

Contents

- 451. G20 Protests: What Was Gained and What Was Lost
John Riddell and Art Young
 - 452. Did Consumers Cause the BP Oil Disaster?
Ian Angus
 - 453. Venezuela: Land reform, food sovereignty and agroecology
Alan Broughton
-

Socialist Voice #451, September 2, 2010

G20 Protests: What Was Gained and What Was Lost

By John Riddell and Art Young

Two months after the protests against the G20 summit in Toronto and the accompanying police rampage, it is time for an initial balance sheet of what was gained and lost.

Some on the left view the experience as entirely positive. In particular, the Toronto Community Mobilization Network (TCMN) declares flatly that “the people won,” citing participation by “nearly 40,000 people,” the success of the June 24 march for Indigenous sovereignty, and the involvement of a wide spectrum of social movements and “over 100 grassroots organizations.” The July 26 TCMN statement also highlights protesters’ capacity to carry on in the face of arrests and intimidation, including deployment of almost 20,000 cops and a formidable array of weaponry, at a cost of more than \$1.2 billion.

These achievements during the week of protests against the G8 and G20 were certainly impressive. They resulted from the work of many forces including the TCMN; anti-poverty and Indigenous rights activists; the Council of Canadians, which organized a vigorous rally of 2,500 on June 25; and the trade unions that spearheaded a march the next day of 20,000, including 800 members of the United Steelworkers.

These successes reflect a broad, growing, vigorous, and innovative movement that is striving to defend working people against mounting attacks.

But that isn’t the whole story.

As TCMN’s statement says, “1,090 people have been arrested, thousands beaten, illegally detained, searched, harassed, and abused... [O]ver 300 people face criminal prosecutions, [while] politically motivated targeting continues.” Since the TCMN statement, the police have continued their witch-hunt, making further arrests and circulating “most-wanted” lists, complete with photos, of alleged ringleaders and lawbreakers.

The far-reaching repression has been widely condemned by forces including community activist groups, the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, a number of trade unions, and progressive individuals. There have been demonstrations, rallies and public statements.

The “Toronto Call,” issued within days of the mass arrests, demands that all the detainees be released, that their civil rights be protected, and that there be an independent public inquiry into the actions of the police. More than 2,400 people have now endorsed this call. A similar statement won wide support in Vancouver.

Legal defence of those accused is being coordinated through the Movement Defence Committee and the TCMN.

This vigorous response is encouraging, but it also shows that the popular movement has been put on the defensive and entangled in a complex legal struggle in which the forces of repression so far have the upper hand. Instead of building on the successes of the protests, the left now must divert its limited resources into defending the victims of repression.

An August 30 appeal by the TCMN paints a stark picture: at least 110 of those charged face very serious conspiracy and counselling charges; two have been denied bail; 18 granted bail under punitive conditions – under house arrest, unable to use laptops, cellphones, and the Internet, banned from association with loved ones.

We all need to join in building a united and effective defence effort, demanding the dropping of all G20-related charges. There is a pressing need to stand together against the repression, rejecting all attempts to distinguish between “good” and “bad” protesters. We must contribute generously to the fund drive for legal costs, which the TCMN reports has so far “only raised a fraction of the funds required.” (For information on how to contribute, see below.)

Balance sheet

Despite the repression, TCMN still says: “We insist ... the people won.”

Does reality justify that judgement? We don't think so.

The rulers and their government and police forces saw the G20 summit as an opportunity to test new repressive techniques in battle. To prepare, they assembled an army of cops from multiple cities, fenced off large sections of Toronto, acquired a wide range of menacing weaponry, and installed spy cameras throughout the downtown area.

The very fact that they could do those things was a victory for the cops. But the absurdly excessive “security” mobilization exposed them and the federal government to widespread ridicule. Many in Canada viewed the preparations as an affront to democratic rights and an example of the Harper government's widely detested right-wing policies.

As a result, the cops and the government had a strong interest in “proving” the need for restrictions of freedom of speech, assembly, and movement and in justifying the massive spending for tools of repression. They sought to disorganize and weaken social movements by using their new techniques in battle – and to win the contest for public support by representing themselves as defenders of public safety.

The cops were determined to have a fight, regardless. Their army was hyped up to attack at the slightest provocation. Even before the June 26 march, cops were invading homes and carting

away activists in handcuffs. Others were arrested in the street “on suspicion” because they spoke French or were wearing dark-coloured T-shirts.

During the march, a line of cops charged marchers who were peacefully singing “O Canada.” In a widely-publicized incident, a cop seized and arrested a young protester for the crime of blowing bubbles. These and many other such incidents revealed the police as brutal violators of democratic rights.

How could such appalling actions be justified? The police needed a pretext – and such a pretext was handed to them.

‘Radical contingent’

How this unfolded on June 26 was explained by Montreal-based movement organizers Jaggi Singh and Robyn Maynard:

A “radical contingent ... occupied a large bloc within the labour march,” sallying forth in attempts “to break through police lines.” When this was blocked, the contingent separated from the main march, headed into Toronto’s financial core, and then up Yonge Street, with “some engaging in corporate property destruction,” Singh and Maynard report. “Several police cars were destroyed by protestors as well,” they add. “Most of the targets are symbols” of corporate greed and pillage.

