

The science and politics of ultra-processed foods

What the Lancet Series reveals about a global health crisis

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“Right now, in the [USA], people consume more soft drinks than any other liquid, including ordinary tap water. If we take full advantage of our opportunities ... we will see the same wave catching on in market after market until, eventually, the number one beverage on earth will be ... soft drinks—our soft drinks.”

— Roberto Goizueta, Coca-Cola CEO, 1986

“We are the flour in your bread, the wheat in your noodles, the salt on your fries. We are the corn in your tortillas, the chocolate in your dessert, [and] the sweetener in your soft drink.”

— Cargill promotional brochure

The rise of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) cannot be understood apart from the economic and political forces that have reshaped global diets over the last half century. What began as a corporate strategy to maximize profit through cheap ingredients and industrial food processing has grown into a dominant dietary pattern across much of the world. These products have become embedded in daily life because the system that produces them is designed to prioritize corporate returns, not human health.

The consequences are soaring rates of diet-related chronic disease, the replacement of traditional food cultures, and growing dependence on commodities engineered to be consumed rapidly, repeatedly, and in enormous volume. Claims that the spread of ultra-processed foods simply reflects consumer preference obscure the underlying economic imperative driving this transformation.

The Trump administration’s Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) initiative, promoted by anti-vaccine quack Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, as a bold effort to confront the nutritional and metabolic crisis, has adopted rhetoric critical of ultra-processing. But it is advancing policies that leave the industry’s power untouched. This is a deliberate effort to take advantage of popular distrust of the giant agribusiness corporations while actually serving their interests.

It is in this global diet and nutrition situation that gives the *Lancet Series*—a comprehensive three-paper scientific assessment released in November 2025—its profound significance. The Series brings together 43 leading experts whose careers have shaped modern understanding of nutrition, food systems and corporate influence.

Carlos A. Monteiro, emeritus professor at the University of São Paulo and creator of the NOVA classification, leads the evidence paper documenting the health impacts of ultra-processed diets. Gyorgy Scrinis and Camila Corvalán, respected scholars of food policy and nutrition governance, outline potential regulatory approaches in the policy paper.

Most crucially, Phillip Baker, a political economist of global food systems, leads the third paper analyzing the economic and political power of the UPF industry and the mechanisms through which it blocks meaningful public health action.

Together, these authors provide an integrated scientific and political analysis that exposes the structural foundations of the UPF crisis. They demonstrate that ultra-processing is not merely a matter of poor nutrition or individual choice, but the outcome of global systems of production, marketing and political influence.

The Series establishes a decisive new benchmark in the scientific evaluation of ultra-processed foods. At its core is a simple but far-reaching argument: the worldwide transition from traditional diets built on minimally processed foods to diets dominated by ultra-processed products has become a major driver of chronic disease and premature mortality.

The Series assembles the most extensive body of evidence to date on the health harms linked to these products while situating them within the larger political economy of global food production. This framework makes clear that the UPF crisis cannot be addressed through appeals to personal responsibility or incremental reform. It requires confronting the corporate structures that have transformed food systems worldwide and continue to obstruct public health policy at every level.

The expansion of evidence on ultra-processed foods and health

The *Lancet Series* builds on a rapidly expanding body of scientific literature that has emerged since the recognition of ultra-processed food as a significant issue in 2009. Over the last decade—and with increasing speed in the past five years—research across epidemiology, nutrition, public health, and the social sciences has converged on the same conclusion that link ultra-processed foods to a wide range of chronic diseases.

This surge in scientific investigation reflects a simple reality. As ultra-processed products have come to dominate global diets, evidence of their biological and population-level harm has become impossible to ignore. The Series’ systematic review assessed 104 prospective studies, of which an overwhelming 92 documented strong associations between higher UPF intake and at least one adverse health outcome. Meta-analyses confirmed statistically significant associations across 12 major health endpoints, spanning nearly every major organ system.

Among the most striking findings are the elevated risks of being overweight and obesity, type two diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease and several cancers, including colorectal and breast cancer. Chronic kidney disease, depression and higher all-cause mortality also show clear links to UPF consumption. These results have been reinforced by more recent research. A 2025 analysis by Wang and colleagues in *Thorax* reported increased lung cancer risk associated with higher UPF

intake, while an umbrella review led by Melissa Lane, published in the *British Medical Journal* in 2024, found “convincing evidence”—the strongest grade of epidemiological certainty—for cardiovascular disease-related mortality and type two diabetes. Taken together, the weight of this evidence demonstrates that the harms of ultra-processed foods are neither incidental nor confined to specific ingredients or product categories. They are inherent to the logic of ultra-processing itself.

