

PRESS RELEASE

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IRELAND & JUSTICE AND PEACE GROUP, Afri present

*****IRELAND'S FIRST FOOD SOVEREIGNTY ASSEMBLY*****

Castlebar, 16th May 2014 at 7.30pm

Gaining control of our food

The government and agribusinesses in Ireland are obscuring the story of how the food system works in Ireland and internationally - it's time for some home truths

Stepping into your local supermarket is like going to the arrivals hall of an international airport. Apples from New Zealand, chickens from Thailand, cabbages from Holland and pork from god knows where. Almost all the meat or dairy you see, Irish or not, has been fed animal feeds (mostly GM soya) from Argentina and Brazil.

The reality is that this globalization of our food and agricultural system is failing consumers, the environment and farmers. Big retailers like Tesco are multi-national corporations, squeezing suppliers and eliminating local food providers. Much of the food they sell is produced mechanically, on industrial farms, in a multitude of countries using a cocktail of agrochemicals. The industrial food system then sells heavily processed foods with dubious labels to overwhelmed consumers, who eventually discard almost a third of the food they buy.

Unfortunately, our own government and our largest farming organisation, the IFA, have completely bought into this model. We hear repeatedly of the importance of agriculture to our economy, of how we can contribute to "feeding the world" and for potential growth in exports. This message hides the reality - that farmers in other countries would be happier feeding their own populations, that most of our farmers earn an average income of €21,000, and how the majority of our so called high quality exports are in fact fed into the industrial, processed food industry.

Farmers in Ireland deserve better. They should be producing food for their local communities, not the industrial food system. They should not be pushed to constantly increase production as they watch their incomes remain static or fall. Farmers in rural areas during the fodder crisis in 2013 committed suicide after shooting their own cattle in the field, for lack of feed. The real farmers of Ireland, not the profitable agribusiness sector, are pushed to their limits.

The idea of Food Sovereignty was launched during the World Food Summit in 1996, when farmers organisations from different parts of the world felt the need to counteract the increasing power of corporations, agribusinesses and the WTO to dictate prices, crops and other issues to farmers.

These farmers' organisations formed an International movement - La Via Campesina (the way of the peasant/small farmer) which fostered a sense of

solidarity instead of competition between farmers internationally. Neverending competition between farming families all over the world will mean fewer farmers, either here or somewhere else - Food Sovereignty means more of us working the land, not less. It means no dumping of cheap food in the economies of other farmers and people; and letting them make a living from producing their food too.

Why not focus on increasing quality, instead of neverending quantity? Why not ensure Irish farmers produce healthy, non-processed foods for Irish people before talking about export overseas? Why can't farmers make a living from their work instead of being squeezed by processors and supermarkets? Why can't we have local markets for local produce, and farming practices which put the land and people of Ireland first, and the interests of international markets second?

These are some of the questions we will be asking at Ireland's first Food Sovereignty Assembly in Castlebar on the 16th of May.

The Food Sovereignty Assembly will hear contributions from Paul Nicholson, a Basque farmer who has participated in La Via Campesina since its inception, from Luis Jalandoni, who has struggled on the ground for the rights of farmers in the Phillipines, from John Brennan of the Leitrim Organic Farmers COOP, one of Ireland's most informed voices on Food and Agriculture as well as from Rose Kelly of the organisation AFRI and Pat McCarthy of the United Farmers Association who have long struggled for a fair deal for Irish farmers. The assembly will be chaired by Dr. Mark Garavan of GMIT.

Farmers in Ireland today are facing a choice - to let profits go to middlemen, and sleep with one eye open worrying about changes in prices or in how negotiations dominated by agribusinesses will divide up the next CAP - or stand up together and call for real change, for a food system which puts farmers, citizens and the land of Ireland - not big business - at it's centre.

Ireland's first assembly for Food Sovereignty will take place this 16th of May in Castlebar - starting a discussion on another way of organizing food and agricultural systems which puts farmers, citizens and the land before the interests of global markets and corporations.

Join us at the Food Sovereignty Assembly:

16 May 2014, 7.30 pm
TF Royal Hotel
Old Westport Road
Castlebar, County Mayo

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