

News Details

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10 and 11 years of European milk delivery strikes



"I will not supply any more of my milk as of tomorrow." (German dairy farmer, May 2008)

"I prefer to pour away my milk rather than be a slave to the dairy industry" (French dairy farmer, September 2009)

One quote is rational and resolute, while the other is passionate and convinced. It was a combination of these aspects that led dairy farmers in many European countries to declare a milk delivery strike 10 and 11 years ago.

Producers were rational-resolute because the implications of the *price-cost* imbalance over the last few years was evident: It is impossible to continue with such a constant shortfall. There simply must be clear consequences.

The constant shortfall, the social and economic devaluation of milk, the lack of action from decision-makers in policy and industry also elicited emotions like rage and, of course, a steadily growing fear for one's economic livelihood. In 2008 and 2009, all of this finally amalgamated in courage and striking solidarity, leading to the two most important European milk delivery strikes.

The milk delivery strikes

In 2008, over the 10 days of the delivery strikes, some 85,000 dairy farmers in Europe participated, mainly in Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Belgium, Luxembourg and Switzerland. In addition, the member organisations of the European Milk Board in Denmark, Sweden, Italy, Ireland and the United Kingdom engaged intensively with the press to create awareness about the demands and actions of their European colleagues.

In 2009, 40,000 farmers, notably in France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, Austria, Italy, the Netherlands and Switzerland, withheld their milk deliveries. This was also accompanied by media campaigns by colleagues in other countries. All of this had an effect – it impressed many and unleashed a wave of expressions of solidarity. For example, the milk producers received this letter: *The Taiwan Farmers Association and ATOAP (Association of Taiwan Organic Agriculture Promotion) strongly supports your Europeanwide strike for getting decent prices for European milk producers, prices that must make liveable incomes for you all. Through this message, we bring you our solidarity and our wish that your peaceful strike will gain its legitimate success and bring a better life as well as ensure your future as European milk producers.*

A highlight of the milk delivery strikes was in 2009 when more than 3 million litres of milk were poured away in a field in Ciney, Belgium. It was a powerful sight.

But wait! What was the result of all of this?

Did cost-covering prices and balanced accounts become a reality after the end of the milk delivery strikes? Did policy-makers implement the demanded framework conditions for the dairy sector – did they create an instrument that would correct for chronic market distortions in the future? Could dairy farmers finally stop fearing for their livelihood?

No. In 2015, the EU market was liberalised, without a functioning crisis mechanism being put in place. This resulted in further acute milk-price crises and the discontinuance of milk production on many farms across Europe.

So, were the milk strikes pointless?

Once again: No.

The strikes were the start of a Europe-wide movement that did not go unnoticed on the political front. Dairy farmers showed a high degree of determination, ready to resort to extreme measures to fight for the state of their profession. Thereafter, they were more vocal about their concerns and ideas in political discussions – and this produced results. Firstly, an EU-level observatory was set up in line with their recommendations; thereafter voluntary production cuts were implemented during the crisis of 2016 – this was the first time the crisis-generating market volumes were actively reduced on this now liberalised dairy sector.

Secondly, there have been numerous major actions, demonstrations, tractor rallies, etc. across Europe post 2008/2009, which would have been unthinkable without the milk deliveries strikes. These demonstrations of strength and solidarity have been the driving force that has kept Europe's dairy farmers going over the last 10 and 11 years. The sector thanks the producers who took a rational and, at the same time, passionate and courageous decision to withhold the delivery of huge quantities of their milk.

This commitment and determination have allowed dairy farmers to assert themselves within their sector. This is an arduous path that does not simply lead to one success after the other. But in spite of all the difficulties, it is not and has never been pointless. The next milestone for dairy farmers along this path: Legislation at EU level that anchors voluntary production cuts (including capping) as a permanent crisis instrument for the dairy sector.

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