The mechanisms through which these products undermine health operate on multiple, overlapping levels. Ultra-processed foods are typically high in refined sugars, industrial fats and sodium, while lacking fiber, micronutrients and protective phytochemicals. Yet these nutritional imbalances alone cannot explain the consistent associations found across such a wide range of diseases. UPFs are engineered to be hyper-palatable and rapidly consumed. In a controlled metabolic study, participants consuming an ultra-processed diet ingested an additional 500 to 800 calories per day compared with those on a minimally processed diet, despite matched macronutrient content. This finding underscores that the structure and sensory design of UPFs—soft textures, intensified flavors and rapid swallowability—encourage overconsumption independent of hunger signals.

A deeper layer of harm arises from disruptions to the gut microbiome, a central regulator of metabolism and immunity. Ultra-processed diets lack the fiber required to maintain a healthy microbial environment, while additives common in UPFs—such as emulsifiers, artificial sweeteners, and colorants—can degrade the intestinal mucus layer and increase gut permeability. This allows bacterial toxins to enter the bloodstream, triggering chronic low-grade inflammation. Known as *metabolic endotoxemia*, this inflammatory state weakens insulin signaling, promotes fatty liver disease, and accelerates the cellular damage that contributes to cardiovascular disease and cancer. These harms are compounded by industrial contaminants produced during manufacturing, such as acrylamide and advanced glycation end-products, along with endocrine-disrupting chemicals that leach from packaging materials, including BPA and phthalates.

The cumulative effect of these processes is visible not only in chronic disease incidence but in rates of premature mortality. The *Lancet* Series estimates that diets dominated by ultra-processed foods account for 3.9 to 13.7 percent of premature deaths (ages 30 to 60) across eight countries it examined. Based on a recent *JAMA Health Forum* study estimating US premature mortality (ages 18 to 64) at 309 deaths per 100,000 in 2022, a back-of-the-envelope calculation using the *Lancet* Series’ estimate that 13 percent of premature deaths for the US are attributable to ultra-processed foods suggests that roughly 60,000 early deaths each year may be linked to UPF consumption. These are deaths occurring most frequently during the working years of life, representing irreparable losses in health, productivity and life expectancy. Behind these numbers are families and communities confronted with avoidable suffering, the social costs of which are incalculable.

Not surprisingly, the global rise of chronic disease mirrors the global spread of these products because the two phenomena share the same underlying cause: an industrial food system optimized for profit rather than human well-being.

The *Lancet* policy agenda and its limits

Crucially, the *Lancet* Series situates the global public health crisis posed by ultra-processed foods within the economic structure of the modern food industry. Ultra-processing is not simply a technological choice or an unintended byproduct of industrialization; it is the foundation of the

industry’s most profitable business model. By relying on extremely cheap ingredients and producing commodities that can be sold at high margins, transnational corporations have expanded their reach into every region of the world. This growth has been most rapid in middle-income countries, where rising urbanization, expanding retail networks and fewer regulatory safeguards have created ideal conditions for market penetration. It is in this context that the third paper of the Series, led by Phillip Baker, makes its most vital contribution. Baker demonstrates that the central obstacle to effective public health policy is not a lack of scientific evidence, but the entrenched economic and political power of the ultra-processed food industry itself.

Baker details how this industry has embedded itself into the global food system. Structural adjustment programs in the 1980s forced many low- and middle-income countries to reorient agricultural production away from traditional crops and toward cash crops destined for global commodity chains. The establishment of the World Trade Organization in the mid-1990s, along with the explosion of free trade agreements, further empowered transnational food corporations by liberalizing markets and imposing binding rules on national food regulations. Meanwhile, corporations such as Archer Daniels Midland, Bunge, Cargill, COFCO, Louis Dreyfus, and Wilmar came to dominate the trade of grains and oilseeds. These global agribusiness conglomerates supplied the cheap commodity ingredients—refined starches, sugars, industrial oils—on which the ultra-processed food industry depends.

The second paper of the *Lancet* Series, written by Gyorgy Scrinis and colleagues, acknowledges the urgent need to restructure food environments and presents a set of policy measures that could in principle slow, or even reverse, the rise of ultra-processed foods. These recommendations include taxes on ultra-processed products; mandatory front-of-pack warning labels; restrictions on marketing, especially to children; and public procurement policies favoring minimally processed foods.

