

Interview

# Kristjan Bragason

## What kind of agriculture do we want for tomorrow's world?

Interview by Tony Musu  
ETUI

Kristjan Bragason, elected General Secretary of the European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions (EFFAT) at its Zagreb congress in November 2019, has a lot of issues on his desk, covering everything from reform of the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to its "Farm to Fork" Strategy, not to mention collective bargaining, labour mobility, gender equality and occupational safety and health. The main objective of EFFAT is to defend the interests of the 25 million workers it represents. We met with Bragason to talk about working conditions in agriculture and the problems caused by massive pesticide use.

↳ **Kristjan Bragason, General Secretary of the EFFAT.**  
Photo: © Margret Leosdottir



➔ According to Eurostat figures, agriculture is one of the most dangerous sectors in Europe to work in, with a high rate of accidents, occupational illnesses and deaths. What are the main occupational safety and health issues facing agricultural workers?

Agriculture encompasses a wide range of occupations, but there are some problems common to them all, for example musculoskeletal disorders due to repetitive movements or the carrying of loads, and accidents caused by the numerous kinds of equipment and machinery used. Because our jobs are mostly done out of doors, skin cancers from exposure to the sun are also very common. There is also a lot of precarious and undeclared employment in agriculture. Working hours are typically very long, which only makes the problems worse. In agriculture or forestry, workers perform certain kinds of labour alone, and if there is an accident it takes longer for help to arrive. Deaths are thus far more likely. In intensive farming for meat production or in aquaculture, we have zoonoses (infectious diseases transmissible from animals to humans). Given that enormous quantities of antibiotics are used, exposure to pathogens that are resistant to antimicrobials is another major risk to workers' health in this sector.

And then, of course, we have all the health problems linked to the massive amounts of pesticides that farmers use. Official statistics for our industry record about 1 000 work-related deaths and 150 000 accidents every year in the EU-27, but these figures are certainly underestimates.

➔ **EFFAT has worked for years at European level to represent and look after workers in the food production chain. What is the most difficult situation you have been called on to manage in recent years?**

Without doubt, it is the Covid-19 crisis we are living through at the moment. The whole food industry is, of course, part of the essential activities which cannot stop. In some businesses such as abattoirs and meat-packing companies, employees work in close proximity to one another in enclosed air-conditioned premises. These are real breeding grounds for infection and propagation of the virus. Employment there is precarious and not very unionised, and workers do not know their rights, so it is extremely difficult to enforce prevention<sup>1</sup>.

---

*"There is a lot of precarious and undeclared employment in agriculture."*

➔ **Pesticides can cause a range of health problems for workers exposed to them: skin irritation, allergies, poisoning, reproductive disorders like sterility or congenital malformations, cancers, etc. How could these problems be prevented?**

Many users are unaware of the dangers they face. Workers are not sufficiently informed and trained in the use of pesticides, especially workers who are self-employed or illegal. Protective equipment is often inadequate, and its costs are illegally deducted from wages. The health problems linked to the use of pesticides and other hazardous chemicals are obvious but difficult to report, so one of EFFAT's main demands is that every farm worker should have an official record of those s/he has used during his/her career. Above all, there are inadequacies in the law and the rules on the sale of these products, both nationally and at European level. Pesticides are supposed to be free of substances harmful to human health or the environment, but sadly that is still not the case. So we need to use less of these products in agriculture and tighten up the rules governing their sale, so that there is less exposure. Hazardous pesticides pollute the soil and groundwater and reduce biodiversity. Moreover, their residues are found in the food we eat. The solution is reducing the quantities used and introducing stricter licensing rules, not only for workers' health but also for consumers and the environment. But it must be said that there is a lack of political will to make real changes in the use of pesticides in Europe. The agrochemicals lobby is extremely powerful and is able to influence both EU and national law-making. In addition, many pesticides banned in the EU are detected in food imported into the EU market. This must be prevented as it affects competition and consumers' health. Under the Farm to Fork Strategy, the EU has committed to set a trade policy that supports a just transition and at the same time promotes a global transition to sustainable agri-food systems. These goals must now be pursued with determination. Here at EFFAT, we expect the EU to take the lead in stopping support for any practices that jeopardise human health and biodiversity.

