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EEC

Farmers' Riots and Their Background

by Sicco L. Mansholt, Brussels *

Friedrich Schiller, the German poet, in his trilogy, "Wallenstein", has put into the mouth of one of his characters the words: "The peasant, too, is a human being ... so-to-say." This afterthought, "so-to-say", contains everything that has been the curse of the peasant farmer's existence for centuries — to be abused, exploited, treated as an inanimate object only, deprived of his freedom, and led up the garden path. Therefore, it is not surprising that farmers, from their centuries-old experience, especially have become suspicious of everything new. Their mistrust becomes stronger under the impact of persistent persuasion that these new developments would not only be unprofitable but positively dangerous for them.

Causes of Unrest

People in responsible positions have used the last three years, in almost totally irresponsible fashion — with some exceptions, naturally — and in some cases, against their own knowledge to the contrary, to paint the plans of the European Commission for a reform of the state of European farming in the blackest colours. In a great number of cases, this was done in order to reap party-political profits.

Trying to trace the causes of unrest among farmers, which found its climax in the destructive riots of approximately 80,000 farmers on March 23, 1971, in Brussels, we have to state that these were not primarily economic but rooted in their need to cast themselves loose from traditional social ties. Agricultural politicians of conservative leanings are opposed to such changes, because these would reverse the picture they have of their position in the world and do harm to their (ap-

parent) interests. They prefer to raise the cry for higher prices, though these will never overcome farmers' problems.

For the basic truth has been seeping into all the nooks and crannies of our Society that fundamental changes in Society's structures are afoot, not leaving out a single sector of life: the family, the schools and institutions of higher learning, religion and morality, sexual life and the arts, economics and, perhaps one future day, also politics — a hope which we, as progressive European politicians, are not willing to give up. Through these changes affecting all aspects of life, a feeling of uncertainty, and in some people of fear, becomes widespread, and those who feel these changes as most threatening are people living on, and working in, agriculture, whose world views and traditions go back for centuries. They therefore feel that they are going under and sinking.

Hostile Suspicion against Brussels

It is obvious to anyone with only the slightest experience how complex the problems of farming policy have become, not only in Germany but in all the EEC countries — or in practically all the countries of the world. What we call "the man in the street", or in another context, the consumer, or taxpayer, is usually uninformed in questions of farming policy. He only hears that farmers' organisations do not cease to demand higher prices for farm produce and new subsidies, but he will hardly be able to discover what is the real meaning of new agreements and their connection with new negotiations, nor will he be able to understand their purpose. But even the farmer himself, whose fate is the subject of negotiations, hardly understands more of their purport. Yet those responsible for the policies of farmers and

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their organisations show the same lack of understanding. However, in their case, this is caused by the wilful refusal to make the effort to understand, because in their home countries, everything is much easier to settle than trying to grasp ideas of European policy, though farmers' problems are difficult enough already in one's home country.

This alone leads to hostile suspiciousness against "Brussels", against the Plan of the Commission, even before economic interests of the critics themselves have come into play. And then, these do play their important, additional part.

Such animosities derive from the incapacity of the individual to understand the interdependence of problems, and they explode in protests every time when group interests or national interests are to be subordinated to the common interests of member countries. Up to the present day, it has always proved possible to keep the common interest in the foreground through tough and patient bargaining, for in the field of farming, the compulsion to work out joint decisions has long been inescapable, and attempts of individual member countries to break out of the Community have always eventually failed. The Council of the EEC took its first decisions on structural and social policies on March 25 last, and I believe that this was also the first hopeful symptom that the Council is aware of the real situation and was determined about the direction of future developments.

