

Sarah Wiener: "SLAPP lawsuits in Italy seek to silence critical voices "

Pesticide critics are on trial again in South Tyrol on 28th May. Sarah Wiener observes criminal proceedings on site.

In South Tyrol, the trials of pesticide critics from Austria and Germany will continue this Friday, 28th May at 9.30 am in the Provincial Court of Bolzano. The defendants are the environmental activist Karl Bär and the author and documentary filmmaker Alexander Schiebel. Both had publicly criticised the high use of pesticides in South Tyrolean apple orchards and were subsequently sued by South Tyrolean Provincial Councillor Arnold Schuler. More than 1370 farmers have joined this complaint. Yesterday evening, on 26th May, Schuler and two representatives of the South Tyrolean fruit co-operatives withdrew their joint complaint. The farmers' complaints are still pending.

Austrian MEP Sarah Wiener observes the court case of Karl Bär and Alexander Schiebel in Bolzano. "In this case, committed people who rightly criticised the status quo are being intimidated, and put under immense psychological and financial pressure," says Sarah Wiener and continues: "Karl Bär and the rest of the defendants are not only threatened with enormous costs, that could destroy their livelihoods, but also with years of psychological stress, and this for something that only benefits us all: education and information. They publicly called out the enormous use of pesticides in the South Tyrolean apple orchards. I would like to thank them for this and emphasise: I stand by their side, as do countless other people from our society."

Around ten percent of Europe's apples grow on more than 18,000 hectares of cultivated land in South Tyrol. Around 950,000 tonnes of this very popular fruit are harvested there every year. The trees are often sprayed more than twenty times a year. The poisons not only reduce biodiversity - bees, bumblebees and butterflies are negatively affected - but also endanger people's health. Among the products applied in South Tyrol are some that scientists and authorities believe are likely to cause cancer, affect fertility, disrupt foetal development, interfere with the human hormonal system or damage genetic material.

The Bär and Schiebel cases are just two of the increasingly common SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) lawsuits designed to silence critics. The European Parliament already has the issue in its sight. "We need legislation that protects critical journalists, activists, media and NGOs from SLAPP lawsuits. Judges must be trained to quickly recognise SLAPP lawsuits as such and defendants must be given the opportunity to request dismissal of such cases as early as possible. Freedom of expression is one of the most important assets of our democracy and must be protected," says Sarah Wiener MEP.

More information on the trial: <https://www.umweltinstitut.org/mitmach-aktionen/pestizidrebelln-vor-gericht.html>

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