➔ **Glyphosate, the herbicide most widely used worldwide, is highly controversial. Its manufacturers, including Bayer-Monsanto, claim that glyphosate and its commercial formulations are not harmful to health, whilst the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) classifies glyphosate as probably carcinogenic to humans. Renewal of its licence in the EU will be debated in 2022. Where does EFFAT stand on glyphosate?**

EFFAT calls for an immediate ban on glyphosate in the renewal process, which ends in 2022. Farmers will need to receive the necessary assistance to adapt to alternatives, but there is now enough evidence of the harmful effects of this herbicide (see box) to justify its removal from the market. We can't have workers risking their lives by using glyphosate. Protecting their health is our number one priority along with safeguarding their jobs. In the debate about the renewal of its authorisation, workers' health and safety must be central. This herbicide also raises the question of what kind of agriculture we want to promote in the EU. Glyphosate encourages monocropping and intensive farming, and it accelerates loss of biodiversity. We need a more sustainable approach to agriculture both in Europe and elsewhere in the world. Simply banning glyphosate in Europe will not achieve this on its own. A worldwide ban is needed too. The way to do it could be through trade agreements which don't allow the importation of agricultural products containing glyphosate residues. That would also stop unfair competition from countries that still use glyphosate to keep production costs down.

➔ **Are there alternatives to glyphosate?**

There are, and there could be even more if the agrochemicals industry was incentivised to invest more in research and development on alternatives to synthetic herbicides. An EU ban on glyphosate would probably trigger such investments. Weed control is possible without glyphosate or other chemicals of the same type. Crop rotation using a precise order is one of the oldest weed management measures of all. With mixed cropping, you plant several crops at the

*"We can't have workers risking their lives by using glyphosate."*

same time in the same field, in such a way that the properties of one foster the growth of the other, whilst suppressing the growth of weeds. Mulching can be used to cover the ground with organic wastes or synthetic mulches. There are, of course, all kinds of mechanical and thermal methods, but also biological control using insects, bacteria or fungi to reduce weed populations. There are also natural herbicides derived from plants or animals. All these methods are already used in organic farming. This kind of farming should be encouraged, and farmers

↓ **Augusta, student in body anthropology, sells organic vegetables at the Flagey market in Brussels.**  
Photo: © Martine Zunini



should be trained in cropping methods that do not use synthetic pesticides. These practices would even create new jobs. The EU institutions and national governments should help our intensive farming model to transition into one that is more sustainable and can better compete with the rest of the world.

⇒ **In May 2020, the European Commission unveiled its new Farm to Fork Strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally friendly food system. One of the actions the Commission will take is to reduce the overall use and risk of chemical pesticides by 50 per cent between now and 2030. Do you think these objectives are ambitious enough?**

Obviously we have to aim as high as possible in our efforts to reduce and gradually eliminate our dependence on pesticides and other chemicals in agriculture. But there is another problem: there is a mismatch

between declared intentions and what actually happens. One of the aims of the Farm to Fork Strategy is to use funds from the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to help farmers reduce their environmental impact and achieve the other goals set in the strategy. But in the ongoing CAP revision this ambition was not at all reflected in the positions of the European Parliament and the Council. For example, 80 per cent of CAP funds go to 20 per cent of the wealthiest farmers who continue to practise intensive farming. Another example: the European Union wants to reduce use of the most hazardous pesticides, but at the same time it signs a free trade agreement with Mercosur (a common market of several South American countries) which allows the importation into Europe of agricultural products grown there using dozens of pesticides that are banned here. So there's a disconnect between the declared objectives and what actually happens. What is missing from this Farm to Fork Strategy and the CAP is a true social dimension. The European Commission should also set itself ambitious goals to safeguard agricultural workers' social rights. There must be more coherence between different EU policies. In practice, this means that the objectives and principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights should be reflected in the CAP. Financial aid to farmers under the CAP should be made conditional on their respect of ILO conventions, national and EU labour law, and collective bargaining agreements. EFFAT is pressing for this "social conditionality" clause to be included in the final text of the CAP reform currently under interinstitutional negotiation at EU level. The clause is ethically necessary, it would tackle social dumping, and it is also the only way of ensuring that a substantial part of the EU budget is spent on improving working conditions in one of our economy's most precarious sectors.

