

Nothing for the Hungry

Jean Ziegler
An interview

Jean Ziegler was the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food from 2000 to 2008. He is now a Member of the UN Human Rights Council's Advisory Committee. He is the author of Empire of Shame: The Fight against Poverty and Oppression.

In June 2008, Professor Ziegler gave a radio interview about the outcome of the Conference on World Food Security: The Challenges of Climate Change and Bioenergy, which had just met at the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation's Headquarters in Rome. The questions are in italics and Professor Ziegler's replies in ordinary type.

On the last day of the World Food Conference, the non-governmental organisation World Hunger Help made a sharp criticism: the Conference had not resulted in a binding common agreement on the development of agriculture and the rural regions in the world. Only short-term measures for reducing the prices of fertilizers and seeds were decided, a change which will result in even greater dependency on the part of small farmers ... Mr. Ziegler, at first sight it seems a good idea that the United Nations sets its sights on cheaper seeds and cheaper fertilizers, doesn't it? What's wrong with that?

This summit, in which 50 heads of government participated as well as more than 2,000 diplomats, ended in a really scandalous way. I think that World Hunger Help is absolutely right, and almost all NGOs are of the same opinion: this is a victory for the corporations, who dominate over 80 per cent of the world's agricultural trade. Day by day 100,000 people are dying from hunger or its immediate consequences; every five seconds a child under the age of ten is starved. And instead of fighting hunger, which is claiming more and more victims, food price explosion even increases the hunger, this very massacre, as one of the NGOs put it clearly in Rome.

The Rome summit tends to even increase the hunger in the world instead of really fighting it. Why is this so? The conclusions, the recommendations and final resolution of the Rome summit result in nothing else but more market liberalisation. That means there will be even more dumping of

agricultural goods. The big companies can sell their products to the agrarian countries of the southern hemisphere even more easily, and these countries will have no chance to react against this by means of customs barriers or contingents, and so on.

So, if fertilizers, seeds, etc will become cheaper, this does not mean that basic foodstuffs will also become cheaper in the poor countries?

Definitely not! The primary goal would be to protect their agriculture. Last year the industrial nations, members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the 27 European Union countries paid common production and export subsidies amounting to 345 billion dollars. On every African market you can buy European vegetables and fruit for half the price or even one-third the price of the domestic products of equal quality. And this price dumping is what is destroying their domestic agriculture.

Many had expected that at least there would be resolutions concerning biofuels, concerning the use of land for the production of biofuels instead of food products, on which people can be fed. But there was no resolution of that kind. What are the reasons?

The reason is the absolute weakness of the present United Nations Secretary General who – and I am expressing myself very cautiously – is very much exposed to US influence. Therefore he did not recommend anything that could bother the corporations in the least. You are definitely right in saying that it is a crime to burn hundreds of millions of tons of corn – last year it amounted to 138 million tons of corn which in the United States alone were used to produce bioethanol or diesel, while human beings in the world are going hungry. This is a crime and should be prohibited altogether. Such a prohibition wasn't even dealt with in Rome, only a vague recommendation was expressed to the effect that research in this field should be promoted so that one day other means of production might be available. So this was an absolute step backwards and it was a betrayal of the United Nations Charter which lays down solidarity and help for the poorest and respect for the principle of 'food for all' on this planet.

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