

Food Crisis



**World Hunger, Agribusiness, and
the Food Sovereignty Alternative**
by Ian Angus

Includes statements by
Fidel Castro, Esteban Lazo, La Via Campesina
and the Nyéléni Forum for Food Sovereignty

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FOOD CRISIS

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Food Crisis: World Hunger, Agribusiness, and the Food Sovereignty Alternative

By Ian Angus

“If the government cannot lower the cost of living it simply has to leave. If the police and UN troops want to shoot at us, that’s OK, because in the end, if we are not killed by bullets, we’ll die of hunger.” — A demonstrator in Port-au-Prince, Haiti

In Haiti, where most people get 22% fewer calories than the minimum needed for good health, some are staving off their hunger pangs by eating “mud biscuits” made by mixing clay and water with a bit of vegetable oil and salt.^[1]

Meanwhile, in Canada, the federal government is currently paying \$225 for each pig killed in a mass cull of breeding swine, as part of a plan to reduce hog production. Hog farmers, squeezed by low hog prices and high feed costs, have responded so enthusiastically that the kill will likely use up all the allocated funds before the program ends in September.

Some of the slaughtered hogs may be given to local Food Banks, but most will be destroyed or made into pet food.

None will go to Haiti.

This is the brutal world of capitalist agriculture — a world where some people destroy food because prices are too low, and others literally eat dirt because food prices are too high.

Record prices for staple foods

We are in the midst of an unprecedented worldwide food price inflation that has driven prices to their highest levels in decades. The increases affect most kinds of food, but in particular the most important staples — wheat, corn, and rice.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization says that between March 2007 and March 2008 prices of cereals increased 88%, oils and fats 106%, and dairy 48%. The FAO food price index as a whole rose 57% in one year — and most of the increase occurred in the past few months.

Another source, the World Bank, says that that in the 36 months

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ending February 2008, global wheat prices rose 181% and overall global food prices increased by 83%. The Bank expects most food prices to remain well above 2004 levels until at least 2015.

The most popular grade of Thailand rice sold for \$198 a tonne five years ago and \$323 a tonne a year ago. On April 24, the price hit \$1,000.

Increases are even greater on local markets — in Haiti, the market price of a 50 kilo bag of rice doubled in one week at the end of March.

These increases are catastrophic for the 2.6 billion people around the world who live on less than US\$2 a day and spend 60% to 80% of their incomes on food. Hundreds of millions cannot afford to eat.

This month, the hungry fought back.

Taking to the streets

In Haiti, on April 3, demonstrators in the southern city of Les Cayes built barricades, stopped trucks carrying rice and distributed the food, and tried to burn a United Nations compound. The protests quickly spread to the capital, Port-au-Prince, where thousands marched on the presidential palace, chanting “We are hungry!” Many called for the withdrawal of UN troops and the return of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the exiled president whose government was overthrown by foreign powers in 2004.

President René Préval, who initially said nothing could be done, has announced a 16% cut in the wholesale price of rice. This is at best a stop-gap measure, since the reduction is for one month only, and retailers are not obligated to cut their prices.

The actions in Haiti paralleled similar protests by hungry people in more than twenty other countries.

- In Burkino Faso, a two-day general strike by unions and shopkeepers demanded “significant and effective” reductions in the price of rice and other staple foods.
- In Bangladesh, over 20,000 workers from textile factories in Fatullah went on strike to demand lower prices and higher wages. They hurled bricks and stones at police, who fired tear gas into the crowd.
- The Egyptian government sent thousands of troops into the Mahalla textile complex in the Nile Delta, to prevent a general strike demanding higher wages, an independent union, and lower prices. Two people were killed and over 600 have been jailed.

- In Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, police used tear gas against women who had set up barricades, burned tires and closed major roads. Thousands marched to the President's home, chanting "We are hungry," and "Life is too expensive, you are killing us."
- In Pakistan and Thailand, armed soldiers have been deployed to prevent the poor from seizing food from fields and warehouses.

Similar protests have taken place in Cameroon, Ethiopia, Honduras, Indonesia, Madagascar, Mauritania, Niger, Peru, Philippines, Senegal, Thailand, Uzbekistan, and Zambia. On April 2, the president of the World Bank told a meeting in Washington that there are 33 countries where price hikes could cause social unrest.

A Senior Editor of *Time* magazine warned:

"The idea of the starving masses driven by their desperation to take to the streets and overthrow the *ancien regime* has seemed impossibly quaint since capitalism triumphed so decisively in the Cold War.... And yet, the headlines of the past month suggest that skyrocketing food prices are threatening the stability of a growing number of governments around the world. when circumstances render it impossible to feed their hungry children, normally passive citizens can very quickly become militants with nothing to lose."^[2]

What's Driving Food Inflation?

Since the 1970s, food production has become increasingly globalized and concentrated. A handful of countries dominate the global trade in staple foods. 80% of wheat exports come from six exporters, as does 85% of rice. Three countries produce 70% of exported corn. This leaves the world's poorest countries, the ones that must import food to survive, at the mercy of economic trends and policies in those few exporting countries. When the global food trade system stops delivering, it's the poor who pay the price.

For several years, the global trade in staple foods has been heading towards a crisis. Four related trends have slowed production growth and pushed prices up.

The End of the Green Revolution: In the 1960s and 1970s, in an effort to counter peasant discontent in south and southeast Asia, the U.S. poured money and technical support into agricultural develop-

ment in India and other countries. The “green revolution” — new seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, agricultural techniques and infrastructure — led to spectacular increases in food production, particularly rice. Yield per hectare continued expanding until the 1990s.

Today, it’s not fashionable for governments to help poor people grow food for other poor people, because “the market” is supposed to take care of all problems. *The Economist* reports that “spending on farming as a share of total public spending in developing countries fell by half between 1980 and 2004.”^[3] Subsidies and R&D money have dried up, and production growth has stalled.

