



# starvation

by Malcolm Guy

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If Gerry Connolly invited you to lunch one day you might think twice before accepting...

Connolly is associate director of the American Freedom from Hunger Foundation. When he invites a group of people to a "banquet" he waits to serve the meal until stomachs are growling and heads begin to ache from hunger.

Then he serves one third of the guests juicy prime ribs, steaming baked potatoes and all the trimmings.

The other guests are served rice and tea.

In an original way, and on a minute scale, Connolly succeeds in reproducing the eating patterns of the world's population. A world where two thirds of the population is malnourished, half the people are hungry all the time, and 32 nations are close to starvation.

## Death by starvation

To most Canadians, hunger is an occasional pang of delayed meal or a skipped breakfast. But for an estimated 700 million people, hunger is common-place and the prospect of an agonizing death by starvation, a grim fact of life.

In the past few years Third World countries have united around the issue of food, bringing it into the limelight of international politics alongside the "energy crisis".

Last year's World Food Conference in Rome demonstrated a new trend in international relations. Third World countries at the Conference, standing together, demanded a better deal in their trade relationships with the economically developed countries, including Canada.

More recently, the 135-member United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization ended its stormiest meeting in its 30-year history. For the first time, the three-week conference saw

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confrontations between industrialized and developing nations.

In a demonstration of growing Third World power the Palestine Liberation Organization was granted observer status and Lebanon's Edouard Saouma was elected to the six-year post as FAO Director-General.

The Third World countries are no longer content to talk of the world food problem in terms of technical problems, such as fertilizer shortage, climatic changes, population growth, and inefficient farming methods.

These countries realize that the FAO and World Food conferences have been discussing food while ignoring the economic and political bases of these technical problems, and for years more and more of their people have been dying of starvation.

## Humanitarian concern

At the Rome conference and the recent FAO meeting, Canadian delegates continued to voice humanitarian concern for the plight of the starving masses and emphasized the need for more solid food aid to cope with the short-term crisis of starvation.

The Canadian delegations, like those from the U.S. and other developed countries, carefully avoided discussing the political dimensions of

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the food crisis.

Third World countries, on the other hand, challenged the wasting, hoarding and destruction of food resources and the recent cutbacks of food aid by the developed nations.

They challenged on a political level the trade and development policies of the developed powers and the channelling of food resources from the Third World through international agribusiness to the developed capitalist markets of Europe and North America. For these people know that the world food shortage is not a "technical problem".

Many food experts have admitted that in purely technical terms the world is capable of producing enough food to meet everyone's needs. For example, to dispell one common myth, in the world as a whole the production of food has outstripped the increases in population numbers.

The latest FAO figures show that between 1970 and 1985 the world population can be expected to grow at an annual rate of 2.1 per cent while the world's food production will grow by 2.7 per cent per year.

From 1962-72, population growth annually was 2.4 per cent while food production expanded 2.7 per cent annually. But, if this is the case, why are people still hungry?

## Maldistribution

The fact is that the world food problem is primarily a problem of distribution.

And it is becoming clearer that the controllers of food production and distribution in Canada are playing an important role in assuring that the majority of the world's people go to bed hungry.

Canada has a major export and import role in food products which ties it directly to the economies of other countries.

Don Mitchell, in his recent book *The Politics of Food* states that, "With a double role as both food colony and food colonizer, Canada has a complicated place in world food trade. In general Canada is dependent on the US for markets for food exports, and as a supplier of food imports. "But Canada also plays the role of colonizer in relationship to resource exporting countries of the Third World."

Canada is one of a group of developed capitalist countries, including the US, Europe and Japan, which consume a hog's share of food relative to world standards.

It is estimated that 210 million Americans consume as much food in grain equivalent as the 1.5 billion people who live in the most populated nations, India and China.

In total, the 20 per cent of the world's population that live in the most industrialized countries consume as much food as the other 80 per cent of the world's population.

In order to support the consumption habits of Canada and the other industrialized countries, the world's agricultural resources have been gradually converted toward the production of

luxury and high protein food commodities, such as sugar, meat, tea, coffee and fruits.

Third World countries are drained to feed the already overfed populations of developed countries while their own populations are starving. This can be most clearly illustrated by the sugar industry in the US and Canada.

## 'Sweet-tooth' diet

Sugar is a luxury commodity which caters to the "sweet-tooth" diet of the developed countries. In the North American diet, sugar and grain are included in virtually every article of consumption with the exception of fresh fruit and vegetables. Sugar is one of Canada's major food imports, since only 12 per cent of total market needs are filled by sugar beets in western Canada.

Canadian sugar refineries, as part of the international sugar cartel, profit directly from the apartheid policies of South Africa and the exploitation of land resources and labour in other third world countries.

Up to 1973, an International Sugar Agreement kept prices stable but low relative costs of production. This meant that the hiring of cheap black labour in South Africa and the exploitative labour conditions in other countries was encouraged. In Canada it was not profitable, even with migrant farm workers, to maintain the sugar beet industry.

