

# Food system won't last much longer

By Catherine Lerza

Any person of average income who shops in a supermarket, trying to feed themselves or their family on a limited budget knows that eating adequately is fast becoming a luxury. Likewise, the average Midwest farmer, faced with unpredictable markets and climatic conditions and with ever-increasing production costs, knows that it is almost impossible to make a good living on the land.

But an executive at Beatrice Foods or the Bank of America sees things a little differently: food is America's number one industry. Food exports have tripled in value since 1971 and the capital base of agriculture will amount to \$800 billion by 1980—four times what it was in 1960. Farm land in many places is so inflated in value that it is worth more than the crops that can be grown on it.

In short, Americans are caught in a food system so costly that they can hardly afford to eat.

A recent report from the Washington-based Exploratory Project for Economic Alternatives presents detailed statistics about the American food industry today, proving what many Americans already know: someone is making lots of money, and it is not the average farmer or consumer.

But authors Joe Beldon and Greg Forte go on to tell us something many people may not know: the American food system is so costly, so wasteful of energy, resources and people that it cannot last in the long run. We—farmers and consumers—are taking tremendous long-term risks, while a handful of businesses and financial institutions make the short-term profit.

Beldon and Forte look at why it is that in an economy beset with unemployment and a shortage of vital resources, our food system has come to rely almost completely on an energy and resource intensive technology. They argue that this move to a capital intensive system—away from a system of family farmers—is the direct result of increasing monopoly control of food production and distribution.

## ►Control in marketing.

The real economic power in food, Beldon and Forte explain, lies not in who owns the land, but in who controls the marketing system. Some 95 percent of the production of processed vegetables, for instance, is controlled by processors, retailers and other non-farm interests, while 85 percent of citrus production is controlled via a similar system of vertical integration. Our food supply, they point out, has been integrated and rationalized into an industrial system—a system designed by people like former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz and his predecessors and implemented by both Republican and Democratic administrations and Congresses over the past 30 years.

What all this means, Beldon and Forte argue, is that most of us have no control over our food supply. Like Third World nations where the best food-producing land is given over to cash crops that produce profits for a few wealthy landowners or corporations, Americans find themselves at the mercy of a system designed to produce money instead of food. Food is grown for markets instead of people. And in a system where not everyone has enough money to adequately purchase their food needs in that market, people will always be hungry.

Beldon and Forte's intent is not just to describe the present system. They make some radical proposals about food and its control: *The basic solution...lies in the support of family farming and assault on privilege and monopoly. These goals will not be achieved without some fundamental shifts in the control over all the stops along the road from the farm to the grocery checkout counter. It must be recognized that the producer's capital, credit and other inputs are public needs, requiring public commitment and accountability.*



Ken Frestone

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*ity. Similarly, the mid-sectors of processing, transportation, wholesaling and retailing must be seen as too vital to be left responsible only to the forces of profit. It is government, preferably the states under federal coordination, which must assume ultimate responsibility for social stability and progress. In agriculture...this means public replacement of inadequate private mechanisms.*

To create public accountability and control, the report suggests that the federal government take several immediate steps, ranging from small reforms to outright public control over agricultural commodities. Among the reform actions the plans calls for are:

- federal anti-trust action to break up monopoly-controlled food production/marketing/processing;
- tax advantages and new financing opportunities for family farmers who, under the present system, cannot compete with economically-advantaged corporate interests in the food system;
- government encouragement of a decentralized food production system to reduce energy and resource wasteful long-distance transportation of food and to revitalize regional economies;
- incentives to recycle urban and animal wastes for use as fertilizer to cut down dependence on expensive and scarce fossil-fuel based chemical fertilizers and to reduce the burden of water pollution abatement costs.

## ►Subsidize farm income.

The major structural change advocated by the report is the support of farm income by the public through the tax system, rather than by an ever-inflating price system. Farm income could be stabilized through direct government support of farm prices. Support levels would be set by a formula providing farmers with an income equal to costs of production and a reasonable rate of return.

Along with this direct payment for farmers, Beldon and Forte envision agricultural marketing boards, modeled after the Canadian Wheat Board and other existing bodies. These publicly-controlled government-run boards would provide an alternate marketing mechanism to that now controlled by commodities trading (e.g., the Chicago Board of Trade) and would eliminate the wildly fluctuating prices that make it possible for commodities traders to profit from specula-

tion. Cost of production and market demand, not speculation or economic control, would thus determine the price of commodities like wheat, beef or potatoes under this system.

