

## **Farmer Protests: The Wrong U-Turn**

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While farming and nature are inextricably bound together, political bargaining often sets the two in opposition. Recent protests across Europe and worldwide show growing frustration among farmers. The European Commission is responding with row-backs on environmental standards. Could farmers be brought back onside with a Common Agricultural Policy U-turn on trade?

Imagine a job where you never get a day off. Where your work, providing an essential public service, requires you to take on hundreds of thousands of euros in debt over decades. Where you never know how much you'll get for what you sell. Where mainstream media either ignores or vilifies you. Where your health is at risk from prevailing practices. Where you don't earn enough to retire with a pension. Where, once you do retire, no new generation is willing to take up the reins because the quality of life is considered low. Welcome to today's farming in Europe. And not just in Europe but worldwide.

It's not hard to see why recent weeks have witnessed waves of European farmers' protests from Brussels to Madrid and Warsaw. Headlines have been filled with images of tractors blocking motorways and city centres, slurry dumped at supermarkets, police being sprayed with manure and pelted with eggs. Farmers are vociferously raising their voices demanding dignity, support for their livelihoods, viability of small farms, a future: "No farmers, no food!"

In Brussels, many of those on the streets have been demonstrating against the free trade agreements that undercut their prices and livelihoods. In Poland, Germany, and Romania, farmers are rejecting the influx of cheap Ukrainian grain and its impact on their livelihoods. In India, farmers are once again out on the streets, resisting the latest attempts to dismantle commodity price support policies, without which their already-strained livelihoods will be even further devalued.

These protests are not isolated incidents but rather a global expression of frustration and disillusionment with a system that prioritises profit and global competition over people. They are stirring up important debates about regulation, fair prices, trade agreements, and the future of our food. In Europe, the negotiations for a deal with the Mercosur trade bloc loom large, threatening to undercut local producers and exacerbate the challenges they face.

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Yet, as these protests unfold, panic-stricken politicians – in the heat of a “mega” election year – seem more inclined to throw environmental protection under the bus than address the legitimate grievances of

those who feed us. The European Commission has already unscrupulously junked plans to cut pesticide use, scrapped a strategy on sustainable food systems, and loosened environmental and labour requirements that farmers must respect to access farming subsidies under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

## **Missing the point**

In the scheme of farmers' struggles, the Commission's response completely misses the point. Many farmers are fighting *against* deregulation: namely, free trade agreements that set unequal competition, the dumping of cheap produce on their markets, and the dismantling of market support. Scrapping green protections won't help farmers tackle soaring input and land costs, falling farmgate prices, cut-price competition, a subsidy system that favours the big players, the debt and uncertainty suffocating farmers, nor the outsized power of retail and food giants who profit from their labour. In the European Union, farmer incomes are around 40 per cent lower than non-agricultural incomes. Postponing urgent and necessary action to protect the ecosystems on which farmers depend also panders to far-right agendas, and validates a false narrative of a war between farmers and climate action.

It cannot be denied that some farming groups have voiced opposition to environmental regulations – raising uncomfortable questions for green movements. Flaws have been identified in the Commission's initial efforts to promote the European Green Deal, indicating that a change of approach is needed if we are to bring farmers on board for a more sustainable food and farming model.

All the same, the interests of farmers and the environment coincide. Farmers and farmworkers are the first-level, silent victims of polluting, industrialised food systems: the severe health impacts of occupational exposure to pesticides – too often ignored or concealed – correlate with the development of a wide variety of diseases ranging from respiratory effects to various types of cancer. They would be the first to benefit from phasing out harmful pesticide use. Also, when it comes to climate impacts, farmers are among the first casualties. For example, floods, droughts, and storms wiped out some 10 per cent of Italian farmers' production in 2022, driving 6 billion euros in losses. No farmers, no environmental transition!

Farmers' interests are not fundamentally opposed to the Green Deal, the Farm To Fork Strategy, or a future CAP that supports a green transition. This misconception is often peddled by big agri-food lobbies and political parties seeking to exploit current tensions – lazily parroted by some media outlets.

What is unsustainable is environmental and climate rules that leave farmers unable to compete on a level playing field, struggling to make ends meet amidst unfair competition and floods of cheap imports. Too often, the costs of environmental regulation are imposed on farmers while the benefits flow to the rest of society. In short, a transition that is not a *just* transition will fail. Farmers aren't asking for handouts but for recognition of their essential role in society – and they deserve nothing less.

## **Dialogue**

There is huge scope to bring farmers back onside. Fair and just transition plans decided between farmers and the many who sympathise with their plight are a must. To move forward, we must acknowledge the inherent injustices and power imbalances within our food systems. Instead of pitting farmers against environmentalists or consumers, we must work together to build a food system that pays a decent wage, is resilient, and is respectful of our planet's limits.

This means implementing policies that address the uneven playing field created by international trade

agreements and corporate greed. The right kind of support and processes, co-constructed with farmers and citizens, bring economic benefits for farmers transitioning towards sustainable food and agricultural systems. Studies conducted in France, for example, show that agroecological farms generally have better medium-term economic results than conventional practices.

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Belatedly realising the extent of farmer anger, the Commission has convened a series of farmer and civil society dialogues. These could be a useful forum to begin the conversations needed to rebuild trust. But they will only be effective if the Commission genuinely listens to the concerns of farmers, regardless of the size and location of their holdings, as partners in crafting solutions – not just listening to the influential few. Acknowledging uncomfortable home truths about free trade agreements and corporate price-gouging, addressing the marginalisation of small-scale farmers in the decisions that directly affect them, recognising farmers' knowledge, and decentralising decision-making processes, methods, and funds to take decisions and plan transformations of territories at a local level are all necessary.

