

Meeting discusses new book on Mad Cow Disease epidemic in Britain

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Some sixty academics, medical students, youth and workers attended an April 28 public meeting at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds to launch the book *Human BSE--Anatomy of a Health Disaster*. This is a record of the Workers Inquiry convened last year by the Socialist Equality Party of Britain into the epidemic in Britain of BSE, often called mad cow disease.

John Middleton's son, Matthew Parker, died of the human form of BSE. At the Leeds meeting, Middleton gave a moving account of how Matthew died of the disease at the age of 19. In December 1995 John noticed that his son, a six-foot, eight-inch tall, healthy and outgoing young man, had become very introverted. His health deteriorated and by August the following year, his speech was slurred and he could not keep his balance.

"I remember taking Matthew shopping in town. He couldn't even stand. I had to hold him up. People were staring, they thought he was drunk. When I got him home I rang for an ambulance and got him into hospital. Eventually the consultant said he was 99.9 percent certain it was human BSE... I was going to lose my son and there was nothing I could do about it."

In March, 1997 Matthew fell into a coma and died. John described the devastating effect this had on himself and his family. He urged everyone to "read this book to learn the truth."

Professor Richard Lacey is a well-known microbiologist who has studied BSE since 1989. He told the meeting, "Unfortunately, we are still not getting at the truth. Anyone who raises issues becomes the target of malice and diversions, frequently mediated by a corrupt media, almost as if the health of the nation is totally subservient to the interests of the beef industry."

Lacey said that statistics claim to show a dramatic drop in the incidence of BSE, but this is due to the

government policy of killing all beef cattle at the age of thirty months, before they show clinical signs of the disease. Compensation paid to farmers has been cut by over 50 percent, which discourages reporting of cases on their farms.

BSE is now established in the British national herd and is being spread by vertical transmission, from cow to calf, and by horizontal transmission, through animal-to-animal contact and through the environment. The whole population of Britain has been exposed to infected beef and beef products since the early 1980s, when BSE first became widespread.

Research shows that approximately one third of people are genetically susceptible to infection. There have been twenty five confirmed deaths from the disease, and there could be many more in the future. It is not possible to establish how widespread the disease might be, because the incubation period in humans could be twenty or more years.

Lacey concluded by indicting the Tory and Labour Party governments and those who have colluded with them: "This is a complete nightmare--a complete mess. Their compromise tactics have not assured the public. They are going to damage human health and they are going to cause havoc to the farmers."

Barbara Slaughter, a member of the Central Committee of the SEP, led the investigation into the BSE crisis on behalf of the party. Addressing the Leeds meeting, she pointed out that the March 1996 announcement that the death of 10 people from a new variant of the rare condition Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (nvCJD) was probably due to eating BSE-infected beef had provoked an outcry. Beef sales plummeted and a worldwide ban was imposed on the export of British beef.

The then-Conservative Party government responded by launching a chauvinist attack on Europe to try to get

the ban lifted, and insisting that British beef was safe. This attempt to conceal the problem lost valuable time in elaborating a strategy to fight this disease.

"Once the link between human BSE (nvCJD) and animal BSE was established, any government concerned with public health would have warned of the danger of eating British beef and the possible contamination of European and other herds. They would have called for international collaboration to investigate the mechanism of transmission and seek a cure, and they would have provided the necessary finance. Since the Labour government took office, they have done none of these things. They continue to argue that British beef is safe. Both governments are driven by the same imperatives--the needs of the profit system.

"The Socialist Equality Party convened an independent Workers Inquiry to bring out the truth about the economic, social and scientific questions posed by the crisis. We approached the investigation from a definite standpoint, that of the defence of ordinary working people, whose lives, health and livelihoods are threatened by the unsafe production of food. We do not subordinate the search for truth to the preservation of the profits of the beef industry, nor the political fortunes of its defenders."

In the discussion that followed, Malcolm Povey, a lecturer in the food science department at Leeds University, agreed that the profit system was the source of the crisis. He said that about five years ago, two large food companies had written to Leeds University saying that unless Professor Lacey's activities were curbed, they would not fund any research.

Sid Jenkins, the head of an Animal Husbandry department at a local college and former inspector for the Royal Society of Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, said that he had raised concerns in the 1970s over diseased and drug-laden domestic animals entering the human food chain through the rendering process.

Asked about the nature of the BSE infection, Professor Lacey explained that the current theory was that it probably arose in the 1960s or 1970s as a result of a rare disease that occurs occasionally in cows. These rare occurrences would have been magnified many times over because of the increasingly widespread practice of recycling cattle remains (some of which were infected) into animal feed.

See Also:

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