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Rural America Needs You

By [NIEL RITCHIE](#)

Fifty years ago, when I grew up in a small Iowa town, diversified family farms were the norm, local economies were thriving and the middle class was expanding. Then a new weapon was launched in the Cold War—cheap food—and the landscape of my youth was plowed under.

The horrors of an industrialized food system already were well-known, but with Richard Nixon in the White House, “feeding the world” became our national mantra and farmers famously were told to “get big or get out.” Land values rose, credit flowed, and neighbors were bought out or squeezed out of the growing global economy.

Agribusinesses like Archer Daniels Midland, John Deere and Cargill were quick to seize on this new opportunity, developing a sophisticated lobbying arm with a firm grip on federal policy. Massive producers took over enormous tracts of land across the United States and around the world, requiring a new generation of outsized tractors and tons of chemicals for their vast commercial operations.

But this system of artificially high land values, enforced low prices and unmanageable debt levels was unsustainable, its collapse inevitable. By the mid-1980s, bankruptcies, foreclosures and suicides became commonplace as farmers were forced off land that often had been in their families for generations. Small-business owners who counted on local producers for their bread and butter also began disappearing, shuttering Main Streets across the Midwest.

It was in this political crucible that the [League of Rural Voters](#) was formed. Building on the longstanding progressive traditions of states like Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin, family-farm advocates began organizing and the effect was immediate: leaders like Tom Harkin were elected to the U.S. Senate. But operating in the shadows was right-wing radio, buttressed by the hate-filled messages of their allies on the ground. And its power to sway opinion grew as the rural economy continued in freefall and national Democratic Party leaders largely abandoned rural states for concentrated votes in urban and coastal regions.

Despite our many challenges, ideas planted decades ago are taking root as never before. Growing among mainstream consumers is a deep understanding that corporate agriculture threatens their health and our nation. This profound linkage of urban and rural offers progressives an opportunity to fundamentally alter our political landscape.

That work is under way, and detailed in this October issue of *In These Times*. In “[Uniting, One County at a Time](#),” Mike Edera and Marcy Westerling share their experiences building a powerful, community-based network of progressive organizations in rural Oregon to foster human dignity and combat right-wing extremism. In “[Building the Left in Harbor Country](#),” Jim Vopat details how progressives in rural Michigan have grown and sustained a grassroots movement to affect local politics and elections. And the League of Rural Voters continues its work, reaching out to farmers, ranchers and small-town residents nationwide to combat the fear and confusion propagated by the right.

Good stewardship of this land demands that progressives in America align themselves with those in small towns and rural communities as we work for change. For decades, rural states have been regarded as little more than flyover country in the broad political calculus. The result was catastrophic, not just for the 50 million of us who call such places home, but for this great truth: whether we live in cities or the suburbs, the exurbs or the country—we’re all interconnected.

“Progressives in America must align themselves with those in small towns and rural communities working for change.”

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