Most, but not all. A *Toronto Star* article described looting and window-breaking directed against small independent stores owned by immigrants from Afghanistan, China, and Cuba.

This spectacle served the purposes of the authorities all too well. The 20,000-cop army made no move to halt property damage. Police officers later told the *Toronto Sun* that there was “a clear order from the command centre saying ‘Do not engage.’” No firefighters were dispatched to douse the dangerously flaming police vehicles.

When the cops finally moved into action, they arrested hundreds of peaceful demonstrators who had no connection to the attacks on property. The brutal repression was sold by the cops and their political bosses as prudent and necessary in face of the threat to Toronto residents’ life and property.

The media orgy that followed was hypocritical and manipulative. Video clips of burning patrol cars and individuals breaking windows played again and again. The mass march and the police brutalization of peaceful demonstrators were largely ignored, while the actions of a few black-garbed figures were portrayed as a grave threat to public safety.

Predictably, government leaders rushed to applaud the actions of the police. Many Toronto-area working people, whose support the movement needs to win, accepted the official version of events.

In short, despite the mobilization against the G20 of several tens of thousands of working people – immigrants, trade unionists, Indigenous people, gays, and others – it was a good day for the federal and provincial governments and for the cops. They attained their main goals: justifying the “security” mobilization and expense; inflicting lasting damage on the right of assembly; and

disrupting radical movements through a wave of arrests. The next time Toronto faces a repressive mobilization by the authorities, it will be much harder to build a broad, effective, popular protest.

‘Diversity of tactics’

It is understandable that many protesters were dissatisfied with a mass labour-sponsored march that had vague, limited goals and demands. They sought a more effective, more militant form of protest. There are many ways that this could have been done. But the actions taken by the self-appointed “radical contingent,” whatever their motivation, had a perverse result, enabling the police to mobilize broad public support for their brutality and violations of civil liberties.

These issues were foreshadowed in discussions among protest organizers during the preceding months regarding “diversity of tactics.” According to *Canadian Dimension*, organizers of the June 26 labour march “weakly acceded to the demands of ‘radicals’ on diversity of tactics.”

Acceptance of a diversity of viewpoints is a firmly held principle on the left. In a broad sense, experimenting with diverse strategies and tactics also makes sense. But in this and many other cases, the term “diversity of tactics” has been used to impose what activist Steve D’Arcy correctly calls “a taboo against collective discussion and decision-making” on tactics.

The result: a small group carries out provocative actions that are incompatible with the purpose of a large, peaceful demonstration, actions that tend to frustrate achievement of the demonstration’s goals and greatly increase the vulnerability of all concerned to police repression.

This approach violates elementary principles of movement democracy and solidarity that are well understood by most radical activists and consistently applied in other contexts. Progressive movements decide on policies democratically and then carry them out in a spirit of unity. And when we face police repression, we maintain a united front and act in a spirit of mutual responsibility to minimize dangers and frustrate and discredit attempts by the authorities to violate our rights.

Immigrant rights advocates, in their demonstrations, do not allow participants to undertake provocative actions that could give the cops a pretext to victimise undocumented participants. Demonstrators in solidarity with Palestine do not allow banners that could be used to slander the action as anti-Semitic. Workers in factory occupations do not permit freelance destruction of property.

The same approach is needed at high-profile confrontations with police repression such as the G20 protests.

Democratic rights

The G20 protests also raise issues about the role of democratic rights in liberation struggles.

Even under dictatorships, working people and the oppressed strive to carve out areas of relative freedom within which to develop democratic activity. The rights that many people in Canada take for granted – to voice unpopular political views, to form unions, to assemble and engage in street protests – were won in this fashion. These democratic rights are precious acquisitions that

we must defend tenaciously. The capitalist rulers claim to uphold them, but in fact they violate them systematically.

Progressive movements win decisive victories when they demonstrate to the public a commitment to broadly shared democratic principles that are under attack by the governments. In this way, movements of an active minority can win the support of an aroused majority – including, ultimately, for ousting the capitalist rulers and embarking on transformative social change.

This sometimes involves audacious defiance of capitalist laws and property rights. The right to abortion was won in Canada through overt and successful defiance of the oppressive anti-abortion law, which was repudiated by every jury asked to convict abortion provider Dr. Henry Morgentaler. Blacks defeated legal segregation in the U.S. South in large measure through mass defiance of segregation laws. Road and rail blockades by Indigenous people in Canada have won important gains.

The key to such victories lies in demonstrating that such actions defend the democratic principles that are cherished by the vast majority, principles incompatible with the rulers' laws and claims to property.

All social movements seize such opportunities, at least in a small way, as part of their regular activity. But careful consideration must be given to the relationship of forces and state of public awareness. That didn't happen on June 26.