As a result, in seven of the past eight years the world consumed more grain than it produced, which means that rice was being removed from the inventories that governments and dealers normally hold as insurance against bad harvests. World grain stocks are now at their lowest point ever, leaving very little cushion for bad times.

Climate Change: Scientists say that climate change could cut food production in parts of the world by 50% in the next 12 years. But that isn’t just a matter for the future:

- Australia is normally the world’s second-largest exporter of grain, but a savage multi-year drought has reduced the wheat crop by 60% and rice production has been completely wiped out.
- In Bangladesh in November, one of the strongest cyclones in decades wiped out a million tonnes of rice and severely damaged the wheat crop, making the huge country even more dependent on imported food.

Other examples abound. It’s clear that the global climate crisis is already here, and it is affecting food.

Agrofuels: It is now official policy in the U.S., Canada and Europe to convert food into fuel. U.S. vehicles burn enough corn to cover the entire import needs of the poorest 82 countries.^[4]

Ethanol and biodiesel are very heavily subsidized, which means, inevitably, that crops like corn (maize) are being diverted out of the food chain and into gas tanks, and that new agricultural investment worldwide is being directed towards palm, soy, canola and other oil-producing plants. The demand for agrofuels increases the prices of those crops directly, and indirectly boosts the price of other grains by encouraging growers to switch to agrofuel.

As Canadian hog producers have found, it also drives up the cost of producing meat, because corn is the main ingredient in North

American animal feed.

Oil Prices: The price of food is linked to the price of oil because food can be made into a substitute for oil. But rising oil prices also affect the cost of producing food. Fertilizer and pesticides are made from petroleum and natural gas. Gas and diesel fuel are used in planting, harvesting and shipping.^[5]

It's been estimated that 80% of the cost of growing corn is fossil fuel related — so it is no accident that food prices rise when oil prices rise.

* * *

By the end of 2007, reduced investment in third world agriculture, rising oil prices, and climate change meant that production growth was slowing and prices were rising. Good harvests and strong export growth might have staved off a crisis — but that isn't what happened. The trigger was rice, the staple food of three billion people.

Early this year, India announced that it was suspending most rice exports in order to rebuild its reserves. A few weeks later, Vietnam, whose rice crop was hit by a major insect infestation during the harvest, announced a four-month suspension of exports to ensure that enough would be available for its domestic market.

India and Vietnam together normally account for 30% of all rice exports, so their announcements were enough to push the already tight global rice market over the edge. Rice buyers immediately started buying up available stocks, hoarding whatever rice they could get in the expectation of future price increases, and bidding up the price for future crops. Prices soared. By mid-April, news reports described “panic buying” of rice futures on the Chicago Board of Trade, and there were rice shortages even on supermarket shelves in Canada and the U.S.

Why the rebellion?

There have been food price spikes before. Indeed, if we take inflation into account, global prices for staple foods were higher in the 1970s than they are today. So why has this inflationary explosion provoked mass protests around the world?

The answer is that since the 1970s the richest countries in the world, aided by the international agencies they control, have systematically undermined the poorest countries' ability to feed their populations and protect themselves in a crisis like this.

Haiti is a powerful and appalling example.

Rice has been grown in Haiti for centuries, and until twenty years

“Nowhere in the world, in no act of genocide, in no war, are so many people killed per minute, per hour and per day as those who are killed by hunger and poverty on our planet.” —Fidel Castro, 1998

ago Haitian farmers produced about 170,000 tonnes of rice a year, enough to cover 95% of domestic consumption. Rice farmers received no government subsidies, but, as in every other rice-producing country at the time, their access to local markets was protected by import tariffs.

In 1995, as a condition of providing a desperately needed loan, the International Monetary Fund required Haiti to cut its tariff on imported rice from 35% to 3%, the lowest in the Caribbean. The result was a massive influx of U.S. rice that sold for half the price of Haitian-grown rice. Thousands of rice farmers lost their lands and livelihoods, and today three-quarters of the rice eaten in Haiti comes from the U.S.^[6]

U.S. rice didn't take over the Haitian market because it tastes better, or because U.S. rice growers are more efficient. It won out because rice exports are heavily subsidized by the U.S. government. In 2003, U.S. rice growers received \$1.7 billion in government subsidies, an average of \$232 per hectare of rice grown.^[7] That money, most of which went to a handful of very large landowners and agribusiness corporations, allowed U.S. exporters to sell rice at 30% to 50% below their real production costs.

In short, Haiti was forced to abandon government protection of domestic agriculture — and the U.S. then used its government protection schemes to take over the market.

There have been many variations on this theme, with rich countries of the north imposing “liberalization” policies on poor and debt-ridden southern countries and then taking advantage of that liberalization to capture the market. Government subsidies account for 30% of farm revenue in the world's 30 richest countries, a total of US\$280 billion a year,^[8] an unbeatable advantage in a “free” market where the rich write the rules.

The global food trade game is rigged, and the poor have been left with reduced crops and no protections.

In addition, for several decades the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have refused to advance loans to poor countries unless they agree to “Structural Adjustment Programs” (SAP) that

require the loan recipients to devalue their currencies, cut taxes, privatize utilities, and reduce or eliminate support programs for farmers.

All this was done with the promise that the market would produce economic growth and prosperity — instead, poverty increased and support for agriculture was eliminated.

“The investment in improved agricultural input packages and extension support tapered and eventually disappeared in most rural areas of Africa under SAP. Concern for boosting smallholders’ productivity was abandoned. Not only were governments rolled back, foreign aid to agriculture dwindled. World Bank funding for agriculture itself declined markedly from 32% of total lending in 1976-8 to 11.7% in 1997-9.”¹⁹¹

During previous waves of food price inflation, the poor often had at least some access to food they grew themselves, or to food that was grown locally and available at locally set prices. Today, in many countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, that’s just not possible. Global markets now determine local prices — and often the only food available must be imported from far away.