Becoming an Uninfluential Minority

But a few days prior to this date, demonstrating farmers in Brussels had demolished everything in their reach, because they had been made to wait far too long for this decision, which released them from a painful dilemma. Despair had been the result of this measure having been postponed for year after year, and despair had been increased by the mounting fear of the farmers lest they become an uninfluential minority. For example, in the Federal Republic of Germany, only 8 p.c. of the working population are still engaged in farming, and this proportion is bound to decline further. It is true that farming continues to hold a special position in our Society but no longer in the way of past times, when farming was the main foundation of all Society. The change in this respect, naturally, also has its political effect, and farmers' leaders are fighting for their political rank and position, which are subject to a process of complete reorientation. Among farmers, the feeling is therefore widespread of having become a minority which is accorded minority rights of a kind suitable for the inhabitants of a reservation or nature reserve, who are kept alive by the good will of other people.

Summing up, it is, of course, a fact that it is no longer farming but industry which moulds the forms of human life, which means for our farming community that its past structure, based on a majority of smallholdings, is simply being rolled flat by newly formed large-scale structures of industrialised society. We know the results: rural villages and farming families have entered upon a crisis of their foundations. Whether they like it or not, they are forced to adapt themselves to modern society. Such adaptation is found in the new economic forms of poultry and pig raising, where keeping a few roasting chickens and/or pigs has been replaced by industrially organised large-scale factory farming. Such changes affect the farming population most deeply, and their immediate reaction is to refuse to take part in this transformation, whose practical form they get to know as the common European farming policy.

Their resistance is stiffened by the difficulties based on general economic policy and on the graduations of income, but most of these difficulties are caused by structural shortcomings of European farming. Fantastic technological progress, expansion of industry, full employment, and shorter working days and working weeks — all this has spread at an unprecedented rate during the last decade. What will be, for example, the thoughts of a farmer's young wife who, on the pastures near the North Sea Coast, has to milk her cows any day and every day, when a few hundred yards from her, women and girls of about the same age who have come from one of the cities and towns have their long sunbathing weekends, free of all work?

Mounting Social Tensions

Such differences will lead to mounting social tensions. Wage increases in some countries of the European Community have been of the order of 14 p.c. in 1970, much more than the general rise in productivity, which made for steep rises in prices and costs, coupled with creeping devaluation of the currency. Our farmers, working in an out-of-date economic structure, were not able to keep pace with this development, and a swift glance at actual conditions will confirm this.

In the EEC area, there are at present about 6 mn heads of farms, of whom one full quarter would be old-age pensioners if working outside farming, because they are all over 65 years of age. More than half of all farmers—55 p.c.—are older than 55, and 15 p.c. of all farmers in the EEC area have been compelled to take a second job outside farming, and this proportion rises to as much as 27 p.c. in the Federal Republic. They are called "farmers with a sideline" and are forced to serve

two masters — their new non-farming vocation and their old farmwork. Of those heads of farms who do not at the same time follow any other vocation, three quarters are without a potential successor to take over. One third of all farms in the EEC area have not even enough work, let alone chances to earn enough, for one fully employed worker. Only 6 p.c. of all farms in the EEC practise bookkeeping.

These figures which, of course, only illustrate a narrow aspect of the real problem, make it unnecessary to provide elaborate proofs for the fact that price and marketing policies alone will not lead to an improved situation.

It would, naturally, also be a mistake to accept generalisations about farming as the literal truth about individual farms. There is hardly another branch of the economy where individual incomes are subject to such vast differences as in farming. There are farming units of comparable sizes, structural and marketing characteristics, of which one may earn a capital yield of 16 p.c., the other show a net loss on capital of 12 p.c. — which means a differential margin of above 200 p.c. And such results are incontrovertibly reported from farms which do practise bookkeeping.

Need for Well-planned Specialisation

If a farm is of the right size or—in smaller farms—the farmer operates a well-planned specialisation scheme oriented towards a near market, the farmer succeeds in earning parity wages for himself and his workers and at the same time in paying satisfactory interest rates on his capital.

But only 15 to 20 p.c. of all farmers are able to operate in this way. More than 80 p.c. of all farmers do not reach parity wages. A further break-

down by farm types shows that greater weakness is widespread among animal husbandry farms that are based either on pasture land or on the growing of fodder, or both, than among the farms with much arable land, growing grain, potatoes, or sugar beet. This is the present starting situation for our farming policy.

