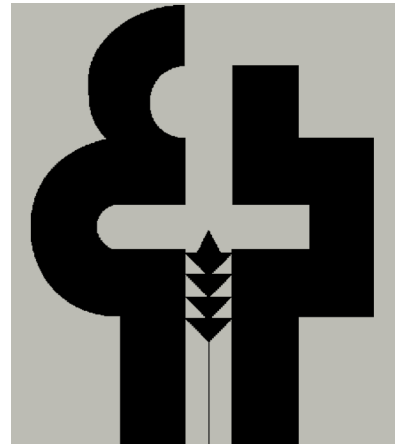


Agricultural Missions, Inc.



Burning Off Summer Fat for Justice: An October of Social Movement Convergences – Stephen Bartlett, AMI

As I gazed upon my October calendar ... I had a feeling I might lose a few pounds. It was an itinerary **to wake up a hungry soul** inhabiting a well-fed body accustomed to easy access to an abundant garden and farmers' market: first to the mountains of Honduras with 800 others to organize for freedom and democracy against militarism, greed, intolerance and patriarchy; onward by stiff-backed caravan through the long day and night to Guatemala City for the III Social Forum of the Americas with 15,000 others to purify ourselves with Mayan rituals and share knowledge and strategies with indigenous and campesino movements from across the hemisphere; then finally traversing the Atlantic Ocean in fat-bodied airplanes and south across the equator and deserts of Namibia and Botswana to Mozambique for the V International Conference of the Planetary Peasant Movement known (and whose name is feared by the World Trade Organization) as the Via Campesina, some 700 persons strong from across the globe. In two of these gatherings the food was going to be provided by the host organizations, served to long hungry lines of mostly campesino delegates. In Guatemala City who knew what one would eat, or where, or when? I might even need to cut a new notch in my thread-bear belt by the end of these gatherings.

But this was fine by me, fine indeed! Going weeks on end eating a bit less than what one is accustomed to, as part of a collective effort serving a larger purpose, not only trims a few pounds, but also energizes and drives one to efforts whose yields are greater than the sum of the individual parts, like the fruits of a diversified family farm harnessing the full integrated forces of nature. **How grateful I am** to participate and contribute in a modest, low-key way, to the efforts of courageous and tempered organizations under the leadership of persistent and maturing thinkers and doers, people with a passion for justice and effective action for social change, many of whom I have known for nearly a decade now. And we were always provided just enough nutritious food to nourish the physical needs sufficiently, leaving us sharp-eyed and alert and, yes, hungry for justice and freedom above all else. How a measure of physical hunger can sharpen one's desire for justice!!

Doing mass social change on a shoe-string budget is a bit like being a magician and a juggler all rolled into one: there is a lot of multi-tasking, prodigious tolerance of ambiguity and a persistent patience and long-burning willfulness, with some sleight of hand to smooth over the wrinkles. Miraculously, dramatically, magically, it all worked. More bang for the buck than could ever be had in top-down enterprises.

Iconoclastic Anti-Militarization Gathering in Honduras

In the mountains of Honduras, I was gratified to be a part of an event as diverse, tolerant and iconoclastic of the conventional boundaries of mainstream Latin American culture as I have yet witnessed to date. The central theme around which to conceptualize and organize was militarization, its roots in patriarchy and neo-liberal capitalism, its strategic capacity to instill fear, to cultivate conformity, complacency, secrecy, and machismo and bearing always a single-destination, lock-step corporate agenda to protect. The solutions, on the other hand, we were living out in the course of the gathering itself: the elaborate sharing of strategies and vision by sector and by region; the embracing of difference, including in sexual orientation; a breaking down of stereotypes and an expanding of the horizons of organizing, mixing the arts, popular education, capacity building and mobilization, along with actions of solidarity and mutual support across borders and time and space. The motley Beehive Collective of Maine, USA had fashioned their magical images for the event held in a town called Esperanza (Hope): with giant Esperanzas (grasshoppers) representing the people in struggle, carrying their multi-colored banners and dashing the uniformity of fascistic militarists with people power. Where there was a marching oppressive boot coming, there was also a sharp stake positioned in the soil, waiting for the soft sole. Where there were gray colored attack helicopters, there were the rainbow colors of the peoples' banners and clothing, moving massively to disarm a world of colorless despair and tragedy.