Despite limited successes with some reforms in several Latin American countries, these policy agendas that are being prescribed confront the same political realities that have defeated every major effort to regulate the food industry over the past half century. Ultra-processed food corporations operate through vast global supply chains, powerful trade alliances and sophisticated lobbying networks that span national borders. These corporations have the capacity to pressure governments by threatening job losses, investment withdrawals, or trade disputes if regulations threaten their interests. Industry lobbyists actively shape national and international regulatory environments, challenging proposed laws, diluting standards, and manufacturing doubt about scientific findings through extensive funding of research and strategic public relations campaigns. As Baker’s analysis makes clear, this political machinery is designed not merely to influence policy but to prevent effective regulation from emerging in the first place.

This political reality also explains why initiatives like MAHA, despite their rhetorical emphasis on confronting ultra-processing, fail to propose any binding regulations. Instead, they adopt the same language promoted by major corporations that have defined ineffective voluntary agreements for decades. The unwillingness to impose taxes, restrict marketing or regulate retail environments reflects not a lack of understanding, but a political alignment with the interests of the ultra-processed food industry. Technical interventions in policies alone cannot alter the trajectory of ultra-processed food production or consumption. Without confronting the corporate structures that underpin the UPF model, policy recommendations, however scientifically grounded, amount to little more than symbolic gestures.

What ultra-processed foods are

Ultra-processed foods are not simply “processed foods” in the everyday sense; they are industrial formulations engineered to replace whole foods and traditional meals. Defined as Group 4 in the NOVA classification, these products are made largely from cheap ingredients extracted, refined, or chemically modified from food—starches, sugars, industrial oils, protein isolates—combined with additives that would rarely appear in home or commercial kitchens.

Their defining feature is not the degree of processing but its purpose: to create inexpensive, shelf-stable, hyper-palatable products that can be manufactured at scale and sold at high profit margins. To achieve this, they rely on cosmetic additives such as artificial flavors, colors, sweeteners, emulsifiers and thickeners that simulate taste, aroma and texture while masking the poor quality of the underlying ingredients.

Common examples include sugar-sweetened beverages, packaged snacks, mass-produced breads, sweetened breakfast cereals, instant noodles, reconstituted meat products, flavored yogurts, frozen entrées, and many “energy,” “protein” or “nutrition” bars and drinks. While not all industrially produced foods qualify—pasteurized milk and frozen vegetables remain minimally processed—the products that dominate the UPF category share the same design logic: low-cost base ingredients, extensive industrial transformation, and an additive-driven sensory profile.

Ultra-processed foods are created to be convenient, aggressively marketed, and consumed frequently. These characteristics, rather than individual nutrients, set them apart from minimally processed or traditionally prepared foods and explain why they have become central to modern diets and to the global health crisis.

Historical development of ultra-processing

The rise of ultra-processed foods is rooted in the transformation of industrial food systems over the past half-century. Although food processing existed for millennia, the modern era of ultra-processing began during World War II, when the military pushed for technologies that could produce durable, inexpensive, mass-produced rations. These innovations—synthetic flavor compounds, new preservatives, high-temperature manufacturing, and advances in packaging—later migrated into the commercial food sector.

The decisive shift occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, when US agricultural policy drove massive overproduction of corn, soy and sugar. These surpluses became the raw material for high-fructose corn syrup, modified starches, refined flour, industrial oils and other cheap inputs that now form the backbone of ultra-processed foods. By pairing these ingredients with newly available additives and flavoring technologies, corporations could create branded, shelf-stable products with exceptionally high profit margins.

From the 1990s onward, global trade liberalization, supermarket expansion, and rapid consolidation allowed transnational food companies to scale this model worldwide. As Phillip Baker’s research in the *Lancet* Series shows, ultra-processed products rapidly penetrated middle-income countries, displacing traditional dietary patterns and reshaping food environments across Latin America, Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe.

By the early 21st century, ultra-processed foods had become dominant sources of dietary energy in many high-income nations and increasingly central to diets elsewhere. Their global spread reflects not a response to nutritional needs but the logic of industrial production: low-cost

ingredients, technological standardization, and a design philosophy aimed at maximizing consumption and profit.

The UPF business model and global expansion

The modern global food system is structured around the ultra-processed food business model, which has become one of the most profitable and politically entrenched sectors of the world economy. As Baker’s analysis demonstrates, ultra-processing is not merely an industrial technique, but the core logic of a system built on extracting value from cheap agricultural commodities through branding, chemical engineering and global distribution that has generated extraordinary returns for shareholders while embedding ultra-processed products into daily diets across the world.

