



# The ban on glyphosate: in the balance between democracy and emergency

Laurent Vogel  
ETUI

Glyphosate is the most widely used herbicide in the world. In the global pesticides market, worth around 53 billion euros in 2020, at more than 8 billion euros glyphosate is the number one product.

Since it was first brought onto the market in 1974 by agrochemicals company Monsanto, its toxicity has gradually emerged from a series of studies conducted by independent researchers. These have been validated by peer review, involving a critical analysis of the data and methodology by scientists from other institutions. On this basis, in 2015 the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) classified glyphosate as probably carcinogenic to humans.

In 2016, Monsanto was taken over by Bayer. The 56 billion-euro buy-out gave this German multinational control of 24% of the global pesticides market and 29% of the seeds market. But the lawsuits brought in the United States alone could add several tens of billions of euros to the bill.

When, in December 2017, Bayer secured a renewal of the approval of glyphosate for the European market for a five-year period, a U-turn by the German government came as a surprise. Despite a commitment to vote against the approval, Germany's final vote gave the European Commission a comfortable majority.

Now, in the spring of 2022, the debate surrounding glyphosate is at a crossroads.

A report delivered in June 2021 by a group of four states (France, Hungary, the Netherlands and Sweden) as part of the approval procedure came out in favour of renewing the approval. The credibility of this 11 000-page report was challenged in France in January 2022 by the National Commission on Ethics and Alerts in Public Health and the Environment. The Commission's Chair, Denis Zmirou-Navier, explains: 'It has been shown that the preliminary European report involved radical screening, excluding most of the studies on glyphosate published in international scientific literature and basically using the ones provided by the manufacturers, conforming to standardised protocols. This method has to be questioned: we cannot go on having reviews that ignore scientific advances.'

As far as the Member States are concerned, the number of countries that might vote in favour of a ban will probably increase. This time, it might be difficult for Germany to object to it. The new 'traffic light' tripartite majority of Social Democrats, Greens and Liberals that came out of the September 2021 elections has taken a firm stand in favour of a ban on glyphosate from January 2023 onwards, regardless of the outcome of the European procedures. Conversely, France has done a U-turn without ever clearly admitting it. In

November 2017, President Macron undertook to put an end to the use of this pesticide within three years. In March 2022, in the context of his reelection campaign, he admitted that he had not kept this promise, on the pretext that the decision needed to be taken at European Union level. This justification sits uneasily with the French Presidency's propesticide turnaround in the past few months.

As far as public opinion is concerned, there are also contradictory trends. The crisis of the pandemic has brought to light an uneasiness with political decisions that rely on somewhat unclear scientific advice. This is the conclusion of an analysis by Stéphane Foucart, a journalist and environmental specialist who covers science for the French newspaper *Le Monde*. Although decisions about vaccination were based on sound scientific evidence, significant parts of the public were unconvinced: 'Defiance of Covid-19 vaccination policies has thrived on the recent health and environmental scandals fomented by questionable reviews.' Of all the examples cited by the journalist, glyphosate comes top.

On the other hand, the combination of the pandemic and Russian aggression against Ukraine is paving the way for authoritarian decisions in the name of a state of emergency. This situation is perfectly epitomised by the chemical industry, which is setting itself up as the guardian of Europe's self-sufficiency in food. Accordingly, in March 2022, the European Commission postponed the adoption of two key texts on reducing the use of pesticides and restoring the environment.

In this context full of contradictions, trade unions play a crucial role. Trade union organisations in the agricultural sector are struggling to have the herbicide banned worldwide. Their European federation (EFFAT) has demonstrated that significantly less dangerous alternatives exist. However, there is a rift that calls to mind the debate around the banning of asbestos towards the end of the last century. At that time, trade unionists from industries that used asbestos ultimately realised that a ban was needed. However, some trade unions in the chemicals industry and mining sector aligned themselves with their employers for fear of job losses. Will trade unions today take effective action and defend occupational health in a spirit of solidarity, no matter which sector is involved? The stakes are high. It is a question of the society we want to build, of democracy, and of the important links between occupational health and the environment.