## ►Not new.

Most of the report's suggestions are not new or even tremendously radical. The direct payment system was devised by former Secretary of Agriculture Charles Brannan on the mid-1940s, for instance. Nevertheless, it is considered very unlikely that any of them will be adopted. The power of the corporate interests that control the food system, so amply demonstrated by Beldon and Forte and others, is such that it is unlikely that anything other than minor reforms to make the industrialized food system more "accountable" to the public, but leaving the real control where it now rests, will be adopted in the immediate future.

Congress is now considering a new five-year farm bill—the Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act of 1977. Senate Agriculture committee chair Herman Talmadge (D-Ga.) has drafted one version of the legislation, while the House Agriculture Committee is preparing its own permutation of the bill and the Department of Agriculture is hammering out Carter's farm proposals. The biggest change likely to come out of any of these new bills is a new formula for federally financed commodity loans.

Loan levels would likely be based on cost of production (75 percent of such costs in the Talmadge bill) and would, if farm lobbyists have their way, be adjusted automatically as these costs increase. This concept would replace the present system for farm loans, which determines them by a complex process most observers feel does not reflect the current economic needs of farmers.

The new loan levels would be accompanied by "target prices," first introduced by the Nixon administration in 1973. Under the target price system the federal government must buy up commodities when market prices fall below the "target prices." So far, the targets have been so low that market prices have never come close, nor have they reflected actual costs of production of the commodities; target prices for wheat, for instance, were raised to \$2.50 a bushel last year (while Gerald Ford campaigned in the Midwest), but the cost of production, according to the agri-

culture department, was between \$3.40 and \$3.71 per bushel.

Such a system of loans and target prices though it provides farmers with financing at the early, crucial stages of production and protects them from the possibility of total market collapse, does nothing to stabilize overall market prices or reduce increasing dependence on expanding export markets. In addition to the basic farm bill, Congress and the new administration are considering a variety of small changes in U.S. farm and food policy. The House Agriculture Appropriations committee will soon decide whether or not to fund a small, \$1.5 million program to encourage the development of direct farmer-consumer marketing systems approved by the last Congress. And the Agriculture department may set up its version of the Carter administration symbolic gesture, an Office of Public Participation. These and other proposed changes remain minimal; a far cry from the kind of wide-reaching structural change called for by Beldon and Forte.

## ►Farmers remain skeptical.

Many farmers, however, remain skeptical of any change, realizing perhaps that government intervention over the last 30 years has meant favoritism for the already wealthy. Beldon and Forte, for instance, point out that in 1959 some 56 percent of American farms received only seven percent of total government support payments and that past "stabilization" programs have only exacerbated the economic discrepancies between small farmers and agribusiness interests.

A leader of one national farm organization, looking over the Beldon/Forte report, commented that it called for the "Chinese-ization of farming" and feared a loss of independence for the farmer were its recommendations to be implemented. Clearly, then, the Exploratory Project for Economic Alternatives and all the other groups seeking a food system that feeds a maximum number of people in the most rational long term fashion will have to convince farmers that such a system doesn't mean an end to the independence they cherish.

Beldon and Forte have done a real service in bringing together an impressive array of figures and proposals. Whether that array can be translated into positive action, however, remains to be seen.

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# IN THE WORLD

## AFRICA



*Above: Ailuncine Sene, Minister of Culture from Senegal, with Ron Karenga.*

*Right: Jose Mas-sip, director and producer of the National Film Industry in Havana, Cuba, with Ron Karenga.*



*Below: Chin Pi-hua, correspondent of Hsinhua News Agency (New China News Agency), Peking, China, with Ron Karenga.*



*Left: Wole Soyinka, noted Nigerian writer, with Ron Karenga.*



# FESTAC: report from Nigeria

By M. Ron Karenga

The Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) was delayed and endangered by a civil war, a coup, assassination of the head of state in the host country and the tragic death of the director of the Colloquium. Thus, when this month-long cultural extravaganza and intellectual exchange, involving thousands of participants from 75 countries, took place in Lagos on Jan. 15, it seemed a miracle, a good omen of great expectations and greater possibilities.

That it was being held in Nigeria also seemed auspicious. Nigeria is Africa's most populous country (70 million), rich in oil reserves (two million barrels a day and second-ranking supplier to the U.S.) and considered pivotal in the liberation and development of the continent. Also, Nigeria has recently shown a refreshing progressiveness in its foreign policy. It has spoken out against imperialism and neo-colonialism, advocated armed struggle to free Southern Africa and given \$50 million in aid to the liberation movements. Moreover, Lt. Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo, head of state and grand patron of FESTAC, had opposed the American position on Angola and Southern Africa in general, accused Ford and Kissinger of siding with the Boer regime of South Africa and refused three times to meet with Kissinger.

