

## Agrarian Transformation in Lower Saxony?

Lower Saxony is Germany's second largest and second most populous state (or "Land"). With close to 8 Million inhabitants, it hosts more people than, for example, EU member state Denmark.

Lower Saxony is also one of Germany's biggest producer of agrarian produce. It is home to some 2.848.000 cows and 8.428.000 pigs, as well as 56.609.000 chicken (Numbers from 2011). However, most of the animals reared for meat production are found in factory farming; organic agriculture only makes up 3% of the agricultural sector (compared to 9% in Hesse). Poultry farming is the biggest trend, it has risen by 81% over the last decade. The huge concentration of animals in factory farming, destined for cheap production, has led to social conflict.



Protester dressed up as a factory chicken at Berlin protest march

Increasingly, citizens worry about environmental and healthy risks connected to intensive meat production. Fear of disease due to overuse of antibiotics, groundwater contamination, over-fertilisation of arable land, obesity, unfair trade practices: some keywords in the discourse on the dangers of factory farming. Mr Hettwer, Chair of the Lower Saxon branch of the *Alliance for Farms not Agro-Factories*, believes that the movement for cleaner, healthier food has the potential to be the biggest contemporary social movement. Mr Hettwer and his allies are involved in awareness-rising – their enemies call it fear-mongering. Nevertheless, ten thousand people walked the streets of Berlin in January to declare “We are fed up” – with what they see as perversions in the German (and global) food system.

One day after the protest march, on January 20, Lower Saxony held general elections. The incumbent, Mr. David McAllister, had followed Mr Christian Wulff as Prime Minister when Mr Wulff was elected President of the Federal Republic. Mr Wulff had to leave office after only 20 months due to accusations of corruption, a fact that hardly featured in electoral campaigns of January 2013.

It was going to be a close call: The ruling parties, the conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) and the Liberal Party (FDP), had been in power for ten years. Especially the former are closely connected with conventional,

often large-scale far-ming enterprises. One prominent example: In 2010, Minister of Agriculture Mrs. Astrid Grote-lüschen (CDU) had to resign from office because she was obviously too close to vested interests in the poultry industry.

A center-left coalition of Social Democrats (SPD) and Greens was challenging the cabinet of Mr. McAllister and managed to marginalize other political parties, namely the Left and the Pirate Party, in public opinion. After a long election night, the so-called red-green coalition won the day by only a few thousand votes. Mr Stephan Weil (SPD), former mayor of the state capital, the City of Hanover, was elected Prime Minister. Some believe that the votes for the exceptionally strong Greens made the difference; votes quickly connected to the wide-spread discontent with agrarian policies.

Mr Christian Meyer of the Green Party was one of the most outspoken critics of factory farming; he campaigned vigorously for stricter legislation, better animal protection and against what he saw as an increasingly excessive livestock industry. Now, on February 19, 2013, Mr. Meyer was made the new Minister of Agriculture. Among revelations of new food scandals, Mr Meyer promised to take on problems and work towards agrarian transformation. As a first step, his ministry announced a drastic increase in hand-outs for organic farming, creating incentives to switch from conventional to organic.

Now it is the part of the powerful lobby of agrarian industrialists to take part in fear-mongering. While citizen initiatives and environmental organisations put their hope in some policy change, conventional farmers are afraid to lose some hard-earned privileges.

Lower Saxony's countryside is a conservative social space. Only the future will tell whether a switch towards more sustainable practices in farming can be made.

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