But this did not mean that the North American price of retail sugar was necessarily a bargain. As in other segments of the food industry, large monopoly companies and cartels were controlling the price, and had the power to pass on inflationary price increases despite their overly cheap supplies.

In Canada, the big three Eastern refineries of Atlantic Sugar, Redpath Industries, and St. Lawrence Sugar are part of the international cartel of sugar refineries and have twice been dragged into federal courts for alleged price fixing at artificially high levels, with little effect.

## Sugar shortage

When sugar prices rose in 1974, it was a result of speculation by the refineries themselves and petty speculators. It started from rumours of a world shortage of sugar, even though production at that time matched demands.

Fears of purchasing and hoarding by Arab countries, holding of supplies by refineries, and threatened cutbacks in production by some sugar producing countries (where sugar plantations were almost all foreign owned), pushed prices up and panic spread throughout the fall of 1974. The price rose from \$16 per hundred weight in August 1973, to \$72 per hundred by December 1974.

Since 60 per cent of the Canadian market for sugar is for industrial use in canned fruits, soft drinks, confectionaries and baked goods, a jump in sugar prices affects a great many consumer items. The sugar refineries exploited the

situation by placing the bulk of the supplies onto the market at the real price.

Eventually the panic subsided and the price of raw sugar dropped to \$40 per hundred weight or a 40 per cent wholesale decline in price.

Meanwhile, in the stores the price dropped only 30 per cent.

The refineries had no obligation to completely return to earlier prices for refined sugar. When they decided to increase their margin of profit, they had the power to decide what the price of refined sugar would be.

The candy manufactures, bakeries, canneries, ice cream plants and so on, naturally climbed on the band wagon and all the products with sugar additives remained at higher price levels even after the price of sugar fell.

This example of price manipulation is the sugar industry demonstrates how closely the Canadian food industry and the Canadian consumer are tied into the world food structure.

Canadian sugar refineries and companies using sugar benefit from exploitation of third world labour and at the same time exploit the consumer at home.

The food industries in the developed countries are intimately connected to the state. Through a system of trade and tariff policies and protection of the interests of huge monopoly companies the Canadian government, amongst others, supports the present inequitable distribution of food in the world.

## 'Bread basket' of the globe

Along with sugar, the other main constituent of Canadian diet is grain. Canada has always been considered a major supplier of world grain reserves, with the wide expanses of the prairies viewed as the "bread basket" of the globe.

And, it is true that Canada contributes substantially to world food markets. We are second in volume as a food exporter to the United States, supplying, for instance 20 per cent of all wheat exports.

Yet, and here comes the crunch, we produce less than our capacity and we produce for markets that are least in need of our resource. Contrary to the myths about feeding the hungry masses of the world, 80 per cent of our agricultural exports go to European, Japanese, and American markets.

Since the demand for our food produces comes from these primary trading partners, they control to a great extent what Canadian farms produce.

At the moment their demand is shifting from cereal crops to protein crops, animal feed grains and beef and pork products.

What this has meant in Canada is a reduction in wheat and other grain production and the starving millions in need of Canadian grain are very quickly forgotten in the rush to fill the very profitable demands of European, US and Japanese buyers.

The Soviet Union as well as the other leading capitalist powers, has played an important part in contributing to the rapidly rising price of grains in the world market.

## 'Great grain rip-off'

After the world's largest wheat producer had a disastrous crop in 1972, Russian buyers took part in what has become known as the "Great Grain Rip-off".

They raided the US wheat market and helped drive the price of wheat up from less than \$2 per bushel to over \$6 per bushel in a matter of twelve months. Under the guise of "detente" the Russian government had pulled a fast one on the Americans.

The disastrous effects on consumers of the Russian government's tactics were felt all over the world. This deal affected world prices, which tripled, contributed to further hardships in the Third World, and created higher domestic prices in Canada on bread flour, cereal products and meat products.

The examples of the grain prices in 1973 and sugar prices in 1974, each of which in their respective years was the greatest single contributor to overall food prices on a world scale, are not unique.

They represent a major feature of food distribution under capitalism and are the primary

source of the world food crisis.

The large food companies and monopolies in Canada such as the sugar refineries cartel, Weston family empire and the Argus Corporation and Canada Packers represent a trend in advanced capitalist countries towards monopoly control of the food industry. It is these companies which benefit directly from the spiralling prices of wheat, sugar and other foodstuffs.

In contrast to the general levels of foreign ownership found in manufacturing and resource industries, the proportion of US ownership of the food beverage and farm supply sectors in Canada is small.

The dominant source of capital investment for agribusiness in Canada has been Canadian banks, investments and the network of Canadian capitalists centered in Toronto's Bay Street.

But the Canadian-based food corporations are no more responsive or accountable to the needs of the Canadian people or the people of the world than American branch plants.