* * *

Food is not just another commodity — it is absolutely essential for human survival. The very least that humanity should expect from any government or social system is that it try to prevent starvation — and above all that it not promote policies that deny food to hungry people.

That’s why Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez was absolutely correct on April 24, when he described the food crisis as “the greatest demonstration of the historical failure of the capitalist model.”

The people of Haiti are “suffering from the attacks of the empire’s global capitalism,” he said. “This calls for genuine and profound solidarity from all of us. It is the least we can do for Haiti.”

When food riots broke out in Haiti, the first country to respond was Venezuela. Within days, planes were on their way from Caracas, carrying 364 tons of badly needed food.

Venezuela’s action is in the finest tradition of human solidarity. When people are hungry, we should do our best to feed them. Venezuela’s example should be applauded and emulated. But aid, however necessary, is only a stopgap. To truly address the problem of

world hunger, we must understand and then change the system that causes it.

No shortage of food

The starting point for our analysis must be this: *there is no shortage of food in the world today.*

Contrary to the 18th century warnings of Thomas Malthus and his modern followers, study after study shows that global food production has consistently outstripped population growth, and that there is more than enough food to feed everyone. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, enough food is produced in the world to provide over 2800 calories a day to everyone — substantially more than the minimum required for good health, and about 18% more calories per person than in the 1960s, despite a significant increase in total population.^[10]

As the Food First Institute points out, “abundance, not scarcity, best describes the supply of food in the world today.”^[11]

Despite that, the most commonly proposed solution to world hunger is new technology to increase food production.

The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, aims to develop “more productive and resilient varieties of Africa’s major food crops ... to enable Africa’s small-scale farmers to produce larger, more diverse and reliable harvests.”^[12]

Similarly, the Manila-based International Rice Research Institute has initiated a public-private partnership “to increase rice production across Asia via the accelerated development and introduction of hybrid rice technologies.”^[13]

And the president of the World Bank promises to help developing countries gain “access to technology and science to boost yields.”^[14]

Scientific research is vitally important to the development of agriculture, but initiatives that assume in advance that new seeds and chemicals are needed are neither credible nor truly scientific. The fact that there is already enough food to feed the world shows that the food crisis is not a technical problem — it is a social and political problem.

Rather than asking how to increase production, our first question should be why, when so much food is available, are over 850 million people hungry and malnourished? Why do 18,000 children die of hunger every day? Why can’t the global food industry feed the hungry?

The profit system

The answer can be stated in one sentence. *The global food industry is not organized to feed the hungry; it is organized to generate profits for corporate agribusiness.*

The agribusiness giants are achieving that objective very well indeed. This year, agribusiness profits are soaring above last year's levels, while hungry people from Haiti to Egypt to Senegal were taking to the streets to protest rising food prices. (See box ^[15])

The companies listed in the box, plus a few more, are the monopoly or near-monopoly buyers and sellers of agricultural products around the world. Six companies control 85% of the world trade in grain; three control 83% of cocoa; three control 80% of the banana trade.^[16] ADM, Cargill and Bunge effectively control the world's corn, which means that they alone decide how much of each year's crop goes to make ethanol, sweeteners, animal feed or human food.

As the editors of *Hungry for Profit* write, "The enormous power exerted by the largest agribusiness/food corporations allows them essentially to control the cost of their raw materials purchased from farmers while at the same time keeping prices of food to the general public at high enough levels to ensure large profits."^[17]

Over the past three decades, transnational agribusiness companies have engineered a massive restructuring of global agriculture. Directly through their own market power and indirectly through governments and the World Bank, IMF and World Trade Organization, they have changed the way food is grown and distributed around the world. The changes have had wonderful effects on their

Agribusiness Profits, First Quarter 2008.

Grain Trading

- *Archer Daniels Midland (ADM)*. Gross profit: \$1.15 billion, up 55% from last year
- *Cargill*: Net earnings: \$1.03 billion, up 86%
- *Bunge*. Consolidated gross profit: \$867 million, up 189%.

Seeds & herbicides

- *Monsanto*. Gross profit: \$2.23 billion, up 54%.
- *Dupont Agriculture and Nutrition*. Pre-tax operating income: \$786 million, up 21%

Fertilizer

- *Potash Corporation*. Net income: \$66 million, up 185.9%
- *Mosaic*. Net earnings: \$520.8 million, up more than 1,200%

profits, while simultaneously making global hunger worse and food crises inevitable.

The assault on traditional farming

Today's *food crisis* doesn't stand alone: it is a manifestation of a *farm crisis* that has been building for decades.

As we saw in the previous article, over the past three decades the rich countries of the north have forced poor countries to open their markets, then flooded those markets with subsidized food, with devastating results for Third World farming.

But the restructuring of global agriculture to the advantage of agribusiness giants didn't stop there. In the same period, southern countries were convinced, cajoled and bullied into adopting agricultural policies that promote export crops rather than food for domestic consumption, and favour large-scale industrial agriculture that requires single-crop (monoculture) production, heavy use of water, and massive quantities of fertilizer and pesticides. Increasingly, traditional farming, organized by and for communities and families, has been pushed aside by industrial farming organized by and for agribusinesses.

That transformation is the principal obstacle to a rational agriculture that could eliminate hunger.

The focus on export agriculture has produced the absurd and tragic result that millions of people are starving in countries that export food. In India, for example, over one-fifth of the population is chronically hungry and 48% of children under five years old are malnourished. Nevertheless, India exported US\$1.5 billion worth of milled rice and \$322 million worth of wheat in 2004.^[18]

In other countries, farmland that used to grow food for domestic consumption now grows luxuries for the north. Colombia, where 13% of the population is malnourished, produces and exports 62% of all cut flowers sold in the United States.