⇒ **Why and how should the public take an interest in these highly specialised issues?**

Yes, these are specialised issues, and we have a duty to translate them into language that everyone can understand. But, above all, they are political. The main problem in agriculture today and throughout the food production chain is the mad scramble to produce food as cheaply as possible. The environmental and social consequences of this approach are inevitable: soil erosion, biodiversity loss, labour exploitation, wage theft, and other labour abuses. It leads to a flouting of health and environmental rules,

---

## "What is missing from this 'Farm to Fork' Strategy and the Common Agricultural Policy is a true social dimension."

and all the problems we've already talked about. Conventional agriculture is not sustainable. What kind of agriculture do we want for tomorrow's world? How can we move things towards a model that shows greater respect for workers and our environment? It is a matter that concerns us all, and these are questions that each and every citizen of Europe should reflect on.

### ➔ What role do you think trade unions should play in these areas?

Trade unions have an important role to play. The absolutely necessary digital and green transitions are expected to be disruptive for the agriculture sector. Our role is to make sure that the social dimension is taken on board throughout this process and that nobody is left behind. We stand side by side with the most vulnerable. Our job is to safeguard workers and ensure that their living and working conditions are good. That requires policies and laws that are fit for purpose. We are fighting to secure a ban on the most hazardous pesticides while protecting the competitiveness of the European agro-food sector in order to safeguard jobs and ensure that workers are treated with dignity and respect. Agriculture and all occupations in the food production chain are essential to our economy but also to our wellbeing. People in Europe need food security and a healthy environment and food. Agriculture must not disappear from Europe. The EU realises that our agriculture has to move towards a model that is more robust, more resilient and more sustainable. The trade unions will be an essential force in driving forward this change. ●

## Glyphosate timeline

- 1974** Monsanto puts its first glyphosate-based herbicides, including Roundup, on the market. This active substance is a "total herbicide", meaning that it acts on all plants.
- 2000** The patent for glyphosate enters the public domain and is marketed by numerous manufacturers.
- 2015** The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), part of the World Health Organization (WHO), classifies glyphosate as "probably carcinogenic to humans".
- 2016** EFFAT launches a campaign to have glyphosate banned in Europe.
- 2017** Glyphosate is again licensed for sale on the European market up to 15 December 2022. Renewal is based on assessments by the European bodies responsible for regulating chemical risks (the European Chemicals Agency, ECHA) and pesticides (the European Food Safety Authority, EFSA).  
  
The "Monsanto Papers" released as part of a lawsuit in the USA show that Monsanto manipulated the scientific debate and misled the public about the dangers of glyphosate.
- 2018** The German Bayer group acquires Monsanto for 66 billion dollars.  
  
Dewayne Johnson, an American gardener who blames glyphosate for his cancer, is the first private individual to win his case against Bayer. The manufacturer is ordered to pay him 78 million dollars.
- 2019** An independent meta-analysis\* shows that workers with high exposure to glyphosate-based herbicides have a 41 per cent higher risk of developing non-Hodgkin lymphoma (NHL, a rare form of blood cancer). Another study\*\* of 315 000 European farm workers using glyphosate also found an increased risk of developing NHL.  
  
On 10 May, an EU Assessment Group on Glyphosate (AGG) is appointed, comprising four EU Member States (France, Hungary, the Netherlands and Sweden). Their role is to act jointly as rapporteurs on the herbicide. The AGG will deliver an opinion by June 2021.  
  
On 12 December, the Glyphosate Renewal Group (a group of companies seeking the renewal of the approval of glyphosate in the EU) applies for a post-2022 licence to the AGG, the other Member States, EFSA and the European Commission. This application formally initiates the renewal process in the EU as provided for by Regulation (EC) No 1107/2009.
- 2020** Bayer announces that it will pay up to 9.6 million dollars to settle glyphosate-related litigation before the American courts, involving approximately 125 000 claims.
- 2021** Glyphosate remains the world's most widely sold herbicide, with more than 850 000 tonnes used each year. Some countries have already banned it, however: Vietnam, Mexico and Luxembourg. Germany has announced a total ban from 2024.
- 2022** The European Commission will lay a proposal before the Twenty-Seven on whether or not the licence for glyphosate should be renewed.

\* Zhang L. *et al.* (2019) Exposure to glyphosate-based herbicides and risk for non-Hodgkin lymphoma: A meta-analysis and supporting evidence, *Mutation Research/Reviews in Mutation Research*, 781, 186-206.

\*\* Leon M. L. *et al.* (2019) Pesticide use and risk of non-Hodgkin lymphoid malignancies in agricultural cohorts from France, Norway and the USA: a pooled analysis from the AGRICOH consortium, *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 48 (5), 1519-1535.