Polish farmers defy EU bureaucracy

GRAIN

In June 2003 a large majority of Poles enthusiastically voted in a referendum to join the European Union. The 'yes' vote even had the support of the then Pope, Polish-born John Paul II. Most people refused to listen to the warnings of a small group of activists, who predicted that EU membership would spell doom for the country's 1.5 million small farmers. But today, four years after Poland joined the EU, many of the fears expressed at the time are proving justified.

Photo: Jadwiga Łopata, ICPPC

One-horse plough, Poland

"Just as we warned, EU bureaucracy is beginning to destroy our way of farming", says Jadwiga Łopata, founder of the International Coalition to Protect the Polish Countryside (ICPPC). "We still have 1.5 million farms, more than any other European country. Most of our farms are tiny by European standards – about 7 hectares – and they play a huge role in protecting our biodiversity, as well as providing us with fantastic food. Most farms are mixed. Our farmers both plant crops and rear animals – one or two cows, a few goats, a few pigs and some chickens. And now they are facing more and more problems with EU bureaucracy. Polish farmers are finding that the practices they adopted hundreds of years ago are now illegal. It's become a nightmare."

So what sort of practice has been banned? "When I was a child, I drank milk that farmers had hand-milked from their cows. I can't remember anyone ever getting ill as a result. But now it's illegal to milk by hand and sell it. And the local dairy, which used to buy the farmers' milk, has been closed down for failing to comply with the EU's sanitary and hygiene regulations. Our village used to have 100 cows; now there are only two." So are farmers being forced out of business? "Not yet, but many are changing the way they farm in order to survive. They are becoming less diverse. For instance, if you get rid of your animals and just cultivate fruit trees, the bureaucracy isn't so bad. But we're losing a lot of biodiversity as a result. It's very visible."

Julian Rose, a British organic farmer who now also farms the small area of land that forms part of the ICPPC's headquarters, says he knows what the Polish farmers are going through. "I went through it myself when EU regulations were being enforced in the United Kingdom. You have to have stainless steel walls and concrete floors in your cowsheds. You have to have eartags and passports for your cattle. You

"GMO-Free", but for how long?

Poland is the only country in the EU that has imposed an outright ban on GMOs. In 2004 the ICPPC began to lobby local authorities to declare their regions "GMO-free". They argued that such a ban would help trade and tourism. One by one the 16 voivodeships or provinces not only agreed to a local GMO ban but lobbied the central government to have the ban turned into a national law. Rather to the amazement of the activists, the then Prime Minister, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, agreed. In April 2006 the Polish parliament adopted a law on seeds and plant protection that introduced a total ban on both the trade in, and cultivation of, GMO seeds on Polish territory.

But the ban is under threat. On 31 January 2008 European Union regulators began proceedings against Poland at Europe's highest court, the European Court of Justice, alleging that the ban had "no scientific justification". If the court finds against Poland, the country will face a hefty fine. At the same time, Monsanto, which was reportedly caught off guard by the Polish decision, is lobbying hard to get the ban lifted. "Every week or so a delegation arrives from the US authorities or from Monsanto", says Jadwiga Lopata. "The pressure is huge. Our current Prime Minister, Donald Tusk, is beginning to wobble. And we see Poland's stance as crucial. If Poland gives in, the corporations will have a much better chance of getting GMOs accepted throughout the EU."

have to conform to rigid bureaucracy or face heavy fines. I fought it like blazes at the time and just about survived. But I know how destructive the process is to the quality of food and the quality of life. My job, as President of ICPPC, is to warn the Polish farmers: 'Don't follow us; keep your traditions alive and you will come out ahead in the end'."

Even before joining the EU, Poland had undergone rapid economic change, stemming from the collapse of the Soviet Union. The economy was opened up to market forces, and multinationals snapped up cheap assets. One of the corporations to move in was Smithfield, the US meat processing giant, which in 1999 bought up Animex, Poland's largest meat processor. Since then Smithfield has set up a dozen huge pig farms, often buying up bankrupt state farms. Intensively feeding its tens of thousands of pigs with genetically modified soya meal imported from North and South America, Smithfield has been able to produce pork more cheaply than the local farmers. Indeed, since 2004 the price of pork has dropped 30 per cent, causing additional problems for local farmers. Although consumers have been shocked by reports of the overcrowded conditions in which the pigs are reared, many are still purchasing the cheap pork products.

