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Don't let neoliberal ideology undermine farmers' existence

Interview with Jan Slomp, President of the Canadian National Farmers' Union

Mr Slomp, you recently wrote a [letter](#) to the EU's agriculture Commissioner Mr Hogan saying you have an idea how the milk crisis could be solved. Europe should take inspiration from the Canadian experience with dairy supply management. How could this work?



Back in the 1960s, Canada faced a similar situation to what Europe is experiencing now with an over-supply of milk on the market and farmers going bankrupt due to low milk prices. It took a year of discussions between farmers, but in the end everybody agreed that limiting the milk supply was the only way to solve the crisis in the long term. A system of supply management was installed which is based on three pillars and is still active today: Firstly, supplies are matched with demand on the Canadian market. Secondly, farmers receive a fair price for their milk, based on an index which calculates the production costs in each region. Finally, tariffs and import controls allow Canadians to protect their milk farmers from low-cost world market products to be dumped on their internal market. The not-so-nice side of supply management is that we hardly export anything - which is unacceptable for free-trade proponents.

But this system has allowed farmers to make a good living, it allows citizens to have access to dairy products at a reasonable price, and it requires no subsidies whatsoever. The whole system is paid for by dairy farmers themselves. We should not forget that the millions of Euros which are poured into the European dairy sector at this very moment as an emergency measure are also tax payers' money. But the problem is that these measures can at best provide short-term relief. If Europe wants to keep its milk farmers and healthy rural areas in the long-term, then supply management is the best option. **Most Europeans would be happy if farmers received a fair share of the price they pay for milk products. Additionally, citizens are becoming more and more concerned by ethical questions related to food production. They want cows to graze on pastures, not to be fed with GM-soy, and not to be pushed to their physical limits by producing a maximum amount of milk. Is the Canadian system fit to help farmers to produce in a way which is sound for the environment and animal welfare?** The Canadian system allows farmers to plan a lot better. Therefore any kind of investment into better stables, pasture systems and so on can be met much easier than within a system where farmers constantly have to worry about their existence. The Canadian supply management system gives farmers stable income, and in return environmental and animal welfare conditions can be applied to production. **It seems that Europe is currently going into the opposite direction, with Commissioner Hogan visiting countries such as Mexico, Colombia, China and Japan in a quest for new markets for European products...** Supply management doesn't mean you have to stop exports completely, but you cannot pursue an aggressive export strategy and protect your own farms at the same time. Trade should be based on mutual interests, so if after satisfying the European market, there is an interest from other countries to import European products, that's fine. But often what happens is that producing and exporting more is seen as an end in itself. Like in Europe, we have many fierce proponents of trade liberalisation in Canada. Many politicians heralded the strong increase in exports of food products from Canada as a big success. But what they forget to mention is that at the same time, food imports have been increasing just as heavily. So in the end, we surrender sovereignty over our own affairs because we cannot decide how our food should be produced anymore. With free trade agreements, the problem is that many of them should better be called "forced trade agreements", which aim to dump products on other countries' markets. Take the example of CETA, the Canadian-EU trade deal which is currently the hot potato on everyone's plate. It foresees to raise import quotas for European cheese into Canada by 17.000 tons. That's the equivalent of 400 Canadian dairy farms! It wouldn't be so bad if European farmers would make a living from these exports, but they are not. These 17.000 tons of cheese are a huge strike to the Canadian dairy market regulation. Canada should never have accepted these imports. But dairy farmers did not negotiate strongly enough and settled for compensation. That may help dairy farms now, but it will not help future generations who want to start farming. **CETA, the planned EU-Canada trade deal, is currently leading to mass protests all over Europe. What is the take of Canada's civil society on this trade agreement?** Canada's civil society is campaigning heavily against this agreement. The National Farmers Union shares the concerns raised, such as arbitration systems that favour large corporations. Concerning agriculture, food and rural areas, I already mentioned the strike to our domestic milk market regulation by allowing high imports of cheese. Moreover, we strongly criticise the severe restrictions on farmers' right to save and re-use seeds which are included in CETA. Thirdly, local food systems would be harmed due to rules against local public procurement. So there are a lot of good reasons to oppose this trade deal. **Thank you a lot for this interview, Mr Slomp. Is there anything you would like to add?** Well, let me add that I had the opportunity to visit a dairy farm yesterday with a young farmer of 35 years who has the energy, the courage and the motivation to run it. I feel deep compassion for family farms who, against all odds, run an honest business and produce food for our societies. I just do not want to believe that because of an ideological belief in neoliberal market orthodoxy, farmers' existences are carelessly undermined. We have already seen more than 50 years of reduction of farms. If European citizens, rural and urban dwellers alike, are to believe in the European project, politicians now have to make a choice and protect the very fabric of rural communities. Politicians should always have future generations and the future of rural areas in mind when planning and making agreements. Otherwise, if livelihoods in rural areas are destroyed, this provides fertile grounds for right-wing parties to rise. We can already see that happening in many parts of Europe. The Canadian experience shows there is a solution to the dairy crisis - now Europe's politicians

have to make a choice. **Further info:**

- [Letter by Jan Slomp to EU-Commissioner Hogan](#)
- On the Canadian system of supply management: [Strengthening Supply Management - Defending Canadian control of our market space and advancing food sovereignty](#)

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