

Ministry of Agriculture and Agri-Food



Canada's agriculture and food processing system forms the economic basis upon which all other industries grow. With 310,000 members in 20 sectors, Unifor is Canada's largest private sector labour union. Unifor has 10,000 members in the food and beverage industry, but thousands more work in rail, road and marine transportation—many of whom transport agricultural commodities. Food processing, where Unifor's members are concentrated, is an industry valued at \$27 billion annually and it accounts for \$7.3 billion of Canada's exports. Unifor's members are employed by some of the largest agri-food companies in Canada, including Coca-Cola, Black Diamond, Nestle, Saputo and Maple Leaf Foods, among others.



Unifor priorities

Unifor works with employers, organizations and movements to develop strong social programs, efficiently deliver high quality services and ensure a healthy economy. This includes advocating for a national child care program, improvements in seniors benefits and programs, and legislative changes that help families balance their work and family responsibilities. Unifor also aims to improve the lives of working families at the bargaining table, by negotiating for provisions around child care, parental leave and retirement benefits, among others.

The federal government's approach to jobs, innovation and growth in the agri-food industry has centred on deregulation and trade and investment liberalization. This approach to developing Canada's agri-food industry needs to be revisited. Unifor envisions a modern, responsible and socio-ecologically sustainable approach to agricultural production and food processing.

Roughly 2.3 million people are employed in the Canadian agriculture and agri-food industries, with roughly one-in-ten working in the food processing industry. Many workers, especially on the agriculture side of things, are part of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program. This program has been chronically abused by employers. Rather than increasing employee compensation to attract and retain local workers, employers have used the TFWP to bypass Canadian compensation levels, and because of weak regulatory oversight, they have often been able to bypass labour market laws.

The so-called 'free trade' agreements currently signed or under negotiation threaten the quantity and quality of good jobs in Canadian agri-food. The Harper Government's agreement to increase imports of European cheese as a condition of signing CETA with the EU was a mistake. This doubling of the allowable quota will force Canadian dairy farmers to produce less milk, leading to lower incomes. It is also an initial step towards undermining Canada's supply management system in dairy, which benefits Canadian consumers with quality dairy products at a stable price while allowing farmers to earn their income from the marketplace instead of through state subsidies (as in Europe).

The TPP is an even greater threat to Canada's supply management system. The Harper Government claimed that it protected the three pillars of supply management, but also admitted that new market access will be granted through quotas phased in over five years: 3.25% for dairy, 2.3% for eggs, 2.1% for chicken, 2% for turkey and 1.5% for broiler hatching eggs. It also promised the industry \$4.3 billion in compensation in exchange for increased market access. One does not provide stakeholder compensation if they have negotiated a favourable deal. The National Farmers Union (NFU) denounced the TPP for putting supply-managed parts of the industry

at risk for the sake of what they call 'illusory gains' in beef, pork and grain. It stresses that supply management had not historically cost taxpayers anything, but that the compensation program put forward by the government will now put taxpayers on the line for the economic losses sustained by Canadian farmers. The NFU fears that concessions will increase in the future as subsequent rounds of TPP talks proceed.

→ Specific issues and recommendations

Unifor calls on the federal government to refocus agricultural programs and policy on the principles of Canadian food sovereignty and sustainability, rather than one completely geared toward exports. The agri-food industry should not only be a source of nourishment for Canadians; it should also be an industry that provides good jobs to the local population. Unifor recommends:

- Supply management provides Canadian farmers with a stable income based on cost of production. Therefore, the government should make a commitment to protect Canada's supply managed commodities under any trade agreements.
- The federal government provide support for the Canadian food processing industry and to help ensure that the local population—especially youth and especially in seasonal industries—are provided with good job opportunities.
- The federal government re-establish the Canadian Wheat Board or put in place a mechanism to regulate the grain system to ensure all farmers have an equal opportunity to ship grain, to counteract the power of the major grain companies, and to give priority in shipping to small grain companies, producer rail cars, and short-line railways.
- The federal government provide funding and support to farmers for adaptation to climate change, and to play a role in storing carbon or otherwise contributing to the reduction of greenhouse gases. As a first step, Unifor recommends the reinstatement of federal funding for the publicly owned community pastures program, which was originally established under the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA).

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