

The Global Food Crisis... and the Ravenous System of Capitalism



A Haitian woman making cookies made of dried yellow dirt mixed with salt and vegetable shortening to ease hunger pangs.

In Haiti, where people live on less than \$2 a day and food prices have risen by 40 percent in the past year, people are forced to eat cookies made of dirt as a remedy for hunger. Here we are in the 21st century, and hundreds of millions of poor people worldwide who were already malnourished now face the threat of starvation. People in poor countries around the world are taking to the streets to demand something as basic as a loaf of bread or a bowl of rice.

We live in a *capitalist* system. That means that the production of the basic necessities—like food—is driven and shaped by one thing only: the maximizing of profit. We live in an *imperialist* system. That means that a small handful of rich, imperialist countries dominate the rest of the planet, with the United States at the top of this global system. These imperialist powers dictate to the vast majority of oppressed nations what will be produced—and here, too, the fundamental question that is considered is what will turn the maximum profit.

As a matter of conscious Western imperialist foreign policy, poor countries—some of which had been largely self sufficient in food—have been turned into food importing countries. Third World countries have been forced to shift much of their food production *away* from subsistence crops to high value exports. They have been pressured to open up their markets to cheap food imports. As a result, local food production for domestic consumption has been undercut. Now these countries are caught in a vise: The price of imported food has gone way up at the same time that the ability to produce food for local consumption has been eroded. And so we have the phenomenon of millions of ruined peasants and farmers, no longer able to live off the land, flooding into the slums and shantytowns of the cities.



Drought and plummeting coffee prices in 2002 left farmers in El Paraiso, Nicaragua, unable to provide for their families. Thousands of people suffered from malnutrition and related diseases. Here, a family awaits medical assistance.

There is no reason that food must be produced and exchanged in the way it is today—other than the fact that the system of capitalism demands this, and enforces it through its armed might and political power. All this is not only criminal, but totally unnecessary. The basis exists, in human knowledge, technology, and resources, to solve the food needs of humanity.

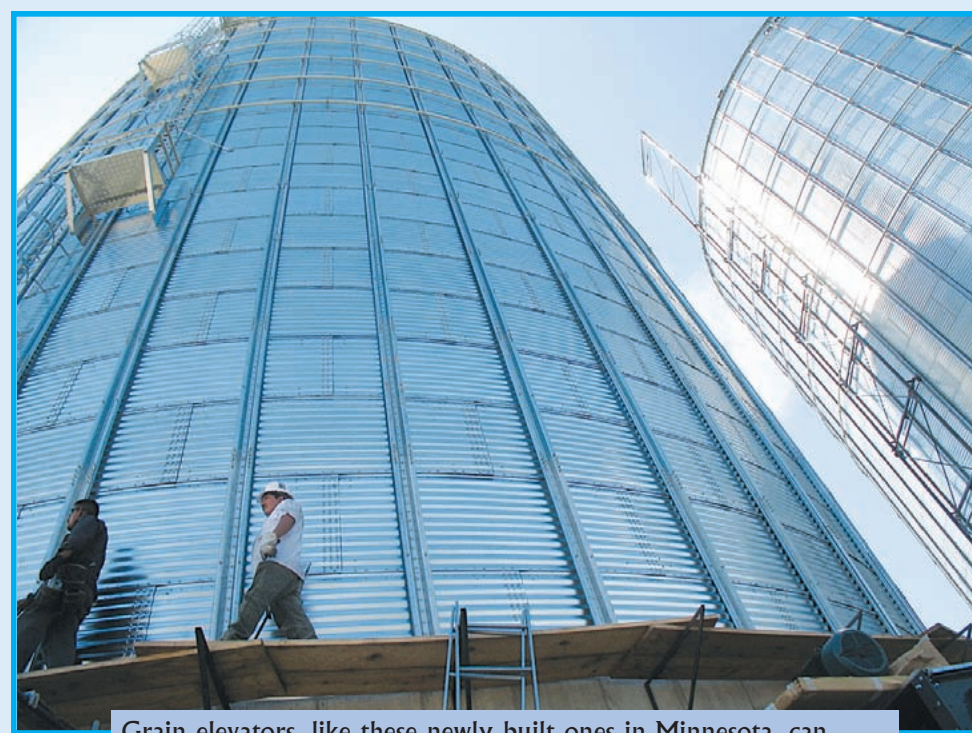


Ethiopian women sort coffee beans.

The industrialization of agriculture on a world scale means that production of food in the Third World is highly vulnerable to sudden and dramatic changes in the world market. For example, many poor countries shifted into coffee production in the 1980s and 1990s to take advantage of high world coffee prices. But they wound up competing with each other and, when coffee prices plunged, some suffered dire economic consequences. In El Salvador, malnutrition is spreading because coffee growers are unable to compete in the world market and have lost income and livelihoods—and at the same time, the amount of food they get has been cut in half because of rising food prices. In Ethiopia, 4.5 million people needed emergency food aid in June 2008.



A malnourished six-year-old girl in southern Ethiopia.



Grain elevators, like these newly built ones in Minnesota, can store millions of bushels of grain. Billions of dollars in new capitalist investments are pouring into agriculture worldwide in anticipation of higher profits from increased food prices.

A recent article in the *New York Times* (“Food Is Gold, So Billions Invested in Farming,” June 5, 2008) described how capitalist investors are now looking to pour huge amounts of capital into agriculture around the world—not to help ease the food crisis, but because they see an opportunity to make enormous profits. The head of a British firm said it is investing in Sub-Saharan Africa because “land values are very, very inexpensive.... Its microclimates are enticing, allowing a range of different crops. There’s accessible labor. And there’s good logistics—wide open roads, good truck transport, sea transport.”



People in Nairobi, Kenya demanding food, January 2008.

Unless and until this system is abolished through revolution, and is replaced by a new socialist system, there will continue to be massive hunger and starvation...and some people will continue to be forced to eat “mud cookies” and drink pesticide out of horrific desperation...in what could—and should—be a world of shared abundance for everybody.

For a fuller analysis of the food crisis and its causes, see the article “The Global Food Crisis... and the Ravenous System of Capitalism” in *Revolution* #128, available online at revcom.us.