To be sure, bold gestures can help win public sympathy, but for any movement for radical change the key to victory lies in opening the door for ever larger numbers of the victims of capitalism to act in their own interests. In that sense, the main march on June 26, despite its deficiencies, pointed the way forward. It was broadly sponsored and conceived in a manner that could reach beyond the organized left and link up with a broad range of people who do not normally take part in protest activity. The crowd who marched, estimated at 20,000, was without doubt reduced by police intimidation. Yet its numbers indicated a vast potential.

When opportunities for future marches of this type arise, we must ensure that they are effectively built, raise clear and militant demands, and are carried through in a spirit of unity.

Only in this way can progressive movements grow in influence while effectively resisting the threat of repression.

++++

Donate to Legal Defence Fund: We urge readers to donate generously to the G20 Legal Defence Fund. For information on how to do so, see <http://movementdefence.org/defencefund/> or <http://g20.torontomobilize.org/support>.

Socialist Voice #452, September 13, 2010

Did Consumers Cause the BP Oil Disaster?

by **Ian Angus**

Following the BP/Deepwater oil well explosion in the Gulf of Mexico, many commentators have tried to explain why it happened. Many blame greed and arrogance in BP's executive offices. Others blame it on the Military-Oil-Government alliance that views free-flowing oil (and free-flowing oil profits) as something to be promoted at all costs. But some writers identify a different cause.

Bonus-seeking executives, corrupt politicians and oil-hungry generals all played a role, but they were only front men for the real villains – *consumers*.

“Who’s Really to Blame for the BP Oil Spill? We Are,” by U.S. green activist Dave Chameides, is typical:

“The bottom line is, no matter who did their work poorly, or who shirked their responsibilities, at the end of the day, we are the ones who are responsible for the disaster at hand.

“That’s right, we are the ones responsible.

“BP, like any other oil company, is in the petroleum game for one reason and one reason only: money. And where does that money come from? It comes from us.” [1]

Similarly, a *Guardian* article by British academic Mark Coeckelbergh was headlined, “We’re all to blame for the oil spill.”

“Moreover, and perhaps most important, we should not only consider responsibility for oil production but also for oil consumption. Business and finance are not isolated from our own choices. Companies such as BP can only do what they do because we want what they sell. We’re all too happy with cheap oil. ...

“As consumers, we continue to depend on oil in various ways and therefore maintain the oil-hungry system that makes oil companies drill in deep water and undertake other risky activities.” [2]

These are just two of many such articles. [3] All promote a simple lesson: If only “we” would wean ourselves of our oil addiction, then “they” would stop destroying the environment. If “we” would just use less oil, then “they” wouldn’t have to drill in environmentally sensitive areas like the Gulf of Mexico.

As Al Gore wrote a few years ago: “All of us contribute to climate change through the daily choices we make ... you can begin to take action and work toward living a carbon-neutral life.” [4]

Buy green products, drive less and save the world.

Such views rest on the implicit assumption that corporations – indeed the capitalist economy as a whole – are driven by consumers’ desires and choices, as displayed in the market. Economist Mark Perry of the right-wing American Enterprise Institute, explains:

“Consumers are the kings and queens of the market economy, and ultimately they reign supreme over corporations and their employees. ... In a market economy, it is consumers, not businesses, who ultimately make all of the decisions. When they vote in the marketplace with their dollars, consumers decide which products, businesses, and industries survive — and which ones fail.”[5]

Perry is echoing the opinions of the influential libertarian economist Ludwig von Mises:

“When we call a capitalist society a consumers’ democracy we mean that the power to dispose of the means of production, which belongs to the entrepreneurs and capitalists, can only be acquired by means of the consumers’ ballot, held daily in the marketplace.” [6]

This view, usually called *consumer sovereignty*, is widely held, not just by conservative economists but by commentators of many political stripes. It is *conventional wisdom* in the worst sense of the term, a dominant superstition that is assumed to be obviously true and so is never questioned.

But there are many reasons to believe that the conventional wisdom is wrong. The following are just four of them.

1. The market is manipulated

Fifty-three of the one hundred largest economies in the world are corporations. Exxon Mobil alone is larger than 180 countries. [7] In 2000, *Fortune* magazine reported that the 500 largest industrial corporations had revenues equal to two-thirds of all U.S. production. [8]

Those corporate behemoths constantly use their immense economic power to influence consumers’ choices. As a result, the balance of information and persuasion in the consumer goods marketplace is overwhelmingly weighted in favor of sellers and against buyers, for corporations and against consumers.

Michael Löwy writes:

“Contrary to the claim of free-market ideology, supply is not a response to demand. Capitalist firms usually create the demand for their products by various marketing techniques, advertising tricks, and planned obsolescence. Advertising plays an essential role in the production of consumerist demand by inventing false “needs” and by stimulating the formation of compulsive consumption habits.”[9]

Michael Dawson argues convincingly that advertising has to be understood as part of a much larger marketing process that aims “to make commoners’ off-the-job habits better serve corporate bottom lines.”