Between 2009 and 2023, global ultra-processed food market sales grew from \$1.5 trillion to \$1.9 trillion (in constant 2023 dollars). The eight largest transnational manufacturers—Nestlé, PepsiCo, Unilever, Coca-Cola, Danone, Fomento Económico Mexicano, Mondelez, and Kraft Heinz—collectively dominate the sector. These corporations are headquartered primarily in North America and Western Europe, and in 2021 they controlled 42 percent of the sector’s total assets, including production facilities, distribution networks, marketing systems and thousands of trademarked brands. Nestlé alone expanded from 80 factories in the 1920s to 340 factories across 76 countries by 2023, supported by 24 research and development centers serving 188 markets. The Coca-Cola System, one of the most vertically integrated beverage networks in the world, produced 2.2 billion daily servings across 200 markets in 2022 through 950 bottling plants, according to Baker.

This global production model provides corporations with enormous leverage. By threatening to relocate jobs, investments, or sourcing operations, industry lobbyists can influence national policy decisions and intimidate regulators. Ultra-processed food corporations also gain competitive advantages over local producers through economies of scale, low-cost sourcing, and global brand recognition. Ultra-processing lowers costs by replacing more expensive ingredients with cheaper modified substitutes, reducing product weight for transportation, and extending shelf life. These practices are readily emulated by local and regional manufacturers, further expanding the reach of ultra-processed products and reinforcing the dominance of the industrial model.

The political strategies associated with this business model are equally expansive. Baker and colleagues document the existence of more than 207 industry-affiliated interest groups operating worldwide, concentrated in Washington D.C. and Brussels—close to the centers of regulatory power. These organizations coordinate lobbying efforts, monitor emerging regulatory threats, and disseminate corporate talking points. For example, Coca-Cola Europe developed a “public policy risk matrix” evaluating 49 regulatory policies based on their likelihood to materialize and their potential impact on profit. The corporation’s priorities included “fight-back strategies” against sugar taxes, labeling requirements, recycling laws and environmental regulations. These strategies are mirrored across the industry.

Ultra-processed food corporations also participate in—or directly create—multi-stakeholder initiatives that project a responsible public image while advancing industry interests. The *Lancet* Series identifies 45 such global initiatives, more than half established by corporations or affiliated groups. These initiatives address topics such as nutrition, sustainability, human rights, climate change and plastic waste, but they largely function to diffuse political pressure, co-opt civil society and promote voluntary commitments in place of binding regulations. Corporate social

responsibility slogans—Nestlé’s “creating shared value,” Coca-Cola’s “refreshing the world,” and Mondelez’s “snacking made right”—are emblematic of this political strategy: presenting corporations as partners in health and environmental stewardship while continuing to expand the ultra-processed food model.

Another critical component of the UPF business strategy is the systematic influence over scientific research and public knowledge. Between 2008 and 2023, more than 3,800 scientific articles disclosed funding or conflicts of interest involving ultra-processed food manufacturers. These studies were authored by more than 14,000 individuals affiliated with universities, government agencies, corporations, and civil society organizations, with the majority based in the United States and the European Union. Approximately one-third of these articles focused on “energy balance” or physical activity—a known tactic to shift attention away from the structural properties of ultra-processed foods and toward narratives of personal responsibility. A network of corporate-funded scientific front groups disseminates these findings and mobilizes industry-friendly arguments that deny the validity of the UPF concept, exaggerate scientific uncertainty, and promote reformulation as a solution. These arguments mirror the industry’s broader political strategy: manufacturing doubt to delay or prevent regulation.

The unequal impact of ultra-processed foods is also a key dimension of the business model, and one that reinforces global and domestic inequalities.

As the *Lancet* Series notes:

UPFs are disproportionately consumed by populations affected by economic constraints, gender, and time poverty. Their affordability and convenience make them attractive to people working long hours or living in constrained conditions, or to women, who disproportionately continue to bear the primary responsibility for food preparation in many cultures. Instead of alleviating these burdens, UPFs often reinforce structural inequities by facilitating low-wage labor, not challenging gendered domestic roles, and displacing environmental and social burdens to low- and middle-income countries.

