

# SOWING ANTI-SEMITISM

*The Jewish Stake in the Farm Crisis*



by Frank D. Hornstein

**T**ony Dryak's voice was filled with emotion as he addressed a gathering of 150 farmers and Jews at Temple Israel in Minneapolis last January. Dryak, an Ohio farmer facing foreclosure, spoke of his personal bond with the Jewish community and what farming had come to mean to his immigrant family. "My family was driven off our land in Czechoslovakia by the Nazis. My father resisted the occupation as a member of the Czech underground . . . Now we are in danger of being driven off the land again, and I am determined that we will not be uprooted a second time. . . . I know, that as a Jewish community which has suffered so much prejudice, isolation, and uprootedness throughout your history, you can understand, perhaps better than most urban Americans, the plight of the farmer today."

Dryak, an activist with the Ohio family farm movement, was one of many farmers, rabbis, and Jewish communal leaders participating in a "Farmer-Urban Dialogue," a program that included one-on-one exchanges between farmers and Jews meant

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to sensitize each community to the concerns of the other, sponsored by the Jewish Community Relations Council—ADL of Minnesota and the Family Farm Organizing Resource Center.

"Farmers are looking for various kinds of urban support, while Jews are interested in helping farmers and rural clergy to discredit fringe elements in the farm movement that tend to blame the agricultural crisis on a Jewish banking conspiracy," said Paul Wellstone, a political science professor at Carleton College in rural Northfield, Minnesota who helped to arrange the meeting.

Wellstone is active in Minnesota Groundswell, a rural farm protest group that emphasizes peaceful demonstrations, provides crisis counseling to troubled farmers and lobbies elected officials for changes in farm legislation.

On the same January weekend that members of Groundswell and other farm groups were meeting with Jews and discussing constructive strategies for dealing with the farm crisis, radical right-wing farm organizers were drawing large crowds in such rural Minnesota communities as Clarksfield and Worthington, part of a January "tour" organized by Georgia farmer Tommy Kersey and Oklahoma activist Larry Humphreys, both of whom have strong ties to the Christian Identity Movement, which blames the farm crisis on a Jewish/Zionist conspiracy. Christian

Identity, a white supremacist theology, preaches that Jews are the children of Satan, and Aryan Christians are the "lost sheep of the House of Israel." Identity theology is often the glue that binds various factions of the radical right, including the Posse Comitatus, National Agricultural Press Association, Aryan Nations and the Populist Party. Humphreys and Kersey both advocate violence as a means to stop foreclosures. They recruit farmers by advertising "do-it-yourself legal tactics," which law enforcement officials say do nothing to enhance a farmer's chance of preventing foreclosure. Dan Levitas, an organizer for the progressive Iowa farm group Prairiefire, believes "the January tour of Kersey and Humphreys marks a significant and disturbing change in both the nature of the far-right's approach to violence, as well as its success." Leonard Zeskind, a researcher for the Atlanta-based Center for Democratic Renewal, estimates that anti-Semitic groups have between 2,000 and 5,000 activists.

While these numbers at first glance may appear small, in a sparsely populated area even a dozen activists are a substantial political force. There is a growing potential for farmers to support extremist solutions to the farm crisis if their plight worsens in the coming months. Findings in a recent Harris poll, commissioned by the ADL, suggest that the majority of farmers reject anti-Semitic groups. The poll,

Illustration by Lee Bearson

however, also revealed a startling statistic—that 75% of farmers surveyed believe the farm crisis is caused in part by “Big International Bankers,” which the far-right associates with Jews.

The main causes of the current farm crisis are deflated land values, high interest rates and the drying up of an export market for American agricultural projects. The most important cause, however, is artificially low farm prices that do not reflect the true “supply and demand” of agricultural markets. One farm activist recently pointed out that, because the individual farmer is a small player in a large market, a few multinational marketing companies determine the return farmers receive for their products. It is the buyer, not the seller, who sets the prices. The structural inequality of the American food distribution system is reflected in Department of Agriculture statistics for 1980, which indicate that, for every dollar the American consumer spent on food, marketing and processing companies took 69¢, farm suppliers drew 27¢, and farmers received only 4¢. In many cases the cost of a cardboard cereal box is higher than the farmer receives for the food it contains. In addition, the billions of dollars of government subsidies, price supports and tax credits often are more advantageous to large corporate farms than to small and medium-sized family operations.