“Big businesses in the United States now spend well over a trillion dollars a year on marketing. This is double Americans’ combined annual spending on all public and

private education, from kindergartens through graduate schools. It also works out to around four thousand dollars a year for each man, woman, and child in the country. ...”

Dawson calls this process a form of “class struggle from above.”

“On our side of such struggles, within broad limits – for example, we must eat, drink, and sleep – we have the power to choose what we do with our free time, and we fight to make that time as fulfilling as possible. Meanwhile, big businesses have the power to implant objects, images, messages, and material infrastructures in our off-the-job behaviour settings, and, thereby, to influence the choices we make in our personal lives. ...”[10]

As liberal economist John Kenneth Galbraith insisted, the immense sums spent on advertising “must be integrated with the theory of consumer demand. They are too big to be ignored.” This, he said, “means recognizing that wants are dependent on production... [which] actively through advertising and related activities, creates the wants it seeks to satisfy.”[11]

This is not to suggest that consumers are helpless victims of all-powerful marketing monsters. Consumers frequently resist being manipulated, and specific advertising campaigns often fail. But by spending a trillion dollars a year on marketing, corporations don’t just promote individual products: they set the terms under which the market operates, define the range of permissible choices, and promote the constant expansion of needs and purchases that their profits depend on. They wouldn’t spend the money if it wasn’t working.

2. Consumers aren’t equal

Competition among consumers is also grossly unequal. “Consumer democracy” is rendered meaningless by the fact that a few consumers have most of the votes, because they have most of the money.

It’s sometimes argued that inequality of wealth doesn’t matter, because the rich are vastly outnumbered – our combined wealth lets the rest of us outvote the rich in the market. That sounds good, but it just isn’t true. The rich don’t just have more money than us as individuals, they have more than us *collectively*.

A recent study of the global distribution of household wealth, published by the prestigious World Institute for Development Economics Research, revealed just how much more the rich own than the rest of us.

“The richest 2 per cent of adult individuals own more than half of all global wealth, with the richest 1 per cent alone accounting for 40 per cent of global assets.

“The corresponding figures for the top 5 per cent and the top 10 per cent are 71 per cent and 85 per cent, respectively.

“In contrast, the bottom half of wealth holders together hold barely 1 per cent of global wealth.

“Members of the top decile are almost 400 times richer, on average, than the bottom 50 per cent, and members of the top percentile are almost 2,000 times richer.”[12]

Study after study leads to similar conclusions.

- In Australia, eleven very rich individuals own more than the country's 800,000 poorest households combined. [13]
- The richest 5% of Americans own more than everyone else in the U.S. combined. [14]
- The 147 individuals who topped the 2002 *Forbes* "World's Richest People" list had total wealth equal to the total annual income of three billion people, half the world's population. [15]

Such gross inequality exposes the term "consumer democracy" for the fraud that it is. The capitalist market is a *plutocracy*: we all participate, but a tiny minority of very rich people has decisive influence.

3. Market choice is restricted

While consumers have some ability to choose among a variety of products, they can't choose products that capitalists choose not to offer. Buyers face a "proffered world of micro-choices, where Ford versus Chevy is a live issue, but cars versus trains is most certainly not." [16]

The market is also restricted by political, social and economic decisions – past and present – that few consumers have any ability to influence.

North America's automobile-intensive culture, for example, is the product of a multi-pronged, multi-year campaign by the oil and automobile industries, beginning in the 1930s, to limit public transit, pour billions of public dollars into building roads, enforce zoning restrictions and building programs that encouraged urban sprawl – and at the same to promote the car as the quintessential symbol of success, freedom and modernity.

"Journalists never tire of pointing to the love of the automobile in the United States. But such 'love' is more often than not a kind of desperation in the face of extremely narrow options. The ways in which cars, roads, public transports systems (often notable by their absence), urban centers, suburbs, and malls have been constructed mean that people often have virtually no choice but to drive if they are to work and live." [17]

There is even less choice when it comes to oil – it is so pervasive in every aspect of production and distribution that one analyst has justly called it "the stuff without which nothing else happens." [18]

Indeed, it's nearly impossible to buy a household product that isn't partially or completely made from oil-derived chemicals. These are just a few examples:

Ammonia, Anesthetics, Antifreeze, Antihistamines, Antiseptics, Artificial limbs, Artificial Turf, Aspirin, Awnings, Balloons, Ballpoint Pens, Bandages, Basketballs, Bearing Grease, Boats, Cameras, Candles, Car Enamel, Cassettes, Caulking, CDs & DVDs, Clothes, Cold cream, Combs, Cortisone, Crayons, Curtains, Dashboards, Denture Adhesive, Dentures, Deodorant, Detergents, Dice, Diesel fuel, Dishes, Dresses, Drinking Cups, Dyes, Electric Blankets, Electrician's Tape, Enamel, Epoxy, Eyeglasses, Fan Belts, Faucet Washers, Fertilizers, Fishing Boots, Fishing lures, Fishing Rods, Floor Wax,

