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Crise alimentaire, crise agricole et l'agro-industrie canado-québécoise

Ian Angus, éditeur du site web « Socialist Voice » de Vancouver et un des chefs de file du nouveau courant mondial écosocialiste, démontre comment la combinaison du développement du modèle agro-industriel dans le tiers monde (la « révolution verte »), l'imposition du libre-échange à ces pays sur fond de fort protectionnisme agricole dans les pays impérialistes (les « programmes d'ajustement structurel »), la crise climatique (sécheresses) et la crise pétrolière (agrocarburants) non seulement causent la flambée inflationniste des denrées de base mais aussi ont rendu ces pays complètement dépendants des pays impérialistes pour leur alimentation (l'arme alimentaire).

Un cas d'espèce de cette analyse à un pays exportateur de grains et légumineuses comme le Canada est l'Argentine où a eu lieu une récente grève des grands producteurs qui refusaient que leurs lucratives exportations de soya soient taxées par le gouvernement. L'analyste de Via Campesina, dans le bref texte ci-joint, conclue en la nécessité de « *la réforme agricole intégrale et la souveraineté alimentaire, ce qui implique un changement de modèle agricole.* »

Dans Le Devoir de ce matin (27/04/08), Christian Lacasse, nouveau président de l'UPA (<http://www.ledevoir.com/2008/04/28/187195.html>), donne son opinion sur la crise alimentaire. Il fait certes un diagnostic mettant en cause la mondialisation et la spécialisation agro-exportatrice imposée par la Banque mondiale mais ignore les conséquences de l'effet de serre et les agrocarburants. Il en conclue à la nécessité de la souveraineté alimentaire mais ignore celle du « *changement de modèle agricole* ». Ne remettant pas en cause le modèle agro-industriel, il ne peut mettre en évidence sa contribution à l'effet de serre et son intérêt pour les agrocarburants.

Michel Morisset, professeur de la faculté d'agriculture de l'Université Laval, toujours dans Le Devoir de ce matin (27/04/08) (<http://www.ledevoir.com/2008/04/28/187186.html>), n'a rien à foutre de la souveraineté alimentaire promouvant plutôt « *...une agriculture capable de supporter la concurrence mondiale actuelle...* » Sur cette base, il rejette le rapport Pronovost en n'en soulignant cependant certaines faiblesses dont celle de rejeter l'UPA, n'excluant pas toutefois une limitation de son pouvoir, ce qui se ferait au bénéfice non pas de l'Union paysanne mais de « *l'Association québécoise des industries de nutrition animale et céréalière (AQINAC)* ». Il souligne certains points positifs du rapport dont « *...l'assurance stabilisation du revenu agricole qui devrait être réformée, les prix des quotas qui devraient être plafonnés...* »

En particulier, il a raison de souligner que « *[l]a tendance lourde est aux super et mégamarchés. En conséquence, sans une industrie de transformation forte, il n'y aura pas d'agriculture de masse au Québec. M. Morisset soutient en outre que le nationalisme alimentaire québécois est battu en brèche par l'extraordinaire disponibilité à bas prix, qui provient de trois distributeurs contrôlant 90 % du marché et pouvant s'approvisionner partout dans le monde. Quant aux produits de niche et du terroir, ils sont essentiellement réservés au repas festif du samedi soir...* » Comme lui aussi considère la modèle agro-industriel indépassable, il ne voit de porte de sortie que dans sa rentabilisation. Finalement, Christian Lacasse et Michel Morisset se rejoignent en préconisant le même modèle, le premier dans une perspective protectionniste, le second libre-échangiste.