In many cases the result of switching to export crops has produced results that would be laughable if they weren't so damaging. Kenya was self-sufficient in food until about 25 years ago. Today it imports 80% of its food — and 80% of its exports are other agricultural products.^[19]

The shift to industrial agriculture has driven millions of people off the land and into unemployment and poverty in the immense slums that now surround many of the world's cities.

The people who best know the land are being separated from it; their farms enclosed into gigantic outdoor factories that produce only for export. Hundreds of millions of people now must depend on food that's grown thousands of miles away because their homeland agriculture has been transformed to meet the needs of agribusiness corporations.

As recent months have shown, the entire system is fragile: India's decision to rebuild its rice stocks made food unaffordable for millions half a world away.

If the purpose of agriculture is to feed people, the changes to global agriculture in the past 30 years make no sense. Industrial farming in the Third World has produced increasing amounts of food, but at the cost of driving millions off the land and into lives of chronic hunger — and at the cost of poisoning air and water, and steadily decreasing the ability of the soil to deliver the food we need.

Contrary to the claims of agribusiness, the latest agricultural research, including more than a decade of concrete experience in Cuba, proves that small and mid-sized farms using sustainable agroecological methods are much more productive and vastly less damaging to the environment than huge industrial farms.^[20]

Industrial farming continues not because it is more productive, but because it has been able, until now, to deliver uniform products in predictable quantities, bred specifically to resist damage during shipment to distant markets. That's where the profit is, and profit is what counts, no matter what the effect may be on earth, air, and water — or even on hungry people.

Fighting for food sovereignty

The changes imposed by transnational agribusiness and its agencies have not gone unchallenged. One of the most important developments in the past 15 years has been the emergence of La Vía Campesina (Peasant Way), an umbrella body that encompasses more than 120 small farmers' and peasants' organizations in 56 countries, ranging from the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil to the National Farmers Union in Canada.

La Vía Campesina initially advanced its program as a challenge to the "World Food Summit," a 1996 UN-organized conference on global hunger that was attended by official representatives of 185 countries. The participants in that meeting promised (and subsequently did nothing to achieve) to reduce hunger and malnutrition by

guaranteeing “sustainable food security for all people.”^[21]

As is typical of such events, the working people who are actually affected were excluded from the discussions. Outside the doors, La Vía Campesina proposed food sovereignty as an alternative to food security. Simple access to food is not enough, they argued: what’s needed is access to land, water, and resources, and the people affected must have the right to know and to decide about food policies. Food is too important to be left to the global market and the manipulations of agribusiness: world hunger can only be ended by re-establishing small and mid-sized family farms as the key elements of food production.^[22]

The central demand of the food sovereignty movement is that food should be treated primarily as a source of nutrition for the communities and countries where it is grown. In opposition to free-trade, agroexport policies, it urges a focus on domestic consumption and food self-sufficiency.

Contrary to the assertions of some critics, food sovereignty is not a call for economic isolationism or a return to an idealized rural past. Rather, it is a program for the defense and extension of human rights, for land reform, and for protection of the earth against capitalist ecocide. In addition to calling for food self-sufficiency and strengthening family farms, La Vía Campesina’s original call for food sovereignty included these points:

- Guarantee everyone access to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food in sufficient quantity and quality to sustain a healthy life with full human dignity.
- Give landless and farming people — especially women — ownership and control of the land they work and return territories to indigenous peoples.
- Ensure the care and use of natural resources, especially land, water and seeds. End dependence on chemical inputs, on cash-crop monocultures and intensive, industrialized production.
- Oppose WTO, World Bank and IMF policies that facilitate the control of multinational corporations over agriculture. Regulate and tax speculative capital and enforce a strict Code of Conduct on transnational corporations.
- End the use of food as a weapon. Stop the displacement, forced urbanization and repression of peasants.
- Guarantee peasants and small farmers, and rural women input into formulating agricultural policies at all levels.^[23]

La Vía Campesina’s demand for food sovereignty constitutes a powerful agrarian program for the 21st century. Labour and left movements worldwide should give full support to it and to the campaigns of working farmers and peasants for land reform and against the industrialization and globalization of food and farming.

Stop the war on Third World farmers

Within that framework, we in the global north can and must demand that our governments stop all activities that weaken or damage Third World farming.

Stop using food for fuel. La Vía Campesina has said it simply and clearly: “Industrial agrofuels are an economic, social and environmental nonsense. Their development should be halted and agricultural production should focus on food as a priority.”^[24]

Cancel Third World debts. On April 30, Canada announced a special contribution of C\$10 million for food relief to Haiti.^[25] That’s positive – but *during 2008 Haiti will pay five times that much in interest* on its \$1.5 billion foreign debt, much of which was incurred during the imperialist-supported Duvalier dictatorships.

Haiti’s situation is not unique and it is not an extreme case. The total external debt of Third World countries in 2005 was \$2.7 trillion, and their debt payments that year totalled \$513 billion.^[26] Ending that cash drain, immediately and unconditionally, would provide essential resources to feed the hungry now and rebuild domestic farming over time.

Get the WTO out of agriculture. The regressive food policies that have been imposed on poor countries by the World Bank and IMF are codified and enforced by the World Trade Organization’s Agreement on Agriculture. The AoA, as Afsar Jafri of *Focus on the Global South* writes, is “biased in favour of capital-intensive, corporate agribusiness-driven and export-oriented agriculture.”^[27] That’s not surprising, since the U.S. official who drafted and then negotiated it was a former vice-president of agribusiness giant Cargill.

AoA should be abolished, and Third World countries should have the right to unilaterally cancel liberalization policies imposed through the World Bank, IMF, and WTO, as well as through bilateral free trade agreements such as NAFTA and CAFTA.