Folding Doors, Food Preservatives, Footballs, Glycerin, Golf Bags, Golf Balls, Guitar Strings, Hair Coloring, Hair Curlers, Hand Lotion, Heart Valves, House Paint, Ice Chests, Ice Cube Trays, Ink, Insect Repellent, Insecticides, Life Jackets, Linings, Linoleum, Lipstick, Luggage, Model Cars, Mops, Motor Oil, Nail Polish, Nylon Rope, Oil Filters, Paint, Paint Brushes, Paint Rollers, Panty Hose, Parachutes, Percolators, Perfumes, Petroleum Jelly, Pillows, Plastic Wood, Purses, Putty, Refrigerant, Roller Skates, Roofing, Rubber Cement, Rubbing Alcohol, Safety Glasses, Shag Rugs, Shampoo, Shaving Cream, Shoe Polish, Shoes, Shower Curtains, Skis, Soap, Solvents, Speakers, Sports Car Bodies, Sun Glasses, Surf Boards, Sweaters, Synthetic Rubber, Telephones, Tennis Rackets, Tents, Tires, Toilet Seats, Tool Boxes, Tool Racks, Toothbrushes, Toothpaste, Transparent Tape, Trash Bags, TV Cabinets, Umbrellas, Upholstery, Vaporizers, Vitamin Capsules, Water Pipes, Wheels, Yarn [19]

That's not to say that people shouldn't conserve, shouldn't try to be as green as possible. Of course we should. But only radical social and economic change can possibly free us from dependence on oil. That choice isn't available in the market.

4. Consumers don't control production

In his article blaming consumers for the BP oil spill, Dave Chameides (who calls himself "Sustainable Dave") recommends remedial action: "Stop driving your car one day a week ... Ride your bike."

That's a good idea ... but bear in mind that your bicycle's tires, brake pads, handle grips, cable sheaths, lubricant, paint and other components are all made from oil. The metal was smelted, and the frame was formed and assembled, in factories that depend on oil. The finished bike was delivered to the shop in a diesel-powered truck driving on asphalt (oil again) roads.

The point, as environmental sociologist Alan Schnaiberg and his colleagues point out, is that even though consumers may decide what to buy from among the products that capitalists put on offer, they don't get to choose how those products are made.

"While individual consumers may be the ultimate purchasers of some of the products of the new technologies, decisions about the allocation of technologies is the realm of production managers and owners. ... [I]t is within the production process where the initial interaction of social systems with ecosystems occurs and where the key decisions about the nature of social system-ecosystem relationships are made.....

"The decision of which alternative forms of production will be offered consumers is not in their hands. It remains in the hands of a small minority of powerful individuals ... who are empowered by their access to production capital. It is in those decisions where social systems (the producers' access to capital and labor, and their assessment of potential liability, profitability, and marketability) and ecosystems (the producers' access to natural resource inputs and ecosystem waste sinks) first interact." [20]

Michael Dawson makes a similar point:

“Ordinary product users remain shut out of major economic decisions. Corporations plan, design, and sell goods and services according to their own profit requirements, without providing any means of subjecting basic productive priorities to popular debate and vote.” [21]

Even if we accept the farfetched idea that oil companies drill new wells only to please consumers, no one can reasonably suggest that consumers somehow forced BP to cut every possible corner, suborn regulators, violate safety guidelines, and worse. Those decisions were made in BP’s executive offices, and consumers had no say.

“In the end,” writes environmental policy professor Thomas Princen, “the idea of consumer sovereignty doesn’t add up. It is a myth convenient for those who would locate responsibility for social and environmental problems on the backs of consumers, absolving those who truly have market power and who write the rules of the game and who benefit the most.”[22]

Blaming Individuals for Capitalist Destruction

If the idea that consumers are in charge makes little sense for the capitalist economy as a whole, it is completely absurd for the oil industry. As *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert points out, working people simply don’t count in this system:

“The fact that 11 human beings were killed in the Deepwater Horizon explosion (their bodies never found) has become, at best, an afterthought. BP counts its profits in the billions, and, therefore, it’s important. The 11 men working on the rig were no more important in the current American scheme of things than the oystermen losing their livelihoods along the gulf, or the wildlife doomed to die in an environment fouled by BP’s oil, or the waters that will be left unfit for ordinary families to swim and boat in.

“This is the bitter reality of the American present, a period in which big business has cemented an unholy alliance with big government against the interests of ordinary Americans, who, of course, are the great majority of Americans. The great majority of Americans no longer matter.”[23]

Nevertheless, as Michael Dawson writes, whenever mainstream thinkers comment on today’s social ills, they always “blame the little folk”

“Ordinary product users, who, because their purchases can be used to accuse them of choosing what they get, usually take all the transferred blame for capitalists’ costly, socially irrational actions.” [24]

It’s true that producers must sell their products, but the idea that consumers therefore control corporate behaviour is ideology, not fact. Immensely wealthy corporations decide what to produce and how to produce it. They spend billions to promote specific products and to protect their power. They allow us to choose – but only among the narrow range of options that they believe will be profitable.