We analyzed the current political moment, saw the **kinks in the armor of the ruling class** both within our midst and occupying the board rooms of the financially over-extended transnational corporations and the banks that back them up. We talked of the inevitable and rising confrontations of land and resource-deprived farmers with the police forces and paramilitaries in the pay of corporate and governmental interests. Women and male allies analyzed how patriarchy as a worldview and economically dogmatic framework informs and fuels militarism and hierarchical top-down "final solutions." Organized transvestites and gay men and women among us challenged macho stereotypes and occupied the psychic spaces of expanded tolerance within the ranks of rural and community-based delegates with their sass and feisty performances among those no doubt unfamiliar or otherwise inexperienced and unsure of such lifestyles and ways of being, challenging stereotypes and prejudices. This was an intentional part of the agenda: brilliant in its vision and generous in its trust in cultural and human diversity. Pushing the envelope in order to be truly inclusive. Living out our future culture of radical inclusivity here and now.

Then there were the meals: the lines in the dust or mud, in the sun or drizzle by the improvised rustic kitchen with its giant pots and laboring Lenca women and men cooks and fire keepers. **The hundreds of recycled, scarred and scratched plastic plates** (some used twice or three times in the course of the meal), the notched plastic cup to hold the thin sweetened black coffee, the spoonfuls of boiled black beans lying with a handful of tortillas, maybe a potato, for lunch, then again later for dinner, the joy at seeing some watermelon or a morsel of chicken one day. The boots, coats and ponchos never taken off all day even in the heat of the day, the belts randomly pulled in a notch, the unexpected joy of acceptance and belonging to such a motley tribe as this: a tribe of people willing to suffer in order to march forward and take a real fight to places of power and prestige. The diverse and beautiful people in their cultural abundance and diversity, tough, calloused and resilient in their collective purpose, bearing guitars and note pads, proverbs and invitations of hospitality in their home communities.

The opening **indigenous Garifuna ritual** in the Plaza of Esperanza Intibucá, with the chanting and drumming, the offering of the circle to spirits from other dimensions, the possession of a woman with such divinities, bringing cosmic powers into our midst, the falling away during these moments of timelessness of the competing rhythms of the secular marching bands streaming out into the streets around the plaza, one after another, falling away from our circle as so many buzzing flies looking for nectar elsewhere. Then the Opening March of the Encuentro, led by the powerful maracas held high overhead then shaken with their might and precision, Garifuna men with their Rasta braids, the shamans of rhythmic steps whose very auras and powerful physiques drew surprised and attentive crowds' gazes on the main avenue of the town.

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The presence, the power, of divinely inspired descendents of runaway slaves and their Taino and Carib host mothers and fathers, who have since occupied lands for 213 years on the coasts of Central America, and who are now the occupiers, protectors and **stewards of the most pristine, ecologically conserved coastal lands and sea**, fighting for their cultural integrity and physical survival based on fishing and cassava planting and processing, offering their solidarity to the struggles of other peoples here in the mountains of Honduras... shining in the midday sun and rolling to the ancestral beats of the soul of Africa and Taino and Carib fore-mothers and fathers. Any gathering thus inaugurated and blessed was destined for powerful harmonies and fertile outcomes! How we marched, shouldering our way through the congested main avenue and how the indigenous sister from Uruguay blew her resounding bull's horn high in the air. We were a force to contend with! Of that there could be no doubt.