Self-Determination for the Global South. The current attempts by the U.S. to destabilize and overthrow the anti-imperialist governments of the ALBA group — Venezuela, Bolivia, Cuba, Nicara-

gua and Grenada — continue a long history of actions by northern countries to prevent Third World countries from asserting control over their own destinies. Organizing against such interventions “in the belly of the monster” is thus a key component of the fight to win food sovereignty around the world.

More than a century ago, Karl Marx wrote that despite its support for technical improvements, “the capitalist system works against a rational agriculture ... a rational agriculture is incompatible with the capitalist system.”^[28]

Today’s food and farm crises completely confirm that judgment. A system that puts profit ahead of human needs has driven millions of producers off the land, undermined the earth’s productivity while poisoning its air and water, and condemned nearly a billion people to chronic hunger and malnutrition.

The food crisis and the farm crisis are rooted in an irrational, anti-human system. To feed the world, urban and rural working people must join hands to sweep that system away.

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[26] Jubilee Debt Campaign. “The Basics About Debt.” <http://www.jubileedebt-campaign.org.uk/?lid=98>

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Cuba: “It is time to act with unity, audacity, solidarity and a practical spirit”

On Wednesday, May 7, 2008, political leaders from 14 Caribbean and Latin American countries met in Managua, Nicaragua, to discuss the food crisis. The meeting was organized by ALBA, the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas founded in 2004 by Cuba and Venezuela.

Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega opened the discussion, describing the situation as an “epic problem” caused by the “tyranny of global capitalism.”

Twelve of the countries present — Nicaragua, Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Honduras, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Haiti, Guatemala, Mexico, Belize, Venezuela, and the Dominican Republic — agreed to draft a plan of action within 30 days to boost local food production in the region and establish a system of “fair trade within and between the countries that results in fair prices for producers and consumers.”

They also supported a Venezuelan proposal to create a \$100 million fund to support expanded food production in the region.

The following statement was made at the conference made by Esteban Lazo Hernandez, Vice-President of Cuba’s Council of State.

Esteemed Comandante Daniel Ortega, President of Nicaragua,
Distinguished presidents and high representatives,

The facts speak clearly for themselves. In 2005, we used to pay 250 dollars for every ton of rice we imported; now we pay 1,050 dollars, four times as much. For a ton of wheat, we used to pay 132 dollars; now we pay 330 dollars, two and a half times as much. For a ton of corn, we used to pay 82 dollars; now we pay 230 dollars, nearly three times as much. For a ton of powdered milk, we used to pay 2,200 dollars; now it’s 4,800 dollars. This is a perverse and unsustainable trend.

This phenomenon undermines the internal markets of most countries in our region and around the world, affecting the population directly, particularly the poorest sectors, bringing poverty to millions of people. A few decades ago, there were countries that grew their own rice and corn. But, following the neo-liberal recipes of the IMF, they liberalized the market and began to import subsidized US and European cereals, eradicating domestic production. With the rise in prices at the pace we’ve mentioned, a growing number of people can no longer afford to eat these basic food products. It comes as no surprise, thus, that they should resort to protests, that they should take to the streets to find whatever means they can to feed their children.

As Fidel underscored in 1996 during the World Food Summit,

“hunger, the inseparable companion of the poor, is born of the unequal distribution of riches and of the world’s injustices. The rich do not know hunger ... Millions of people around the world have perished in struggle against hunger and injustice.”

The food crisis we face today is exacerbated by high oil prices and by the impact that the military adventure in Iraq has upon these; by the effect these prices have on the production and transportation of food; by climate change; by the fact that significant volumes of US and EU-grown grains and cereals are destined, more and more, to the production of biofuels and by the speculative practices surrounding transnational big capital, which gambles with food inventories at the cost of hunger for the poor.

But the essence of the crisis is not to be found in these recent phenomena; it lies, rather, in the unequal and unfair distribution of riches at the global level and in the unsustainable neo-liberal economic model that has been imposed upon us in an irresponsible and fanatical fashion over the course of the last twenty years.

Poor countries, dependent on food imports, are in no condition to take the blow. Their populations have no protection whatsoever and the market, needless to say, has neither the capacity nor the sense of responsibility to offer such protection. This is not a strictly economic problem. It is a humanitarian drama of incalculable consequences which even places our countries’ very national security at risk.

To attribute the crisis to increased consumption by important sectors in certain developing countries that report accelerated economic growth, such as China and India, is not only an unfounded argument, it also conveys a racist and discriminatory message, which portrays as a problem the fact that millions of human beings should have access, for the first time, to decent and healthy food.

The problem, as it manifests itself in our region, is, in essence, linked to the precarious situation of small farmers and rural populations living in underdeveloped countries, and to the oligopolistic nature of the large transnational companies that control the agricultural food industry.

These companies control prices, technologies, norms, certifications, distribution channels and sources of funding for world food production. They also control transportation, scientific research, genetic pools and the fertilizer and pesticide industries. Their governments, in Europe, North America and other parts of the world, set down the international norms that govern trade in food, technolo-

gies and the supplies needed to produce these.

Agricultural subsidies in the United States and the European Union not only make the food these countries sell more expensive, they also constitute a fundamental obstacle for developing countries seeking to access their markets with their products, something which has a direct impact on the situation of agriculture and producers in the South.

This is a structural problem generated by today's international economic order, not a passing crisis that can be alleviated with palliative or emergency measures. The World Bank's recent promises to allocate 500 million devalued dollars as an emergency measure to alleviate the crisis are ridiculous and an insult to our intelligence.

To strike at the very heart and at the causes of the dilemma, we must examine and change the written and unwritten rules, both agreed to and imposed upon us, that today govern the international economic order and the creation and distribution of wealth, particularly in the food production and distribution sector.

