
Interview: Erwin Schöpges

Europe's Milk Crisis: If Required, We Will Toughen Our Fight

Erwin Schöpges is the president of the Belgian dairy farmer organization, Milch Interessengemeinschaft Gruppe (MIG), and one of the founders of the European Milk Board (EMB). This interview was conducted on March 25, by Karel Vereycken, responsible editor of Nouvelle Solidarité, the newspaper of Solidarité & Progrès, the political party headed by LaRouche associate Jacques Cheminade, and has been made available to EIR.

NS: You and your organization, the EMB, were the key organizers of the European “milk strike” and other spectacular actions, calling public attention to the dramatic farm crisis hitting dairy farmers. What was this all about?

Schöpges: For us, the strike of 2009 followed the strike of 2008, when the German milk farmers responded to the dramatic fall of prices, which obliged them to react. Why were the prices falling? Because too much volume arrived on the market. The problem in 2008, was that the French were not participating in the movement. Now, if you want to win such a fight on a European scale, you need both Germany and France to participate, since these two countries alone represent over 50% of the EU's total milk production. But that was not easy to achieve.

In 2009, the situation was far different. I organized quite a few meetings in Brittany, in Normandy, and many other places in France to mobilize the French. In the end, it worked, and movements such as the Independent Milk Producers Association (APLI) and the Milk Producers Organization (OPL) were created. As a result, in 2009, it was the French who led the action. Given that Germany, France, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and Belgium took part in the strike, one can really say it was a European strike.

In 2008, I told myself I didn't want to participate

any longer in the way the action took place then, when farmers dumped their milk on the fields, but nobody saw it. I was at home, opened the milk faucet, and tears rolled down my face. So I decided that this time, if we had to dump milk on the fields, everybody should see it! The idea came up to have a day of action in Ciney [Belgium] which became some kind of symbol of the strike. There, we dumped over 3 million liters of milk on the fields in half an hour, i.e., the equivalent of the entire daily milk production of Wallonia, [in southern Belgium]! You see, it was really a big movement.

Calls for Regulation

NS: What did you achieve with this action?

Schöpges: First, it was a great victory, because we showed an incredible solidarity among different countries. I think it is unique to create such a movement where actions take place in several countries. Then, Mme. Mariann Fischer Boel, who was the free-trade-preaching European Commissioner for Agriculture at that time, was not allowed into the new commission. We even ended up [in December 2009] having 22 of the 27 EU countries calling for a return to regulation. Now it remains to be defined what kind of regulation we're talking about...

Under the pressure of the strike, the EU also ended up giving EU280 million in aid to the dairy farmers. That looks like a hell of a lot of money. However, we calculated that for Belgium, it means you get about EU0.2 cents of aid per liter. For myself, with a farm that aims at producing 500,000 liters of milk per year, it means EU1,000. That's better than nothing, but you realize it is very little.

The other victory of the strike is the creation of the first “High-Level Group,” composed of experts of each country, which meets every two or three weeks to define the outline of the new Common Agricultural



Courtesy of Erwin Schöpges

Erwin Schöpges (second from right), shown here with French and German leaders of the milk farmers' organizations, is a leader of the dairy farmers' movement, which has organized "milk strikes" to call attention to the grave crisis that has hit Europe's dairy farmers.

Policy (CAP) of the EU as of 2013. Now the EMB is accepted as an official partner in these discussions. Before, it was only the COPA, representing the large unions, while now Via Campesina and the EMB are listened to as representatives of the milk producers.

NS: After a 20% drop in farm prices in 2008, and by 30% in 2009, and even by 50% for dairy farmers, how can they survive?

Schöpges: For the purpose of clarity, let's take my own situation. First, I produce each day about 1,000 liters of milk, which I sell at EU25 cents a liter. That gives me about EU250 per day. Doing the job requires an average of eight hours of labor. As an independent, you have to earn at least EU25 per hour (gross income). It means that from the EU250 I get from the milk industry, EU200 merely pays my working hours (8 times EU25). With the remaining EU50, I'm supposed to sustain production. . . .

To put it differently, one could say that I work for free, since the income I get isn't even sufficient to maintain production itself! As a result, over the last 18 months, be it in France or in Belgium, dairy farmers only survive by going into debt, and by getting additional loans to pay off the previous ones. Of course, it is said that things will get better, but we're slipping increasingly into a dangerous state of dependence.

NS: For some, desperation is taking over.

Schöpges: How could it be otherwise? Producers are losing their capital; they work long hours, and are less and less able to face their financial obligations. That's a tremendous source of tension in these families. People in the profession were never really rich, but merely able to live a normal life. We never learned how to confront this new situation that drives many out of business, and even to suicide.

Cartel Land-Grabs

NS: What happens to the farmland these farmers leave behind?

