

One million farmers protest in Europe

by Marcia Merry

On April 25 more than 1 million farmers and supporters were on the streets in the 12 member nations of the European Community (EC) to force the EC officials meeting in Brussels to back down on their stated intention of imposing more farm price cuts, output reductions, and farm income losses through acquiescence to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). These mass protest demonstrations are unprecedented in size and effect.

As of 5:30 a.m. on April 27, the farmers had won a victory of sorts in the current round of conflict with Brussels: The EC Agriculture Commission ended its "Marathon" talks on farm policy, announcing what is in effect a farm price freeze. Nominally, there is to be a 3% decrease in the price of grain, but this will be offset by at least 2.7% by other measures modifying how other EC regulations are applied.

This infamous EC annual farm policy conference is called the "Marathon" meeting, because when member nation agriculture ministers gather each spring, they meet round-the-clock, non-stop until there is an agreement on price levels for the year. But this year, when they met in early April, it was a bust, and had to be re-scheduled for April 25. EC Agriculture Commissioner Ray "the Axe" MacSharry, from Ireland, proposed sweeping price cuts, but the heat on the member nation agriculture ministers was so great from their farmers at home, that only France and Britain were prepared to accede to MacSharry's austerity demands.

Then, in the final countdown to the re-scheduled meeting, farm protest actions were staged all over Europe. Most of the key highways in all EC countries were blocked; airports and railways, and border crossings were shut down. There were demonstrations in hundreds of city centers.

In Milan, 5,000-6,000 farmers and supporters snaked through the old city streets near the Cathedral Square.

In Bonn, tractorcades drove to the steps of the embassies of each of the EC member nations, and the U.S. embassy. Farmer delegations went into the offices of West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and of Agriculture Minister Kiechle, and presented emergency policy resolutions to their staff members.

German farmers singled out the British embassy for a special demonstration, because Margaret Thatcher's agriculture minister has consistently demanded that EC grain growers be penalized and taxed for having "overproduced" grain last year, by this year receiving lower prices for their grain.

The British officials also favor continued milk output restrictions.

Altogether, there were an estimated 200,000 farmers demonstrating in West Germany alone. This amounts to every third farmer (counting part-time farmers) joining the protest actions. Some 50,000 tractors were involved in the German demonstrations.

As a direct result of this outpouring of revolt against the EC policies, officials of the ruling German Christian Democratic Union called an emergency session of the parliament on April 25 to discuss the situation. Speaker after speaker condemned farm price cuts, and supported Kiechle's opposition to MacSharry.

"European farmers are fighting for their very survival," said the president of the German Farmers' Union, Wolfgang Heeremann, in his address to the Bonn farmers' rally. He demanded that the EC nations' agriculture ministers "show strength" against MacSharry and the EC Agriculture Commission, as well as against the U.S. and Australian demands for low world farm prices through the GATT.

Heeremann said that the price decreases proposed by the EC Agriculture Commission were a "provocation," and stood in disregard of the European Parliament in Strasbourg that had opposed such price cuts for farmers.

The main slogans at this Bonn rally were, "Parity Prices . . . For the Defense of Our Dignity," and "International Free Trade Is an Absurdity—The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Poorer!"

Farm income dropped 30%

Since 1985, when the financial pressure on EC farmers began to come down from the Brussels EC officials, European farmers have suffered at least a 30% drop in income. Prices for their output have declined, and their costs have gone up. In addition, EC restrictions, in the name of protecting the environment and "preventing food surpluses," have increased dramatically.

A particularly hated EC program is the milk reduction plan, in which every dairy farm has a quota for how much milk it is permitted to send to market. If the farmer tries to produce and market more, he or she is hit with a stiff fine. Now there are needless milk shortages in regions of Western Europe. And dairy farmers don't have the cash flow to service their debt and remain in operation.

Judging by the venality of the EC Agriculture Commission, whose officials are following an austerity blueprint authored by the Trilateral Commission in 1985 called "Restructuring Agriculture," the battle over agriculture policy is not over yet. Even one of the most tradition-bound groups of farmers in the world, the wine grape growers, are preparing for action. The organizers of a group called the Organization of Protesting Wine Growers in West Germany, were bowled over when at its first public meeting, 800 farmers streamed into the hall.