

Dateline Mexico by Cruz del Carmen de Cota

Food consumption plummets in Mexico

More children are dying than being born in some parts of the country, a sure sign of biological holocaust.

The drastic and continued reduction of Mexico's agricultural production over the past six years has resulted in a biological holocaust. The vertical drop in food consumption has led to epidemics of diseases which had formerly been under control or even eradicated.

This tragedy is a consequence of the economic policies begun by President Miguel de la Madrid and continued by Carlos Salinas. Government men boast of their *successes* in pushing crop guarantee prices paid to farmers far below the cost of production, while raising the prices of imported inputs. The other pillar of their "anti-inflation" program, the lowering of real wages through the "Economic Solidarity Pact," has undermined the internal market for food.

The cost per gram of animal-origin protein rose 600% in real terms from 1985 to 1988, as food subsidies were eliminated in compliance with International Monetary Fund conditionalities. A worker earning the minimum wage could only afford 11% as much protein of animal origin as he could in 1988, a study published in the daily *El Financiero*, June 23, calculated. That meant a reduction from 369 grams to 39 grams (a little more than one ounce) per family member per day. The National Consumer Institute reports that daily meat consumption among the poorest 32% of the Mexican population averages 29.7 grams (one ounce), while the "richest" 25.5% average 160.2 grams (5.5 ounces).

Egg consumption averages 25.4 grams daily; milk and dairy products,

91.8 grams. The poor and middle classes are filling their stomachs with more corn tortillas (221.5 grams), double the tortillas eaten by better-off strata.

Medicine has become scarce, due to the high cost of imported ingredients. Mexico has to import 80% of the ingredients of some of the most widely used medicines.

The outcome is the return of epidemics. A recent study by Professors Olivia López Arellano and José Blanco of the Autonomous Metropolitan University reported, "Between 1979 and 1986 there was an impressive rise in morbidity from malaria. In that period malaria went from approximately 30 cases per 100,000 to a bit more than 160 cases per 100,000; the curve goes up most sharply starting in 1982, the year when it began sustained takeoff." The Health and Welfare Secretariat registered 35,000 cases of malaria during the first half of this year, 10,000 more than in the same period of last year. The epidemic is centered in the states of Guerrero, Michoacan, and Oaxaca.

The Metropolitan University researchers note, "The reappearance of dengue fever, considered until recently to have been eradicated, is another grave regression in the population's health indicators. Starting in 1981, when there was an epidemic in Central America, the disease was again detected [in Mexico]. It reached 22,000 cases in 1986, an increase of 36% over 1985." They add, "An increase in incidence of diseases such as amebiasis, gastroenteritis, acute respiratory in-

fections, and pneumonia has been evident since 1973; however, the frankly rising tendency expresses itself in the last six years."

The report concludes that despite the efforts of health centers, Mexico is registering "greater perinatal, infant, and pre-school mortality, reaching 20,000 deaths annually of children under the age of five."

In the poverty-stricken mountains of the north of Puebla state, an epidemic of measles, in a panorama of grave malnutrition and amebiasis, has caused the deaths of 50 infants in the past 20 days. Dr. Maximino Betanzos, chief of epidemiology at Puebla University Hospital, reports: "*The growth rate has inverted; more children are dying than being born.*" Although the Health and Welfare Secretariat tried, in the beginning, to play down the epidemic, on June 22 it had to admit the epidemic was attacking not only Puebla, but had spread to the states of Tamaulipas, Sinaloa, Oaxaca, and Hidalgo, with more than 2,205 cases of measles reported.

However, the "solution" the government is offering to the problem of the population's survival is the one in the new Federal Labor Law, now on its way toward formal approval: Instead of raising the minimum wage to catch up with inflation, it leaves wages up to "the free market of supply and demand" and encourages wages to be based on piece-work. That would leave workers at the mercy of Mexican and multinational sweatshop operators.

Citibank president John Reed, the chief negotiator for the 500 banks holding Mexico's debt, has his own diagnosis of Mexico's problems. Reed prescribes, "Mexico does not need large amounts of money, but rather a psychological push which dilutes the feeling some Mexicans have that they are going through a crisis."