

## Excerpts from "Using History to Make History? Progressive Farm Organizing During the Farm Revolt of the 1980s," 1996

AN IMPORTANT PART of the background of recent farm insurgencies was the relative lack of response of well-established farm groups such as the National Farmers Union (NFU) and the National Farmers Organization (NFO). As a result, the American Agriculture Movement (AAM) emerged in the late 1970s. AAM-sponsored tractorcades to Washington and a number of state capitals were dramatic, but internal disunity and lack of a coherent program soon undercut the new group. Although the AAM unofficially backed Ronald Reagan in the 1980 election, members grew disenchanted with his administration's handling of the deepening agricultural crisis. AAM played a part in the farm insurgency of the 1980s, yet the organization of many smaller groups such as the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition or Minnesota's Groundswell indicates that AAM's appeal had declined. AAM split into two separate organizations in the early 1980s and had to share the stage with many other groups.

During the 1980s organizers on the left and right struggled to win the allegiance of the distressed family farmer. AAM, at least in some respects, represented farmers in motion rather than in a movement, and competing groups with a message sought to win over the rural population. When the farm crisis worsened in the 1980s, the stakes were raised. One of the big stories of the decade was the growth of right-wing extremism in the countryside. Although the Posse Comitatus attracted the most attention, many promoters of conspiracy theories, anti-Semitism, and other mean-spirited notions found fertile soil for their ideas in rural America.\* Yet there also was a major effort to counter these tendencies and shift the farm uprising to the left.

The left had suffered serious setbacks among American farmers after World War II, but a remnant of the agrarian left survived the Cold War. Its organizational center was the small U.S. Farmers Association (USEA). The USEA had an office in Hampton, Iowa, and published a monthly newspaper, U.S. Farm News. Ered Stover had headed the USEA since its formation in the 1950s. Eighty-two years old in 1980, he had a long record of backing left-wing causes. He had supported Henry A. Wallace's 1948 presidential campaign and opposed the Korean War. Formerly affiliated with the NEU, Stover's group was kicked out of the liberal farm organization because of his politics. The USEA slogan of "peace and parity" on the masthead of the U.S. Farm News was amended in the late 1960s to include "and power to the people." Unlike other farm groups in the United States, the USEA publicly opposed the Vietnam War. Stover himself was an effective speaker and began appearing on college campuses. As a result, he and the USEA attracted attention in antiwar circles. Some young activists joined Stover's group over the next decade, and several of them played a central role in the farm revolt of the 1980s."

The younger people were impressed with the old-timers they met at the annual USFA meeting. These individuals included veterans of the Nonpartisan League, the Socialist and Communist parties, the 1948 Wallace campaign and, of course, the Farmers' Holiday of the 1930s. In early 1980, a few young activists planned a symposium at Iowa State University on the historic roots of agrarian protest. The three-day affair featured panels of historians, veterans of past rural struggles, contemporary farm activists, poets such as Meridel LeSueur and Don West, and films such as "Northern Lights."

The symposium was part of a strategy to activate a progressive farm movement. Dating to the late 1970s, the young people and Merle Hansen, a USFA vice-president, sought to remake the Farmers' Association into a force within the ranks of organized agriculture. They failed to achieve long-lasting results, but as a result of their efforts, the USFA became deeply involved for a time in the insurgency that developed in the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> The young activists, including Dixon Terry, George Naylor, Mark Ritchie, and Dale Wiehoff, helped to organize farm coalitions in several states in 1982. Along with Merle Hansen, they also played a key role in the formation of the North American Farm Alliance (NAFA), a coalition of U.S. and Canadian groups. Other figures, such as Tom Quinn of the Wisconsin Farm Unity Alliance, Carol Hodne of NAFA, and Denise O'Brien of the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition also had a USFA connection for a time. The USFA "platform" or "launching pad" played an important, perhaps indispensable, role in the progressive rural insurgency of the 1980s.