Although the most numerous participants in FESTAC were artists and writers, the Colloquium on Black Civilization and Education was "the very heart of the Festival."

The Colloquium, held in the profuse and unproletarian elegance of the National Theater, was divided into five sub-themes: 1) Arts and Pedagogy; 2) Language and Literature; 3) Philosophy and Religion; 4) Historical Awareness and African Governments; and 5) Science and Technology and Mass Media. Conclusions and proposals were reported and voted on in plenary sessions at the end of the Colloquium. The plenary sessions also heard lectures by recognized scholars and others.

We argued for cooperation based on mutual respect and mutual benefit, attacked continental chauvinism and reminded continental Africans that it was Marcus Garvey, William E.B. DuBois and Sylvester Williams, Africans in the Diaspora, not continentals, who conceived and carried out the first Pan-African projects.

Two issues dominated the Colloquium: the question of race versus class, and the relations between continental and diaspora Africans.

The first involved the struggle over the character and course of Pan-Africanism, whether it should center in a racial and cultural interpretation of identity and unity or whether it should be continentally inclusive and class-conscious.

### ►Black or African?

FESTAC was the immediate cultural heir of the World Festival of Negro Arts held in Dakar, Senegal, in 1966 and the immediate political heir of the Pan-African Cultural Festival held in Algiers in 1969. The Dakar festival represented the cultural commitment to *Negritude*, or the racial uniqueness of black Africans, and the one in Algiers a political commitment to the class-conscious unity and common struggle of all African peoples on the continent.

Both positions have their basis in the dual sense of cultural alienation and political impotence that capitalism and its supportive apparatus, racism, produced among Third World peoples. It is the split over which factor is the more relevant and decisive that has historically plagued Pan-Africanism and was bound to penetrate the process and discussions of this Colloquium.

The very name of the Festival—Black and African—was an expression of this two-line struggle and the compromise

achieved to facilitate exchange. Senegal, which has historically advocated the Negritude position, refused at first to attend FESTAC unless it was exclusively for black peoples of the world. Nigeria, however, was able to work out a compromise that brought Senegal back to the Pan-African fold. The agreement was that FESTAC would recognize the principle that the festival was essentially for black people the world over and that Senegal would reciprocate by accepting the "pragmatic realities" that FESTAC was "open to all member states of the OAU, black governments, and black communities outside Africa and liberation movements recognized by the OAU."

The compromise was fragile and the struggle to annul it began on the first day with Senegal challenging North African participation and arguing black uniqueness and exclusivity.

Guinea, in response, attacked this position as being objectively on the side of imperialism and argued that since civilization could not be explained by the color of one's skin, it would be more appropriate to speak of an African rather than a black civilization.

The delegations from the U.S., the Republic of the Congo, Somalia and Cuba supported Guinea's espousal of a continentally inclusive and class-conscious Pan-Africanism. These delegations formed what came to be referred to as the "radical caucus" of the Colloquium and led a generally successful struggle in every plen-

ary and working group to establish and maintain a socialist perspective on all issues and to keep the Colloquium from turning into an elaborate exercise in black self-admiration and exclusivity. Nigeria, through its chairing the Colloquium, played the conciliatory role expected of a host and strove to maintain a workable unity, however fragile.

### ►The African diaspora.

The second major issue in the Colloquium was the history and future of relations between Africans on the continent and Africans in the Diaspora. This question, raised and pursued vigorously by the American delegation under the chairmanship of this writer, assumed perhaps a greater importance than ever before in a Pan-African gathering. This was due mainly to the clearly socialist positions we took on the issues before the Colloquium and the self-conscious practice we pursued in and outside the Colloquium to put ourselves on the Pan-African agenda and gain the respect crucial to effective and mutually beneficial participation.

It was undoubtedly the socialist and anti-imperialist character of our position that more than any other factor contributed to the Western press stressing cultural events at FESTAC, and to its concealing the favorable response evoked by our delegation. The press also reflected the U.S. State department's attitude. The State department had failed to determine the composition of the 10-person delegation as it had on previous occasions and was displeased that the International Festival committee extended its invitation to the Afro-American community rather than the American government.

Our position on Pan-Africanism was that it must of necessity be world-wide in scope and socialist in content. We argued that only a socialist Pan-Africanism could unite the continent in the struggle to defeat imperialism and neo-colonialism and ensure the ownership and control of the means of production by the masses of African peoples, the rationalization of industry and agriculture, the correct use of surplus, the end of prestige projects and long

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