

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

Farm protests rock Europe

Tens of thousands take to the streets after the European Community cut farm prices to prevent "overproduction."

A wave of demonstrations and protest actions of farmers, unprecedented for three decades, is sweeping the European Community (EC), especially Germany, the Netherlands, and Denmark. This has been caused by the repeated actions by the European Community Agriculture Commission in Brussels, to impose hardship on farmers in the name of preventing "overproduction," and of "protecting the environment."

The protests are particularly directed against the latest EC grain price proposals, which mean a 3% cut of grain prices and an overall cut of farm income by at least 6%. The farmers are also protesting the international trade negotiations of the GATT (U.N. General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) which also aim to lower farm income in the name of increased EC "competitiveness" on the world market.

The EC dictates an arbitrary upper limit on annual 12-nation total grain output, of about 165 million metric tons. If the EC Agriculture Commission's statistics say that the grain harvests exceeded the limit, grain growers are ordered to accept lower prices the next season, on the rationalization of preventing "overproduction."

Since January, tens of thousands of farmers in hundreds of cities have staged demonstrations of all kinds. They have blocked dozens of border crossings along the German-French, German-Dutch and German-Danish borders for weeks in a row. There are frequent protest actions in front of agriculture ministries in many countries and states. Crowds of farm dem-

onstrators have invaded political party headquarters and offices, such as the Konrad Adenauer House, the center of the ruling Christian Democratic Union in Bonn.

On March 5, Dutch farmers blocked selected border sites for an entire day. At least 1,000 farmers were involved in this action, which follows the simultaneous demonstrations of 10,000 in Aachen and 15,000 in Strasbourg in February, and other actions in Greece, Spain, and Portugal.

In the Netherlands—which, along with Germany, has seen the most massive demonstrations and disruptions of traffic—a "commission of good faith" has been formed between the former Agriculture Secretary König and the two current EC commissioners, Wiegel and Meijer.

The commission is charged with determining how the Dutch government can compensate farmers for the price cuts imposed by Brussels EC bureaucrats. Because of the intensity of the farmers' protest actions, one of the new commission officials publicly confessed that "trust between agriculture and policy is deeply disturbed," and that there are "enormous tensions between the farmers and their most important organizations."

Dutch Prime Minister Lubbers has recently announced, "Additional financial support for grain farmers is possible and should be done. I think the income situation of farmers has become so bad, that one has to say that it is no longer tenable."

Similar national measures to balance EC farm income cuts are under

discussion in Bonn. German Agriculture Ministry official George Gallus has reported to the parliament on the crisis, though no decisions have yet been taken.

The protest actions to date are regarded as just the beginning of even bigger demonstrations, unless remedial measures are forthcoming. Despite this being the planting season in Europe, farmers have kept up their mobilization against the EC.

The German national farmers organization—whose leaders are under ferocious pressure from the membership—announced nationwide rallies for the last week in March. Again and again, farmers are quoted saying, "If people in the totalitarian countries dare to stand up, why should we swallow all kinds of injustice and thievery committed by the politicians? We know how to fight too."

Since the mid-1980s, a series of EC-wide "quotas" have been imposed on farmers to limit the amount of milk, grain, wine, and other products they are permitted to produce—on penalty of stiff fines and lowered prices for their output.

In the Rhineland wine district, for example, there is a rebellion going on against the newly imposed quota system, and against the EC agriculture programs in general. At some places, tactics are being recalled from the Great German Peasant War of the 1520s.

Fine growers have threatened government bureaucrats that they will burn their harvesting books this fall, if their demands are not met. These records are the most important documentation for marketing quality wines. This is exactly what their ancestors did 515 years ago. It signals that they are no longer willing to accept even the most essential regimentation any longer, even if it means great hardship for them.