

AGAINST THE GRAIN

September 2013

COLOMBIA FARMERS'

uprising puts the
spotlight on seeds



Destroying “unlicensed” seeds in the name of “free” trade (Photo: ICA)

On 19 August, Colombian farmers' organisations initiated a massive nationwide strike. They blocked roads, dumped milk on cars and basically stopped producing food for the cities. The problem? Farmers are being driven out of existence by the government's policies.

The state provides almost no support for the small-scale farming sector.¹ Instead, it embraces a social and economic model that serves the interests of a wealthy elite minority. Recent free trade agreements (FTAs) signed with the US and the EU are undercutting Colombian producers, who can't compete with subsidised imports.² The Colombian government has been actively promoting land grabbing by large corporations, many of them foreign (Monica Semillas from Brazil, Merhav from Israel, Cargill from the US), to promote export-oriented agribusiness at the expense of family farming oriented towards food sovereignty.

But the farming sector needs real support, especially in the form of access to land and lower costs of production, protestors argue. Otherwise, Colombian potato and coffee farmers, dairy and meat producers, not to mention small fishers, will not be able to keep up. They are being evicted and exterminated.

With their backs against the wall, a movement of mobilisation began in one part of the country in June and grew into a coordinated national action for August. The farmers' strike was soon supported by other sectors: oil industry workers, miners, truckers, health sector professionals and others. On 29 August, ten days into the strike, more than 20,000 students joined the movement and shut down the capital city, Bogotá.

The response of the government was chaotic and contradictory. Police forces violently repressed and injured a lot of protestors, not to mention journalists. More than 250 people were arrested, including high-level

union leader Hubert Jesús Ballesteros Gomez, mostly on trumped up charges.

A number of people on both sides lost their lives. At one moment the government recognised the farmers' grievances as valid and offered some concessions. In another it claimed that the movement was infiltrated by the FARC. President Santos even went on TV and claimed that "the agrarian strike does not exist". The following day, he was filmed from a helicopter, inspecting the skirmishes and tear gas which filled the streets of Bogotá.

The mobilisation has been extremely successful in opening up space for discussion, conscientisation, solidarity and resistance in Colombia. Students, for instance, were keen to support the farmers and back their demands. They rallied loudly against GMOs and for food sovereignty. But they also wanted to put forward their own demands for free public education, nudging the mobilisation beyond agrarian concerns into a broader wave of social pressure to change current Colombian policies.

Law 970

Seeds emerged as one highly visible issue. Under the FTA signed with Washington, as well as that signed with Brussels, Bogotá is required to provide legal monopoly rights over seeds sold by US and European corporations as an incentive for them to invest in Colombia. Farmers who are caught selling farm-saved seeds of such varieties, or simply indigenous seeds which have not been formally registered, could face fines or even jail time.³

1. Almost one-third of the Colombian population lives in the countryside and nearly 60% of those in the rural areas live, to some extent, in hunger. See [Paro Nacional Agrario y Popular, Pliego de peticiones](#).

2. The effects are just starting, but they are real. US agricultural exports to Colombia shot up 62% in the first year of the agreement, while Colombian farm exports to the US went down 15%. (See [USTR](#), and [Portafolio](#))

3. To be registered and certified, seeds need to meet criteria of genetic uniformity and stability, to suit agroindustrial processes. This excludes, by definition, peasant seeds — or criollo varieties, as they are called in Colombia — which tend to be diverse, adaptive and dynamic. Under the current rules in Colombia, if a farmer wants to plant criollo seeds, s/he has to get authorisation from the government, can only do it once, can only do it on five hectares or less

As is the case in many other countries throughout the world, this criminalisation of farmers' and indigenous people's rights to save, exchange and sell seeds puts the country's biodiversity and cultural heritage at risk.

While it's true that the Colombian government has been moving in this direction for many years, and agreeing to such policies as part of its membership in the Andean Community or the World Trade Organisation, many people point out that it is only since the signing of the US and EU FTAs that the government has begun seriously implementing them.

In 2011, the Colombian government authorities stormed the warehouses and trucks of rice farmers in Campoalegre, in the province of Huila, and violently destroyed 70 tonnes of rice that it said were not processed as per the law. This militarised intervention to destroy farmers' seeds shocked many, and inspired one young Chilean activist, Victoria Solano, to make a film about it. The film is called "9.70" because that is the number of the law adopted in 2010 that articulates the state's right to destroy farmers' seeds if they don't comply.⁴

Today, thanks to the force, tenacity and justness of the farmers' protest, people from all walks of life are Colombia are discussing that film, as can be seen in the mass media, social networks and the streets, and asking why the government is pursuing such senseless policies.

and must consume the entire harvest at home (cannot sell it on the market).

4. See the film's [Facebook page](#) and on Twitter look up [#Nomas970](#). In the three years of Law 970 so far (2010-2012), the government rejected or destroyed nearly 4,000 tonnes of seeds.

Going further:

- "[La historia detrás del 970](#)", Semana, Bogotá, 24 August 2013.
- Grupo Semillas, "[Colombia: Las leyes que privatizan y controlan el uso de las semillas, criminalizan las semillas criollas](#)", Bogotá, 26 August 2013.
- Julia Duranti, "[A struggle for survival in Colombia's countryside](#)", 30 August 2013.

Visit the [bilaterals.org](#) website for more coverage (in English, French and Spanish) of the general agrarian strike and the fight over Law 970.

For more information about the struggles around the seed laws in Colombia, please contact Grupo Semillas ("Seeds Group") at semillas@semillas.org.co or visit their website <http://semillas.org.co/>

To learn more about the political battle currently taking place in Chile, please get in touch with [Anamuri](#), the National Association of Rural and Indigenous Women, at secretariag@anamuri.cl

For information about what is happening in Argentina, please contact Diego Montón at the [Latin American Coordination of La Vía Campesina](#), at secretaria.cloc.vc@gmail.com

Support the movement

There is no question that Colombian farmers can feed the country very well, in a way that provides jobs, dignity and a healthy environment. But the government is too firmly attached to an economic model that caters to crony interests and holds no place for small-scale family farming. We should all support the popular agrarian struggle in Colombia to turn that model around. It's not too late.

As one small concrete action, the documentary film "9.70" — which you can watch online in Spanish at http://youtu.be/kZWAqS-El_g — is seeking funds to produce a version with English subtitles so that more people around the world can understand what the Colombians farmers are facing and support them to defeat such policies. The smallest contribution helps. Please go to <http://idea.me/proyectos/9162/documental970> to participate. The deadline is 10 September!

As another meaningful action, the Latin American Coordination of La Via Campesina are seeking international solidarity initiatives to support the strike. Please go to <http://goo.gl/9u6RXJ> to learn more. Again, time is of the essence!

Beyond Colombia, the battle over similar seeds legislation is raging right now at very high political levels, and across the countryside, in Chile and Argentina as well. One concern is that some of the more aggressive elements adopted by the government of Colombia could infiltrate other Latin American countries as well. The need to scrap these laws is truly urgent indeed!



GRAIN is a small international non-profit organisation that works to support small farmers and social movements in their struggles for community-controlled and biodiversity-based food systems. *Against the grain* is a series of short opinion pieces on recent trends and developments in the issues that GRAIN works on. Each one focuses on a specific and timely topic.

The complete collection of *Against the grain* can be found on our website at:

www.grain.org/article/categories/13-against-the-grain

GRAIN,
Girona 25 pral., 08010 Barcelona, Spain
Tel: +34 93 301 1381, Fax: +34 93 301 16 27
Email: grain@grain.org
www.grain.org