Today, the truly decisive move is to undertake a profound, structural change of the current international economic and political order, an order which is anti-democratic, unjust, exclusive and unsustainable. An order which is predatory, as a result of which, as Fidel said twelve years ago, "waters are contaminated, the atmosphere is poisoned and nature is destroyed. It is not only the fact that investments, education and technologies are lacking or the population is growing at an accelerated pace; the environment is deteriorating and the future that is growing more hazardous with every passing day."

Having said this, we agree that international cooperation, as a means of confronting this time of crisis, can no longer be postponed. We need emergency measures to quickly alleviate the situation of those countries which already face social turmoil. In the middle term, we must also give impetus to cooperation and exchange plans that entail joint investments and accelerate agricultural production and food distribution in our region, through the firm commitment and resolute participation of the State. Cuba is willing to contribute its modest efforts to this.

The program brought to us today by comrade Daniel, a call to join forces and wills and to combine the resources of ALBA members and countries in Central America and the Caribbean, is worthy of our support. It presupposes the clear understanding that the current food crises the world faces is not an opportunity, as some believe,

but a very dangerous crisis. It involves express recognition that our efforts must be aimed at defending everyone's right to food and at securing a decent life for the millions of peasant families that have been plundered to this day, not at availing ourselves of the occasion to pursue corporate interests or petty commercial opportunities.

We have debated on the matter extensively. Now, it is time to act with unity, audacity, solidarity and a practical spirit. If this is our common goal, you can rely on Cuba.

Allow me to conclude with the farsighted words Fidel pronounced in 1996, which reverberate today with undiminished pertinence and profundity: "The bells that toll today for those who starve to death each day shall toll tomorrow for the whole of humanity if it refuses, or is unable, or is not wise enough to save itself."

Thank you very much.

An Open Letter from La Via Campesina:
**'Peasants and small farmers
 can feed the world'**

Thursday 1 May 2008

TO: Mr Jacques Diouf, Secretary General of the Food and
 Agriculture Organization (FAO);
 Mr. Yasuo Fukuda, President of the G8;
 Mr. John W. Ashe, Chairman of the Group of 77

Dear Mr. Diouf, Mr. Fukuda, and Mr. Ashe,

Our movement, La Via Campesina, consists of millions of small farmers and landless workers in more than 60 countries around the world. Although we are the ones producing food for our families and communities, many of us are hungry or living in poverty. Over the last months, the situation has worsened due to the sudden rise in food prices.

We are also severely hit by the crisis because many of us do not have enough land to feed our families, and because most producers do not benefit from those high prices. Large traders, speculators, supermarkets and industrial farms are cashing in on and benefiting from this crisis.

This current food crisis is the result of many years of deregulation

lation of agricultural markets, the privatization of state regulatory bodies and the dumping of agricultural products on the markets of developing countries. According to the FAO, liberalized markets have attracted huge cash flows that seek to speculate on agricultural products on the “futures” markets and other financial instruments.

The corporate expansion of agrofuels and the initially enthusiastic support for agrofuels in countries such as the US, EU and Brazil have added to the expectation that land for food will become more and more scarce.

On top of this in many southern countries hundreds of thousands of hectares are converted from agricultural uses in an uncontrolled way for so-called economic development zones, urbanization and infrastructure. The ongoing land grabbing by Transnational Companies (TNCs) and other speculators will expel millions more peasants who will end up in the mega cities where they will be added to the ranks of the hungry and poor in the slums.

Besides this, we may expect, especially in Africa and South Asia, more severe droughts and floods caused by global climate change. These are severe threats for the rural as well as for the urban areas.

These are highly worrying developments that need active and urgent action! We need a fundamental change in the approach to food production and agricultural markets!

Time to rebuild national food economies!

Rebuilding national food economies will require immediate and long-term political commitments from governments. An absolute priority has to be given to domestic food production in order to decrease dependency on the international market.

Peasants and small farmers should be encouraged through better prices for their farm products and stable markets to produce food for themselves and their communities.

Landless families from rural and urban areas have to get access to land, seeds and water to produce their own food. This means increased investment in peasant and farmer-based food production for domestic markets.

Governments have to provide financial support for the poorest consumers to allow them to eat. Speculation and extremely high prices forced upon consumers by traders and retailers have to be controlled. Peasants and small farmers need better access to their domestic markets so that they can sell food at fair prices for them-

selves and for consumers.

Countries need to set up intervention mechanisms aimed at stabilizing market prices. In order to achieve this, import controls with taxes and quotas are needed to avoid low-priced imports which undermine domestic production. National buffer stocks managed by the state have to be built up to stabilize domestic markets: in times of surplus, cereals can be taken from the market to build up the reserve stocks and in case of shortages, cereals can be released.

Regulating international markets and supporting countries to strengthen their food production

At the international level, stabilization measures also have to be undertaken. International buffer stocks have to be built up and an intervention mechanism put in place to stabilize prices on international markets at a reasonable level. Exporting countries have to accept international rules to control the quantities they can bring to the market, in order to stop dumping. The right to implement import controls, set up programs to support the poorest consumers, implement agrarian reform and invest in domestic, farmer peasant-based food production has to be fully respected and supported at the international level.

We ask the FAO, based on its mandate, to take the initiative and create the political environment for a fundamental change in food policies. In the International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD) a broad majority of governments recognized and agreed on the importance of rural development and agrarian reform to combat poverty and hunger in the rural areas.

The International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), an assessment of the agricultural sector that involved Civil Society organizations, the private sector, and governments as well as the FAO and the World Bank came to the conclusion that corporate-led agriculture and the increasing dependence of peasants and small farmers is at the heart of the problem.

They also concluded that peasant, and farmer-based sustainable agriculture has to be supported and strengthened. The International Fund on Agricultural Development (IFAD) also recognizes the key role of peasants and small farmers in the production of food.

