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Romuald Schaber: Blutmilch – Wie die Bauern ums Überleben kämpfen

(Blood milk – The farmers' fight for survival)

„Blutmilch“, while reading the title of this book, printed in milk white on a blood red cover, one might assume that this is a thriller. This book deals indeed with perpetrators and victims, with power and greed, with justice and responsibility. The author, however, is Romuald Schaber, president of the European Milk Board (EMB) and the Bundesverband Deutscher Milchviehhalter (BDM).

Against the backdrop of his home region and origins the dairy farmer from the region Allgäu describes in his book, that is an autobiography as well as a documentary, the fight of his fellow farmers for a fair farm gate milk price. The book opens with the following statement: “You will not recognise your home once scrupulous profiteers have destroyed us.” Far from being nostalgic the author describes how farmers do their utmost to keep up with economic developments. He takes the reader with him to the centres of power of the dairy industry and depicts the helplessness, but also the ill will of representatives of government and professional bodies that cooperate with the dairy industry. Romuald Schaber says that nobody forces us to play Monopoly with our food production. The author and his colleagues from the BDM and the EMB do not want to oppose the market. The contrary is the case. They want to face up to the market by organising independent farmers to negotiate with the processing industry on an equal footing. They do not want to have to rely on subsidies that always seem like alms or calming measures. The appeal “Stand up if you are a farmer” does not only lead to an uprising against the interests of the dairy industry and the deadlock of national and European agricultural policy.

The initiatives and aims of BDM and European Milk Board are explained as well ranging from a volume control to the launch of the “Fair Milk”. But this is not just about enforcing the interests of farmers. They fight against genetic engineering and the destruction of the environment, against feed imports and exports of excess production to developing countries and the associated lack of solidarity with farmers who fight for their survival in these countries. Society as a whole shares these concerns. The fight of milk farmers against the liberalisation of their market and the associated interests of the industry are part of a social discourse about the definition of social market economy. The belief that the free play of market forces must not be interfered with is widely spread amongst policy-makers and members of economy and threatens the social consensus increasingly. The BDM thus agrees with the German economist Wilhelm Röpke who said that the market economy alone is based on preconditions that it cannot create itself. The fight of milk farmers thus goes hand in hand with the lessons learned from the current financial crisis.

Sieta van Keimpema from the Netherlands (EMB) is quoted saying: “If liberalisation leads to our death, we should rather try something else.” The current system is an economic system that leads to excess production and hunger at the same time and that is even funded by the state. This is one of the core theses of the book. It becomes evident that it will not be easy, but rather a tough struggle, to reshape the conditions on the dairy market. One milestone is the most significant statement in modern agricultural history: “As from tomorrow I will keep my milk.” Romuald Schaber said so at a huge assembly. The farmers said let's get started and opened the taps of their milk tanks.

A book worth reading for dairy farmers who took part in this struggle as well as farmers who, due to different reasons, are still standing on the sidelines, farmers from other agricultural sectors who have to deal with similar market conditions and all interested parties who want to understand and learn more about the struggle for a fair milk market.

Günther Völker

„Blutmilch“, Romuald Schaber, published by Pattloch Verlag, 280 pages, 18 Euros, ISBN: 978-3-629-02273-8. The book is only available in German so far.

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