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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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 challenge. 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.

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, alongside 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 in the marches, every day was an opportunity to make new friends and comrades. At a moment when nationalism is on the rise around the world, it’s more 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 multigenerational dairy and beef farm.

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 an 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.

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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 challenges 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 VII 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 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.

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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’ (“Sink, Plant, Spread”) written for the occasion by the Basque writer Joseba Sarriónandía and recorded by the local band En Tol Sarriamondo. 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!”

From the farmer’s field, to the city, to the conference, to the celebration, this year’s 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 challenge. 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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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 kids 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.”

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