There were other important organizations in Iowa as well. Rural America, a liberal rural advocacy group, opened a Midwest office in Des Moines in the summer of 1981. When David Ostendorf, a United Church of Christ minister, arrived in Iowa to head the Rural America office, he had little idea that he would devote the remainder of the decade to working on farm crisis issues. He soon was joined at the office by a young intern from the University of Michigan, Danny Levitas, who also played a key role in the new farm movement."

In the fall of 1981 the USFA became more involved in the farm crisis. Members approved an activist program at the annual meeting, and the USFA obtained matching funds to hire Mark Ritchie to coordinate activities. As a result of this initiative, contacts with people in other organizations were further cultivated. USFA activists sought to work with other groups while advancing their own agenda on farm issues.

The Iowa Farm Unity Coalition was organized in late January 1982. USFA activists called a meeting at a bank in Atlantic, Iowa, on a Saturday afternoon to discuss common concerns among agrarian activists. Approximately fifty people attended, most of them AAM, NFO, NFU, or USFA members. Although Curt Sorteberg, the Iowa FU's only staff person, played an active role, as did Rural America's David Ostendorf, USFA figures orchestrated much of the meeting, and USFA activist Dixon Terry emerged as a spokesman. The Coalition prepared a press release and made plans to protest President Ronald Reagan's upcoming visit to Des Moines. Members also made tentative plans to run a candidate for state secretary of agriculture." At the time of the meeting, none of these farm groups had a significant political presence on their own in Iowa. As a coalition, however, the groups had a real opportunity—in the short term, at least — to reach a larger constituency of Iowa farmers and perhaps even wean some away from the Farm Bureau. Its organizers were heartened by farmers' involvement in the anti-Reagan protest two weeks later, and the Coalition soon attracted media attention.<sup>^^</sup> The Iowa Farm Unity Coalition would become one of the best known groups in the farm revolt of the 1980s...

...The farm movement of the 1980s was involved in more than protest. A large part of its activity was devoted to counseling and legal action. For example, the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition and other groups established hotlines to deal with a variety of problems. In many cases, callers sought help to fend off foreclosure or "voluntary" settlements forced by U.S. government agencies such as the Farmers Home Administration (FmH A) or the Production Credit Association. Danny Levitas and a number of others who provided this type of counseling became experts on agency regulations. Some counseling provided practical advice on obtaining food stamps or other kinds of public assistance. In addition, counselors dealt with the human cost of the farm crisis, talking to farmers suffering from stress and emotional disorders. Suicides in the countryside increased in the 1980s, and some hotlines dealt with suicide prevention. Counseling by phone or in person was an ongoing activity for many rural groups in this era."

Legal action was another important part of the new farm movement. There was an avalanche of complaints about the FmHA in the early and mid-1980s. Ironically, the FmHA was the successor to the Farm Security Administration, a New Deal agency designed to help small farmers and serve as "the lender of last resort." Now, however, it threatened to foreclose on thousands of hard-pressed borrowers. Farm groups and farmers filed a number of lawsuits against the FmHA, but perhaps the most celebrated effort was *Coleman v. Block*, a class action suit brought by Sarah Vogel in North Dakota. In May 1983, a federal judge issued an injunction in the case that required the FmHA to grant borrowers certain procedural rights prior to initiating foreclosure proceedings or other actions. Elsewhere, similar efforts to tame the FmHA were under way. Jim Massey, who had served as co-counsel in the North Dakota case, later founded the Farmers Legal Action Group (FLAG), which became involved in numerous lawsuits against federal credit agencies. Counseling and legal action may seem a far cry from the activities of Mary Elizabeth Lease, A. C. Townley, or Milo Reno, but they were an important part of the farm movement of the 1980s....

...Farm activists also were involved in lobbying efforts for state and national legislation, including the so-called Harkin Bill, which some of them reportedly had helped write. The National Save the Family Farm Coalition, organized in 1986 to promote this legislation, included the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition, NAFA, and other new organizations. But the multiplicity of farm groups in the 1980s also meant additional competition for members and funding. Some, like NAFA, were unable to maintain a niche for their activities.