

G-8 Ag Meet: Shift To Pro-Production

by Marcia Baker and Claudio Celani

April 23—Giovanni Robusti, an agriculture expert and a member of the European Parliament, issued a statement to *EIR* today, as a comment on the recently concluded meeting of the G-8 Agriculture Ministers. The meeting took place in Cison di Valmarino, Italy, April 18-20, at the initiative of Italian Agriculture Minister Luca Zaia, and a final statement was drawn up in which the issues of doubling world food production, curbing speculation, ensuring food security, and protecting local products are addressed, as well as making biofuel production compatible with stability of food growth. The statement, however, does not challenge the globalized regime of free trade, despite calling for “rules-based” free trade.

Both Robusti and Zaia belong to the anti-globalist Lega Nord party. In his statement, Robusti says that the fact that “eight agriculture ministers of the largest economies in the world were able to discuss agriculture directly, without going through the mediation of their diplomatic personnel, should be acknowledged as a great result, to the credit of Luca Zaia.” Robusti stressed that we are now at a moment of an “agriculture revolution focussed on production,” a reversal of a “previous planned revolution aimed at not producing.”

Robusti thinks that Zaia “did not expect an executive resolution. Maybe the media did, but that is a game of setting expectations. At that level of interaction, you read between the lines, and what is primarily important is the direct relationship which is established. That result has been achieved.” For countries such as Italy, which is a producer of quality food products, national interest lies in achieving agreements with countries representing markets for its products, for instance the United States, “in the framework of a positive and not nasty reciprocity.” That is a long road, but the Italian-led G-8 “has moved forward on that road quite a bit. The rest will require time.”

Robusti says he is convinced that “direct and confidential talks” among the ministers “have allowed them



Group of Eight

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to know, and some of them maybe to agree upon, different strategies which must aim at not sacrificing agriculture on the altar of the energy race. We farmers do not need to consume in order to produce. We have the opposite problem, i.e., to produce more in order to support consumers’ demand.”

Beyond the results of the G-8, some sources indicate that the EU strategy of trying to protect labelling of quality in a free-trade, globalization system, instead of a system of negotiated bilateral tariff agreements as proposed by Robusti, is a losing proposition. In order to achieve recognition of labels, the EU has made severe concessions. For instance, Italian Parmesan cheese is a protected label, i.e., only Parmesan produced by the Italian consortium can bear the Italian label, “Parmigiano.” However, anyone in the world can produce a bad imitation and label it “Parmesan,” in English. Thus, “Parmesan”-labelled cheese has 50% of the market in Germany today. The food cartels that dominate world markets are not interested in the label, the experts say.

The G-8 Summit

The G-8 agricultural summit was the first ever to be held. As its website points out, it occurred in the context of dramatic crisis: 1 billion people in the world are suffering from hunger. Furthermore, “there is hidden hunger,” affecting an additional 2 billion people, which means that their diets are limited in quantity and nutrients. Three million underweight babies die yearly.

In the face of this situation, the watchword of international summitry recently has shifted to the need for dramatically expanding food production. However, in most cases, this impulse is hampered by the old demands for expanding free trade, and maintaining low-



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Giovanni Robusti, an agriculture expert and Member of the European Parliament, issued a statement to EIR on the recent G-8 Agriculture Summit, calling for a return to production vs. speculation.

technology, low-infrastructure agriculture, which guarantee that food shortages will escalate into genocide.

In the run-up to the G-8 summit, however, Zaia broke profile in numerous respects. In an interview with the daily *Il Libero*, the minister declared: “I will propose banning all financial instruments which involve speculation on agricultural products. The truth is that speculation makes people starve.”

“The fact that people get rich off other people going hungry is unthinkable,” he added.

Later on, Zaia broke from the consensus in addressing the issues of both infrastructure and free trade, although in general terms. For example:

“Agricultural production must be increased in emerging countries. It must be doubled. Water plays a key role: We need to provide water where it’s lacking. Productivity is increased through investment in infrastructure.”

Asked about tariffs, which developing countries want reduced so they can produce for export, Zaia responded:

“I don’t agree on this point. The example of the reduction of tariffs on rice at the WTO is an example. We opposed it, rightly, because the measure would have eliminated domestic production. We need to find a balance; we can’t harm our farmers. It’s no coincidence that another issue to be discussed at the Summit is the safeguarding of the identity of agricultural production.

“It’s true that we agreed with Paris on the rejection

of a widespread idea: the idea that the West should concentrate on high-tech, and become an importer of agricultural products. France and Italy share the opinion that a solid economy requires a solid agricultural sector. Thus, the need to defend production and focus on farmers. It’s no coincidence that this will be another issue on the agenda at the G-8. Food is strategic. Lastly, to complete the picture, there is a final aspect that is closely linked to this.”

Asked, what aspect, Zaia said:

“Food security. This is an absolute priority for us; and, another reason to say no to imprudent liberalization, theorized by those who think that agriculture has no future in Europe. But some people think that only because, as I said before, their own country lacks an agricultural character.”

Unfortunate Final Communiqué

The final communiqué itself of the agriculture ministers—the G8+5 (Brazil, China, India, Mexico, and South Africa) and several other nations and international agencies—was at best a half-flop, although Zaia presented it as a breakthrough. Issued April 20, at the conclusion of the meeting, the declaration spoke only in general terms, offering no recommendations for concrete action. Clearly, a compromise was reached with the free-trade faction. The “Plus Five” nations’ ministers did not sign it.

After recalling that the Millennium Development Goals of doubling world food production are far from being reached, the statement said that “more should be done to increase the quantity and enhance the quality of agricultural production and enable all citizens to have economic and physical access to safe and nutritious food.”

The paragraph opposing speculation said: “Farmers must be the main protagonists of the agricultural sector. Agriculture must serve citizens’ needs for food security and food safety, producing safe, nutritious food in response to consumer demand, and [it] must not be allowed to be negatively affected by trade distortions. There should be monitoring and further analysis of factors potentially affecting price volatility in commodity markets, including speculation.”

The statement called for sustaining “the benefits of globalization” against “protectionism,” and called for concluding the Doha Round of trade negotiations, saying, however, that this must be “balanced” and “rules-based”—a concession to the pro-tariff faction.