

'Cows at a meeting of the EEC Council of Ministers' from De Letzeburger Bauer (19 February 1971)

Caption: On 19 February 1971, De Lëtzeburger Bauer, a periodical published by the Centrale paysanne luxembourgeoise [Luxembourg farmers' association], is concerned about the deterioration in the European agricultural sector and echoes demands issued by farmers.

Source: De Lëtzeburger Bauer. Organ vun der Lëtzbürger Bauernzentral-Organen de la Centrale Paysanne Luxembourgeoise. 19.02.1971, n° 7. Luxembourg. "Kuhexpedition im EWG-Ministerrat", p. 1.

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Cows at a meeting of the EEC Council of Ministers

Headlines were made in the European news bulletins at the beginning of this week by an unusual incident: a group of around 50 young farmers had gone along to a meeting of the EEC Council of Ministers, and they had brought three cows with them. This raiding party and their four-legged friends forced their way into the Council of Ministers' meeting and interrupted the session that had just begun, where the Ministers for Agriculture were getting ready to debate farm prices and structural plans for agriculture with the Commission. It is assumed that everybody is familiar with the details of this intermezzo.

However, more importance should be attached to this incident than to see it as a simple diversionary stunt.

Some people may tend to see only the entertainment value and the funny side of this most extraordinary event — for that is certainly what it was — and then they will proceed to the business in hand. If the EEC Commission and the Agriculture Ministers were inclined to dismiss the incident with the same kind of reaction, it would be proof of the extent to which they live and conduct their debates in a highly artificial world of agricultural unrealities.

The irruption of the expeditionary force and its cows into the EEC Council of Ministers' meeting has inherent symbolic significance. What is more, it is one of the first outbreaks of a disturbing process of fermentation within the world of farming in Europe and also a tangible expression of a resistance movement organising itself against the provocative policy of liquidating millions and millions of livelihoods in agriculture.

The concern here is not to philosophise about the value of symbolism. The technocratic EEC concept of agriculture, remote from any consideration of the human and economic aspects of the situation in the agricultural sector, has removed things so far from reality that the invasion by cows and young people from the farming world into the decision-making bodies of the EEC for once brought some of those actually affected by the economic policies to the debating table. If there is such a complete lack of concern in gambling with the fate of human beings, as seems to have become part of the customary operation of the EEC at the moment, bringing the undisguised realities into the ambit of those holding political responsibility should surely have its symbolic significance.

European agriculture was initially given an extremely rosy picture of its future within the EEC. The farmers declared their support for the EEC! They did not judge the situation here at all in the sense of ancient taboos that are sacrosanct! They did not assume that the traditional structures of the agriculture sector should be frozen. Quite the opposite! They were in support of continuous development, of the idea that agriculture would expand into new dimensions in the modern economy.

But in these expectations they were totally disappointed.

The disregard for the interests of agriculture, indeed its deliberate sacrifice for the sake of ephemeral developments, has now led to a crisis of confidence that has already gone so far that the institutional bodies of the EEC, be it the Commission or the Council of Ministers, have destroyed their credibility. This situation is fatal, it is distressing, and it is regrettable to the very highest degree.

On the part of the farmers, there is now bitterness and dismay in place of economic and social expectations. A spirit of open rebellion is eating itself deeper and deeper each day into the wounded souls of the farmers. In this light, the incursion by the Brussels expeditionary force has to be interpreted as a spectacular warning.

What it is really all about.

It is estimated that about 30 million people in the EEC are directly or indirectly connected with agriculture. Their incomes, their livelihoods, their property and their professional standing are all threatened with destruction. In an environment where inflation is causing devastation and where life is becoming more expensive with every day that passes, farmers are being denied the right to keep pace with society as a whole

in a some way or another.

Over a period of approximately 10 years, one third of the 16 million people working in agriculture and their family dependents have already transferred to other sectors. In the coming decade, another third will probably take this step, provided that sufficient jobs are available elsewhere and the economy is developing normally, without any crises or disruptions.

In this kind of fluid situation, economic measures are being used in an attempt to starve out every last person working in agriculture, something that is expected to be accelerated by the process of elimination.

On the pretext that the ministerial decisions concerning the establishment of a structural policy for agriculture had not been taken, the rural population engaged in agriculture is being kept short on lower and lower incomes!

The consequence of this state of affairs is that the financial basis of the entire range of agricultural holdings is put at risk, with the most up-to-date and advanced being the most vulnerable. This last category is in the process of simply facing ruin.

In this process, it is certainly not the farmers who are putting up resistance to understandable and reasonable structural developments. They are not even being asked for their opinion. The tactics employed by the EEC Commission of playing poker with the EEC Council of Ministers using the motto: either you sanction our (the Commission's) structural ideas, without thorough examination, or we block the agricultural prices for the farmers, is a hugely dangerous way of playing with fire.

Those farmers, be they young or old, who have invested in their farms and have opted to work in agriculture, no longer accept being degraded into submissive common fodder.

If the EEC wants to create a rural lumpenproletariat of the kind found among our farming comrades in Africa and South America, who are struggling to survive in dire poverty, it is treading a perilously fine line.

The visit by that group to Brussels was an initial warning. Before the farmers die, they will resist with all their might. You can count on that.