

Farmers caught in food politics

The Politics of Food, by Don Mitchell, James Lorimer and Company, 1975. 235 pp.

Capitalism is a system that produces for profits rather than for human needs. This is so even in the production of the most important human necessity - food.

What else can be the case when 28 million eggs are destroyed; when farmers are paid not to grow wheat; when wheat reserves are cut back and when millions of acres of prime cultivated land are converted out of farming - while half-

billion of the world's population are suffering from malnutrition and millions are dying from starvation?

This is part of the picture that emerges from Don Mitchell's *The Politics of Food*. The book is a study of the Canadian food industry, dealing with, among other things, the inflation in food prices, the tremendous disparity in income and living standards between the owners of large-scale, capital-intensive farms and small Canadian farmers.

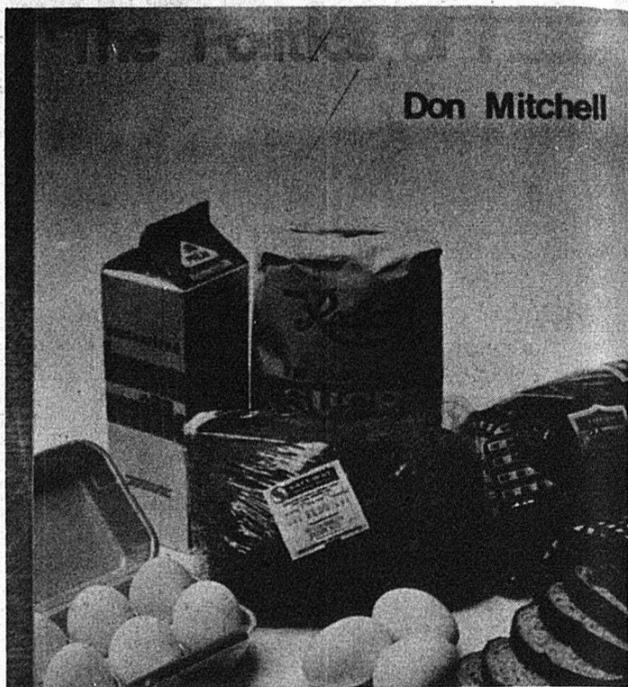
The Politics of Food focuses in on the bread, beef and milk industries, with a chapter on each. From August 1972 to August 1974, the retail price of these above-listed items increased 37 percent, 36 percent and 23 percent respectively. Adding to this calculation the subsidies Canadian consumers pay through taxation to the bread and milk corporations, the price increases soar to an incredible 60 percent for bread and 40 percent for milk!

Why have food prices been increasing like this?

Farmers are not responsible. They are caught in a squeeze play by big business.

Since 1945, to quote Mitchell, "the rate of increase in the combined costs of producing a commodity were rising faster than the gross return received by the farmer for the commodity when he sold it." In the case of wheat, the cost of farm inputs had increased 30 percent from 1961 to 1969 yet the price of wheat had dropped 27 percent. In 1974 the farmer's net income on a 36 cent loaf of bread was 1.2 cents.

Neither are farm workers to blame. According to the government, they are not even



eligible to receive the minimum wage.

They are not protected by child labor laws nor accident and sickness coverage. They are prevented by law from forming unions in Ontario (and most other provinces), which has the highest concentration of farm workers.

The source of food-price

inflation is agri-business and the market structure dominates. Like most sectors of the Canadian economy, the farm supply sector and the food and beverage industry (that agri-business) are characterized by high degrees of concentration and integration.

For example if we take the four largest agri-business corporations, they supply 67 percent of the tractor and combine market, 77 percent of the flour milling capacity, and account for 96 percent of breakfast cereal manufacturing. The three largest meat packers have 53 percent of the national market.

The integration of agri-business is seen in the massive empire of Argus Corporation. Dominion Stores, Canada's largest supermarket grocery chain and Massey-Ferguson, the largest Canadian-owned manufacturing firm, are controlled by one corporation, Argus.

Another example is Canada Packers, the largest Canadian food manufacturer. They own the second largest block of

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For further information contact Brian Mason, Executive Vice-president in the Students' Union offices, 2nd floor SUB (phone 432-4236).