



Farmers win court challenge: CWB keeps barley mandate, NFU plays major role

“I conclude that the new Regulation is *ultra vires* and of no force and effect.” So said Federal Court judge Delores M. Hansen in her July 31 decision. (“*Ultra vires*” means “beyond the power.”)

The Regulation Judge Hansen struck down was the Federal Government’s June 7, 2007 Cabinet Order that would have, on August 1, terminated the Canadian Wheat Board’s single-desk marketing mandate over western Canadian barley. (The June 7 Cabinet Order was made public on June 11.)

The positive ruling for farmers secures, at least for now, the ability of barley producers to continue to enjoy the increased returns that CWB single-desk selling brings—every independent, credible analysis by economists demonstrates dramatically higher prices as a result of the cartel-like powers the CWB wields on behalf of Canadian barley farmers. The ruling also maintains the right for farmers to market collectively through a farmer-controlled agency, rather than competing, neighbour-against-neighbour, to see who will sell cheapest into a transnational-controlled grain trade. Finally, the ruling protects the rights of farmers to democratically direct the future of their marketing agency, the CWB.

The NFU played an important role in helping farmers achieve their July 31 court victory. The following will include part of that story. First, some context around the decision and the events leading up to it.

Speaking on CBC’s “The House” on Saturday, July 28—just after Court proceedings wrapped up in Calgary, but three days before the Judge announced her decision—NFU President Stewart Wells framed the court challenge this way:

Over the past 18 months, we’ve been locked in a power struggle for control of the Wheat Board. The struggle is over whether that control rests with the Federal Government or with Western farmers who market their grain through the Board.

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NAFTA reshaping North American labour patterns: Following the migrant worker trail

Martha Robbins recently returned from a Food First reality tour, “El Camino Del Migrante”. She is working on migrant farm worker issues with the support of the Global Youth Fellowship from the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation.

The Borderlands

We arrive in El Paso, Texas at the end of July after the long drive from Saskatchewan through Montana, Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico and we quickly discover that El Paso truly is a borderland. According to Guillermo Glenn, Coordinator at the Border Agricultural Workers Project (a fellow Via Campesina organization), El Paso exists between two worlds. “El Paso really doesn’t belong in Texas. We exist in a no-man’s land,” he tells us. And you can feel it.

The downtown sports many grand but now empty buildings from a heyday in the first half of the 20th Century. The security presence is aggressive and there are regular check-points along the US side of the border territory. Guillermo tells us that there is a two hundred-mile strip along the border where communities struggle with a lack of basic municipal services.

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(NAFTA *reshaping North American labour patterns*, from page 1)

Veronica Carmona, an organizer with Colonias Development Council in Las Cruces, New Mexico, takes us out to a relatively new community called Rio Vista and tells us that residents bought lots and developed the town without being told that it was located beside a huge industrial dump site. The dump takes waste from the city of El Paso and, in a twist of irony due to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), it now has an obligation to take industrial waste from the maquiladoras on the Mexican side of the border. Many of these maquiladoras (factories) used to provide jobs on the US side of the border, pre-NAFTA. She describes the borderlands as the “backyard” for both the United States and Mexico.

The El Paso region is one of the most important places along the US-Mexico border for recruiting farm labourers. There are more than two million migrant farmworkers working in the United States and a large majority of them are Mexican. The average wage for farm workers in the area is less than US\$7,000 per year, well below the poverty line. Yet hundreds of people cross the border from Mexico into the United States every day to work in the fields picking chilli peppers or performing other labour-intensive tasks.

So what has caused this massive migration out of the Mexican countryside? How did living below the poverty line in the United States become the best option for so many people?

For every container of corn that the US exports to Mexico, Mexico sends back two migrant workers

As we continue our travels south, moving into the Mexican state of Chihuahua, it becomes apparent that a large part of the crisis in rural Mexico, which has necessitated this incredible migration, is due to trade liberalization and more specifically, to NAFTA.

Unlike a conversation with the average farmer in Canada who is more likely to identify problems of efficiency or lack of technology than relate negative farm incomes to the rules of international trade, Mexican farmers are highly educated on what NAFTA’s agricultural chapter contains. Over and over again, Mexican peasants identify the connections between their farm income crisis and NAFTA.

Victor Quintana, a leader with the Via Campesina farm organization Frente Democratico Campesino and a newly elected member of the Chihuahua state congress, recognizes two key moments as contributing to the crisis in the Mexican countryside. He believes that the crisis first erupted in 1982 when Mexico was faced with an enormous external debt and few economic resources. At this time, Mexico became one of



Victor Quintana (second from left) speaking at the Via Campesina forum on Food Sovereignty in Mexico City, August 2007.

the first countries in the world where the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank introduced Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). The introduction of SAPs meant that agencies that supported farmers were forced to close, minimum payments for crops ceased, agricultural loans were drastically reduced and virtually all extension work and research was halted.