## Weston's monopoly

For instance, Weston is Canada's largest food corporation, and it has companies located in Britain, Australia, Ireland, Rhodesia has been South Africa as well as representatives in many others.

The monopoly consequently has a stranglehold

Despite all the rhetoric that you hear from Canadian government representatives at the food conferences, the lion's share of the food and animal feed moving in world market is streaming into the well-fed Western World.

For example: one half of all beans and peas, nine tenths of the peanuts and three quarters of the oilseed cake from soybeans and peanuts. Food is marketed on the basis of profitability, as the examples of sugar and wheat have shown before.

Canadian companies and governments have taken part in the raising of prices of staples such as sugar and wheat and the diversion of food products from countries where they are grown and needed.

Canada has been a very important factor in turning the agricultural resources of third world countries toward the production of "luxury" high protein food commodities to support the highly profitable marketing of cash crops such as sugar in the industrialized countries.

In 1974, the Canadian Council for International Co-operation claimed that, "Rich countries export three million tons of average protein high profit grains to poor countries while four million tons of high protein foods flow from poor countries to rich countries each year. The rich have the power to command food from the market which is denied to the poor."

Through the export of capital, the use of tariffs, and other devices, the Canadian capitalists take part in the imperialist division of labour that creates a situation where people die of starvation in the midst of plenty.



on the Canadian economy and influences the world market. Weston's involvement in South Africa and Rhodesia has been particularly rewarding and humanitarian considerations have disappeared.

The exploited indigenous work force, and the racist governments the police it and keep it in place, have long made these nations a favoured haunt of multinational corporations such as Weston.

Through large monopoly corporations such as Weston, and through government policies that protect the big companies, the affluent, developed countries dictate the flow of food items in the world market.

The fact that these distributive problems are basic to other food production problems and that these distributive problems have a political nature is illustrated by the case of China.

Before the socialist revolution in China, the population was ravaged by problems of starvation and malnutrition. It was only through the socialist revolution that it was possible to bring about the end of an exploitative economic system that had served other country's imperialist interests.

By creating an economic system that provides a fairer distribution of goods among the people, the Chinese have been able to employ science and technology to their potential and it is in this way that they have reached the point of virtual self sufficiency in food production.

Despite the fact that the Chinese do not have a very high standard of living, both their diet and their general living standard are at an acceptable level.

## Malnutrition: unknown in China

Because of their distribution system, starvation and serious malnutrition problems are unknown in China today.

As the Chinese delegation pointed out at the World Food Conference, in the three previous years, China's \$2 billion in food imports of grain, mostly comprised of wheat, had been balanced by about \$2 billion in food exports, mostly of rice, including food aid to other countries in Southeast Asia.

Enforcing this policy of self-reliance, in which food trade mainly serves to create variety in their diets, has only been possible because of land reforms and collectivization after the revolution. This has been a most significant achievement in a country of 800 million people with a minimal amount of mechanization.

In contrast to India, the Chinese example shows the crucial importance of political change in conquering the food problem.

The two countries have about the same population size and massive agricultural lands. In the past 25 years they have both had the world's scientific advances in agriculture available to them to improve their situation.

While China has taken the political steps necessary to make scientific advances serve the population, India still has problems of starvation and malnutrition because class, caste, regional distinctions and other forms of oppression continue to exist.

The people in power in Canada are very content to see the world food situation problem remain unchanged.

The problem of maintaining high profit levels by cutting down on grain storage, the destruction of vast amounts of food, as was common during the great depression and more recently the case of the 28 million rotten eggs that were destroyed in Canada are good examples of agricultural waste and manipulation that is involved in maintaining an economic system that clearly does not meet the needs of the majority of the world's population.

In Canada, like India and the other countries of the world, food is an indispensable commodity. In Canada, there are different people in our midst dying of both overconsumption and malnutrition. This is the exact situation in the world at large.

If one looks at some of the meetings and conference that have taken place in the past two years-The Law of the Seas conference, the World Population conference, and the World Food conference-it is immediately clear that they have all been marked by debates between the developing countries, debates revolving around the issue of how to get what resource from where, and how.

The successful formation of a cartel by the OPEC countries to control their hard won oil resources has sparked similar moves by other countries around commodities such as bauxite and bananas.

The Third World countries are now realizing that their strength lies in their unity against the countries that have exploited them.

The great scientific and technical breakthroughs of the past decades have released a tremendous potential to feed the entire world-and feed it well.

Yet, exploitative economic relations, inherent in capitalist and imperialist powers such as Canada and the remnants of feudalism in many parts of the world, prevent technical innovations from being effective in solving the food problem. These economic problems create inequality, poverty and prevent the people of the world from dealing with rapid population growth and starvation. The world food problem is a political problem, and will only be solved with a political solution.

## Imperialist Control

Third World people are becoming more aware that malnutrition and food shortage is a result of imperialist control of food production and distribution by countries such as Canada.