

The EU is destroying farms across Europe ...

France also joins the protests

by Pierre Lévy,* France

(Edit. S-St) Farmers in Europe are protesting against increasing regulations, constraints and falling incomes. This development is no coincidence. In recent years, the air has been cut off from them insidiously through various EU requirements that are implemented nationally. More and more are threatened in their existence. Suicide rates are high. A similar gloomy picture is emerging everywhere. Farmers are rightly fighting back against this development.

Obviously, the aim of this “farmer’s lay-off” is to ensure the survival of only large agricultural corporations. Multi-billionaires and global financial investors are making gigantic land purchases and creating new dependencies. To enforce this international development, national legislation is being undermined via the EU. This is deeply undemocratic.

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In Germany and France, but also in the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Poland, Romania and even in very EU-disciplined Lithuania, farmers have already mobilised or are still mobilising to defend their societal useful work and at the same time to reclaim the means for a dignified life for themselves.

In Germany, this movement seems to be far from dying down. On 15 January, it reached a spectacular climax, when tractors and demonstrators gathered in Berlin. The French farmers started later, but the anger that first manifested itself in mid-January with the occupation of a motorway in the south of the country spread like wildfire across the country within a few days. Blocked traffic routes, occupied roundabouts: the years of pent-up despair suddenly exploded.

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Farmers’ protests in Germany. (Picture ma)

In France: memories of the yellow vests

One event sparked this fire: the announcement of the gradual abolition of the previous tax exemption on fuel for agricultural machinery (so-called diesel fuel for non-road transport, GNR). The same element had already triggered the mobilisation of German farmers. And this supposedly “green” tax measure is reminiscent of the spark that triggered the *yellow vest* movement in France at the end of 2018 and profoundly destabilised *Emmanuel Macron’s* rule.

Another similarity with the yellow vests is the very broad support that immediately emerged among the French, as was the case with the protests against the pension reform in 2023. The farmers who had mobilised for roadblocks gathered countless expressions of solidarity. For farmers, who often feel like unloved people accused of polluting the planet, this support is an important source of help and encouragement.

Add to this the first signs of consensus with angry fishermen or small road haulage businesses, you can understand why the new French Prime Minister *Gabriel Attal* is ready to “shed ballast”, so to speak, in the hope of putting out a fire that may be getting out of control.

So, on 26 January, Attal went on site – to a farm near Toulouse – and announced a package of measures: the relaxation of certain ecological standards, the easing of controls, an emergency fund and, above all, the withdrawal of the planned tax increase on the diesel fuel GNR,

which is indispensable in agriculture. However, it is not certain whether all this will be enough to calm the angry farmers.

Political framework conditions and environmental regulations in the EU

Even if the political framework conditions in the individual EU countries are different, there are many parallels to the dramatic difficulties faced by rural areas everywhere. The many small and medium-sized farmers are increasingly caught between falling real incomes (particularly due to pressure from the food industry and the large retail chains as increasingly monopolised retailers) and rising costs: taxes, but also the price of fertilisers and energy costs (as a result of the sanctions imposed by the EU on Russia) and increasingly expensive bank loans (particularly in connection with the European Central Bank's interest rate decisions).

Add to this the environmental regulations imposed by the EU Commission in Brussels (and the resulting escalating administrative burden), and you can understand the despair that is spreading everywhere. Many farmers, who often work seventy to eighty hours a week to earn a monthly income below the minimum wage, or even end the year with higher expenses than income, despair about the future of their business. A farmer in central France recently put the following sign on his tractor: "I am a livestock farmer, I feed you, I am dying."

In the face of the emerging movements, the reactions of the various national governments are similar. Firstly: "Farmers, we love you." Secondly: "The EU bears no responsibility." Thirdly: "Be careful, you are playing into the hands of the far right."

The first point is just the implicit admission of the balance of power ... The third point reflects

the fact that the so-called "populist" parties were for a long time the only ones to engage in a discourse (undoubtedly not necessarily sincere) that questioned the opening of borders and the quasi-religious dogma regarding the climate or the environment.

