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Powerful farming lobby, powerless farmers

The farming lobby is one of the most influential pressure groups in parliament. Farmers in Switzerland are highly subsidised. And yet they have taken to the streets to attack Swiss farming policy. Why?

Frustrated heavy labourers:
farmers demonstrating
during the spring of 2024
in a field in Uster (ZH).
Photo: Keystone

JÜRGEN STEINER

The village of Lohnstorf is barely a half-hour drive from the Federal Palace in Berne, but its surroundings are distinctly rural. On a clear day, you can see the iconic Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau mountains in the distance rising up majestically over a flat plain of neatly arranged arable fields. Lohnstorf is situated in the fertile Gürbe Valley, which is known throughout Switzerland for intensive cabbage farming, hence its nickname “Chabisland” (cabbage land).

Urs Haslebach stands on the balcony of his farmhouse, which lies on the edge of the valley overlooking Lohnstorf. The route up to his farm is steep and winding. Haslebach and his family run a large pig farm. They have around 3,000 pigs and employ 15 people. He has purchased a second farm on the valley floor and also rents out apartments in various buildings that he owns. Haslebach is also involved in local politics, representing the SVP. In 2023, he became the mayor of Thurnen, the municipality that encompasses Lohnstorf.

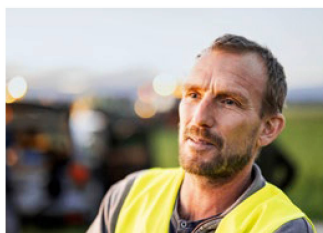
Haslebach radiates the energy of an entrepreneur who finds opportunity wherever he looks. And sees problems as a challenge. A new responsibility was added to his varied to-do list earlier this year – when he started organising a series of farmers’ protests.

Money pressures

Swiss farmers took to their tractors in their hundreds in February and March. On weekday evenings or at weekends, they would chug along to pre-arranged meeting points in fields,

park in formation and vent their feelings. With consumers unable to wean themselves off cheap imports, farmers say that their income is being squeezed. And that they are drowning in regulation. They feel underappreciated. The Swiss Farmers’ Union (SFU) put this deep sense of frustration into words, quickly collecting 65,000 signatures in a petition to the Federal Council and retailers Coop, Migros, Aldi and Lidl.

Farmers have a lot to worry about. There used to be 250,000 farms in Switzerland. Now there are 48,000. An average of ten farms are going out of business every week. Money pressures are real for Switzerland’s 150,000 or so remaining farmers.



“If the people vote for green initiatives at the weekend but buy cheap imported meat during the week, we farmers are the ones who lose out.”

Urs Haslebach organised farmers’ protests.

Photo: Keystone

Haslebach spent a lot of time on messaging apps coordinating protest rallies in his home patch, the canton of Berne. Unlike the demonstrations in France and Germany, none of the actions escalated in Switzerland. Time and again, Haslebach reminded his colleagues that they should not block the traffic with their tractors. There are no protests at the moment, because farmers are out in their fields in summer.

Caught in the middle

Haslebach is not one to moan. Neither is he hard up. And yet he knows from personal experience that there is a fundamental disconnect between economic reality and what society expects from its farmers. This explains why people like him have also decided to protest.

He gives us an example. Over 20 years ago, the federal government wanted farmers like Haslebach to prioritise the well-being of their pigs by building pens with outdoor space. They gave him money for this purpose. The idea was that supermarkets would pay him an extra Swiss franc per kilo for the pork. He made the investment in good faith. But because the outdoor rearing systems for pigs are associated with higher ammonia emissions, Haslebach soon attracted criticism from environmentalists. And before he had paid off the investment, the additional franc per kilo had been whittled down to a few centimes.

Consumers are often oblivious to these problems. “I am not blaming anyone,” says Haslebach, “but how can we plan for the future if the people vote

for green initiatives at the weekend but buy cheap imported meat during the week? We are the ones who lose out.”

It is unacceptable for farms to be caught in the middle like this, he continues. And that is why farmers feel so strongly – that includes everyone in the disparate agricultural sector who

Farmers account for a good two per cent of the working population, **but about a sixth of all parliamentarians in Berne come from the agricultural sector, i.e. they are farmers themselves or they represent farmers.**

would normally otherwise agree to disagree: from big industrial farmers, to organic farmers, to Alpine farmers.

Nevertheless, you could be forgiven for wondering why Swiss farmers have taken their shiny tractors onto the streets in the first place. Because Swiss farmers enjoy considerable influence at the centre of political power compared to farmers in other countries. Very considerable indeed.