The second phase of liberalization began with Mexico joining the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) in the mid-1980’s. Mexico moved almost overnight from a closed economy to an open economy, which immediately prompted a flood of external goods to replace Mexican goods. Eventually, Mexico also signed the NAFTA with Canada and United States.

The first result of these measures, according to Victor Quintana, was an agricultural crisis followed closely by a food crisis. Whereas Mexico used to produce the majority of its own food, it is now a country that imports vast quantities of food and is heavily reliant on those food imports. Peasants struggle to compete with cheap imports from the United States and elsewhere while at the same time, many agricultural sectors suffer from the intense corporatization and consolidation felt around the world.

The consequence has been food dependency coupled with a staggering loss of jobs (an estimated 2 million jobs lost between 1994 when NAFTA was signed and 2004). Sadly, many of the people who are now forced to migrate for work on US and Canadian farms are farmers in their own right. For Victor, the paradox is summed up by stating, “For every container of corn that the US exports to Mexico, Mexico sends back two migrant workers”.

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Working to roll-back NAFTA

The movement to counter the negative effects of trade liberalization on the Mexican countryside is widespread and diverse. On our journey, we visit successful local cooperatives, sustainable farming projects, and defiant indigenous communities—all sharing the lesson that organizing matters.

In Mexico City, we meet with Diputada Federal (Federal Congresswoman) Susana Monreal Avila who serves on the Agriculture Commission, among her many other duties. She informs us that most of the political parties in the Mexican Congress (with the exception of the governing PAN) take the position that NAFTA needs to be renegotiated. She believes that NAFTA is “naturally unjust”. It was predicated on unequal relationships between the three signatory countries and perpetuates those inequalities by consistently placing Mexico at a disadvantage. In her opinion, the negotiating imbalance is proved through the constant threat by the Canadian and American governments that if Mexico seeks to reopen NAFTA and renegotiate the Agriculture Chapter, they will reopen other chapters of the agreement as well and push an agenda that would have further devastating effects for Mexico.

Peasant organizations have worked diligently pressuring the Mexican government to remove agriculture from NAFTA entirely. Dip. Susana Monreal Avila sees a return to domestic markets as the only solution. She thinks that there are really two options: the first one is to become like the US and Canada with a population of farmers below 2% of the national population and to live as a country dependent on outside sources of food.

The second option is to ensure Mexican peasants have the role once again of producing food for Mexican communities, of reclaiming food sovereignty for Mexico. She says that this would also change the social space for peasants. “They [peasants] wouldn’t be 2nd and 3rd class citizens anymore. They would instead be the ones responsible for feeding all other Mexicans.”

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Some fuzzy thinking on biofuels, part 2: The United Nations weighs in

Biofuels and bioenergy have a “huge potential to reduce hunger and poverty” if production shifted to poor countries. So says Jacques Diouf, United Nations (UN) Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Director General in an August 15 editorial in the Financial Times of London (UK). (<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/963b5354-4ac7-11dc-95b5-0000779fd2ac.html>)

Diouf does lay out three strategic directives intended to help ensure bioenergy production benefits the poor. But his strategies echo similar (failed) attempts to ensure that the poor and developing-nation farmers benefit from the globalization of the food trade.

Diouf says “our strategy must ensure that a significant share of the multi-billion-dollar-a-year bioenergy market is produced by farmers and rural labourers in the developing world, the people who make up 70 per cent of the world's poor. ... [I]t will require the lowering of trade barriers....”

He goes on to say: “Such measures would allow developing countries—which...often have ample reserves of land and labour—to use their comparative advantage.”

Over-optimistic, perhaps, Diouf says: “If we get it right, bioenergy provides us with a historic chance to fast-forward growth in many of the world's poorest countries, to bring about an agricultural renaissance....”

But according to United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) data, we are currently in the fastest, most sustained food-supply drawdown in 45 years, probably the fastest in the post-War period. Projections are that we will add over 3 billion people to the global population in the coming 40 years. Cropland area is static (or slowly shrinking). Bioenergy crops mean burning food, or, at best, diverting cropland and displacing food crops.

A push to ramp up production of bioenergy crops for export also ignores the fact that these crops would compete for land that currently supplies cooking fuels for local households—much of the developing world already runs on wood and other “bioenergy” sources. Many citizens of developing nations work and walk for hours each day to secure or scavenge wood, straw, and other materials to stoke their cooking fires.