Pourtant, Michel Morisset met partiellement le doigt sur le bobo en soulignant la concentration des fermes rentables : « *Les fermes ayant des revenus de 100 000 \$ et moins, soit près de 20 000 fermes [les deux tiers des fermes existantes], généraient [seulement] 10 % des revenus bruts globaux.* » Si on ajoute à cette information, l'endettement des fermes dont Michel Morisset ne parle pas contrairement au rapport Pronovost qui affirme que « *l'endettement sans précédent des agriculteurs* », relativement plus important de 50% qu'en Ontario et plus du triple qu'aux ÉU et qui « *a doublé au cours des dix dernières années* », provoque « *la baisse des revenus agricoles* ». Malheureusement le rapport Pronovost n'en tire aucune conclusion de réforme agricole pas plus qu'à propos de l'hyper-concentration de la distribution. Pour la transformation, aussi passablement concentrée, le rapport Pronovost recommande des aides de toutes sortes afin qu'elle devienne mondialement plus compétitive, rejoignant ainsi le libre-échange de Michel Morisset.

Sans une remise en cause de la concentration capitaliste des fermes, même au Canada et au Québec, de l'endettement des fermes, même des plus grandes, de la monopolisation des industries en amont et en aval de la production agricole, y compris pour la distribution aux consommateurs, et sans remise en question des modes de consommation et d'habitation, y compris les rapports ville-campagne, on sera coincé entre le Charybde du libre-échange et le Scylla du protectionnisme.

Marc Bonhomme, 27 avril 2008

FOOD CRISIS: The greatest demonstration of the historical failure of the capitalist model

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 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 Prével, 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 Cambodia, 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 companies. 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 development 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. This increases the prices of agrofuel 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, since 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 costs of growing corn are fossil fuel costs — so it is no accident that food prices rise when oil prices rise.

* * *

By the end of 2007, reduced investment in the third world, 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 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." [9]

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, to describe the food crisis as "the greatest demonstration of the historical failure of the capitalist model."

What needs to be done to end this crisis, and to ensure that doesn't happen again? Part Two of this article will examine those questions.

Footnotes

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Source : Socialist Voice, www.socialistvoice.ca

Agriculture ? Ce dont on ne parle pas en Argentine.

Par Mocase-Vía Campesina *

Página 12 . Buenos Aires, le 25 avril 2008.

En Argentine vivent 280 000 familles nombreuses issues de 22 peuples indigènes, et 220 000 familles paysannes, soit au moins 1.5 million de personnes. Elles ne produisent pas du soja ni ne sont dans l'agrobusiness, elles sèment des denrées et élèvent des animaux pour l'autoconsommation et ont une relation spéciale avec la terre : elles ne la considèrent pas comme un moyen de faire des affaires, mais se considèrent comme faisant partie d'elle, de leur culture, leur histoire et comme un bien commun des prochaines générations. Ces deux acteurs centraux, peuples originaires et paysannerie, ont systématiquement été exclus du débat du mois dernier, où les quatre organismes les plus traditionnels et conservateurs de l'agriculture argentine ont mené une grève patronale inédite dans le pays.

La Société Rurale (MME), les Confédérations Rurales (CRA), la Confédération Intercoopérative Agricole (Coninagro) et la Fédération Agricole (FAA) se sont mobilisées et ont cessé d'approvisionner en biens alimentaires les grandes villes avec un principal objectif : l'augmentation de leur rentabilité, bénis par le prix international du soja. Les agriculteurs, qu'ils soient grands ou petits, n'ont à aucun moment couru le moindre danger de pertes économiques, mais en effet (après une mesure fiscale de l'État) ils ont été sur le point de gagner moins d'argent que prévu.

Pendant des semaines de manifestations et de joutes verbales sur des tons variés, les organismes traditionnels et le Gouvernement ont fait silence sur les sujets suivants :

Affaires : Sur le marché de l'agrobusiness mondial, l'Argentine est vu comme un élève modèle. En 1997, en Argentine on a récolté onze millions de tonnes de soja transgénique et on a utilisé six millions d'hectares. Dix ans plus tard, en 2007, la récolte a atteint 47 millions de tonnes, en comprenant 16.6 millions d'hectares. L'Argentine est le troisième exportateur mondial de grain de soja (après les Etats-Unis et le Brésil) et le premier d'huile. Les exportations de soja et de ses dérivés, en 2007, se sont élevées à 11 milliards de dollars. L'Argentine ne produit déjà plus de denrées alimentaires et dans le pays on ne mange pas du soja. La demande provient d'Europe et de Chine, où elle est utilisée pour l'alimentation animale.