One of the major consequences of the current crisis is an unprecedented exodus from farming communities. According to the Census Bureau, 399,000 people left their farms in 1985. In areas hardest hit by the farm crisis, such as Iowa and Minnesota, 30% of the farmers may lose their land in the next 18 months. The severity of this economic depression has led to a marked increase in suicides and child and spouse abuse. The farm crisis also affects non-farmers and small towns. As many as five jobs are lost for each family farm failure. Some small midwestern communities resemble ghost towns, with the resulting migration contributing to urban unemployment and homelessness. As farmers are displaced, land ownership becomes highly concentrated among such absentee-owners as banks, insurance companies and agribusinesses. Bishop Maurice Dingman of the Catholic Diocese of Des Moines believes that the concentration of land ownership inevitably leads to social instability. “Our goal should be widespread ownership of land. That is what made our country great.” Yet, current governmental policies have done little or nothing to alleviate the suffering of farmers and rural Americans. In a particularly ominous move, the Farmer’s Home Administration, one of the major government farm lenders, recently sent foreclosure notices to 70,000 farmers.

The Jewish community, long active in social action, is only now beginning to address the farm crisis issue. Until recently, hardships in the farm sector were

not part of the Jewish social action agenda. Jewish leaders, however, began to recognize the farm crisis as a significant issue following the airing of a controversial segment of the ABC news program 20/20 last August, which dealt with the involvement of neo-Nazi and other radical right-wing groups in the farm belt. While the broadcast may have left a false impression that the majority of farmers support violent and anti-Semitic organizations, it did note the correlation between economic desperation and anti-Semitic activity. Following the 20/20 program, Rabbi James A. Rudin of the American Jewish Committee toured the rural midwest and concluded, “While farmers are no more anti-Semitic than anyone else, they admit that their friends and relatives are more vulnerable to propaganda because of the economic crisis.” Rudin believes it is critical for the Jewish community to support clergy and

crisis. The positive answer is an economic solution that provides a just price for farm products and assures the farmer a fair return on his investment. Such groups thrive on injustice; we must be advocates for justice.”

Reform congregations throughout the midwest can replicate the successful dialogues between farmers and Jews that have occurred in both Minneapolis and, last March, at Isaac M. Wise Temple in Cincinnati by contacting farm groups and others who are eager to combat anti-Semitism and solve the farm crisis. As Prairiefire’s Dan Levitas has pointed out, “Fighting rural anti-Semitism is the responsibility of Christian clergy, farm organizations and civic leaders. The Jewish community can play a valuable role in influencing that effort and providing input.”

Equally important is a concerted polit-



Farm rally in London, Ohio.

democratic farm organizations that, he asserts, are “the first line of defense against anti-Semitism in rural areas.”

To that end, Rudin invited two prominent Iowa clerics, Bishop Dingman of Des Moines, and Reverend Donald Manworren, executive director of the Iowa Inter-Church Forum, to speak at an American Jewish Committee-sponsored news conference in New York last September. Reverend Dingman works closely with the Community Relations Commission of the Jewish Federation of Greater Des Moines and has played a leading role in the ecumenical efforts to respond to agrarian anti-Semitism. According to Dingman, “Disgruntled people who have nowhere to turn will give hearing to demagogues who blame the Jews for their problems. How do we address these hate-groups? The best way to counter their propaganda is to take the issue away from them. Solve the farm

ical campaign to press for a just and equitable solution to the farm crisis that would include a temporary moratorium on foreclosures, restructuring of farmers’ debt loads and instituting policies that guarantee farmers a fair price in the marketplace.

The family farm system historically has been the most economically efficient and environmentally compatible method of growing food in America. Urban residents have a real interest in saving family farms, which have yielded high-quality, relatively low cost meats, cheeses and produce for American consumers. As Jews we have a special responsibility to aid clergy and farm groups that struggle to provide farmers and rural residents with constructive, non-violent alternatives to the anti-Semites and radical groups that are attracting a small but growing following in the farm belt. ★