This is not a side effect but an integral feature of a system that profits from the erosion of traditional diets and the intensification of time and labor pressures. The global expansion of ultra-processed foods is driven not by consumer demand but by the economic structures that shape that demand. By making minimally processed foods increasingly inaccessible—due to cost, time, or availability—while saturating markets with cheap ultra-processed alternatives, corporations shift the burden of nutritional harm onto populations with the least economic and political power.

Baker’s analysis demonstrates that the ultra-processed food industry has achieved not only economic dominance but political insulation. The structural integration of corporate power into global food governance ensures that attempts to regulate ultra-processed foods confront a nearly immovable obstacle, especially in the present political climate enchaind by capitalist production.

Global dietary shift toward ultra-processed foods and its health impact

Ultra-processed foods have reshaped diets across the world, displacing

traditional eating patterns at a pace unmatched in modern history. In high-income countries, this shift is now deeply entrenched: UPFs routinely make up half or more of daily caloric intake, and despite small declines in categories such as sugary beverages, overall consumption remains structurally high. The pattern has not reversed; it has simply recomposed itself within the same industrial model.

The most rapid transformation is occurring in middle-income countries. As the *Lancet* Series documents, transnational food corporations have aggressively expanded into Latin America, Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe, using low-cost pricing, supermarket penetration, and targeted marketing to replace longstanding dietary traditions. In China, UPF consumption has more than tripled; in countries such as Brazil and Mexico, it has doubled over recent decades. These markets now account for the strongest global growth, with sales projected to reach parity with high-income countries.

Children and adolescents have become especially exposed. UPFs saturate schools, childcare centers, sporting environments, digital platforms, and retail corridors. With taste preferences and metabolic pathways still developing, young people are uniquely vulnerable to habitual consumption. Evidence summarized by UNICEF and researchers in the Series links early UPF exposure to emerging metabolic disturbances, developmental concerns and mental health impacts.

A substantial body of scientific evidence now shows that ultra-processed foods harm the body through multiple, reinforcing pathways. Large prospective studies and systematic reviews—synthesized in the *Lancet* Series and in recent umbrella analyses published in the *BMJ*—link high UPF consumption to more than 30 chronic conditions, including type two diabetes, cardiovascular disease, chronic kidney disease, several cancers and increased all-cause mortality. These associations are not isolated observations but follow a clear dose-response pattern: for every 10 percent increase in the share of UPFs in the diet, the risk of premature death rises by roughly 15 percent, and cardiovascular disease risk increases by about 12 percent.

MAHA and the politics of evasion

The MAHA initiative has been presented by the administration as a bold confrontation with the public health crisis facing the United States. But a closer examination shows that MAHA is defined not by its ambition, but by its profound political contradictions. It acknowledges the catastrophic condition of the American diet and the collapse of the food system, yet proposes remedies that are voluntary, vague and structurally incapable of challenging the corporate forces responsible for the crisis.

When the MAHA Commission released its initial report in May 2025, the mainstream press described it as a “scathing indictment” of the American food system. The report pointed to corporate consolidation, aggressive marketing, food deserts, the ubiquity of ultra-processed products and the nutritional deterioration of the national diet.

But the leaked draft of MAHA’s proposed recommendations in August 2025 revealed its true purpose. Instead of calling for binding regulations—measures that would meaningfully limit ultra-processed food marketing, impose taxes, regulate retailers or protect children—the draft was filled with verbs such as “explore,” “partner” and “encourage” that have long served as the language of political retreat. These are the same terms that have appeared in every failed health initiative over the past 40 years. They are the characteristic language of programs designed not to regulate corporate behavior, but to avoid doing so.

In practice, MAHA aligned itself with the voluntary “self-regulation” model favored by the very corporations driving the crisis, a framework

that has repeatedly proven ineffective in every country where it has been applied. MAHA's recommendations therefore functioned not as a challenge to the UPF industry, but as a political shield that preserved its dominance.

This underlying contradiction became even more apparent when placed in the context of the administration's broader agenda. While MAHA spoke of improving national nutrition, the government simultaneously advanced deep cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and proposed reductions to Medicaid. Public health researchers, anti-hunger advocates and independent economists unanimously warned that these cuts would intensify food insecurity, worsen diet-related disease and leave millions of families unable to afford medical care. A program that claims to "make America healthy" while stripping away the foundations of food and healthcare access stands exposed as a political fraud.

