

**Notes from Latin America:**

# **Uniting for food sovereignty**

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This January, students and activists from all over Latin America converged on a little pueblito called Charbonier, in the central Argentinian province of Cordoba. An Australian researcher and food sovereignty activist was lucky enough to be able to join them.

This was the first inter-disciplinary meeting organised by the Latin American Agronomy students' association. This association has been meeting for decades, but decided this year to broaden the invitations and the scope of their discussions. Various other student organisations supported the initiative, as did the umbrella organisation for the global peasants' movement, [La Via Campesina](#).

In the small local school that provided a venue, agronomists mingled with sociologists, economists, political scientists and activists of many stripes. Panel discussions and workshops covered the history of Latin American politics and student activism, the power of multinational companies, the impacts of neoliberalism, the value of agroecology, and current initiatives challenging the capitalist economy such as the food sovereignty and workers' cooperative movements.

Cordoba, the site of the meeting, is the largest soy-growing province of Argentina, where virtually all soy grown is genetically modified (GM). Since the first GM soy was grown here in 1996, the proliferation of GM has been rapid and voracious. Argentina is the world's 3<sup>rd</sup> largest grower of GM crops, with [22.9 million hectares in 2011](#). Virtually all soybeans and cotton grown in Argentina are GM, and around 86 per cent of corn. The agribusiness lobby would have us believe that Latin American farmers have chosen the GM path, convinced by

'benefits' they say it offers. The truth is, as often the case when powerful private interests are involved, obscured.

Multinational agribusiness uses deplorable strategies to gain control of the land and crop production in Cordoba, Sante Fe, Salta and other provinces. Many of the peasants, or *campesinos*, in this part of the world do not have clear land title. Rather, they have been living on the land for generations and have land rights pursuant to possession. Technically, the law requires people without clear land title documents to be able to demonstrate twenty years of uninterrupted possession in order to assert their right to stay on the land. Agribusinesses take advantage of this technicality, pushing people from the land they have worked for generations.

The result is hundreds of thousands of people forced into urban areas seeking whatever work they can find. Meanwhile, the land is cleared for GM soy and the fields soaked with toxic agrichemicals. People who are left in the villages experience horrific health and environmental consequences from the use of agrochemicals. These impacts have been the basis of much of the work of Professor Andres Carrasco at the University of Buenos Aires, as well as organisations like [Grupo Reflecion Rural](#) and [Semillas de Rebelión](#). Semillas de Rebelión, from Santa Fe, was one of the organisations represented in Charbonier. The collective organises workshops and other activities in the struggle against agrochemicals, the patenting of food, de-peasantisation of the rural areas, and the establishment of an "agricultura sin agricultores" – agriculture without farmers.

In the north of Argentina, the national movement of indigenous peasants ([Movimiento Nacional Campesino Indígena](#) - MNCI) is fighting both GMOs and the mega-mining industry that are threatening peasants' way of life. The movement seeks to build food sovereignty and to promote agrarian reform. One of the most important activities of this movement is education. MNCI reaches out to secondary schools and to community organisations through their alternative school for education in agronomy. Acknowledging and subverting

business influence in the university sector, this movement is developing links with students and professionals of agronomy to bring agroecological practices to rural areas including chemical-free agriculture, solar power and water harvesting, seed-saving, as well as traditional Andean farming practices.

As well as ecological sustainability, the national peasants' movement is concerned with economic and social justice. The movement encourages peasant producers to commercialise their own products, such as textiles, cheese and jams, on the basis of fair trade principles, rather than working with retailers.

Australian agriculture shares many of the same issues with Argentina. Lack of water and depleted soil quality drives many farmers to desperation in Cordoba and surrounding provinces, as is the case in the Murray-Darling Basin and in much of Western Australia. Multinational companies, hungry for profit, have forced the expansion of GM crops and agrochemicals. The results for Argentina have included huge profits for a few private companies and increasing divisions between farmers. After about a decade of GM soy production, around 60,000 farms had gone out of business. The [land under soybean cultivation](#) increased 126 percent at the expense of dairy, corn, wheat and fruit production. Added to this are the extensive health problems and environmental damage arising from the increased use of agrochemicals, deforestation and urbanisation of rural populations.

It is inspiring to see how people in Argentina and other countries in Latin America are responding to the might of agribusiness by collaborating and cooperating to build an alternative food system, one based on the needs of the people who rely on it and with respect for the environment that sustains it.

Now is the time for people in Australia to start thinking about what food sovereignty might look like for us and what steps we need to take in order to achieve it. Where does the power lie in our food system? What environmental challenges do we face and what is causing them? What are the motivations of the private interests and companies who are extracting huge profits from our food

industry? How can we re-build links between food producers and food production, and people who eat? What strategies might we use to create a food system that is directed towards producing food rather than profit?

We can learn a good deal from our companeros across the seas, not least of all, how to start a rousing chant:

“¡Globalizar la lucha, globalizar la esperanza!”

*Globalize the struggle, Globalize hope!*