

Monsanto and the National University of Córdoba (C): The Price of a Bad Reputation

The Resolution

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Marcelo Conrero, the dean of the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences (FAS) of the National University of Córdoba (UNC), made a quick decision in response to the High Council's call to cancel the agreement with Monsanto, opting to suspend the agreement and discuss the advisability of moving forward with it in a workshop with the faculty community: teaching staff, non-teaching staff, students and alumni. This temporary suspension meant that for the time being the agreement hadn't been canceled.

On September 7, 2014, *La Voz del Interior* published an interview in which Conrero explained his perspective. He said the agreement was one of many that the faculty had with seed producers and that such agreements were useful as a framework for internships related to the professional activity of agronomists. For the dean, the opposition was due entirely to the fact that in this case the company was Monsanto. He stressed that the organization was regulated by the state and authorized to work as it did.

Broadly speaking, he based his position on three arguments:

1. Plurality within universities. Conrero said that in his faculty there were people who supported the Monsanto project and others who opposed it, and that everyone had the right to discuss their views.
2. He spoke in favor of autonomy, stressing that a university shouldn't give in to political pressures, in this case from environmentalists.
3. He said the social role of the university was to bring clarity to conflicts by providing a point of view based on scientific and technical objectivity.

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The structure of this case is as follows: the problem is described from two different perspectives, the university (part A) and the business (part B); the resolution (part C) is communal. It is designed to divide the class into two groups with different perspectives, in order to enrich group discussion.

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Finally, he contrasted his arguments with the university's actions:

I'm concerned to see that the breadth, judgment and freedom that should characterize a public university are lacking. [...] The university should get more involved in these decisions, but to bring clarity, not to put forward an opinion as it did in 2012. Our duty as a university is not to generate fear in the community, but to bring clarity. We shouldn't let certain groups drag the whole institution down just because they're making a lot of noise.¹

Meanwhile, Monsanto decided to postpone the environmental impact study for the seed plant until 2015. The regulations for the new environmental law hadn't yet been published, and provincial elections were scheduled to be held in Córdoba in July 2015. Given new public tensions over the agreement with the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences, the legal framework for the project was too uncertain to continue on the planned schedule.

Public Support for Conrero

Up to that point, no individual or organization had spoken out publicly in favor of the agreement with Monsanto. However, after Conrero's decision, some voices of support for his position, or some of his arguments, did emerge.

On September 8, a group of residents of Malvinas Argentinas presented a petition requesting a meeting with Rector Tamarit and another with Conrero. The request was backed by a letter signed by 600 residents who were in favor of the Monsanto facility. According to Elvio Tejeda, the president of the Malvinas Argentinas Water Cooperative (where the lecture by FAS professor Alicia Cavallo had been given), the group wanted to make its position known in order to differentiate itself from the "leftist parties" that claimed to represent the residents of Malvinas Argentinas and opposed Monsanto for "ideological reasons."²

Conrero also received support from the business sector. The Agri-Food Community of Córdoba expressed its support for the "scientific-technological system" getting involved in issues of public interest in order to provide arguments based on research free of "preconceptions and fundamentalisms."³ The Córdoba Grain Exchange, in turn, declared "its fullest support" for the dean's decisions. At an event held by the Rural Society of Córdoba, the head of the organization congratulated Conrero for seeking to shift the discussion "from fear to knowledge." The dean, who was at the event, was applauded from the platform.⁴

Other voices supported some of the central arguments without taking an explicit position on the agreement. On September 4, an editorial in *La Voz del Interior* said: "If there's one thing that the National University of Córdoba (UNC) can't afford, it's to have its decisions dictated by hype, chants and banners."⁵ The editorial went on to describe the decision to request the cancellation of the agreement as pragmatic, but a long way from what "distinguishes a university: debate with a plurality of views."

The Persistence of Opposition

Despite the new support for Conrero, opposition to Monsanto and the opportunity for the FAS to have an agreement with the chemical company remained on the public agenda in Córdoba.

On September 7, the civic organization Avaaz released a survey showing that 90% of the residents of Malvinas Argentinas wanted a referendum and predicted that 65% would vote against the construction of the plant.⁶



On September 17, the UNC's Secretary of Science and Technology, Joaquín Navarro, published an opinion column in which he argued that discussion on the agreement couldn't take place in a single academic unit, that the perspectives of the social sectors adversely affected by the conflict should be taken into account, and that scientific work should be shielded from any speculation about corporate links.⁷

Scandal and Revocation

On September 17, Monsanto's executives made public their decision to postpone the environmental impact study until 2015. Although the study was almost complete, they preferred to wait for the regulations for the new environmental law to come out and for politics to move on from the election campaign.

Meanwhile, the environmental activists remained steadfast in their attempt to secure a referendum and reject the Monsanto facility. They'd kept up the fight for two years, and the permanent blockade of the construction site was still in place.



Marcelo Conrero during the 2014 environmental protests.

Source: "Ciencias Agropecuarias Discutirá Su Vinculación Con Monsanto," *La Voz Del Interior*, last modified October 15, 2014, <https://www.lavoz.com.ar/ciudadanos/ciencias-agropecuarias-discutira-su-vinculacion-con-monsanto/>.

In an attempt to channel the discussion, the UNC Rector's Office set up a committee called the Monsanto Committee, composed of professors, students, alumni and deans (including Conrero), as a forum for "pluralistic" debate on the location of the Monsanto plant in Malvinas Argentinas.⁸