The farming lobby

Although agriculture plays a marginal role in the Swiss economy, accounting for just 0.6 per cent of GDP, no other sector is as supported, pro-



tected or nurtured. Billions of francs go into farming. Two key figures stand out in particular. Every year, 2.8 billion francs in environmental subsidies are paid directly to farmers from the public tax coffers. Secondly, import duties worth more than 3 billion francs a year protect the Swiss agricultural sector from foreign competition.

Protectionism is possible not least because the farming lobby has become an even greater force in national politics since the last elections in autumn 2023. This is quite the paradox given the continual decline in the number of farms. Farmers account for a good two per cent of the working population, but about a sixth of all parliamentarians in Berne come from the agricultural sector, i.e. they are farmers themselves or they represent farmers.

The head of the SFU, National Councillor Markus Ritter (The Centre), is one of the most influential parliamentarians. He pulled off a strategic coup in 2022 when he struck an alliance with Switzerland's main trade associations. This bolstered the SFU's efforts to op-

Whether on remote individual farms or industrial fattening farms, the average farmer works hard and earns little.

Photos: Keystone

Demanding consumers: are they also ready to pay fair prices?

Photo: Keystone

pose left-wing popular initiatives that would force farmers to adopt greener practices. The next showdown is on Sunday 22 September 2024, when an initiative by conservationist groups and the Greens to promote biodiversity is put to voters. The SFU has called the proposal “extremist”. Orchestrated by Ritter, the farming lobby has already blocked the Federal Council's counterproposal in parliament.

Mountain of bureaucracy

Yet farmers are under increasing pressure despite the SFU's lobbying. It is hard to gain an overall picture, given that the problems facing the big agriculture of the Central Plateau are not the same as those affecting small-holdings in the Alps, for example.

Nevertheless, it is fair to say that farmers work a lot for relatively little. According to surveys, they put in well over 50 hours a week on average while earning under 20 francs an hour. Running a farm can, therefore, feel precarious for many families – who maybe just about cope because they live rent-free on the farm that they have inherited, but are unable to generate enough money to invest. If the farmhouse needs renovating, it can spell the end for the business.



Farmers are losing more and more hours to paperwork – time they could have otherwise spent farming. Even the SFU, the political force behind the multi-billion bankrolling of the agricultural sector, concedes that the financial support has spawned a mountain of bureaucracy that urgently needs to be trimmed. The federal acts and ordinances on funding run up to several thousands of pages. Approval and monitoring take an enormous amount of time.

At the mercy of suppliers and buyers

The loss in efficiency is obvious, but government funding continues to increase as more and more farms go under. What is going wrong? And why is Switzerland unable to achieve its goal of getting domestic production to cover more than 50 per cent of the country's food needs?

Patrick Dümmler, an economist at the liberal think tank Avenir Suisse, makes the important point that farmers are too dependent on subsidies. Essentially, he believes that there is too much money in the system as opposed to not enough. According to Dümmler, farmers are unfortunately at the mercy of suppliers and buyers. He says that



Alongside farmers, subsidies also benefit fertiliser and feed manufacturers as well as retailers.
Photos: Keystone

Intensive farming is highly mechanised and is a failed doctrine, according to Green agricultural politicians.
Photo: Keystone

farmers receive subsidies but then use the funds to buy things like seed, fertiliser, feed and equipment – from agricultural giant Fenaco, for example. Hence, Fenaco also benefits from the farming subsidy system in its supply role. The prices at which farmers sell to distributors or to supermarkets like Migros and Coop are, on the other hand, too low – and farms are forced to offset the shortfall with state funds earmarked for fulfilling environmental obligations.

Some of the more critical members of the farming lobby have identified the problematic role played by agribusiness and the supermarkets. One of them is Kilian Baumann, National Councillor for the Green Party and head of the national association of smallholder farmers, who often takes a different view to that of the SFU. Baumann laments the low prices and mounting bureaucracy – but he also criticises “decades of misguided farming policy” for which the SFU bears some responsibility.

The imperative – encouraged by the state – to produce more and to farm

bigger and more intensively is a failed doctrine, he writes, adding that intensive agriculture leads to nitrogen run-off into groundwater and drinking water, and harms biodiversity through its reliance on pesticides. According to

The Federal government is channelling more and more money through fewer and fewer farmers. In spite of this, their economic outlook is growing ever bleaker – and Switzerland's self-sufficiency targets are not being met.

Baumann, farmers cannot blame their problems on new green legislation. On the contrary, environmental standards are urgently needed.

Food production is subject to market forces. The Swiss state is addressing the environmental question, while subsidies are funding measures to correct the “wrongs” of the market. These are the decidedly muddy waters in which Swiss farmers find themselves. And they feel powerless to do anything about it – despite the powerful farming lobby.

“We will reassess in autumn,” says Haslebach. If nothing improves, he and his colleagues will be back out on their tractors. The next protest could take them all the way to the Bundesplatz in Berne.

