

We Feed Our People And Build the Movement to Change the World!

A Report from La Via Campesina's VII International Conference - Bilbao, Spain

By: Siena Chrisman



In Basque Language Euskara

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At the end of July 2017, Family Farm Defenders President Joel Greeno and I spent a week in the Spanish Basque Country near Bilbao, Spain with hundreds of small farmers from around the world, at the VII International Conference of La Via Campesina, the international peasant movement for food sovereignty. Joel was part of the National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC) delegation this year. FFD will be able to send its own three-person delegation to the next conference, as our membership in La Via Campesina was finalized this year. I attended as a media representative, generously sponsored by FFD and the food and farm news site Civil Eats. I am writing articles on the conference to increase coverage of the event and global food sovereignty here in the US.

Gathering in Basque County

Through its more than 160 member in nearly 80 countries, La Via Campesina represents 200 million

small and midsize farmers, peasants, indigenous and landless people, rural women and youth, migrants, and agricultural workers. Through national, regional, and international coordinating bodies, its member groups come together to learn from each other, build international solidarity, and strategize how to tackle the struggles ahead. The International Conference, held every four years, is the largest gathering of member organizations, and is an important and unique space for checking in on progress and renewing commitments. The VIII International Conference was hosted by the Basque Farmers Union (EHNE-Bizkaia) in the small town of Derio in Spain's autonomous Basque region. The region is governed by the Basque government, but is still a part of Spain and uses both Spanish and Basque language, Euskara, side by side nearly everywhere, demonstrating that the complicated question of sovereignty and self-governance can be worked out in many different ways.

The Youth Voice

The conference began with three days dedicated to the youth and women's delegations, both of which have been at the forefront of pushing change in LVC for as long as each has been meeting. The North American youth contingent at this conference was especially dynamic and energized with representatives from the US, Canada, and Mexico working closely together. The youth delegation has been seeking greater representation in LVC's International Coordinating Committee (ICC) through conventional channels since the VI Conference four years ago; when their proposal was stalled yet again in the final morning of the VII, they staged a (sit-in), demanding a meeting before the end of the day. As so many of their forebears know, civil disobedience works: they got the meeting, and more youth will be on the ICC in the coming months.

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Songs and Work

The full conference opened on July 19th with a showcase of singing, bells, and other Basque traditions; a moving *mistica* (a wordless short play); welcome speeches; waving flags; and rousing dancing to what came to be the theme song of the conference, "Erein, Landatu, Zabaldu" ("Sow, Plant, Spread") written for the occasion by the Basque writer Joseba Sarrionandia and recorded by the local band En Tol Sarmiento.

Translated from Euskara, the song's infectious catchy chorus says, "If we sow solidarity, we will reap the benefits. / If we plant equality, our culture will grow/ Work for all, food for all/ freedom for all!"

The singing and dancing gave way to serious matters of land and sovereignty, in discussions of the present state of affairs and challenges in each region. Daily plenary sessions focused on the history and context of the movement; in regional meetings and thematic working groups, delegates talked about agroecology, climate justice, water, migration and more, along with strategies for tackling them. Much work also went into crafting the final declaration of the conference, which began with the statement, "We feed our people and build the movement to change the world." The full declaration of the conference can be read at www.via-campesina.org

Besides the concrete work of strategy and declaration-crafting, the building of relationships was equally important. Whether through long conversations over dinner, sharing of technical expertise, or simply raising our voices side by side in the chants that broke out between plenary speakers, the conference provided ample opportunity for participants from around the world to get to know each other, recognize our common challenges, and make new friends and comrades. At a moment when nationalism is on the rise around the world, it's more



*Hosts - Multigenerational Dairy and Beef Farm - La Garita
Father and Daughter Team - Jose and Eva Saudo Gomez*

important than ever to come together across cultures and recognize our shared humanity.

In the Field

We left the conference site for the final two days of the conference. We went to the countryside to visit farms on the last day. Joel and I were part of a group that traveled to Santander, a small seaside city west of Bilbao, where Family Farm Defenders held its annual meeting in 2003. In the city, we briefly met the governor and talked with his agricultural and rural development staff, who were surprised by the tough questions we had about rural initiatives. We were then hosted at La Garita, a beautiful multi-generational dairy and beef farm. Eva Saudo Gomez (pictured in new but already farm-worn FFD shirt) grows organic vegetables for market, while her parents raise beef and dairy cattle. In his youth, her father Jose was a national champion of several unique Basque feats of strength: competitive wood chopping and grass scything. His demonstrations were impressive - and the skills have some practicality even today. He told us that when his tractor was broken at

haying time a few years ago, he scythed a couple of his fields instead. The twenty or so acres only took him two and half hours to cut by hand.

On next-to-last day of the Conference, EHNE-Bizkaia led a march and rally for Food Sovereignty and Farmers' Rights in Bilbao. It was a beautiful sight: hundreds of farmers and allies of all races and ages, many in traditional dress, waving flags, carrying shovels and rakes, singing: "When they ask who we are, We are Via Campesina, and We are marching for our lives." After the Rally in Plaza Nueva in Bilbao's lovely old city, there was more music and dancing, with farmers and Food Sovereignty activists sharing the square with the Spanish and Basque casually enjoying tapas and good wine at the outdoor bars around the plaza. For a brief moment there in the sun, it seemed like another world is really possible.

Siena Chrisman is a freelance writer focused on farm and food policy and is a longtime friend of Family Farm Defenders