



About 100 people picketing in front of the Federal Building in Winnipeg on March 15 as part of the national days of action against the war in Iraq and Afghanistan and to demand the immediate withdrawal of Canadian troops from Afghanistan

Teetering Toward the Edge in Lebanon

Another Middle Eastern car bombing on February 12 - this time in Damascus - killed Imad Mughniyed, a former Hezbollah leader who had largely retired from political life. Although no one has claimed responsibility for the bombing most speculation has focused on Mosad, the Israeli secret service. This speculation has been fuelled by the open rejoicing in Israeli government circles and ill-concealed glee in Washington and the mainstream U.S. press. The relative sophistication of the bomb, which apparently was triggered by satellite, reinforced the view among observers that both Tel Aviv and Washington were involved in this assassination.

More sinister than the assassination itself are the possible motives behind Mughniyed's killing.

Although his name has been linked to various hijackings, bombings and similar attacks on Israeli and American citizens and officials, these allegations have generally been made without any actual evidence. What is known about Mughniyed is that he was born in southern Lebanon and spent his life resisting the many and various attacks on his country and people by the Israeli and American armed forces. His involvement with resistance to the foreign invasion of Lebanon stretched over more than two decades and, as a senior member of Hezbollah, he is widely thought to have been involved in the successful campaign to force Israeli forces out of their last enclave in southern Lebanon in 2000.

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Harper Government Attempts to Lower the Price of Barley and Destroy Collective Marketing in Western Canada

It has been a busy few months in the Harper government's campaign to destroy the Canadian Wheat Board (CWB) and hand control of western Canada's grain industry over to American multinationals ADM and Cargill. Within the space of six weeks it has moved from so-called consensus building, to arm twisting, to name calling, to legislation.

On January 29, Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz convened a meeting in Ottawa to discuss his proposal to remove farmers' single desk on barley. Originally scheduled to meet for the first time with the CWB's farmer-controlled board of directors, Ritz cancelled that meeting and instead invited two CWB representatives to Ottawa, along with representatives of the malting barley industry and grain companies, as well as a handful of farm groups, provincial agriculture ministers and some Ottawa officials. The invited farm groups represented about 500 of the 75,000 Prairie grain growers and, not surprisingly, all opposed collective marketing. Other farm groups, including the National Farmers' Union and the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, representing tens of thousands of Prairie farmers, asked to be given a seat at the table but were refused.

The purpose of the meeting, Ritz said, was to come to a solution on barley marketing and to discuss the CWB's proposal to resolve the current impasse. This proposed a new marketing program that would, in essence, set up a cash market for malting barley operating within a single desk system.

Barley marketing on the Prairies has been a political "hot potato" since the elimination of the Crow Rate in the early 1990s and subsequent explosion of a livestock industry almost entirely dependent on access to the U.S. market. The livestock industry in Canada is highly consolidated, with two meat-packing monopolies – Cargill and Maple Leaf - controlling virtually the entire market. With them both encouraging aggressive expansion, the need for feed for cows and pigs has increased massively over the past 15 to 20 years. As a result the cash price for feed barley in Western Canada is one of the highest in the world while the CWB's pooled price for malting barley is often only marginally higher

than the cash price available on feed barley, which the CWB does not market. This has made operating a pooling system for malting barley difficult.

The CWB proposal addressed all the operational concerns raised by the malting industry while still empowering farmers to keep marketing their barley collectively through a single desk. Needless to say the representatives of the monopolies were not pleased, particularly because the proposed program was so well received by Prairie farmers. Accordingly, through Ritz, they called on the CWB to simply withdraw from barley marketing all together, by means of a series of procedural changes, and hand it over to them. When the CWB representatives protested that this would violate the legislation under which the CWB operates – which requires the board to maximize returns to farmers – the minister is reported to have dismissed their concerns as "nonsense" and instructed the CWB to study his proposal for an open continental barley market.

Ritz next summoned representatives of the CWB to Ottawa for another meeting on February 12. The CWB ended these talks when it became apparent that there was no common ground on which to build consensus. In what can only be described as a fit of pique, the minister then used a February 13 news conference to denounce the farmer directors of the CWB as obsessed with "preserving the status quo". His message to the directors, who are elected by farmers in 10 districts across Western Canada, was clear: "Lead, follow, or get the hell out of the way" in his government's efforts to destroy collective barley marketing.

Ritz went on to dismiss supporters of the CWB's single desk – the majority of grain farmers on the Prairies - as the "tin-foil hat decoder-ring wearing crowd." He followed this with a most shocking, if honest, declaration, stating that uncertainty over barley marketing is bad for the livestock industry and the agribusinesses which control it. Accordingly, more barley needs to be planted to "bring down the price of feed". Reporters in attendance were seemingly stunned that he put it so baldly. During the same news conference Ritz also said that he would

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introduce legislation on barley marketing by the end of the month.

The standoff continued. On February 29, three days after a federal court of appeal upheld the CWB's argument that the minister could not eliminate the single desk on barley through regulatory as opposed to legislative change, Ritz told a rally on the steps of the Saskatchewan legislature that he would deliver "barley freedom" and introduce legislation on March 3. However, on this occasion his media event - attended by agriculture ministers from both Alberta and Saskatchewan, leaders of three of four of his favourite fringe farm groups and a representative of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business - did not unfold exactly as planned. Despite busing in supporters, Ritz and his crew were still outnumbered by farmers defending their single desk, who crowded around chanting "Our Board, Our Business".