We request that G8 governments allow these initiatives to be taken. They should stop the promotion of agrofuels as these are no solution for the climate crisis and add to the destruction of forests.

Especially in the southern countries, agrofuels occupy millions of hectares that should remain available for food production.

We also demand that the G8 analyze critically their own agricultural policies, take initiatives to stop the ongoing volatility of the international markets and shift their financial support away from industrial agriculture towards sustainable family farmer-based food production.

We also demand that the G8 stop and cancel any free trade agreements that will only contribute to the destruction of food production in developing countries and block any possibility of autonomous industrial development.

The influence of transnational corporations and financial speculative interests has to be controlled as much as possible and kept away from the international food market. Food is too important to be left to business alone.

A possible WTO agreement in the Doha Round will mean another blow for peasant-based food production. We demand that the governments of the G77 assess again the WTO negotiations on agriculture in the Doha round and reject any agreement that has negative implications for domestic food production and does not allow the taking of all necessary measures to strengthen food production and increase national self sufficiency.

Peasants and small farmers are the main food producers

La Via Campesina is convinced that peasants and small farmers can feed the world. They have to be the key part of the solution. With sufficient political will and the implementation of adequate policies, more peasants and small farmers, men and women, will easily produce sufficient food to feed the growing population. The current situation shows that changes are needed!

The time for Food Sovereignty has come!

Yours sincerely,

Henry Saragih

International Coordinator for La Via Campesina

Declaration of the Nyéléni Forum for Food Sovereignty

The Nyéléni Forum for Food Sovereignty was held in Mali, in February 2007. It was organized by an international committee that included La Via Campesina, Le Réseau des Organisations Paysannes et de Producteurs de l'Afrique de l'Ouest, and other groups.

We, more than 500 representatives from more than 80 countries, of organizations of peasants/family farmers, artisanal fisherfolk, indigenous peoples, landless peoples, rural workers, migrants, pastoralists, forest communities, women, youth, consumers and environmental and urban movements have gathered together in the village of Nyéléni in Sélingué, Mali to strengthen a global movement for food sovereignty. We are doing this, brick by brick, as we live here in huts constructed by hand in the local tradition, and eat food that is produced and prepared by the Sélingué community. We give our collective endeavor the name “Nyéléni” as a tribute to and inspiration from a legendary Malian peasant woman who farmed and fed her peoples well.

Most of us are food producers and are ready, able and willing to feed all the world's peoples. Our heritage as food producers is critical to the future of humanity. This is specially so in the case of women and indigenous peoples who are historical creators of knowledge about food and agriculture and are devalued. But this heritage and our capacities to produce healthy, good and abundant food are being threatened and undermined by neo-liberalism and global capitalism. Food sovereignty gives us the hope and power to preserve, recover and build on our food producing knowledge and capacity.

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation. It offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers and users.

Food sovereignty prioritizes local and national economies and

markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal — fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability.

Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just incomes to all peoples as well as the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations.

In Nyéléni, through numerous debates and interactions, we are deepening our collective understanding of food sovereignty and learning about the realities of the struggles of our respective movements to retain autonomy and regain our powers. We now understand better the tools we need to build our movement and advance our collective vision.

What are we fighting for?

A world where...

All peoples, nations and states are able to determine their own food producing systems and policies that provide every one of us with good quality, adequate, affordable, healthy and culturally appropriate food.

There is recognition and respect of women's roles and rights in food production, and representation of women in all decision making bodies.

All peoples in each of our countries are able to live with dignity, earn a living wage for their labour and have the opportunity to remain in their homes, if they so choose.

Food sovereignty is considered a basic human right, recognised and implemented by communities, peoples, states and international bodies.

We are able to conserve and rehabilitate rural environments, fish populations, landscapes and food traditions based on ecologically sustainable management of land, soils, water, seas, seeds, livestock and all other biodiversity.

We value, recognize and respect our diversity of traditional knowledge, food, language and culture, and the way we organize

and express ourselves.

There is genuine and integral agrarian reform that guarantees peasants full rights to land, defends and recovers the territories of indigenous peoples, ensures fishing communities' access and control over their fishing areas and eco-systems, honours access and control by pastoral communities over pastoral lands and migratory routes, assures decent jobs with fair remuneration and labour rights for all, and a future for young people in the countryside.

Agrarian reform revitalizes inter-dependence between producers and consumers, ensures community survival, social and economic justice, ecological sustainability, and respect for local autonomy and governance with equal rights for women and men.

Agrarian reform guarantees rights to territory and self-determination for our peoples.

We share our lands and territories peacefully and fairly among our peoples, be we peasants, indigenous peoples, artisanal fishers, pastoralists, or others.

In the case of natural and human-created disasters and conflict-recovery situations, food sovereignty acts as a form of "insurance" that strengthens local recovery efforts and mitigates negative impacts.

We remember that communities affected by disasters are not helpless, and where strong local organization for self-help is the key to recovery.

Peoples' power to make decisions about their material, natural and spiritual heritage are defended.

All peoples have the right to defend their territories from the actions of transnational corporations.

What are we fighting against?

Imperialism, neo-liberalism, neo-colonialism and patriarchy, and all systems that impoverish life, resources and ecosystems, and the agents that promote the above such as international financial institutions, the World Trade Organization, free trade agreements, transnational corporations, and governments that are antagonistic to their peoples.

The dumping of food at prices below the cost of production in the global economy.

The domination of our food and food producing systems by corporations that place profits before people, health and the environment.

Technologies and practices that undercut our future food produc-

ing capacities, damage the environment and put our health at risk. These include transgenic crops and animals, terminator technology, industrial aquaculture and destructive fishing practices, the so-called White Revolution of industrial dairy practices, the so-called “old” and “new” Green Revolutions, and the “Green Deserts” of industrial bio-fuel monocultures and other plantations.

