

Frances Moore Lappe: Hunger Has No Place

by Gayla Leopard

The current crop of ideas about food—who produces it, who pays for it, and ultimately, who gets it and why—will be examined at two events to be held in October.

Author and lecturer Frances Moore Lappe will speak on the topic, "In a Democracy, Hunger Has No Place," on Thursday, October 8, at 7:30 pm at South Eugene High School. Sponsored by Clergy and Laity Concerned (CALC) and OSPIRG, the presentation is open to the public, with a donation of \$3 being suggested.

Lappe, author of the 1971 bestseller *Diet for a Small Planet* and co-founder in 1975 of the Institute for Food and Development Policy, will also serve as keynote speaker at a statewide conference on Friday, October 9. Titled "Global Issues: Educating for Action," the conference is designed for elementary and secondary teachers, college faculty and students, high school students, and the general public. The conference begins at 8:30 am at South Eugene High School. Registration information is available from Lynn Sandberg at 344-1112.

According to Lappe, interviewed from her home in San Francisco, democracy needs to be re-defined.

"The case I make in my talk is that democracy is really a set of interlocking principles," she says. "One principle of which is that in a democracy, no one is deprived of all power. . . . In a democracy, the leadership is accountable to all citizens. If people are going hungry, the government is not being accountable to them."

She goes on, "Hunger is such a basic need, such a primal need—the right both to feed ourselves and feed our offspring—that if that need is not being met, then we have not fulfilled my definition of a democracy."

Yet Lappe concedes that the traditional American view of democracy dies hard. "There's a cultural idea that anyone can make it in this society," she comments. "That if you're not making it—there's a tendency to blame that person."

"We don't ask if there are jobs that

pay a living wage, or if people have some other difficulties in getting a job. We still blame the individual . . . still see it as the individual's fault. That's what makes it harder for Americans to see the systemic problem," she says, referring to the 1980's economic pattern with its high unemployment rates and low wages. "We look abroad, and Americans will blame it on the weather, or blame it

on another country's government, and not look at home."

Despite these difficulties, however, Lappe sees positive ways in which Americans can speed their nation's progress toward a fuller sense of democracy.

"I think the first step has to be an extension of what we think of as our human rights," she says. "I think that unless democracy includes in it the

right to basic wherewithal . . . it's not a democracy, nor is it a democracy unless we consider it (right to basic wherewithal) as basic as our right to vote, or our right to have more than one political party, or our right to an education. Take education. We have a right to an education, but we don't have the right to use that education.

"To me, that just doesn't make sense—to have one without the other. To have the right to prepare yourself for a job, but not to have a job."

"The human need is to feel useful," she concludes. "I think it's one of the great tragedies that so many people are denied that right to feel useful in our society. They just feel that they don't have the chance to contribute."

The high school curriculum developed by Lappe's institute lists a variety of ways in which high school students can contribute to the understanding of global food issues, including interviews with local farmers and letters to government officials. It was written by Sonja Williams, who will present it at the conference. An elementary school curriculum, which was developed by the institute in the early 1980's, will be presented by Laurie Rubin. According to Lappe, both were developed to combat "frightening images" that can leave students apathetic or cynical about the issue of hunger.

In reference to the newly released high school curriculum, she comments, "They (students) can grasp it—it's not so overwhelming. I think what happens is when you start reading the newspaper . . . you just get overwhelmed—with information overload. Hunger here, and terrible statistics there, and drought, and overpopulation, and desertification . . . you have all these concepts."

According to Lappe, the real strength of the curriculum is its analysis of global problems—"so that students can put two and two together." She notes, for example, that students can see from the data that the popular correlation between population density and hunger does not exist. Us-

ing the curriculum, students "can begin to analyze the data for themselves—they can come to grips with it."

This coming to grips with data, Lappe continues, ultimately means that other ideas about hunger are challenged. For example, she says, "Third World people are capable of figuring out answers for themselves—it's not up to us to solve their problems for them."

Although industrialized countries have in the past mined the natural resources of Third World countries for profit, Lappe maintains that in the current economy, average Americans are not benefiting from the hunger in the Third World. In addition, she says, the poverty of many Third World countries may lead their citizens to take up arms, thus reducing the stability of the entire world. She goes into this topic more deeply in her new book, *World Hunger, Twelve Myths*, written with institute co-founder Joseph Collins.

Ultimately, Lappe sees the role of the United States as inspirational. "I'm more convinced than ever that the most important thing we can do in this country is to be an example to other countries," she says. "As long as we have hunger here, in such an enormously rich country, why would any other country want to be like us?"

To be like Lappe is to enter a world densely packed with speaking engagements and trips to foreign agricultural operations. She addressed the United Nations last fall, recently returned from a three-week trip to China, and is preparing a new book for publication in late 1988. And, with each new challenge, her message is further honed.

"I become more and more convinced as the years go by that food—how we eat and why some eat and some don't—is, for many people, certainly for me, the most useful way of understanding social and political issues," she concludes. "For people who want to cut through the confusing aspects of politics and economics, food is the most powerful tool."

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Frances Moore Lappe

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