In the Gulf, BP did what every capitalist corporation does – it kept costs down to keep profits up. Its irresponsible actions were bound to cause a disaster eventually – but if the company had

lucked out this time, if the explosion hadn't happened, BP's executives and shareholders would have been rewarded for producing offshore oil more cheaply than more cautious competitors. That's the way capitalism works.

The immediate cause of this particular disaster was BP's greed for short-term profits. The long-term cause, of this and many other disasters, is an irrational grow-or-die economic system that is totally dependent on oil, on "the stuff without which nothing else happens." A system in which private profit always takes precedence over the environment and human lives.

The journalists, pale greens and others who blame individual consumers are trivializing the problem and distracting attention from the social roots of environmental destruction. No matter how sincere they may be, they are making it harder to achieve real solutions.

++++

This article was first published in Climate and Capitalism, an online journal focusing on capitalism, climate change, and the ecosocialist alternative which is edited by Ian Angus.

Related *Climate & Capitalism* articles

- Conspicuous consumption and destructive wealth: The case of Ira Rennert
- Murray Bookchin on Growth and Consumerism
- Growth and Consumerism: Nature or Nurture?
- Do Consumers Cause Climate Change?
- Barry Commoner: The Illusion of Consumer Sovereignty

+++++

References

[1] Dave Chameides. "Who's Really to Blame for the BP Oil Spill? We Are." *Care2*, May 12, 2010.

[2] Mark Coeckelbergh. "We're all to blame for the oil spill." *Guardian*. June 9, 2010.

[3] Some other examples:

- Who's To Blame For The BP Disaster?
- The Bp Oil Spill: Who's to Blame? (See comment by 'Martin Smith')
- The Oil spill.....who's to blame?
- BP oil spill – who's to blame?
- Breaking Down the BP Gulf Spill Blame Game

[4] Al Gore. *An Inconvenient Truth*. New York: Rodale, 2006. p. 305

[5] Mark Perry. "Consumer, Not Corporate, 'Greed' Is Ultimately Behind Layoffs." *Macinac Center for Public Policy*, January 7, 2002.

[6] Ludwig von Mises. *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951. p. 21

[7] James Gustave Speth. *The Bridge at the Edge of the World*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. p. 62

- [8] Douglas Dowd. *Inequality and the Global Economic Crisis*. London: Pluto Press, 2009. p. 59
- [9] Michael Lowy. "Advertising Is a 'Serious Health Threat' – to the Environment." *Monthly Review*, January 2010. p. 20-21
- [10] Michael Dawson. *The Consumer Trap: Big Business Marketing in American Life*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005. p. 1, 134. See also Dawson's excellent website with the same name.
- [11] John Kenneth Galbraith. *The Essential Galbraith*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2001. p. 35,
- [12] James B. Davies, Susanna Sandstrom, Anthony Shorrocks, and Edward N. Wolf. "The World Distribution of Household Wealth." United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research, February 2008. p. 7
- [13] Calculation courtesy of Dick Nichols. The eleven are the ten men and one woman from Australia on the *Forbes* magazine list of the world's billionaires. The 800,000 households are the poorest decile (10%) according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- [14] Jonathon Freedman. "Don't Be Fooled by Europe's Mood." *The Guardian*, May 9, 2007.
- [15] Eric Toussaint. *Your Money Or Your Life: The Tyranny of Global Finance*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005. p. 34.
- [16] Dawson. *The Consumer Trap*. p. 144.
- [17] John Bellamy Foster. *Ecology Against Capitalism*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002. p. 101
- [18] David Strahan. *The Last Oil Shock*. London: John Murray, 2007. p. 116.
- [19] based on <http://www.ranken-energy.com/Products%20from%20Petroleum.htm>
- [20] Kenneth A. Gould, David N. Pellow, and Allan Schnaiberg. *The Treadmill of Production: Injustice and Unsustainability in the Global Economy*. Paradigm Publishers, Boulder, 2008. p. 20, 22
- [21] Dawson. *The Consumer Trap*. P. 144.
- [22] Thomas Princen. "Consumer Sovereignty and Sacrifice: Two Insidious Concepts in the Expansionist Consumer Economy." In Michael Maniates and John M. Meyer, editors, *The Environmental Politics of Sacrifice*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010. p. 152
- [23] Bob Herbert. "More Than Just an Oil Spill." *New York Times*, May 21, 2010.
- [24] Dawson. *The Consumer Trap*. p. 144.

Socialist Voice #453, September 20, 2010

Venezuela: Land reform, food sovereignty and agroecology

By Alan Broughton

Alan Broughton is an Australian farmer engaged in developing and teaching techniques of sustainable organic agriculture. He is a member of the Socialist Alliance and lives in rural Victoria.

A massive transformation of agriculture is occurring in Venezuela, a transformation that has lessons for every other country in the world. The *Law of the Land and Agrarian Development*, the *Law of Food Sovereignty and Security* and the *Law of Integrated Agricultural Health* set out the agenda (they can be found on www.mat.gob.ve, in Spanish). The policies are based on the premises that farmers should have control of their land and product, that the country should produce its own food, and that chemical fertilisers and pesticides should not be part of agriculture.