On March 3, Ritz introduced Bill C-46, an act to amend the Canadian Wheat Board Act. The bill removes the requirement for the government to consult with the CWB's board of directors and then all farmers through a plebiscite before removing barley from the single desk. In addition, the legislation goes further in amending the Act by introducing an unprecedented dispute resolution mechanism that would allow grain companies to take the CWB into arbitration.

Clearly the government's aim with Bill C-46 is both to weaken farmer control of the CWB by removing the requirement to consult directly with farmers on barley marketing and to weaken the CWB operationally by increasing the power of the grain companies in the negotiation of commercial agreements.

Interestingly, Minister Ritz, who was first elected as a Reform MP in 1993 on a platform of increased referenda, argued that further consultation with farmers on barley was unnecessary because he had already met with farm groups and his predecessor, Chuck Strahl, had held a non-binding plebiscite with a three-pronged question in 2007. On the issue of the proposed dispute resolution mechanism, he claimed that it would bring "balance" and "fairness" to the grain industry.

It is worth noting that the CWB was created in the 1930s following a massive struggle by Prairie farmers to provide themselves with some power in the face of

the dominance of the grain monopolies. This dominance has increased dramatically over the past 75 years. Today just three companies control over 90 per cent of the grain handling in Western Canada; they are Cargill, Viterra (in which ADM has a controlling interest) and JRI. There are less than 400 grain elevators left, down from over 2,500 just 30 years ago. Yet somehow the Harper government believes that the CWB has an unfair advantage in its commercial negotiations with grain companies.

If Bill C-46 were passed, it would give a third-party arbitrator the unprecedented ability to create commercial agreements which the CWB would be obliged to accept, even if these agreements were not in farmers' interests. In a March 4 news release, the CWB estimated that this alone would cost farmers tens of millions of dollars in lost efficiencies and cost savings a year, along with the \$40 million in premiums the single desk on barley earns farmers. "This is a gift to the grain companies at farmers' expense," a CWB spokesperson told reporters.

Bill C-46 has not yet made it to second reading in the House of Commons and the question now is whether or not the government will make it a confidence vote as Ritz has threatened. It seems unlikely that the Liberals, who have refused to defeat the Conservatives over their budget or extending Canada's military involvement in Afghanistan would do so over the issue of collective barley marketing in Western Canada.

That being said, Ritz began backing away from his threat to make Bill C-46 a confidence vote shortly after claims surfaced about the Conservative Party attempting to "buy" independent M.P. Chuck Cadman's vote in an effort to bring down the Martin Liberal government. Some now speculate that the government will let this current session of parliament come and go without forcing Bill C-46 through, although others believe that Harper and his team have promised results to their friends in the multinationals and cannot back down.

However, whatever happens with barley marketing, it is clear that this is just the rehearsal for wheat, which is the single largest crop grown on the Prairies. The next few months may determine whether or not there is a future for collective marketing in Western Canada.

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Although revenge for these activities may have been a motive, the assassination of Mughniyed has to be seen in the larger context of the region's politics. In the past few years Hezbollah has gained a more prominent and open role in Lebanese politics. Whatever its religious roots, it is virtually the only organization that has a consistent record of defending Lebanese territory against repeated violations by Israel's armed forces. As a result of this history of resistance, Israel, with the open political and military support of the U.S., attempted to destroy Hezbollah in the summer of 2006.

The Israeli attack was carried out after Hezbollah captured two Israeli soldiers on the border between the two countries. However, the capture of the soldiers was just a pretext for Israel to attack. Indeed, the attack had been planned for at least a year prior to its launch. It was designed to destroy Hezbollah militarily and undermine its support among southern Lebanon's Shia population. However, the Israeli plan failed spectacularly on both counts. Israel's armed forces were unable to defeat Hezbollah's armed wing and its army suffered significant damage when it again invaded Lebanon during the conflict. The supposedly invincible Israeli military machine was unable to defeat a few thousand determined Hezbollah fighters. The Israeli armed forces were humiliated on the battlefield and shown to be capable of wreaking havoc only upon an unarmed civilian population.

The war only enhanced Hezbollah's military reputation and reinforced the view among the Lebanese that it is the only organization standing up for Lebanon's territorial integrity. Furthermore, despite Israeli propaganda claiming that the massive and wanton destruction of villages, roads and civilian institutions by the Israeli air force in southern Lebanon was caused by Hezbollah, the Lebanese people clearly viewed Israel as responsible for the carnage. Hezbollah emerged from the war with its reputation intact and in a far more powerful position

in Lebanese politics than it had enjoyed prior to the conflict.

The Israeli politicians and military leaders responsible for the war have since been severely criticized over the outcome. They have not, however, been chastened by the experience and are believed to be planning a repeat of the attack on Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. Many observers believe that Mughniyed's killing was an attempt to goad Hezbollah into providing Israel with a new pretext to launch another attack against Lebanon. The stationing of the U.S. warship, the USS Cole, off the coast of Lebanon at the end of February has also been interpreted as an indication that the U.S. and Israel are planning another aggression against Lebanon.

Although a new round of Israeli aggression in Lebanon is unlikely to repair the prestige and reputation of Israel's armed forces, it would likely result in further destabilization of the Lebanese state. There have been regular bombings and other incidents of a sectarian nature in Lebanon in recent months and an ongoing crisis in the government of the state continues. Israel and its sponsors in Washington may be hoping to undermine Hezbollah's position within Lebanon by creating a new crisis in that beleaguered state.

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