Déplacements : Le modèle d'agrobusiness basé sur le soja transgénique a délogé, durant les dernières dix années, 300 000 familles de paysans et indigènes, qui ont eu comme destin les quartiers appauvris des grandes villes.

Déforestation : En seulement quatre ans, et à cause de l'avancée des cultures du soja, 1.108.669 des hectares de forêts premières ont disparu, 277 000 hectares par an, ce qui équivalent à 760 par jour, 32 hectares à l'heure.

Concentration : Le modèle agricole actuel, basé sur l'exportation et la production intensive, génère une plus grande concentration. Le dernier recensement agricole le confirme : dix pour cent des « exploitations agricoles » les plus grandes concentrent 78% des terres, tandis que 60% des propriétés les plus petites occupent à peine cinq pour cent de la surface cultivable du pays.

Chômage : Mille hectares de soja peuvent être travaillés par seulement quatre personnes. Une exploitation laitière avec cette surface requiert, au minimum, vingt personnes. Si cette portion de terre était entre les mains de familles paysannes indigènes, cela donnerait du travail à 350 personnes.

Santé : Les campagnes argentines ont été arrosés la dernière année de 165 millions de litres de glyphosate, un herbicide toxique dénoncé pour causer des malformations aux nouveaux nés, des avortements spontanés, des cancers et la

mort. Les accusations se tournent vers le plus grand semencier du monde : Monsanto.

Entreprises : Les entreprises qui ont la plus grande rentabilité de la filière soja (exportatrices et fournisseurs de facteurs de production) sont Monsanto, Dupont, Syngenta, Bayer, Nidera, Cargill, Bunge, Dreyfus, Dow et Basf, entre autres. Aucune d'elles n'a été interrogée dans le conflit récent.

Exploitation : 1.3 million de personnes travaillent la terre. Le salaire moyen courant est de 1.250 pesos par mois (251,44 Euro au 25/04/2008). L'État lui-même, considère le paysan comme le travailleur le plus mal rémunéré, celui qui souffre des pires conditions de travail et d'exploitation. Il est payé avec des repas et des logements précaires, dans des conditions proches de l'esclavage. En outre, 75% d'entre eux travaille « au noir », sans contrat de travail, ni couverture de santé, ni cotisation pour la retraite, ni assurances en cas d'accidents.

Différences : Pendant la grève patronale, on a utilisé comme fer de lance la situation d'un « petit producteur » avec 100 hectares. Dans des termes purement économiques : chaque hectare est loué à 200 pesos par mois, 20.000 pesos chaque trente jours, 240.000 pesos par an pour louer leur terre. Si ce propriétaire est un « petit producteur », comment devrait-on appeler une famille paysanne ou indigène qui vit avec vingt hectares, cent chèvres et un potager pour sa consommation ?

Futur : L'industrie agricole a deux prochains objectifs en Argentine : inclure dans son affaire dix millions d'hectares (au détriment des producteurs familiaux) et les agrocombustibles (la création de combustible à partir de soja), affaire avec lequel ils prétendent récupérer quelque quatre autres millions d'hectares aux paysans et indigènes.

Un autre modèle : Le Mouvement National Paysan Indigène (MNCI), qui regroupe 15.000 familles de sept provinces argentines, n'a pas été inclus dans les discussions. Le MNCI, qui a des similitudes avec le Mouvement Sans Terre du Brésil et les zapatistes mexicains, favorise l'organisation des plus pauvres et marginalisés de la campagne argentine, la base de la pyramide rurale. Deux de leurs propositions centrales sont la réforme agricole intégrale et la souveraineté alimentaire, ce qui implique un changement de modèle agricole. Une question de fond qu'aucun des quatre organismes traditionnels, ni le Gouvernement, ne veulent aborder.

* Mouvement paysan Santiago del Estero - Via Campesina. Formé par 9.000 familles de la forêt, qui vivent de ce qu'elles produisent et rejettent le modèle du soja.

Source : ATTAC-France et Pagina 12