Land in Venezuela has been in the hands of about 500 families and corporations since the 1800s and worked by an impoverished peasantry. Much of the land was underutilised as cattle ranching, pulpwood plantations, export crops such as sugar cane, or left idle. Most food was imported. This land is gradually being taken over by the government and handed to local communities who have been fighting for it for two centuries.

Food sovereignty is a key government policy, guaranteed in the constitution: “Food sovereignty is the inalienable right of a nation to define and develop priorities and foods appropriate to its specific conditions, in local and national production, conserving agricultural and cultural diversity and self sufficiency and guaranteeing food supply to all the population.” Food imports are only allowed if there is a shortfall of production in the country, and exports occur only after domestic demand is met.

Control over production is in the hands of farmers’ cooperatives on the newly distributed lands. Assistance is provided by the government for cooperative management and to establish processing plants so the farmers are no longer victim to the power to set prices of the processors and distributors. Agriculture is planned, at three levels: the National Agrarian Assembly, the regional agrarian assemblies and the local peasants and producers councils. The regional assemblies are elected by the peasants and producers councils.

One goal is the elimination of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. Venezuela has had a long experience in their use and the change will be gradual. Agroecology colleges have been set up with the assistance of Cuban advisors, as Cuba went through this process 20 years ago and is now almost fully organic. Agroecology is promoted in all agricultural development projects, to producers and institutes.

I had the opportunity in July 2010 to visit Venezuela and see the changes that are taking place. Here are my impressions.

Urban agriculture – Caracas

Venezuela is emulating the remarkable achievements of Cuba, where more than half of the fruit and vegetable needs of the urban population are produced within the cities. As in Cuba, the city food gardens are all organic, providing non-toxic safe fresh food to communities. The benefits of urban agriculture are seen as contributing to food security and sovereignty, improving the urban environment, supplementing the income of families, communities and schools, and fostering learning and recreational activities. The gardens are set up on unused land, at schools and, using raised beds, on concrete and balconies.

Community centres have established these gardens wherever possible. Some are in the very early stages and need more time and increased soil fertility to fully develop. One that I saw, on a former industrial site, was built on subsoil only six months ago, and was suffering the consequences, showing patchy growth and pest damage; a worm farm has been set up on that land to produce fertiliser to improve the hard soil. The community centres include a free health centre, usually a subsidised shop, a computer centre, adult education facilities and some even run a community radio.

An excellent example has been created in the median strip of a busy highway in Caracas by homeless people, former drug addicts, and is producing excellent crops. Marigolds are planted in each raised bed to provide habitat for beneficial insects, so that pests are no problem. Fertility is provided by a mixture of mountain soil and manure. When asked why the garden was unfenced, the spokesperson said that the usual local suspects for vandalism were already working on the project, so it needed no extra protection.

Cacao production and processing – Barlovento region, Miranda State

Cacao growers, mostly descendents of former slaves brought from Africa, were until recently among the most impoverished people in the country, in a highly profitable industry. The cocoa beans were bought up cheaply by international corporations like Nestlé by various means of price manipulation, and processed overseas. Now the producers are organised into cooperatives that have, with government assistance, set up factories for the primary processing into cocoa powder then into chocolate. The factories are managed by the producer's cooperative and the factory workers, who are from cacao growing families; decisions are made collectively. The price they receive has gone from 1 bolívar per kilo (about 15 cents) to 14 bolívares in three years and now provides them with a good standard of living. Still a large proportion of the beans are sold on the open market, but the government has set and enforces a minimum price that the commercial processors have to pay.

Fishing – Chuao, Aragua State

Venezuela has the strongest fishing regulations in the world, and they are supported by the fishing people. Trawling has been phased out, fishing near reefs is prohibited, stunning devices like dynamite and poisons are not allowed, and nets cannot be left in the water – they are just thrown out and hauled in. The size of the nets allows small fish to escape to breed or provide

food for the larger fish. Sardine fishing is not done, as these are near the bottom of the food chain and needed for other fish. All fishers are organised into a local Fisher People's Council, and the National Council makes policy. The regulations are enforced by the government and the fishing people themselves, in order to provide long-term sustainable harvests. The fishing families now have education, health care, decent housing and retirement pensions, benefits they have never had before. National fish production has actually increased under these policies. The cooperatives run the cool stores and market the catch.

Field crops – the plains states of Cojedes, Portuguesa and Yaracuy states

The central plain of Venezuela is the main food producing area, a region formerly totally dominated by huge estates. The land is gradually being redistributed to the communities that have worked the land for generations. Most of the people are Indigenous and were growing corn and beans long before the Spanish colonists arrived.

The communities that have gained control of the land have different methods of land ownership and organisation. Some communities chose to own individual plots and work together for machinery and knowledge sharing and marketing. Others form cooperatives of from seven to more than 100 members to hold title of the land in common and work the land together. Other land remains as state farms with day to day decision making determined by the farm workers. I saw several of these farms, with sizes ranging from several hundred hectares to several thousand.

