

# Farmers send milk to Iraqi children

by Marcia Merry

On Oct. 1, a group of U.S. dairy farmers in eight states announced a protest action against Washington's farm and food policies, based on the principle of how "David slew Goliath." The 20 farmers (from Wisconsin, New York, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Ohio, the Dakotas, and Michigan) announced that they had mobilized an initial shipment of dried milk powder to go to the starving children in Iraq, as an action intended both to relieve suffering there, and to dramatize the immorality of the Washington policies that allow farmers to be bankrupted while millions of people are going hungry. During October, the group intends to bring their case to the United Nations as well as to the attention of Congress.

The farmers' donated shipment will be about 4,400 pounds of nonfat milk powder, shipped via Jordan to Baghdad. The farmers are working through a Milk Relief Fund set up by the Chaldean Catholic Church of Iraq, which is affiliated with the Vatican. The relief effort is being facilitated by the Committee to Save the Children in Iraq. The initial shipment was booked with pledges by the participating farmers to donate portions of their raw milk sales receipts, or outright donations.

The shipment is relatively small—enough to make about 5,500 gallons of reconstituted milk, that will provide 120 children with a daily milk ration for a year. But the action throws into sharp relief the stupidity of the food policy now in force in the United States.

## The 'supply and demand' fraud

The Bush administration backs the practice of the food cartel mega-companies of grossly underpaying farmers for their output. Last year over 30,000 farms went out of operation, most of them forced to shut down by the low prices, high debts, and the lack of supplementary off-farm jobs. Over 75% of family farms now rely on family members having off-farm incomes to continue running the farm at a loss.

Dairy farmers are getting little more than \$11 for 100 pounds of their milk (about 12 gallons), when a fair parity price would be around \$26. The federal floor price is \$10.10 per hundredweight (cwt). The Bush administration has beaten back the repeated feeble attempts by Congress to raise the floor price by a couple of dollars. The administration maintains that milk prices will rise by the rules of "supply and demand" when enough farms go under.

Instead of opposing this lunacy, the Democrats have pro-

posed bills that would implement "supply management" and coerce farmers to produce less. Over the 1980s there were several such measures, unprecedented in U.S. history—a paid "diversion" program, in which farmers were induced to sign up to receive \$10.00 per cwt of milk *not produced* for 15 months. Next, there was the Dairy Herd Termination program, which paid farmers to slaughter their milk herds, and not resume dairying for five years.

Another variant of supply-demand lunacy is the bill from Wisconsin Rep. Steven Gunderson (R) that would put a cap on what the federal government can acquire on the market for food distribution to the needy, and take the "savings" from that to pay farmers to produce less!

The action of the dairy farmers to feed the hungry in Iraq gives an example of how farm and food policy should be formulated. In reality, there is way too little high-quality food being produced in the United States and elsewhere. Annual milk powder production in the United States has declined from 630,000 metric tons in 1985, to 444,000 in 1988, and last year, only about 330,000 tons.

What is required is the mandating of parity prices to farmers, and anti-trust action against the price-rigging cartel companies.

## Appeal to American farmers

The farmers conducting the milk mobilization for Iraq are focusing on these problems, and are advising their fellow farmers not to fall into demoralization and anarchy. In the statement that they circulated nationally, "Call to American Dairy Farmers," they state in part:

"Today, many dairy farmers are talking about a national 'milk strike,' to withhold, or 'dump,' milk, to try to force better prices. Farmers simply cannot survive with income at 1978 levels, and costs at 1991 levels. As independent farmers go out, more and more of food production falls under the control of giant multi-national food monopolies.

"The farmer is told the *big lie* about 'surplus,' to justify artificially low prices, while there is hunger here in America, and outright starvation and genocide going on all over the world. *The most extreme example today is Iraq*, where health officials estimate that at least 500 children under five years old die *every day*, for lack of food and medicine due to the U.N. sanctions.

"Yet independent dairy farmers are a tiny minority, and can never *by ourselves* defeat the combined power of the food monopolies and the anti-farmer lobby in government.

"Therefore, we need a way to dramatize the fact that *the world needs to keep the independent U.S. dairy farmer in business*. We need a way to mobilize the urban poor, and the poorer nations of the world, behind the cause of saving and strengthening the U.S. independent family farm system."

Instead of pouring milk on the ground, the farmers plan to "remove as much milk as we can from the U.S. market," and at the same time "save the lives of innocent children."