

Agriculture by Rosa Tennenbaum

German farmers form new association

Fed up with the do-nothing attitude of existing farm groups, farmers from both east and west are demanding a change.

The Association of German Farmers (VdL) was brought into being on Dec. 13, 1992, during a meeting of 70 farmers in Grünberg, a town in Hesse, one of the western states on the border of formerly divided Germany. Finally, there is now an organization covering the entire German nation, which is committed to doing something to reverse the crisis that is driving farmers into bankruptcy.

The purpose of the meeting was to shape a program that could mobilize farmers. Participants decided that since they had already come from all corners of the German Federal Republic, it made sense to found a new association, because farmers in the east and west need a new fighting association. The existing farm organizations have gone stale and don't fight for farmers' interests.

A report on the present crisis in agriculture was given by Helmut Eichinger, chairman of the western VdL (founded at the initiative of the Schiller Institute), who criticized not only the politicians who were responsible for the stupid decisions on European Community (EC) agrarian reform and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), but also the special interests, which had made possible incompetent decisions which have thrown agriculture into an acute, life-threatening crisis.

From eastern Germany, Frank Richter, business manager of the VdL in Brandenburg, explained why a new association was needed by farmers in the states that formerly belonged to communist East Germany. "We need an association which recognizes the

situation of small-scale agriculture and turns that knowledge into reality," he said, referring to how the German Peasant Association (DBV) prefers getting into bed with the "former" communists. "Yet," Richter said, "as an association we need to be broad-based, because without that, we are like the DBV, which has moved a long way from its base."

The principal demand of the new VdL draft program was for parity prices for farmers, which would bring agricultural income up to income trends in the industrial sector. Without prices high enough to cover production costs, they all agreed, agriculture would shortly become a dead letter, because no one believes that compensatory payments (proposed by the EC to meliorate the shock to farm income) would long be paid.

The leader of the VdL in the state of Baden Württemberg, Stephan Blasauer, reported that faculty at Hohenheim University in his region were concerned about parity-pricing as a guide for agriculture policy, because the present policy of subsidies and compensatory payments will not hold up even over the medium term.

The key issues discussed were: how the parity price would be calculated, and how it could be politically imposed. These questions remained unresolved.

The second point of the debate on program centered around farm land property settlements in the East, i.e., the breakup of the communist farm collectives. So far only 5% of the reestablished farmers there have reportedly gotten back their property cost-free,

said Günther Seidlitz, chairman of the Elbe-Elster association of the VdL.

A businessman reported that he has personally observed how 90% of the collective farms that were set up under the communists have been officially liquidated because of formal defects and false balance sheets, but these former collectives nonetheless blithely continue to exist. Many are propped up by millions of marks—grants from Bonn or sweetheart contracts from cartel food companies. He denounced this as a huge loophole in the economic order that must be changed quickly. This is seen by the VdL as one of its most important tasks.

Overall, while numerous proposals were made on what the demands in the new program should be, there was unity on one idea: The new organization does *not* want to issue an encyclopedic platform that takes a "position" on every conceivable issue. The German Peasant Association, for example, issued a book so ponderous that no one can find anything in it, and important demands are suffocated amidst hundreds of little details.

The VdL committed itself to limiting proposals to major demands and to fill the vacuum which the DBV had left behind by its retreat from these positions.

The new group also established an executive committee, with three members each from the east and west. The wide experience of the newly elected officeholders reflects a powerful leadership. Helmut Eichinger from Bavaria was elected chairman; he has toured the U.S. farm belt to rally international support for a parity-based food policy. Frank Richter, one of the eastern leaders, also toured the United States in 1992. Josef Kremmeter, a hog farmer from Bavaria, has hosted many foreign farm delegations visiting Germany.