



# The founding of La Via Campesina in Relation to Agricultural Globalisation

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In 1986, the last round of the GATT negotiations on international trade commenced at Punta del Este, Uruguay. Concluding in April 1994 with the Marrakesh agreement, these negotiations -- known as the Uruguay Round -- established the WTO and henceforth shaped agricultural policies around the world.

It was also in 1986 that European peasant-based organisations decided to set up the Coordination Paysanne Européenne (CPE) (European Peasants' Coordination), which gave peasants a voice to change European agricultural politics. These organisations had already built up contacts with similar organisations in other continents, but the stakes of the GATT negotiations for agricultural policies and for men and women peasants from all over the world were so high that these organisations were determined to intensify these contacts.

In November 1990, at the same time as the GATT ministerial conference in Brussels, the CPE participated in the parallel conference "GATTastrophe", where farmer leaders from the USA, Japan, the Philippines and other countries were invited to a round table against the GATT agricultural negotiations. The failure of the Brussels GATT ministerial conference, mostly due to disputes about agriculture between the European Union (EU) and the United States (USA), triggered a strong reaction from the European Lobby of Industry and Services which insisted that the European Commissioners for Agriculture and Trade reach an agreement with the USA quickly.

By the end of 1992, the USA and the EU had agreed on new international agricultural trade rules (the Blair House accord) which would allow them to continue to dominate the global market and to practise dumping using other methods authorised by the accord.

In April the same year, the Nicaragua farmer's movement UNAC (La Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos de Nicaragua) invited leaders of peasant-based organisations of Central America, the Caribbean, North America, Canada and Europe to its congress. In the Managua Declaration<sup>1</sup> they criticised the GATT negotiations and decided to "strengthen their links... and construct an alternative model".

The following year, 1993, was crucial for several reasons. In 15-16 May, the Paolo Freire Foundation (Netherlands), together with organisations present at the Managua congress, convened an international peasants meeting in Mons (Belgium) co-organised by the CPE. During this meeting, there was a serious confrontation opposed the foundation and the peasant-based organisations regarding the objective of the new network to be created: farmers organisations wanted to create a voice for international peasants outside the International Federation of Agricultural Producer (IFAP) and the foundation simply wanted to develop a network for the exchange of information. Via Campesina was born out of this confrontation and a "coordination commission" that would meet every six months was set up. The Paolo Freire Foundation, who had originally given the name of "Via Campesina" to the new network took care of the technical secretariat for a short period.

On 4 December there was a protest in Geneva against the GATT negotiations with peasant leaders from India, Japan, USA and Canada attending.

On 15 December in Geneva, the USA and the EU succeeded in having their 1992 pre-agreement endorsed by other member states of the GATT. The pre-agreement then became a general agreement which concluded the Uruguay Round, the final act being signed the following April in Marrakesh. This led to the GATT becoming the WTO.

Thus, the globalisation of agricultural policies was launched and Via Campesina along with it.

Agricultural policies are now dictated by international agricultural trade rules and Via Campesina has mobilised and raised awareness beyond the peasant organisations during WTO ministerial conferences and their associated protests (notably Seattle 1999, Cancun 2003, and Hong Kong 2005) as well as during the FAO summits in 1996 and 2002.

The WTO has not managed to conclude the Doha Round initiated 12 years ago. The increasing commercial power of large "emerging" countries is now stopping the USA

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<sup>1</sup> <http://viacampesina.org/en/index.php/our-conferences-mainmenu-28/1-mons-1993-mainmenu-47/907-managua-declaration>

and the EU from writing rules such as those in 1993, which is dampening their enthusiasm to come to a new agreement. The difficulties of the Doha Round have driven several countries to negotiate bilateral “free” trade agreements that are often even more neo-liberal than the WTO rules.

Moreover, the economic, social and environmental damage caused by the productivism and neo-liberalism of the end of the 20th Century – the global climate and financial crises demonstrating this – are such that the free-trade ideology has lost much of its aura. There is a widening gap between the neoliberal policies proposed and implemented by the political class and public opinion: these policies now seem outdated and stuck in the last century.

The current international agricultural trade rules are those adopted in 1994 and they restrict any significant change in agricultural policies.

Food sovereignty, created by Via Campesina in reaction to the globalisation of agricultural policy, is incompatible with these rules. Changing them and proposing fair rules for an international trade which is put in its rightful place is one of the necessary steps towards food sovereignty. The global crises and changes open up a political space for Via Campesina.

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<sup>2</sup> The CPE became the European Coordination Via Campesina (ECVC) in 2008.