Schöpges: That's a very special question about a very sensitive issue. In

the dairy sector, we observe that farms, with 1,000 cows, entering bankruptcy, are quietly being taken over, in great secrecy, by corporations and banks, which aim to control agro-food production in Europe. But farmers continue to run these entities as the managers, which means it's somehow hard to document. But the process, which is somehow underground, is deadly real in Germany and Belgium.

There exists a considerable amount of interest by large financial corporations to grab farmland today. Energy is already largely in the hands of the same cartels that are taking over the farm and food sector today, and are out to take over our water resources over the next decade, both in Europe and worldwide. The control by a tiny handful of interests, over something that vital, represents a danger that one should not underestimate.

Even though it's hard to prove, we know it is taking place. I know it is dangerous to talk about it, but I think somebody should raise the issue. If some people feel unhappy about it, they always can sue me!

There is a danger that the consumer and the nation itself will become dependent. Just think about how crucial food is for all of us. Do we want to have the guarantee in the future that high-quality food will remain available in our nations, or are we ready to eat anything: cheese which is not real cheese, meat that is not meat, and bread that is no longer real bread? Already certain illnesses and cancers are on the rise as a result of lower-

quality food. Therefore, a choice has to be made: Are we ready to invest more to have quality food?

NS: How do you see the perspectives for the “new” Common Agricultural Policy [which the British threaten to scrap from the EU budget in 2013—ed.]?

Schöpges: The crucial challenge for the dairy sector is to quit a system of systematic subsidies, while, of course, for the moment, the survival of milk producers depends entirely on those subsidies. What we need is a market price that allows us to live decently, and to maintain and develop production. Producing a liter of milk for EU20 cents, and then cashing in the subsidies to survive, is not the way to go.

To leave that system, the European Milk Board developed a concept that we presented to the EU’s High-Level Group of experts, comparable to the Canadian system. We want to set up a “milk board,” somewhat like an oversight group, where producers are in charge of defining a just price covering their production costs. It is often said that such a thing is impossible, since too many differences exist among countries. I simply think that is not true, and I’m pretty convinced that among producers we can set such a just price, because production prices are, in reality, quite identical in the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, or France. So the producers must be involved.

Secondly, the authorities of different states should be part of it, to make sure we can set up the right framework to make this work.

And thirdly, the consumers themselves should also be part of it, in order to guarantee that the price decided on remains acceptable for the citizens.

These three components are essential for an effective milk board. But also important, is to maintain, not a quota system, but a right for each producer to produce on his land. If farmers lose the right to produce on their farms, their farms become worthless. If you get into a situation where 70-80% of producers don’t own the land they work on, and lose their right to produce, they can be kicked out overnight, and replaced by somebody else. . . .

If the new CAP heads in the direction of this system, one can expect the phasing out of a subsidized agriculture system. We no longer want to be producing here in Europe the cheap products that are ruining the small producers in Africa, as is going on presently. But of course, for those people producing in dis-

advantaged regions, it’s legitimate that they should get support, because they really need it.

Time for Producers and Consumers To Meet

NS: In expectation of this new regulation, you are now launching an original initiative in Belgium?

Schöpges: The time has come when producers should meet consumers. Gone is the epoch, when we producers stayed on the farm, and after the milking, poured it into the tanks, without worrying about the rest. In Belgium, we’ve just established Fairecoop, a cooperative owned and run by milk producers, and under the label Fairebel, will launch a “fair-priced” milk. This fair-priced milk will be sold in most supermarkets throughout Belgium. Our label also requires that each producer will have to promote the product by getting directly into contact with the consumer. The latter has to understand that if he buys his milk at EU50 or 60 cents a liter, he’s ruining all of the producers in Europe.

Basic production costs alone, without the cost of labor, amount already to 35 cents a liter. So, if the consumer buys milk at the store at 50 to 60 cents, it is impossible for the farmers to survive. For each liter of fair-price milk sold, 10 cents will go into a bank account and the total earnings will be redistributed to all of those which invested in our cooperative. The issue here is to create a new solidarity among producers and consumers, which is quite a challenge. We will see how people react. Will they accept the idea of buying milk at 90 cents instead of 60?

NS: Are you planning any new operations as part of your awareness campaign?

Schöpges: For the time being, we’re watching how the situation will evolve. If prices get better, new action will not be immediately required. However, if prices drop again, and there’s no change, spectacular new actions will be rapidly launched.

I had the opportunity to talk for two hours with the new European Commissioner on Agriculture, Dacian Ciolos, and I saw quite a change of philosophy. Mme. Fischer Boel comes from Denmark, an ultra-liberal country. Ciolos comes from Romania and has contacts in France. Of course, he cannot change everything overnight, but I stay in contact with him. We’re doing the best we can to convince him that the road taken by Fischer-Boel was against family farming. However, if nothing happens, believe me, after having organized two milk strikes, new actions do not frighten me.