The main crop is corn, the staple food eaten by most people every day, as arepas (corn flour cakes) and cachapas (ground up fresh corn cooked as a pancake). Other crops include cassava, beans, sweet potatoes, squash and rice. Fruits such as guavas, mangos, bananas, pawpaws, avocados and citrus are commonly grown.

The farming process is mechanised, with harvesting machinery provided by Argentina and tractors by Iran, Byelorussia and China. In one area, San Carlos in Cojedes State, a huge state-owned agricultural support centre has been set up, to hire out machinery to the cooperatives surrounding it. Urea was also stocked – on questioning we were told that while agroecology is the policy it will be some time before some farms develop the skill and motivation to stop using chemical fertilisers and pesticides.

One farm was experimenting with organic techniques, quite successfully. Some fields were mulched with crop residue and treated with biological controls, while others were still managed chemically. The organic fields had far fewer weeds but obviously lacked some fertility. The biological controls were successful.

Biological control and biofertiliser labs are being set up across the country to produce beneficial insects and fungi, and soil inoculants. Several species of predatory wasps and lacewings are used to control caterpillars and aphids respectively; they are bred in large numbers in the laboratory and released onto the crops at the right time. *Metarrhizium* and *Beauveria* fungi are produced to control other insect pests – corn grubs and coffee beetles. *Trichoderma* fungi are used to keep root rotting diseases under control.

Biofertilisers are microbes that release nutrients out of the soil. The well-known *Rhizobium* is produced to assist nitrogen availability for legume crops, and *Azotobacter*, another nitrogen provider, and *Bacillus megaterium*, which releases phosphorus are also part of the lab's work. Currently the organisms are provided to farmers at no cost in order to encourage agroecology, as a temporary measure. The labs are planning to produce other microbes including mycorrhizae, another phosphorus releaser.

Seed banks and seed treatment plants have been established to provide the range of agricultural genetics suited to the various regions. The aim is to completely bypass the international corporations that supply seed around the world, and preserve the genetic diversity that has been built up in Venezuela for thousands of years. Genetically modified (GM) seeds are not allowed, though this is not ruled out in future if some are found to be safe. The precautionary principle is used. Seeds are treated with the beneficial fungus *Trichoderma* instead of fungicides for storage and sowing.

Agroecology college – Barinas State

We visited the Paulo Freire Latin American School of Agroecology, an institute set up to provide education for future advisors and teachers from around Latin America. Students are nominated by either the Via Campesina network or the Brazilian Landless Peasants' Movement. The aim is to reclaim agriculture from the neoliberal model, especially for Indigenous and Afro farmers. The stated philosophy of the school is social transformation in defence of Mother Earth, and its motto: *Estudio, trabajo, organización con agroecología, en la revolución* (Study, work, organisation with agroecology, in the revolution).

The students spend the morning in class and the afternoon in the fields doing practical work. One student was working on a pig-breeding project, mating domestic pigs with wild pigs to create hardiness, and distributing the offspring to a network of participating farmers. On weekends and for a month each year the students go out to the farming communities to live with the farmers in order to both teach and learn. The school has its own farm, producing cattle, pigs, cheese, grains and vegetables on 50 hectares. Permaculture is integrated into the education process. There are no fees to attend the school.

What does it mean for Australia?

Australia went through land reform several times in history – the selection acts of the 1860s and 1870s, the closer settlement acts of the 1890s and the soldier settlement programs following the first and second world wars. These reforms have created a nation of family farmers. While there have been inroads by corporate farming, the majority of farmland is owned and managed by the farmers themselves. This is what people in Venezuela have been fighting for and are now achieving. In Australia we do need legislation to prevent the spread of corporate farming and protect the family farm, as several states of the USA have.

While Australian farmers do control their land, they do not have influence over the prices they receive. The Venezuelan experience shows that farmers can cooperate to obtain fair prices, and

can bypass the power of the huge corporations that control food processing and distribution. This is what Australian farmers need to do, and can do. An excellent example is the Organic Dairy Farmers of Australia cooperative that sets the price of milk for its members.

The other important lesson is that governments can pursue genuinely sustainable policies. Governments can assist farmers in organising themselves, can facilitate the phase-out of chemical agriculture, and can act independently of the World Trade Organization. Supermarket chains can be broken up or nationalised to prevent them from constantly reducing the prices they pay farmers. Processors can be stopped from using the threat of cheap imports to screw producers. We need governments committed to genuine sustainability. The changes in Venezuela have enormous significance globally as they show what governments and people are capable of doing.

The significance inside Venezuela is immeasurable. A farmer on a newly founded cooperative farm at San José told us: “Ahora tenemos dignidad” (Now we have dignity). A few years ago that land was part of a huge estate on which the man was a labourer living in extreme poverty. When asked what will happen if the opposition wins government and tries to give the land back to the big landlords he said: “There will be civil war. We are not going to let them take our land away again”.

[Originally published in Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal]