

THE AGRICAPITAL GROUP'S BREAD RESEARCH AND ACTION

HOW IT ALL STARTED

In about 1975-6 people from environmental, Third World and political pressure groups separately started focusing their attention on the world food situation. Various aspects included the spoiling of the environment by technological agriculture, domination of and speculation on international markets by agribusiness multinational corporations (MNCs), the myths pervading about the malnutrition of over half of the human race.

In 1976 various publications indicated a beginning of a fusion of the differing interest groups on food politics. One such publication was the special issue of Science for People - 'Food Farming and Finance' (winter '76/7). The name 'Agricapital Group' (hereafter ACG) was coined to label the group of authors of this.

In January '77 the International Peace Research Association held a conference in London devoted to food issues. This brought many of those interested in food politics into contact with one another. At one of the workshops it was agreed that, having already given attention to the wheat trade around the world, it was time to start looking to what happens to wheat in this country. A commitment was given by those participating to take this on. The Agricapital Group was the auspices adopted for this project and because of its links to the Science for People group and that many involved were members of BSSRS it was decided to affiliate to the British Society for Social Responsibility in Science.

WHAT HAPPENED

The group started holding regular meetings (mostly in London). Tasks concerning researching wheat farming, plant breeding, milling, baking, nutritional arguments, the monopolistic structure of the industry, safety conditions and the unions were divided amongst the group. For about 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ years the only significant activity of the group was this research (all done in people's spare time) with occasional ~~papers~~ meetings and papers written for self education of the group on other aspects of food politics. In April '78 a little flourish of activity followed Spillers' decision to pull out of baking. Two or three letters in the Guardian helped spread the name of the group a little and give us some much needed encouragement.

We had a big meeting in Oxfordshire about this time to discuss what we wanted to do with our research. Publishing a pamphlet was obvious but we wanted to try reaching a wider audience than the radical bookshop clientel. We decided at that meeting to put effort into a bread campaign, but not a nation wide one (we were too few to have any significant impact) instead to concentrate on one town - Sheffield was chosen - for one week and see how it went. We thought we'd try lots of ideas in that week (more than in fact were eventually tried) to see from experience which approaches seemed to succeed.

Over the summer of '78 drafts and redrafts of the bread pamphlet were circulated and criticised and rewritten. Eventually the final manuscript went to the printers and on September 14th we launched the pamphlet officially by a well attended press conference in London. The Guardian, Times and the Morning Star were the main papers to carry stories, Capital Radio and some of the left and alternative journals also had good pieces.

AND THEN

The day after the press conference the Guardian was served with a writ by Associated British Foods who did not altogether agree with our analysis of the nature of the British bread industry - in particular with our description of work hazards in their bakeries (They are the second largest baking company after Rank Hovis MacDougal who also didn't like our report but didn't try to issue any writs).

Threats of writs jolted us into a renewed effort to get more information - and we came up with some very powerful evidence to back up our accusations. The Guardian was convinced by this and decided to fight the writ rather than negotiate an apology (as quite frequently happens in such cases).

Associated British Foods (ABF) and Rank Hovis MacDougal (RHM) and their front organisations the Flour Advisory Bureau and the Federation of Bakers also complained to Rowntrees who had put up most of the money for publishing the report. Rowntrees were not happy with the political style of the report but never the less refused the industry's demands that they should publically disassociate themselves from our publication and demand their money back.

We were advised by solicitors at this stage that, though the Guardian had a strong case, if they threatened to sue us we might not be so safe. Not that the report contained any lies or substantial inaccuracies, but it could be regarded as implying that the companies were unscrupulous, inhumane sharks. Given our stated political bias we might have been viewed unfavourably in a court of law. So when some months later (why the delay we do not know) Associated British Foods started threatening the Agricapital Group with a writ, we found it difficult to decide what to do. The first inclination was to fight, but in the end we decided to withdraw our publication for the following reasons:-

- 1) Advice from a libel lawyer that libel is at the best of times an unpredictable legal issue and that we were not entirely safe.
- 2) If we were to be found guilty in a court of law the members of the group and of BSSRS would be liable as individuals for the fine and costs - these could run into tens of thousands of pounds.
- 3) We were able to withdraw 'without prejudice' which means that we were not admitting any doubts about the material published.
- 4) By this stage very few copies of the report were left, it was getting to be out of date and we had no plans to republish. We weren't losing very much in agreeing to withdraw.
- 5) The pamphlet had to some extent served its purpose. Various publications from Undercurrents and Women's Voice to the New Society and BBC's Tonight programme had taken the story up or had plans to do so. We had used the findings in other publications of our own (leaflets, slide tape show and a play); a group of M.P.s had expressed an interest in taking the issue up and it was the subject of two court actions - the writ against the Guardian and an unfair dismissal case against a member of the group who worked for A.B.F.

The decision on this was not easy, though, and by no means pleased everyone in the group.

THE WEEK OF ACTION

In October we held our week of action in Sheffield. For this we produced a cartoon leaflet which condensed the bread pamphlet into an entertaining and easy to read format, a slide tape show with the idea of making meetings less dry and a variety style play for use in social evenings etc.

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We were generally pleased with the response to these media though some of the events in Sheffield were disappointing. Very few came to the meetings we organised although the social event at the end of the week was a great success and the play was loved. Leafleting outside bread factories was interesting and led to some interesting discussions with the bakery workers, even if there was little interest in joining in with our activities. Subsequent to the week of action, though, links between the Sheffield members of the Agricapital Group and the bakery trade unionists have strengthened which, in retrospect, has been one of the most positive outcomes of the week of action.

WHAT ELSE ?

Various talks and articles have been done (including Tyne Tees TV, Capital Radio - again)

We again made use of the letters page of the Guardian during the bread workers strike in November, helped on several picket lines during this, in Sheffield a benefit bop was organised and agricap members put out and researched material for strike bulletins and the press. We had a couple of sessions in the House of Commons first with Robin Cook and then with Cook and four others (Audrey Wise, Frank Allaun, Joan Maynard, Eric Deakins) who promised to try and instigate a special investigation into infringement of safety regulations in bakeries and other issues. An unresolved self criticism within the group about whether going to the House of Commons was the right strategy caused us to lose interest in following it up and this approach seems to have fallen by the way-side.

We have been asked to help prepare a radio programme for Radio Workshop (a free-lance radio agency), BBC's Tonight are thinking of running a special programme on bread, ITV's Granada have also expressed interest and the Daily Mirror have approached us for information on food additives. An offer of help has come from a group at the Ruskin trade union college - they have experience in producing slide tape shows and have offered to help jazz up the bread presentation.

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

Spillers Closure:-

This was no surprise (as it was made out to be) - Spillers had been preparing for this for years by withdrawing investments from baking. The overproduction in the industry meant that extensive rationalisation was inevitable - Spillers was the weakest firm and so the first to go.

Spillers (and the other two companies viz: Ranks Hovis MacDougal and Associated British Foods) had a policy of transfer pricing so that the losses in baking were not as acute as they made them out to be. They made huge profits in milling which resulted from this transfer pricing but these profits were kept quite about at the time of their pulling out of baking.

There was clear collusion in the industry. Before the closure was announced A.B.F. and R.H.M. had already agreed to buy up some of the Spillers bakeries and continue allowing them to use Spillers flour. Spillers had cleverly waited until the Monopolies and Mergers Commission had finished their dissection of the industry before announcing their bakeries closure.

The Bread Report

In spite of the industry's protests of poor profitability A.B.F.'s return on capital invested was 23% in 1975 if milling and baking are regarded as one industry (as even the industry itself protest it should in some circumstances - transfer pricing makes it impossible to decide which sector makes how much profit, it only makes sense if they are

combined). The price of bread has risen in recent years faster than other foods. Two thirds of British bread is produced by A.B.F. and R.H.M., they cook the bread by a process in which the rising of the dough is replaced by a five minute factory process, nutrients are removed and up to 28 chemicals (some possibly harmful) are added. The parts of the wheat removed are used in their animal feed subsidiaries and the final products sold in their supermarkets (like Fine Fare). They also sell fertilisers, agricultural products, pet foods, meat biscuits, crisps, ~~zka~~ cakes, pies, pasta, tea eggs poultry etc.

Bread contains 40% water by weight (the white sliced loaf that is), bread is the most profitable item on the supermarket shelves.

Bakery workers wages are just over £1 per hour including on night shifts - they often have to do 12 hour shifts.

Health and safety

Even though wages are poor, conditions of work are atrocious. Hazards of high heat, tiring hours, infuriating noise levels, slippery floors and fast moving often dangerous, unguarded machinery make bakeries amongst the most dangerous of British industries. A.B.F. has a particularly bad record. It seems loath to abide by safety regulations and consequently is frequently prosecuted by the factory inspectorate (it is Britain's No 1 prosecuted food industry). Even their own internal documents make it obvious that company health and safety staff have been aware of serious safety hazards that later (after ~~x~~ inaction by the company) led to severe accidents or death. Illegal certificates are given to engineers giving permission to these workers to service dangerous machinery while it is still in motion (strictly illegal according to the factories act). One worker in such a situation lost his life but the company merely had to pay a £500 fine. Accidents are consistently and drastically under-reported or not reported at all (hence a leg so badly crushed that it needed to be encased in plaster up to the thigh for several weeks was reported as a sprained ankle etc.). Safety switches are often deliberately by-passed in order to cut corners and save time. This too has led to prosecutions by the factory inspector and possibly to severe accidents. In the interests of keeping the production lines running as long as possible if there is a blockage on the conveyor belt running through the oven workers are ~~ki~~ offered financial incentives to go into the ovens and unblock them while the temperatures are still over 300°F. Severe damage to lugs have resulted from this practice in some instances.

The Strike

A.B.F. and R.H.M., kept bread in cold storage which they were able to release when the strike was on - so giving the impression that the strike was almost ineffective. They made sure that stories of bakery workers breaking the strike and returning to work were well publicised (whether the media were concerned about losing big new advertising contracts offered by the industry is not known - certainly, however, overwhelming support was given to the employers in the press - the unions got a hammering. In reality it was the employers who were crumbling. One by one the independent bakers left the Federation of Bakers and settled privately with their workers. In the end the federation consisted of just A.B.F. and R.H.M.

The media bias damaged the strike's effectiveness and caused some sinister aspects of the employers offers to be ignored. Having already established the bad safety record and dangerous, fast machinery used in bakeries it came as some surprise to learn that the pay offer from the employers that the press said the workers should accept included a clause ending the stipulated maximum machine speeds. If accepted like this the accident rate would certainly have increased further as the machine speeds increased to full pelt.