But it is the second point that is the most conspicuous lie. The European Union, with its Commission at the levers of power, bears overwhelming responsibility for the current situation. Two key points in particular: "free trade" and the "ecological obsession".

On free trade

Free trade within world trade is part of the European Union's DNA. In the 1960s and 1970s, the six founding members asserted that they wanted to ensure food independence and, to this end, established a protection zone for agriculture, which was protected from the rest of the world by tariffs and compensatory subsidies.

However, as early as the 1990s and 2000s, the EU opened to strong pressure from the forces of globalisation. Over time, the EU Commission – which has a monopoly on international trade negotiations – has concluded free trade agreements with Mexico, Chile, Canada, and Japan, among others, and an agreement with New Zealand will come into force this year.

A few days ago, the Commission announced in Brussels (the timing could not be worse, and it caused gnashing of teeth in some capitals, especially Paris) that negotiations on an agreement with "Mercosur" (Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay) could be finalised very soon, although they were thought to have come to nothing. This will certainly hit European livestock farmers hard!

However, trade within the EU internal market is not neutral either. This is because the different costs from country to country (especially the price of labour) lead to unfair competition. French fruit and vegetable growers wanted to express this by stopping lorries carrying goods from Spanish industrial hothouses, for example, and emptying them at roadblocks.

Exports from Ukraine, such as grain, but also meat and fruit, are a special case. In a political gesture to support Kiev, Brussels lifted quotas and customs tariffs for products from this non-EU country in 2022, even though it is far from being able to comply with EU standards and rules. A few months ago, French poultry producers



Farmers' protests in France. (Picture ma)

warned of a massive flood of Ukrainian chickens (127 per cent increase in one year) raised in conditions that are strictly forbidden in the 27 EU member states. Both French producers and consumers are suffering as a result.

However, farmers in Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Slovakia were hit the hardest: the provisions adopted in Brussels provided for “solidarity corridors” via the eastern EU countries to facilitate the transport of Ukrainian grain to global customers. The immediate consequence would be a collapse in prices on their domestic markets and the ruin of Polish or Romanian producers.

The uproar was so great that these eased regulations had to be temporarily suspended in Brussels. However, they have now been reintroduced, much to the displeasure of Warsaw and Bucharest. From then on, the farmers mobilised en masse. The new Polish government, which was appointed after the elections in November 2023 (and was celebrated as very EU-friendly), has announced that it will continue the policy of its “anti-European” predecessor government in this area: it will maintain national customs tariffs and thus violate EU law with its eyes wide open.

The ecological obsession

The second component contributing to the doomed state of European agriculture is the supposedly “ecological” obsession for which the EU grandees claim to be the most ardent champions. One example: it was “in the name of the environment” that the European Commission called on member states to raise the taxation of agricultural fuels to the same level as that of normal diesel fuel (proposal for a directive of 14 July 2021).

This was done on the grounds that the EU should lead by example in implementing the *Paris Climate Agreement*. And so, the so-called “Green Deal”, adopted by the EU Council and the



Farmers' protests in Spain. (Picture ma)

European Parliament in 2021, includes no less than seventy regulations in various areas (ban on combustion engines, carbon market, etc.), fifty of which have already been adopted. It also includes an agricultural part, known as “Farm to Fork”, the prospect of which is of great concern to the rural world.

This is in addition to the already implemented reform of the *Common Agricultural Policy*, which imposes ever more environmental requirements. The recently adopted text entitled “Restoring Nature” should also be mentioned, as should the restrictions on plant protection products and the obligations to restore wetlands, fallow land, and hedgerows.

The farmers of the 21st century are proud of what they do, which is to feed the population. But they are realising that the EU technocrats in Brussels, by telling them how to do this, are in fact trying to turn them into “landscape gardeners” – to the great delight of the agri-food corporations, who, by the way, want to dominate world trade completely ...

At the beginning of January, a Romanian farmer on his way to the Bucharest blockade proclaimed: “Peasant brothers, unite”.

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