

European fight back must begin against factory pig farming

Across Europe, a battle is being waged against a neo-liberal agenda that puts the rights of corporations ahead of human health and animal welfare. But against the huge resources that pan-European lobby firms, their advisers and pocket MEP can muster, there is a fight back that unites socialists, greens and conservatives who respect and understand rural communities. Between 2005 & 2009, I made a film '*Pig Business*' (you can watch it [here](#)); a journey that unfolded the industrialization and corporatization of pork farming in Poland that would herald an unstoppable tide of cheap meat across the EU. It's not much fun feeling like a modern Canute but the events of recent months have convinced me that industrial pig farming will not prevail in silence. For farmers in the UK it is a case of getting big or getting out. However the local and national pressure against mega farms is raging. While the application for mega dairy in Nocton, Lincolnshire has recently been withdrawn, libel lawyers were engaged in an attempt to silence objections, on health grounds, to the application to build a mega pig farm in Foston, Derbyshire.

Poland is where it all started. US giant Smithfield Foods of America had persuaded the previous government to sell ex-state farms for what their CEO boasted, were 'small dollars'. Using funds secured from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) (paid for by European taxpayers) they 'modernised' the farms. Modernisation meant putting as many pigs in as small a space possible; it meant very cheap meat.

Smithfield specialise in this form of industrial farming. It is not without consequence. The effect on local eco-systems from tens of thousands of densely packed-pigs is immense. Pigs produce 10 times as much waste as humans do, and male hogs weigh 250 lbs. The waste is stored in stinking lagoons and sprayed on fields, a system which pollutes the coastline causing massive fish kills, and sickens neighbouring residents. In March 2010 a court in Missouri ordered a Smithfield Foods subsidiary to pay local residents \$11 million for "odours so offensive that they defied description," said Stephen A. Weiss, a New York attorney who represented the families, adding, "These corporations have chosen to invade traditional family farming communities and construct industrial operations that simply fail to respect the community and the land."

The former government of Poland welcomed Smithfield with open arms. But under a new government that pro-corporate agenda has been slowly undone by legislating to make industrial factory farming far harder.

Smithfield's response was to move the new wave of operations to a more corporate friendly country, Romania. "We have been very disappointed by the way we have been treated by the government in Poland," says Richard Poulson, executive vice-president of the US based meatpacker. "It has been an uphill fight in Poland and Romania is frankly a way for us to hedge our bets. The difference between the way the Polish government treats us and the way the Romanian government treats us is like night and day."

Janusz Wojciechowski MEP is one of the heroes of this story. Janusz was one of three MEPs including Jose Bove and Dan Jørgensen who invited me to screen my film *Pig*

Business, and host an event to open the debate on Feb 9th 2011, as reforms to the Common Agricultural Policy are being discussed in the European Parliament. The Event was held to highlight the hidden costs of factory farming on pigs, people and the planet and of course the farmers themselves. It could not have been more timely following a 'winter of discontent' for pig farmers facing low supermarket prices for pork, high feed costs, a health scandal caused by animal feed contaminated with dioxin, and the recent discovery that flies are spreading antibiotic resistant bacteria from intensive farms to neighbouring urban areas.

Jose Bove, once a farmer himself before becoming a European politician, has for many years opposed genetically modified crops and industrial agriculture. Famously he was arrested for dismantling a MacDonald's hamburger outlet that threatened to destroy his local town economy. He is clear about the threat industrial pig farming poses to traditional forms of farming. He told the conference attendees of MEPs, their advisers, lobbyists, NGOs and press, "following the deregulation of markets and open ports, come the big firms, like Cargill, Tyson and Smithfield and with them the concentration of production that is causing the elimination of small farmers. If the CAP supports a system of agriculture that destroys the environment and makes poor quality industrial products, I do not see why Europeans would want to subsidise it. Everyone knows that 75% of aid goes to 25% of farmers. This is unacceptable"

A recent survey found that 50% of consumers across the EU believe that pigs are 'fairly well treated'. NGO Compassion in World Farming found out the reality during a spot check of Europe's farms. Their research showed that up to 75% of EU pigs are subject to such horrendous conditions their treatment is illegal even with the low threshold of EU regulations.

Consumers should decide. Just as the EU demands farmers' eggs be labelled if they are from caged hens, the same rule should apply to pigs crammed into barren concrete and metal pens with no access to natural light or fresh air and pumped with antibiotics to keep the miserable creatures alive. When I show people the reality of this farming method in *Pig Business*, almost all say they will never buy factory pork again.

Finally, America too is waking up. On March 9th, I will be going to the US Congress to screen the film and co-host a presentation with Bobby Kennedy Jr. The US is considering legislative proposals to improve farm animal welfare and restrict the use of antibiotics. Although adding antibiotics to pig feed specifically to promote growth has been banned in the EU since 2003, it is still allowed in the US. Doctors and scientists are concerned that this practice is leading to new antibiotic resistant diseases which, like MRSA, pass from pigs to humans. A pilot study in Iowa found the pig strain of MRSA in 45% of the workers and 49% of the pigs.

It would be a strange world indeed if, just as America turns its back on industrial pork and the adverse side effects, that Europe finally succumb to the neo-liberal agenda of a few big corporations and let our small farms go to the wall.

On the ground, the battle in the UK is raging. In light of the withdrawal of the Nocton

mega-dairy application, we hope that 'Midland Pig Producers' will not re-submit their planning application to Derbyshire County Council to build the UK's biggest factory pig farm, situated beside a women's prison in Foston, Derbyshire; an intensive pig unit for 2,500 mother pigs (sows) and around 20,000 piglets which will spend all of their lives indoors. Neighbours are objecting to the planning application in fear of their health and house values and hundreds of small and medium scale UK farmers will have to 'get out' while a few producers 'get big' to compete with 'cheap' imports.

To help UK small and medium scale pig farmers survive the stream of 'cheap' meat, consumers need to buy high welfare UK farm produce! More expensive but less meat is the cheaper, healthier option. (www.pigbusiness.co.uk)