MAHA also placed extraordinary emphasis on "precision nutrition research"—a highly individualized biomedical framework centered on personalized genetics, supplements and boutique diagnostics. Nutrition scientists criticized this approach as "the antithesis of public health." By shifting attention from the food environment to individual biology, precision nutrition obscures the structural forces that determine dietary patterns simply as another version of the promotion of the false premise "medical freedoms." This is not accidental. It mirrors corporate narratives that frame diet as a matter of personal responsibility, rather than the predictable outcome of food environments saturated with ultra-processed products.

The administration simultaneously elevated a series of pet grievances—food dyes, seed oils and isolated chemical additives—while ignoring the structural drivers of the UPF crisis. These issues, loudly amplified in public appearances, functioned as political theater. They channeled public confusion and frustration without ever confronting the economic structure responsible for the production, distribution, and marketing of ultra-processed foods. They also aligned closely with the administration's broader hostility toward scientific institutions, which has included dismantling advisory structures, promoting ideologically driven claims and undermining evidence-based public health.

In this context, MAHA does not represent a break with past failures. It is a continuation and acceleration of them. Its political contradictions are intrinsic to a program that seeks to present the appearance of public health concern while maintaining allegiance to the corporate interests that dominate the US food system. It is this dynamic—an initiative that acknowledges the crisis while deliberately avoiding the measures required to resolve it—that defines MAHA as a paradigmatic expression of political evasion in the present period.

Some political conclusions

The global crisis caused by ultra-processed foods cannot be resolved within the framework of the existing capitalist order. The food system is not malfunctioning; it is functioning according to its design. Ultra-processed foods dominate global diets because they are the most profitable commodities the modern food industry has ever produced, built on extremely cheap ingredients, industrial processing, and branding strategies that extract vast wealth. Between 1962 and 2021, publicly listed food corporations distributed more than \$1.45 trillion to shareholders, with UPF manufacturers capturing much of that value.

Baker's analysis in the *Lancet* Series exposes how deeply this model is embedded in global political structures. Eight corporations—Nestlé, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Unilever, Danone, Mars, Mondelez, and Ferrero—anchor a

network of 207 industry interest groups, nearly half located in Washington D.C. and Brussels. These groups coordinate lobbying, influence regulatory bodies, and intervene in trade negotiations to block public health measures. Their political playbook includes voluntary industry codes, scientific front groups, trade disputes through the WTO, threats to relocate investments, and strategic litigation—mechanisms designed to neutralize any attempt at binding regulation.

These corporations operate with state support. Agricultural and fossil fuel subsidies provide artificially cheap inputs. Codex Alimentarius—the international body jointly run by the FAO and the WHO that sets global food standards—focuses primarily on acute food safety and allows a wide range of additives and processing aids that facilitate UPF proliferation, while largely ignoring concerns related to chronic disease and long-term health. Competition policies remain weak or unenforced, and trade agreements regularly privilege corporate interests over public health. The result is a regulatory environment built around the priorities of global agribusiness corporations rather than the nutritional needs of populations.

This political paralysis is not accidental. It reflects the structural power of the transnational food industry within capitalist states. The scientific evidence linking UPFs to chronic disease and premature mortality is clear. Yet the corporations responsible for these harms occupy a dominant position in policymaking. Their capacity to shape legislation, influence scientific debate, and coordinate global opposition to regulation ensures that the reforms proposed by public health researchers remain aspirational rather than actionable. This is why MAHA, despite its rhetoric, reproduces the same voluntary framework that has failed repeatedly over decades.

The contradiction revealed by the *Lancet* Series is therefore systemic. Public health cannot be protected within a food system organized around private profit. Appeals to consumer responsibility or incremental reform obscure the underlying reality: the global epidemic of diet-related disease is inseparable from the economic imperatives that structure food production. Ultra-processed foods prevail because they maximize shareholder returns, not because they meet human needs.

Addressing this crisis requires a fundamental reorganization of the food system on a socialist basis. The commanding heights of food production must be placed under democratic control, redirecting resources toward public need rather than private accumulation. This means rebuilding local and regional food infrastructure, prioritizing minimally processed foods, eliminating harmful profit incentives, and integrating scientific knowledge into production and distribution decisions. It also requires international coordination, since the UPF industry operates across borders through global supply chains, trade agreements and political networks.

The scientific evidence leads inexorably to the political conclusion: ultra-processed foods will continue to harm health if the food system is governed by the logic of profit. Protecting human life demands replacing this logic with one grounded in social need. Only through the collective organization of the working class, acting on a global scale, can society build a food system that nourishes rather than exploits, sustains rather than destroys, and prioritizes human well-being over corporate power.



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