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Farming

Europe: Crisis in the agricultural sector

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We live in days when anger in the rural world fills headlines and screens. The European Union (EU) and its Common Agricultural Policy (the famous CAP) are identified along with the high costs and low remuneration faced by agriculture and the Mercosur treaty as the main causes of anger. But if we look closely at these mobilizations and the issues from which they emerge, we see that they are rooted in deeper issues.

The first thing to note would be that there is not one rural world in the singular, but many rural worlds that are mobilizing. If a big multinational company were threatened with the cutting off of external supplies on which it depends, the whole company would be angry, but the situation of the owners of that company and that of the workers would be different. While the owners will be worried about not losing, the workers will be worried about surviving. The capacity to resist and face crises is not homogeneous and is traversed by multiple axes, starting with capital, the decision-making power and the power of manoeuvre that each has.

The rural environment and the European agricultural-livestock sector are not a multinational, but they have similar distances and inequalities of power. That is why, in some countries, such as France or Germany, farmers' organizations have been concerned with making it visible that in these mobilizations not everything is the same, that there are interests of large companies, the agrarian bosses, fighting not to lose and maintain macro-projects, while they seek to survive with dignified lives.

They stress that although they are mobilizing on the same dates and are all part of what is happening in the rural world, they do not go hand in hand. Thus, while they demand agrarian social security, decent incomes and food that sustains people and cools the planet, others seek the maintenance of a model that only feeds extractive interests and is sustained with public money. In addition, straddling the line between the big companies and the small farmers are other medium-sized productions that, without being giants, are no longer identified either as small or as farmers. They embraced the discourse of bigness as their goal, but that scale is nothing more than an illusion and their ability to manoeuvre is not that of those with great capital. They are productions that invoice a lot of euros, but slaves to the model, heavily indebted and with little margin for decision-making.

In the midst of all this unrest, the right and extreme right are fishing and the big farming unions are seeking the lesser evil. Headlines emerge saying that ecology is to blame for everything, as if climate change did not exist and the EU's policies were environmentalist. The same EU that at the end of 2023 approved the continued use of glyphosate. The reality is that the sector's problems have their germ in an agricultural model and policies that have pushed it to the limit. A model that ignores the needs and capacities of the earth and ecosystems, generating illusions with the help of inputs. A model oriented to the global market and totally dependent on subsidies. Energy is no longer cheap either to produce or to transport products thousands of kilometres and even CAP numbers have limits.

The Mercosur treaty is one more drop in a very shaken glass. Climate change is shattering illusions and setting the limits on the artificialization of the environment. Droughts, torrential rains and/or anomalous temperatures cannot be managed with the stroke of a drone. While climate change is slapping the sector in the face and generating instability, the EU intends to dress in green and apply some measure that justifies talking about sustainability, but without a real plan to accompany a transition and sustain the transition in the meantime. All this generates anger, anger in the agribusiness that produces the inputs, anger in those who know they are dependent on them, and anger among those who do not depend so much on them, but who know that the cost of change always ends up being paid by the most vulnerable.

For all these reasons, it is realistic to think that the more or less extreme right can fish well among this discontent. Differences in models and sizes exist, but the reality is that all of them, especially the smaller ones and the rural environment in general, have been ignored for years by all political spheres. From the positions of the left, there have been no forceful proposals that support the defence of the small and the transition to other models. In the more traditional progressive discourses that speak of workers' and/or class struggle, people always speak of the urban, of those who live and work on asphalt and rarely in the rural environment that is known to be peripheral. Farmers have not been identified as essential in the workers' struggle, even though without it they cannot, literally, feed themselves. This leaves the door open to those who suddenly look to the rural environment, perceive it as a suitable place for their benefit and adopt a discourse that, although with more noise than content, seem to cater to those who have never been addressed.

At this point it is also important to remember that beyond this rebellion, there are people in the rural world who have no opportunity to rebel and who are not named or made visible in these revolts. The countryside is being mobilized, with few exceptions, in the masculine singular or interested plural. The demands are mostly about the market. In the mobilizations we see many machines and few hands, even fewer hands for day labourers, we see beards and bald heads, mainly white, and few women putting a face, voice and needs to proposals and demands. If, under the urban heteropatriarchal gaze, the workers' struggle ignores those who feed it, the same happens with the primary sector, which seems to ignore all the free family help that makes the accounts balance, as well as the day labourers who, under conditions of semi-slavery in many cases, are essential for the chain to continue functioning. The core of the discourse seems to remain how to sustain the market and not how to sustain life. The most neglected continue to be neglected.

We don't hear these days the question of who will feed us - when it's the biggest question of all. Although there are differences in the rural world, in the primary sector there are too many corporations, but not too many people. In a sector marked by neglect and ageing, the challenge is to generate transitions that can support paths towards more sustainable, equitable and exciting models, which can fairly sustain and feed people and the planet. Models that close cycles and that do not forget that feeding ourselves is part of care, formulas that are based on cooperation and not on competitive models that blame those at the bottom instead of fighting against those who drown them from above.

We need to ask who decides about our food, talk about rights, raise food sovereignty, the right to decide about our food with criteria of social and environmental justice, as an umbrella under which to walk. The solutions to climate change will not come from unsustainable energy technologies, but from looking to the Earth and building coexistence between its needs and ours. It is time to design policies that accompany this transition, that truly sustain. We are living in a complicated time, but also one of opportunity. Opportunity to see that other models are not only possible, but already exist. To be aware of the interdependence in the territory and to get out of the urban fantasy of self-sufficiency. It is urgent to value and emphasize the essentiality of those who feed the world and support transitions that sustain life.

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Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [Viento Sur](#).

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