

**The European trade union movement and sustainable development ahead of the Earth Summit**

–  
**a European strategy for quality employment and  
the protection of the environment**

**ETUC Conference**

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**“A TECHNOLOGICAL STEP FORWARD SHOULD NOT MEAN A STEP BACKWARD FOR SOCIAL  
ISSUES”**

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1. One of the most important debates currently under way among Dutch trade unions in the primary sector concerns biotechnology. The most striking thing in this connection is that there is still a lot we do not know about biotechnology! As a result the debate is very wide ranging, with one side seeing it as a great opportunity. while the other side views it as a threat.
2. This is also evident in the terminology used for **GMOs**. The employers, who are unreservedly in favour of pushing forward rapidly in this area, always talk of **genetically modified organisms**. The unions, much more reserved, talk of **genetically manipulated organisms** - two different words for the same concept, but having quite different connotations. This clearly shows just how sharp the contrasts are.
3. If we look at the opportunities that the employers are always talking about then this involves, for example, the possibility of manufacturing good medicines to combat illnesses that cannot really be treated right now. They also offer opportunities for fighting hunger.
4. The threats mentioned by the trade unions and many environmentalists come in many shapes and sizes. For example, these medicines might prove to be very expensive. Since multinationals are trying to obtain patents on living organisms new power centres may emerge that might not be all that concerned about fighting world hunger!
5. In addition, too little is known about possible health risks. Just think of the reactions when DDT came on the market. Almost everyone was enthusiastic about it: DDT meant that crops would no longer be ravaged, making world hunger a thing of the past. But then we found out decades later that DDT is virtually non-biodegradable and that it had ended up in the food chain. Mothers were poisoning their babies via their breastmilk.
6. I am not saying that GMOs have the same effect. I simply want to make it clear that we have no idea if there are any long-term dangers associated with GMOs - just like we had no idea about the dangers of DDT all those years ago. This is something that must first be investigated very carefully indeed.
7. Dutch trade unions' basic stance is that biotechnology must not only provide economic benefits, but must also make a social contribution to society. Modifying plants is not that

different from modifying microorganisms. Genetic material is taken from a plant or bacteria and then introduced into another plant using a variety of technologies.

8. But what happens with modified plants that bloom and form pollen? How is pollen transferred? Is the modified plant toxic? Can they be crossed with plants in the wild? Since we do not yet know the answers to these questions, test fields must be kept as far away as possible from other fields in order to prevent undesired wind-borne pollination!

9. In many areas, genetic modification is a *fait accompli*. If this approach is supported, then it hardly makes sense to pursue a debate on whether biotechnology is desirable or objectionable. The unions are not against it in principle, we simply want to know more before the move is made to large-scale production. This means that we want the fullest possible information and want to gain a true understanding of the nature and consequences of biotechnology. Only then can limits be set within the context of a wide-ranging discussion.

10. The unions will also be involved in the public debate that will undoubtedly flare up again if the opportunities and threats become clearer. So far this debate has not been sufficiently pursued. Many people have no idea of what is possible or where the potential dangers lie. Then there is the bizarre debate between the two extremes: the fanatical supporters and the fanatical opponents. The first group consists of companies that want to ramp up to full-scale production as soon as possible, without any further research. The other group consists of activists who call any company wishing to do that "Mengele of corn". This kind of discussion leads nowhere; and that is something we have to prevent. We can do this by taking the time to pursue a broad, open discussion on this subject with as many parties as possible.

11. FNV Bondgenoten has already started this discussion. Members who work in the agricultural sector where they deal or might deal with biotechnology, discussed biotechnology, *GMOs* and the opportunities and threats they present with managers and experts. The discussion was broken up into three parts to make it more convenient. One group examined the ethical issues of the matter: is it morally justified to try to interfere with nature in this way? Or, for the believers among us, is it justified to interfere with creation in this way? A second group examined the economic issues at play: What impact will this development have? More specifically, what impact will it have on employment and working conditions? The third group discussed the technology: Which forms are acceptable and which are undesirable? These discussions on individual components are now completed. A conference is due to be held at which all the participants involved in the discussions will forge the components into a coherent policy.

12. Union members and officers working in the sector involved in these developments will disseminate the policy in discussions with employees and - via the works council - with the employers. The union will also be extensively involved in other, related aspects of the work, such as education. It would be good for employees working in companies using GMOs if extra attention could be paid to better work, good training/education and intensive supervision in ensuring safe work on a good product. The unions can help ensure this through their position in education and training. Union officers also sit on the boards of agricultural education institutions. Experienced union officers sit on the bodies that set the content of educational programmes. We will definitely be approaching the issue from these positions.

13. Which companies are currently involved in biotechnology? Seed dressing companies, the agrochemicals sector, animal reproduction, the livestock feed and fish food industry, the

chemicals industry, the pharmaceuticals industry and other non-food industries. FNV Bondgenoten is in favour of ensuring that when companies want to start using biotechnology then works councils must be entitled to give their approval. FNV is well represented on most works councils, so we have influence at that level too. FNV will take part in the discussion and decision-making process in a number of other places where it is involved, such as the commodity boards. This approach will allow us to defend the interests of workers in all sectors in which we are involved!