Smithfield's products are sold in supermarkets, another innovation for Polish consumers. "When we were under Communist rule, we heard about supermarkets and we were fascinated by the idea of them", says Jadwiga Łopata. "The food looked so good and it seemed cheap. When supermarkets finally arrived, after the collapse of communism, people at first flocked to them. About 90 per cent of the food came from Western countries. It looked attractive as it was so well packaged. But quite soon people found that the food didn't taste as good as it looked and actually was often quite awful. So some people have gone back to buying local food, but a lot of people still buy in supermarkets because the food is so cheap there."

Julian Rose thinks it tragically ironic that Polish farmers, who survived first the German invasion during the Second World War and then the collectivisation of agriculture under the Soviet Union, are now threatened with annihilation by the European Union. Few Poles expected the current problems. After 77 per cent of the Polish population voted to join the EU in 2004, the European Commission announced with satisfaction: "A great, proud nation is turning the page of a tragic century and freely takes the seat that should have belonged to it right from the start of the process of European integration." A new era was dawning, the Poles were told, and they bought into the dream.

But the new dawn has ended, at least for farmers, who still constitute about one-fifth of the workforce. So what should they do? Jadwiga Łopata and Julian Rose don't hesitate to respond: "We must organise at the grassroots level and resist. We must ignore the EU regulations and continue to support a way of life that has been going on for centuries. If enough country folk do this, they won't be able to stop us." So isn't it possible to get the EU to change? "I used to think that we could get the EU to accept radical reforms", said Julian Rose, "but I don't believe that now. It's a waste of time and energy. In the longer term change will come. Monocultural chemical farming is doomed." "Our mixed way of farming is the future", added Jadwiga Łopata; "our farmers don't destroy biodiversity, and they're not dependent on oil".

"Farmers were beginning to replace their workhorses with 35-horsepower tractors, but now, with the price of diesel rising so quickly, they're having second thoughts", continued Julian Rose. "And don't forget, horses are sustainable, as they reproduce. Not something tractors do! In many ways, the hike in oil prices is good news, in so far as it means that people are beginning to go back to the time-tested, sustainable ways of farming. It's not a case of opposing new technology, which can help us a lot by providing new forms of renewable energy and better implements. It's a question of combining the best from the past with the best that the modern world has to offer."

As if 12 hours a day campaigning to support local farmers and keep GMOs out of Poland (see Box) was not enough, Jadwiga Łopata and Julian Rose are embarking on a regional campaign to raise awareness among farmers of the importance of saving their native seeds and developing "living seed banks". They consider it crucial that this tradition is maintained at a time when both corporations and EU seed processors and regulators are acquiring unprecedented control over the food chain. "We see it as a basic community concern all over the world. How can there be food security without home-grown seeds?" asks Jadwiga Łopata.

Saying "no" to chemical farming in India

GRAIN

"My conversion to chemical-free farming began about ten years ago", said Malliah, a farmer from Yenabavi village in Warangal district in Andhra Pradesh. "I had an infestation of red-headed hairy caterpillars. I used all kinds of pesticides and couldn't get rid of them. I was getting desperate, as the caterpillars were spreading all over my cotton crop and castor beans." An agronomist from the Centre for World Solidarity (CWS), an Indian voluntary organisation, was visiting the village, and showed him how to set up solar-powered light traps. He put several of these traps on his land and they were "100 per cent effective".

Buoyed by this success, Malliah gradually developed other natural ways of controlling pests. He and other villagers started to go out early in the morning and late at night to study the life cycle of the pests so that they would learn when was the best moment to deal with them. With the help of the Centre for Sustainable Agriculture (CSA), they began to use seeds from the neem tree, a native species used for centuries to control pests. They began to grind the neem seeds, put them in water to soak overnight and then spray the liquid on their crops. The neem treatment disrupts the development and