



COVID-19 in Argentine agriculture: global threats, local contradictions and possible responses

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We live one of the greatest global threats on record. But we still don't know how far its effects will reach, nor exactly where its causes come from. One of the most convincing hypotheses links the origin of this new generation of viruses to three factors: the methods of animal confinement, which massify new strains of viruses and creates resistances to antibiotics; the put into production of virgin areas of the world, which also put us in contact with newer and more aggressive strains of natural viruses; and the speed with which this is put into global circulation as a result of flows of people and goods on a scale and at a speed never before seen. If this is true, capitalist agriculture could be the "missing link" of the COVID-19. In that case, our main threat would be a type of relationship with nature that, far from being guided by some kind of harmonious planning of all these variables, is driven by an uncoordinated multiplicity of short-term economic interests.

Argentina's responses to this global threat are mediated by these same contradictions. The outbreak of the virus in the northern hemisphere gave us time to prepare us and observe the results of different types of approaches. On March 20th the government decided a massive quarantine. Thanks to the efforts of the vast majority of society, so far we have managed to stabilize the spread of the virus at levels that can be managed by the health system. It is still prohibited to move and carry out any productive activity, except for sectors considered "essentials" for the survival of the population. Agriculture is among these essential sectors.

Many agricultural employers did not interpret this permission as a public utility function, but as an authorization to continue their business "as usual". Many rural workers did not want to go to work "as usual": they were afraid of catching the disease and demanded guarantees for their health. This meant investing money and the companies did not want to. So the social function of producing food in the middle of the crisis was put at risk by these short-term economic interests.

The government intervened to reach agreements to guarantee safety of workers, food supply and normal profits for employers. But the companies threatened to close down and lay off workers. Some have made good on their threat. And while there have not yet been too many cases of COVID-19 in agriculture, on April 21st a worker died in a meat packing plant and it was enough to make the rest of his colleagues refuse to go to work. Furthermore, they organized protests about the safety conditions violating the quarantine. Can these conflicts stop food production? If so, can it generate a chain reaction of protests from hungry consumers?

Something similar happened with the marketing of food. Between direct producers and consumers there is a layer of speculators who try to buy at very low prices and sell at very high prices. During a week they generated shortages and price increases. The quarantine was in danger again and the establishment used this as an argument to return to business "as usual". Fortunately, the government acted against the speculators, supplies were resumed and prices stopped rising. What would have happened if food production and marketing had been left to the mere private initiative?

In sum, global capitalism would not only be at the base of the production and distribution of this type of virus, but its logic also constitutes an objective and subjective limitation to deal with its effects at a global and local level. The existence of the COVID-19 does not suspend the contradictions between capital and labor, or between sellers and buyers, but rather sharpens them. And that hinders the

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common struggle for life. Until now, the Argentine experience has shown a type of state intervention that postpones the pursuit of profit as a regulating principle of social life, and proposes life itself as an ordering principle for our society.

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