

No Food Without Farmers, No Farmers Without Nature

Article by Enrico Somaglia, Green European Journal

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With farmers taking to the streets and making headlines all over Europe, national governments and EU institutions are rushing to make concessions to appease them. But are the solutions offered what farmers and agricultural workers really need? We asked Enrico Somaglia, deputy general secretary of the European Federation of Food, Agriculture, and Tourism Trade Unions (EFFAT).

Green European Journal: Is there a common thread among the farmers' protests happening across Europe?

Enrico Somaglia: The protests are linked to different national circumstances, such as overregulation, subsidy cuts, or imports of Ukrainian grain to the EU. But there is definitely a frustration towards a common enemy, the European Union, the Green Deal and its Farm To Fork strategy. Of course, not every farmer sees them as enemies: the agriculture sector is very heterogeneous. Small and big farmers are organised in different ways, they have different representatives. A minority within the sector opposes any kind of green policies because it is resistant to change. As trade unions, we firmly reject this stance.

On the other hand, a significant part of the farmers are against the Green Deal because they perceive it as something that has been unilaterally imposed on them. Fortunately, there is still room to improve green policies to make sure they are more socially acceptable. Trade unions see this as the way forward to build a different agriculture sector which is not only more sustainable from an environmental point of view, but is also a better place to work. To achieve that, we need measures for a truly just transition. We should not forget that if the condition of farmers is challenging, that of agricultural workers is simply unbearable. A vast proportion of seasonal workers, migrant workers, and daily labourers still face unrecorded working hours, appalling housing situations, and exploitative working relationships. The green transition can be an opportunity to create better jobs, but it needs to be stronger on the social side.

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If the agricultural sector is not a united bloc, then who are those protesting? Do they really share the same interests?

Farmers are united against issues such as unilateral decision-making, the EU's deal with the Mercosur trade bloc that is currently under negotiation, and the unfair distribution of wealth.

In many countries, small farmers represent the vast majority and are an essential part of the rural economy. They need responses, and trade unions are by their side on this. Of course, there is also a risk that farmers' protests are instrumentalised by a minority within the sector that is resistant to change

because it profits from the current environmentally and socially unsustainable model. This minority works against nature, and therefore also against agriculture. So farmers should be careful that their demands are not instrumentalised against their interests.

And yet large landowners are often the only ones who get a seat at the table in Brussels How can we address this problem of representation?

As trade unions, we expect all farmers; whether large or small, to respect workers' rights and the environment. But yes, representation is definitely an issue. A relevant portion of the farmers' community is not heard enough. The same goes for trade unions: we represent the most vulnerable workers across the food chain, and yet we don't get enough attention from policy-makers, despite the working and living conditions in the sector are still dramatic for many. Farm workers are the most affected by existing imbalances across the food system. Small farmers are also among the main victims. For example, they are in a position of weakness when it comes to negotiating with supermarket chains that want to impose prices unilaterally.

There have been many attempts – some of them successful – to support the organising of small farmers in various countries. This is one of the main issues the EU should focus on in the next term. Setting ambitious environmental goals is important, but if we don't tackle the root causes that make the agrifood chain so unequal, the frustration of farmers and farm workers will continue. And these root causes have to do with concentration, unfair competition, and unequal distribution of wealth.

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Helping small farmers to organise themselves, implementing the Unfair trading practices directive, and making sure that a fair wage is paid to agricultural workers would all be steps in the right direction. Another important step is acting on the competition law and making sure that mega-mergers and concentration of power in the agri-food sector are stopped, or that they get thoroughly scrutinised from an environmental and social perspective. Finally, there is the issue of unfair competition and trade agreements such as the one with Mercosur, where Europe's agricultural sector is on the losing side.

Instrumentalisation also has a political side. What would happen if angry farmers gave in to the courtship of right-wing parties?

