

People talk about problems with



On Thursday, March 22 the People's Food Commission is coming to the University of Alberta. If the word "commission" brings to mind dignitaries sitting at long tables and people standing nervously at microphones reading long, complicated reports, fear not! Governments have already perfected that style and the People's Food Commission (PFC) is not a government body. It is a forum for people interested in food problems to come together and discuss them.

But we don't have any food problems

There was a time when food was perceived in Canada as only a problem for underdeveloped countries. After all Canada is the "breadbasket" of the world, a farming country, there is lots to eat and no food problems here.

But why then do farmers want to pour milk over a federal cabinet minister and indulge in other news catching events? Obviously in order to get attention directed upon a problem that they know about even if no-one else does.

"The belief that there are no food problems in Canada is largely based on the fact that no-one has asked whether there are problems," says Jean Olynyk, PFC's Alberta co-ordinator.

"That is what the PFC is doing, asking for the feelings and perceptions of Canadians from all over the country about food."

Farmers, fishermen, cattle producers, truckers, store owners, workers, people running co-ops, restaurants, the list of people for whom food is central to the way they earn their living is a long one. They have much to say about how food is produced and distributed and what forces affect their ability to make a living. But there is an even larger group, those who must buy food every day, the consumer, us, aren't there problems that effect the ordinary consumer?

But who is asking?

The idea for a Food Commission grew out of meetings held about two years ago among several groups who had been working on the problem of food and famine in the third world. Interchurch and other religious organizations, the Ontario Public Interest Research Group and other non-governmental organizations decided to move away from exclusively underdevelopment issues, like the "green revolution" which failed, and into issues related to the production, distribution and consumption of food in Canada.

The Berger Commission on the construction of a northern pipeline was adopted as a model of how fact finding could be conducted which lets people speak out, in their own language and at their own pace.

Early funding for the commission was provided by CUSO, Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace, the Canadian Division of World Outreach and the Science Council of Canada. The Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC) provided some co-ordinating staff in Ontario, Saskatchewan and B.C. and in Alberta a co-ordinator was hired from monies provided by CUSO Alberta and CCIC Alberta.

Initial groundwork began in the fall of 1977 with the preparation of materials to be used across the country and initial contacts with farm, labour and church groups who could help with local contacts and



donations. Work began in Alberta in January 1978, just over a year ago.

Contacts were made with individuals and groups around the province from Medicine Hat to Peace River. These were designed to spread information about the Commission and prepare the way for hearings in these communities to come in the fall.

Most of the work was and is volunteer, there is only one paid staff person to keep in contact with people all around the province.

In July 1978 a commissioner for Alberta, Lucien Royer, was hired. The commissioner's role is multifaceted. He chairs the hearings accepting briefs, displays, songs, stories or skits whatever people bring to the hearings. He must also speak to the news media as the formal representative of the Commission. Finally he is responsible for compiling the Alberta region's contribution to the National Report the Commission will prepare once hearings are completed.

Although a copy of the National Report will be presented to the federal government the Commission does not see that as its primary purpose.

"Our focus is not the federal or provincial governments," says Jean Olynyk. "We want to have the people who are usually not heard, the low-income earners, working people, women, native people, the disadvantaged speaking to each other. We want to break down the antagonisms that have been building between consumers, workers and producers and make contacts between them. Most importantly we want to see a network develop that can maintain the links between these groups and continue after the process of hearings is completed."

"The Commission is a great experiment in public participation. We want people to find out what needs to be done to improve the food situation, not in generalities, but in very concrete and specific terms. People have to locate their own issues and see if they are shared with others, then make contact with those who face the same problems. The Food Commission is a vehicle for that process."

Hearings

Hearings for the PFC began spontaneously in September 1978 in Medicine Hat. Lucien Royer, the Commissioner, was visiting there to help arrange hearings for later in the fall but at the organizational meeting people arrived to present briefs to him. The meeting became a Commission hearing and has been recognized as the first People's Food Commission hearing in Canada.

Since then hearings, which can be any meeting with the Commissioner which discusses food related issues, have been held with as few as two and as many as sixty-five people. They have taken place in Cold Lake, an area north-east of Edmonton, during November. There farmers, trappers and fishermen

have spoken about marketing boards for grain, fish, the rising costs of needed equipment with equal increases in returns from the sale of produce, cost/price squeeze as it has come to be called, potential effects of the Cold Lake oil sands development and the licensing regulations for trapping.

Out of the hearings there came the realization many farmers were having similar problems with air force base in the area. Practice bombs had been dropped in fields, livestock was disturbed, promised compensation had not been received. Through the Commission the question was raised in the House of Commons and very quick response by the Air Force followed.

In Calgary during December, where a variety of groups and organizations presented twenty-five briefs on a range of food issues, it became apparent that in Calgary the Commission was in danger of becoming too formal in its hearing process. People were beginning to treat the Commission like a government fact finding mission and call upon it to initiate action on particular issues.

"People were assuming that we were some kind of organization and were looking to us for action instead of to themselves," Olynyk says.

"By announcing that the Commission was interested in receiving briefs that false image was developed."

"We've moved away from the brief format since then, although, of course, we are happy to receive written material and will be receiving some briefs at a university hearing. Now we simply ask people to come and talk about their problems. We record them and will carry the message to the rest of the country through the Regional and National Reports that will be prepared. How people organize themselves to work on other problems once they know what is going on across the country is up to them. We feel sure, however, that once contacts building up through the series of hearings will be the beginning of a much larger long-term process."

During late January and February hearings and meetings have taken place throughout north-east B.C. and north-western Alberta.

"The major concerns there are hydroelectric developments which will flood farm lands, the growth of large land holdings and the loss of second-hand processing industry to the south," Olynyk said.