The Lessons of Farmers' Riots

It is clear that the farming problems of the EEC can only be overcome by structural changes in farming, but it is equally clear that the structural policies on EEC farming are seen by those affected by them as something new and something unknown, denounced as the work of technocrats, against which resistance is being artificially fomented. Therefore:

□ to overcome this resistance, it is not sufficient simply to carry on without wavering past joint policies on farming—which should anyway be more or less self-understood—but to open up and make generally understandable the conditions typical for the present situation.

At the moment, the most urgent task is to spread more and clearer knowledge about actual conditions — implying more enlightenment, a better education, and more research. Only knowledge and awareness of the background of our problems will help us to find the possibilities to be embodied in future suggestions and plans of the EEC Commission. The Commission on its own is not able to master this task. Political authorities, government agencies, and professional organisations, all will have to cooperate more willingly with the Commission than they have done in the past. As the Commission's Vice-President in charge of agricultural policy, I have in the past criticised the information policies of farmers' organisations



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— not for their general content but for their failure to fill it with visible European significance. Our farmers must be convinced and enlightened about the fact that they will have a future only in a European framework, and that this precludes future action determined by nationalist thought.

□ Our farmers must be relieved of their fear that they may not survive economically, which is widespread. Future farming prospects are not as hopeless as many farmers believe them to be today. In the long term, it does not even appear improbable that for some farm products, the present buyers' market may change into a sellers' market. People will always need milk and also meat. Farmers must be given back their self-confidence, which many of them have lost, and the cry often heard at meetings: "It doesn't make sense any more", must be transformed into new hope.

Hopes for the Future

Our analysis has made it clear that development for the future is still in its infancy, and this is also true of the decisions made on March 25, 1971. They are quite useful for a beginning and will cover the next four years, but before these four years have passed, we must look further ahead. Future progress will be strongly dependent, more so than before, on the European Community's overall political evolution. Isolated progress in the field of farming policies will grow progressively more difficult, and the destiny of farming is therefore closely related to that of the Community as a whole.

The picture of the countryside and the farming scene will both change — whether we interfere with the change or not, and this change is already under way.

If we subject farming to effective political and economic measures its change will be a gain, but in the absence of such measures, farming will become a dying industry. We cannot afford to permit such decay, without running the risk of serious dangers for a stable Community. Therefore we have no choice but to act, and the Council's decision to make a beginning with structural reforms in European farming may be interpreted as a

form of compulsory European solidarity. At any rate, we have succeeded for the first time in persuading the wealthier countries of the Community to provide additional funds for the poorer ones, e.g. for paying life rents to Italian farmers leaving their farms. The joint treasury, the European Equalisation and Guarantee Fund for Agriculture, will take over 65 p.c. of the costs of such pensions, thus providing a joint solution of a highly important Italian problem. But what is much more important in farming than in any other industry: a sufficient number of young and efficient managers of production units must be persuaded to stay in farming. This is only possible if and when farming as a career becomes again attractive. Job prospects of young agricultural managers must be good enough to persuade them to stay in farming.

What farming needs is well known: it needs more ready mobility of farming land towards young and enterprising managers, who must be enabled to take over farmland on long lease or through purchase of its freehold. Individual farms must be large enough for producing sufficient to make a turnover which corresponds with contemporary requirements, and they must be modernised for economising in the number of farmhands and the hours worked by them.

To bring this about, large sums of investment aid will have to be mobilised at rates of interest which farmers can afford to pay. The expected result of carrying out all these plans will be a farming income from well managed farms which corresponds to all the claims made in our modern industrialised society.

The Council decisions of 25th March do not yet embody the ultimate aims of this policy; they only go one step into the hopeful direction. Further steps have to follow to get nearer to the aim of integrating farming fully into our industrialised society, one of which will be to make farming more directly responsible for its own market — a state of affairs which is self-understood for producers in any other industry. The EEC Commission will continue to labour for making farming a politically and economically fully viable branch of our Community.



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