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Taking the fields to the streets

Since 2022, farmers all over Europe have been setting up shop outside government quarters. What lies beneath the surface of these demonstrations?

More than 500 tractors made their way to the motorways leading to Paris on Monday, as walls of hay rose here and there in the capital's arteries.

French farmers have vowed to blockade the Paris region until their demands are met, keeping up the pressure ahead of an extraordinary European summit on 1 February. On Wednesday, over 100 roads were blocked and 10 000 people demonstrated across the country, according to the French interior ministry. Prime Minister Gabriel Attal, just named to lead the government, is grappling with his first crisis, with grievances focused on new environmental norms, fuel taxes, free trade and wages. Formerly education minister, the 34-year-old has attempted to quell the unrest by granting emergency subsidies for organic farmers, cattle farmers hit by epizootic haemorrhagic disease and bad weather, and suspending a tax hike on tractor fuel. To the trade unions steering the protests, however, this is too little, too late.

European farmers unite

The demonstrations have been in the making for some time. In late 2023, farmers had already started turning road signs upside down to protest against governmental 'red tape.' The name of the farmers' initiative echoes the sentiment: 'On marche sur la tête', meaning 'We're walking on our heads.' It's a common idiom that refers to an upside-down world.

Speaking to the TV channel TF1 on 22 January, Luc Smessaert, a cattle farmer in the Oise region north of Paris, voiced such feelings: 'nowadays, [a] hedge is subject to 14 different European and French laws — the code on urbanism, heritage, and environment. Farmers don't even want to plant hedges anymore.'

While these movements are not new, they are

In 2021, organic farmers photographed themselves naked in their fields holding a

becoming increasingly confrontational.

sign 'La Bio à Poil' – the literal meaning in French is 'in the nude', but there's also the sense of being exposed and vulnerable – to raise awareness over the political ambiguity around agroecological practices.

Unlike the 'Gilets Jaunes' or pension-reform protests, the uproar isn't unique to France. Since 2022, farmers in northern (the Netherlands, Germany), southern (Italy) and eastern Europe (Poland, Romania, and Lithuania) have been setting up shop outside government quarters and camping tractors and forestry trucks on main roads. Buoyed by the actions of their French peers across the border, Belgian farmers also blocked the roads to Zeebrugge port on 30 January.

The discontent takes place days after the European Commission launched its much-trumpeted strategic dialogue on the future of agriculture and just ahead of the European elections.

While these movements are not new, they are becoming increasingly confrontational.

Juggling contradictions

French farmers know they largely have the public's support, and it's relatively easy for them to gain the attention of politicians and the media. However, past examples show that such movements can be quickly forgotten once the heat of the protest has passed. So, did earlier protest movements serve a purpose?

Whatever farmers grow in France and however they do it, they are having to juggle an increasing number of competing demands. How to 'feed France' while 'caring for the environment' while complying with ever more regulatory standards? How to cope with the immediate impacts of frost, floods and drought, and also face up to new challenges such as an epizootic outbreak?

How to meet society's expectations for more organic farming, even as inflation rises and consumption declines? Conversions agroecological methods are costly, after all, and often require several years. So, how to live in the meantime?

Many farmers believe current economic conditions make it impossible to reconcile the demands of sustainability and development, yet be able to

pass their farms on to the next generation.

Juggling these contradictions places a considerable physical, psychological and emotional burden on farmers, culminating in the societal and moral crisis we are experiencing today. A look at the responses to previous protest movements shows that farmers' anger is generally heard, at least in part.

The 'La Bio à poil' movement has helped farmers secure a number of wins, including a 1-million euro promotion campaign for the sector and subsidies for pig farming. As part of the reforms of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy, the organic farmers' union also clinched higher subsidies for its conservation practices. In 2022, they said they were happy with the progress made.

Actions by the 'On marche sur la tête' movement led to the government backing down on a tax hike on pesticides, originally intended to spread the burden of depollution costs faced by water providers. Likewise, the head of the country's mainstream agriculture trade union, the FNSEA, said it was 'satisfied' with its win on what they called a 'major demand.'

A platform for expression

As far as the current upsurge of anger is concerned, measures and compensation will no doubt be announced. But will they be enough to solve the impossible equation facing agriculture in the long term? Not to mention the risk that new measures may increase perceived contradictions and paperwork.

Since 2019, we have been following 42 farmers from the Centre–Val de Loire region, to research how they navigate these tensions.

If anything is to come out of these protests, politicians and citizens will also need to play their part in facing up to their own contradictions.

We found that such political movements provide them with an important outlet, allowing them to express the anger they feel. In France, suicide has hit the farming world more than the general population. Uniting with others in similar situations allows them to break free from the feeling of isolation. They also allow farmers to define for themselves of what a viable agricultural model for all would look like. For politicians and the rest of us, such protests provide us with an opportunity to show our attachment to the farming world as well as

a certain rural ideal.

If anything is to come out of these protests, politicians and citizens will also need to play their part in facing up to their own contradictions. A November 2023 survey found that 'the French are asking for more financial support from the public authorities (56 per cent), but there is still a high proportion in favour (25 per cent) of maintaining aid to farmers as it is.'

So, what is to be done? It could be a matter of empowering farmers in the face of supermarkets and retailers pushing for cutthroat prices. It could also be a matter of consumers making an effort to consume locally and at the right price and accepting a countryside in which farming is a profession and not just landscapes. And it might also be a question of providing greater support for R&D to ease the agroecological transition.

Next month's International Agricultural Show in Paris will undoubtedly be a test of strength for the government, farmers and their unions, and a decisive stage alongside the European elections scheduled for June.

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