn't what happened. The trigger was rice, the staple food of three billion people.

Early this year, India announced that it was suspending most rice exports in order to rebuild its reserves. A few weeks later, Vietnam, whose rice crop was hit by a major insect infestation during the harvest, announced a four-month suspension of exports to ensure that enough would be available for its domestic market.

India and Vietnam together normally account for 30% of all rice exports, so their announcements were enough to push the already tight global rice market over the edge. Rice buyers immediately started buying up available stocks, hoarding whatever rice they could get in the expectation of future price increases, and bidding up the price for future crops. Prices soared. By mid-April, news reports described “panic buying” of rice futures on the Chicago Board of Trade, and there were rice shortages even on supermarket shelves in Canada and the U.S.

Why the rebellion?

There have been food price spikes before. Indeed, if we take inflation into account, global prices for staple foods were higher in the 1970s than they are today. So why has *this* inflationary explosion provoked mass protests around the world?

The answer is that since the 1970s the richest countries in the world, aided by the international agencies they control, have systematically undermined the poorest countries' ability to feed their populations and protect themselves in a crisis like this.

Haiti is a powerful and appalling example.

Rice has been grown in Haiti for centuries, and until twenty years ago Haitian farmers produced about 170,000 tonnes of rice a year, enough to cover 95% of domestic consumption. Rice farmers received no government subsidies, but, as in every other rice-producing country at the time, their access to local markets was protected by import tariffs.

In 1995, as a condition of providing a desperately needed loan, the International Monetary Fund required Haiti to cut its tariff on imported rice from 35% to 3%, the lowest in the Caribbean. The result was a massive influx of U.S. rice that sold for half the price of Haitian-grown rice. Thousands of rice farmers lost their lands and livelihoods, and today three-quarters of the rice eaten in Haiti comes from the U.S.[6]

U.S. rice didn't take over the Haitian market because it tastes better, or because U.S. rice growers are more efficient. *It won out because rice exports are heavily subsidized by the U.S. government.* In 2003, U.S. rice growers received \$1.7 billion in government subsidies, an average of \$232 per hectare of rice grown.[7] That money, most of which went to a handful of very large landowners and agribusiness corporations, allowed U.S. exporters to sell rice at 30% to 50% below their real production costs.

In short, Haiti was forced to abandon government protection of domestic agriculture — and the U.S. then used *its* government protection schemes to take over the market.

There have been many variations on this theme, with rich countries of the north imposing “liberalization” policies on poor and debt-ridden southern countries and then taking advantage of that liberalization to capture the market. Government subsidies account for 30% of farm revenue in the world's 30 richest countries, a total of US\$280 billion a year,[8] an unbeatable advantage in a “free” market where the rich write the rules.

The global food trade game is rigged, and the poor have been left with reduced crops and no protections.

In addition, for several decades the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have refused to advance loans to poor countries unless they agree to “Structural Adjustment Programs” (SAP) that require the loan recipients to devalue their currencies, cut taxes, privatize utilities, and reduce or eliminate support programs for farmers.

All this was done with the promise that the market would produce economic growth and prosperity — instead, poverty increased and support for agriculture was eliminated.

“The investment in improved agricultural input packages and extension support tapered and eventually disappeared in most rural areas of Africa under SAP. Concern for boosting smallholders' productivity was abandoned. Not only were governments rolled

back, foreign aid to agriculture dwindled. World Bank funding for agriculture itself declined markedly from 32% of total lending in 1976-8 to 11.7% in 1997-9.”[9]

During previous waves of food price inflation, the poor often had at least some access to food they grew themselves, or to food that was grown locally and available at locally set prices. Today, in many countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, that’s just not possible. Global markets now determine local prices — and often the only food available must be imported from far away.

* * *

Food is not just another commodity — it is absolutely essential for human survival. The very least that humanity should expect from any government or social system is that it try to prevent starvation — and above all that it not promote policies that deny food to hungry people.

That’s why Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez was absolutely correct on April 24, to describe the food crisis as “the greatest demonstration of the historical failure of the capitalist model.”

What needs to be done to end this crisis, and to ensure that doesn’t happen again?

Part Two of this article will examine those questions.

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