The privatization and commodification of food, basic and public services, knowledge, land, water, seeds, livestock and our natural heritage.

Development projects/models and extractive industries that displace people and destroy our environments and natural heritage;

Wars, conflicts, occupations, economic blockades, famines, forced displacement of peoples and confiscation of their lands, and all forces and governments that cause and support these.

Post-disaster and conflict reconstruction programmes that destroy our environments and capacities.

The criminalization of all those who struggle to protect and defend our rights.

Food aid that disguises dumping, introduces GMOs into local environments and food systems and creates new colonialism patterns.

The internationalization and globalization of paternalistic and patriarchal values, that marginalize women, and diverse agricultural, indigenous, pastoral and fisher communities around the world.

What can and will we do about it?

Just as we are working with the local community in Sélingué to create a meeting space at Nyéléni, we are committed to building our collective movement for food sovereignty by forging alliances, supporting each others’ struggles and extending our solidarity, strengths, and creativity to peoples all over the world who are committed to food sovereignty. Every struggle, in any part of the world for food sovereignty, is our struggle.

We have arrived at a number of collective actions to share our vision of food sovereignty with all peoples of this world, which are elaborated in our synthesis document. We will implement these actions in our respective local areas and regions, in our own movements and jointly in solidarity with other movements. We will share our vision and action agenda for food sovereignty with others who are not able to be with us here in Nyéléni so that the spirit of Nyé-

léni permeates across the world and becomes a powerful force to make food sovereignty a reality for peoples all over the world.

Finally, we give our unconditional and unwavering support to the peasant movements of Mali and ROPPA in their demands that food sovereignty become a reality in Mali and by extension in all of Africa.

Now is the time for food sovereignty!

Fidel Castro:

‘The rich do not know hunger’

In 1974, the World Food Conference promised to end global hunger within a decade. After 22 years of failure, the 1996 World Food Summit adopted a new goal: to reduce hunger by 50% within 20 years. Of all the world leaders present, only Cuban President Fidel Castro condemned this retreat.

Hunger, the inseparable companion of the poor, is born of the unequal distribution of the wealth and of the world’s injustices. The rich do not know hunger.

Colonialism was not alien to the poverty and underdevelopment afflicting today a large segment of mankind. Neither is the offensive opulence and the squandering by the consumer societies of the former metropolis which have subjected to exploitation a large number of countries on Earth. Millions of people around the world have perished in struggle against hunger and injustice.

What kind of cosmetic solutions are we going to provide so that in 20 years from now there would be 400 million instead of 800 million starving people? The very modesty of these goals is shameful. If 35,000 people — half of them children — are starving to death every day, why is it that in the developed countries olive groves are being torn down, cattle herds are being sacrificed and large amounts of money are being paid so that the land is kept unproductive?

If the world is rightly moved by accidents and natural or social catastrophes that bring death to hundreds or thousands of people, why is it not equally moved by the genocide that is taking place every day in front of our eyes?

Intervention forces are organised to prevent the death of hundreds of thousands of people in eastern Zaire. What are we going to do to prevent the starvation of one million people every month in the rest of the world?

It is capitalism, neoliberalism, the laws of a wild market, external debt, underdevelopment and unequal terms of trade that are killing so many people in the world.

Why is \$700 billion invested every year in the military instead of investing a portion of those resources in fighting hunger, preventing the deterioration of the soils, the desertification and deforestation of millions of hectares every year, the warming up of the atmosphere and the greenhouse effect that increase the number of hurricanes, the scarcity or excess of rain, the destruction of the ozone layer and other natural phenomena which negatively affect food production and humanity's life on Earth?

Waters are polluted, the atmosphere is poisoned, and nature is destroyed. It is not only lack of investment, education and technologies or the accelerated pace of the population growth; the environment is deteriorating and the future that is growing more hazardous with every passing day.

Why are increasingly sophisticated weapons still being produced after the Cold War is over? What are those weapons for if not to dominate the world? Why is there ferocious competition to sell underdeveloped countries weapons that will not make them more able to defend their independence while they would rather be killing hunger?

Why are criminal policies and absurd blockades that include food and medicines being added to all this with the purpose of annihilating whole populations out of hunger and diseases? Where is the ethic, the justification, the respect for the most basic human rights and the common sense of such policies?

Let the truth prevail and not hypocrisy and deceit. Let us build an awareness on the fact that hegemonism, arrogance and selfishness must cease in this world.

The bells that are now tolling for those starving to death every day will tomorrow toll for all humanity if it refuses, or is unable, or is not wise enough to save itself.

Resources

Books

Frances Moore Lappe, Joseph Collins, Peter Rosset. *World Hunger: Twelve Myths*. Second Edition. Grove Press, 1998

Fred Magdoff, John Bellamy Foster, Frederick H. Buttel, editors. *Hungry for Profit: The Agribusiness Threat to Farmers, Food, and the Environment*. Monthly Review Press, 2000

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Websites

Climate and Capitalism. www.climateandcapitalism.com

Focus on the Global South. www.focusweb.org

Food and Agriculture Organization (UN). www.fao.org

Food First Institute. www.foodfirst.org/

Green Left Weekly. www.greenleft.org.au

Jubilee Debt Campaign. www.jubileedebtcampaign.org.uk

Nyeléni Forum for Food Sovereignty. www.nyeleni2007.org/

Socialist Voice. www.socialistvoice.ca

La Via Campesina. www.laviacampesina.org

Climate and Capitalism

Climate and Capitalism is an online journal focusing on ecology, climate change, and the ecosocialist alternative to capitalism and environmental destruction. It has three goals:

- To provide news and analysis to inform, educate and develop the green left around the world;
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