Through dialogue and deep collaboration between farmers, farmworkers, rural communities, and citizens it will be possible to create common visions, and co-design pathways towards a fair and sustainable food system – to bring farmers off the streets and back behind a Green Deal, which is, first and foremost, a *fair deal*.

Two long-standing challenges must be tackled head-on. Firstly, instead of U-turns on environmental measures, the Commission must be willing to change course on trade. Secondly, reimagining the CAP is essential – prioritising not commodity production but environmental sustainability, equity, and economic viability for all farmers.

## **Fair trade**

For decades, the EU's liberalisation of agricultural markets and pursuit of bilateral trade agreements has left farmers increasingly exposed to unfair competition. Food is unlike any other economic sector. It is a basic human need and it should be treated as such.

From the start, the Achilles' heel of the Farm To Fork Strategy and the Green Deal was the external dimension. The Commission willed an environmental transition that didn't affect its trade policy. But this is not tenable and is why recent calls for a "Global Green Deal" should now be heard.

A Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism – essentially, a carbon tax applied to imported products – has been introduced in some sectors of production that are particularly carbon-intensive, including cement, electricity, aluminium, fertilisers, and fossil energies. But, so far, the mechanism hasn't been applied to agriculture, unprotected from environmental dumping. The Farm To Fork strategy has remained vague and toothless on this point. For all the talk of mirror clauses, sustainability chapters, and levelling up, substandard imports continue to undercut the products of European farmers. This has left farmers vulnerable to market disruption – as experienced with the importation of cheap grain from Ukraine.

A fair and green deal for farmers must consider a carbon border adjustment for agriculture. It requires a complete rethink of the trade deal with Mercosur – or the suspension of negotiations altogether. Cracking down on price-gouging by fertiliser giants and input suppliers is also a must. As is taking action throughout the food supply chain to ensure fair prices that reflect the cost of sustainable production, including much tougher action on unfair trading practices, corporate abuses of power, and cut-price supermarket buyers squeezing farmers to the bone – taking inspiration from Spain, where selling below the price of production has been prohibited.

## **Reimagining CAP**

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is in dire need of a reformation to address the disparities, poverty, and environmental harm that continue to plague European farmers.

A cornerstone of EU policy since its inception in the 1960s, the CAP has significantly transformed both Europe's socio-economic and environmental landscapes. Originally conceived as a response to food shortages following World War II, the CAP aimed to increase food security, production, and incomes. It focused primarily on price support mechanisms, and subsidies for key commodities such as grains, dairy, and sugar. While these policies initially achieved their objectives, they led to overproduction, environmental degradation, and unfair dumping of surpluses on Global South markets.

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Over the decades, to achieve greater “market orientation”, the CAP has shifted to awarding farmers a flat-rate subsidy based on the hectares of land they farm – thus privileging large-scale operations. A smaller pot has also been available to fund rural development and conditional “greening” measures. Today, the EU's biggest budget line disproportionately benefits the largest farms specialised in industrial agriculture and livestock production, leaving small-scale and family-owned farms struggling to compete. 80 per cent of subsidies flow to just 20 per cent of farmers.

Now, the challenges posed by ecological crises, the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the cost of living crisis, the prospective accession of agricultural powerhouse Ukraine into the EU, and today's farmer protests are calling the entire model into question.

In this context, the stop-start implementation of the Green Deal has failed to change the shape of the CAP or to shift the fundamentals of EU agriculture, while adding a sense of complexity. Lobbying by big economic interests has contributed to curtailing reforms and rising uncertainty. Only large farms can afford to cover the bureaucratic costs tied to the current system and compete in the low-cost mass production model, which rewards economies of scale and capital-intensive forms of production. The current absence of “vision” (in the words of the former Agriculture Commissioner) risks ceding ground to those vested interests who have captured the bulk of CAP funds to date, ignoring the threats to farmer livelihoods from trade and deregulation.

The Commission is threatening to water down green requirements in the CAP by making them only voluntary, which would be an abdication of leadership. The Commission should urgently accelerate its

thinking about the next CAP reforms to envision a bold and positive future for EU farmers, and a just transition – rather than clinging to the same old failed recipe. This means moving beyond the simple idea of innovation, digitalisation, and ever-larger farms as silver bullets to modernise agriculture. Europe's investment in CAP must be to guarantee fair prices for farmers' produce, transparent supply chains, healthy food, and support for agroecological farming – rewarding farmers, small and big, not for land ownership but for their environmental stewardship.

This must go hand in hand with a broader strategy to re-envision Europe's food systems from the ground up, with social justice, environmental transition, and health at its core. The Farm to Fork Strategy needs to go back to its origins, returning to a truly integrated and comprehensive food policy for Europe, with joined-up steps to promote just and sustainable food systems in Europe and globally, with the right governance structures for an integrated food system policy.

Farmers' protests have been a long time in the making. They are a wake-up call for policymakers to rethink our approach to food systems, and to prioritise the well-being of farmers and rural communities alongside the resilience of our farming *and* our environment. As we stand on the cusp of major European elections, the choices we make will shape the future of our food system for generations to come. Let's choose solidarity over scapegoating, cooperation over culture wars, and a future where farmers can thrive alongside the communities they live in and the land they steward.

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