

Argentinean Farmers Protest by Donating 22,000 Pounds of Fruit



Buenos Aires, August 25 (RHC)-- In a powerful symbol of the crisis rocking Argentina's local agricultural sector, fruit growers from the fertile agricultural region of Rio Negro donated more than 22,000 pounds (10,000 kg) of pears and apples in Buenos Aires' main square while demanding President Mauricio Macri meet with producers

"It's a disgrace that consumers are paying expensive prices while the producers are left with crumbs," Sebastian Hernandez, president of the Allen Chamber of Fruit Growers told Argentina's Radio El Mundo while discussing the event in the Plaza de Mayo, the capital city's central square in front of the Presidential Palace.

At issue is Macri's rescission of an export tax meant to discourage the sale of produce abroad, while encouraging domestic consumption. Introduced by Macri's predecessor, Christina Fernandez, the tariff effectively lowers the price that big industrial producers can demand for their produce on the world market.

"Consumers are paying dearly for the fruit and the producer is receiving little to nothing, pushing some (farmers) to disappear," Hernandez told Radio El Mundo. The economy in the southern province of Rio Negro depends primarily on agriculture, especially fruit production.

The export tax worked, essentially, as a subsidy, and without it, fruit growers' say they receive a pittance for their crops compared to what they received under the Kirchner Administration. Simultaneously, they say, consumer pay more than 850 percent more for apples than what producers receive, while for pears the markup is over 1,000 percent. The difference, they say, goes almost entirely to intermediaries who rake in fat profits while smaller producers endure “bankruptcy,” worsened in recent months by rising costs of utilities and other neo-liberal policies implemented under Macri's administration, forcing many growers to go out of business.

One of Macri's first controversial moves after entering office last December was to roll out major changes to export taxes and import rules to reopen Argentina to the very same neo-liberal trade policies that left an unprecedented 56 percent of the population in poverty by 2002. The South America country had never before recorded a poverty rate above 6 percent.

Macri asserted that the elimination of export taxes on big agribusiness corporations producing corn, wheat, and beef, and regional products like fruit, while reducing taxes on soybeans – another of the country's top agricultural exports – boosts the agricultural sector. However, pear and apple growers argue the policy shifts have only flooded the international market with cheap imports, and undercut the viability of Argentina's agriculture, as well as local food security.

According to data reported by Argentina's La Nacion, a 40-pound box of Argentine fruit is at least US\$3 more expensive on the international market than competing products from countries including Chile, New Zealand, and South Africa.

The producers demand that Macri's administration agree to meet with them to discuss their concerns. “We want there to be a law to pay (producers) what we deserve,” continued Hernandez. “We need political decisions for the sector that can assure that apples and pears are priced consistently with the entire (supply) chain.”

Hundreds of Buenos Aires residents visited the square with shopping bags and rolling totes to take advantage of the thousands of pounds of free pears and apples.

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