It would be a mistake and an extremely dangerous one. Some parties are happy when they see social discontent – be it a cost of living crisis, a migration crisis, or farmers protesting. Yet the solutions they offer are exactly the opposite of what's needed. They are not friends of workers – they pit workers against each other. And they are not in favour of farmers because they are the ones defending the model of distribution that favours only big landowners at the expense of small farmers. They are offering the wrong answer to a real problem, and this is what farmers should be wary of.

However, it is also the responsibility of democratic and progressive parties to offer the right answers, to not be perceived as too far away to speak to farmers and farm workers' unions, to listen to them, to assess their needs and aspirations, and to come up with a clear political agenda that resonates with

them.

Greens are trying to pitch themselves to farmers as their best ally. Are they credible?

Progressive forces, including the Greens, are definitely the allies of farmers. The far right has absolutely bad solutions for the issues farmers are facing. The neoliberal agenda is not what we need. We need to defend nature and promote decent jobs in agriculture with strong collective bargaining rights. Farmers say, "Without us, there is no food". Well, without nature there are no jobs and no farmers. So progressives and democratic parties can offer the best solution for farmers and agricultural workers, on the condition that they manage to build the right narrative, dispel deceiving promises, and make more efforts to build social acceptance.

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The bad news is that the time is limited, and the world has changed over the last few years; 2019 was different. Increased geopolitical tension and the cost of living crisis are not helping the green agenda.

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) still represents about one third of the EU budget and has traditionally helped ensure the support of the agriculture sector for the European project. Is this support faltering?

The CAP is indeed one of the most important policies at the EU level. Its budget has been cut over the last few years, but the main issue is how this budget is distributed. At the moment, most resources go to those who need them least, because their business is already extremely profitable.

The new Common Agricultural Policy will be launched in 2027. What are the main principles it should be based on?

We need to rethink the way CAP funds are distributed, also by revising the eligibility criteria. At the moment, they are primarily based on the extension of the land, and not enough on the kind of production that is carried out, or on the number of employees. Tying the disbursement of funds to the number of regularly employed workers, for example, would help combat undeclared work and ensure decent wages.

The second element, linked to the first, is to strengthen social conditionality and to make it an ex-ante mechanism. Currently, an employer is sanctioned if found guilty of not offering regular contracts. Strengthening social conditionality means that farmers need to comply with minimum social and labour standards in order to receive CAP subsidies.

Finally, we must strengthen the environmental aspects of the CAP: listen to environmentalists and accompany farmers to make the system as unbureaucratic as possible.

All these changes have to do with decision-makers and regulators. Is there also a cultural shift that needs to happen among consumers?

It's not easy to ask consumers to change their shopping habits in the middle of a cost of living crisis.

After all, consumers are workers. Of course, we need to raise awareness about the negative consequences of cheap food on health, workers' rights, and the environment.

But the main change needs to happen at the food system level. We need to make sure that the most affordable food is also the most sustainable. To do this, we must support agriculture in a different way, tackling the unfair distribution of wealth across the food chain. Politics has to drive this change, and this is a big problem; the fact that the Commission abandoned the Sustainable Food System Initiative is worrying, because it was exactly about achieving those goals.

Member state governments and EU institutions are trying to put out the fire by appeasing farmers. Will they succeed or should we expect agriculture to remain front and centre until the European elections in June?

Farmers need responses, they need solutions. Unfortunately, the answers the EU has given so far go in the wrong direction, as they offered derogations on fallow land rules and killed off pesticide reduction plans. A positive signal would be to stop the Mercosur trade agreement, at least the part dealing with agriculture.

As for the protests in the streets, I don't know what will happen in the next weeks. Farmers need long-term solutions, otherwise, sooner or later, the uprisings will start again.

If agriculture is really a strategic sector for the economy, policymakers need to work with trade unions and farmers' organisations, including small farmers. We need to strengthen collective bargaining in the sector, raise wages, and improve working conditions to make it attractive. Currently, thousands of farmers are abandoning the profession every year. In some countries in particular, agriculture massively relies on a model that doesn't respect workers' rights. This cannot be the way forward.

With the world population growing and the impact of climate change intensifying, the agricultural sector will face enormous challenges in the future. We need to take a holistic approach and have a vision.



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