The last day of this convergence we departed from the muddled grounds around the Molino (the Mill) after breakfast, some to their home countries and communities, and two big buses heading for the central valley of Comayagua, where a sprawling U.S. military base known as Palmerola stood with its miles and miles of blank concrete walls marking its bellicose dominion.

When after a few hours of curving mountain passes we finally arrived there, we joined hundreds of people already contributing "**popular messaging**" to those blank walls with the aid of cans of spray paint. Having some tobacco on hand, we lit some up to cast away the evil spirits harbored by this Wall of Shame. Also having a tambourine and drum stick, we got a beat going to accompany these efforts. Once the march itself congealed behind a vehicle and sound system, we took over the main highway and marched along yet more long stretches of military wall. A Blackhawk helicopter took off somewhere within the base and flew off to the south, but we actually had a police escort on the highway and soon reached a main entrance to the base where we held our rally, press conference and boisterous actions at the gate itself, perhaps 1,000 strong in number. A tall young Nicaraguan man said he was born fatherless due to the military activities of the Contra across the border in Nicaragua, activities that were supported by this military base. The insidious alliance between U.S. forces and the Contras, as well as the disappearances and killings that took the lives of many progressive Honduran leaders during the 80s were raised up as part of the infamy of the Palmerola base and U.S. interventions. I was asked to speak to the gathered press, partly in English, and I did so, describing the peace movement in the U.S. attempting to push for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from unjustified U.S. military occupations and proxy occupations and low-intensity counter insurgency wars, and to slash the military budget in favor of investments in badly needed social services, describing U.S. militarism as hand in glove with a desire to control, manage and prolong the flow of wealth from the people and the land to centers of power and privilege. (I was the only U.S.-based person present, I think, at this protest, though there were at least one or two US nationals currently living in Mesoamerica present!).

Many hours later most of us had journeyed 15 hours across the mountainous valleys into Guatemala and up to Guatemala City, where at the Autonomous University of San Carlos the **III Social Forum of the Americas** was up and running, and we were recovering from the journey and gearing up for our workshops and cultural activities. There I met a delegation I was in Guatemala to help facilitate of Salvadoran activists organized by Marta Benavides (Vice President of the Board of Agricultural Missions) and coordinator of Siglo XXIII. The delegates hailed from various parts of El Salvador and a variety of social sectors, ranging from indigenous rural, agronomy, human rights advocates, rural-urban educational groups and student and environmental movement organizations. Together we led several well-attended and successful workshops as part of the Forum: on Rebuilding Local Food Economies, on Agrofuels and Food Sovereignty, on the International Criminal Court and Human Rights, on Holistic Rural Development, and in conjunction with the Convergence of Movements of the Peoples of the Americas (COMPA) and Grito de los Excluidos on Social Movements in Latin America at this Political Juncture (a forum that drew more than 120 people), and in a COMPA assembly with members of Southwest Workers Union and other Grassroots Global Justice (GGJ) alliance members from the U.S., together with various organizational representatives from across Latin America, including Venezuela, Colombia, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico, "Occupied Mexico" (Southwest U.S.). In addition, I spoke on a panel organized by the Americas Policy Program and Laura Carlsen on the

Global Food Crisis and the Solutions to that Crisis, speaking about Food Sovereignty efforts around the world and why small-scale organic farming represents a comprehensive solution to the multi-faceted crisis flailing humanity at present.

The Social Forum of the Americas of 2008 held in Guatemala was notable in particular for its daily **Mayan rituals of purification and harmony**, rituals in memory of the cherished loved ones, martyrs of the long dirty war, rituals to make the spiritual path clear for social movements to progress in their agendas, rituals to center and ground the participants to the forum, 2-3 hour rituals at the entrance to the University, upwind such that the incense, the copal and divine prayer-filled smoke wafted all through the campus during the course of the morning, in effect purifying the entire forum and all its participants. Certainly not a welcome place for sinister spirits or violent thoughts, elements which seemed quite absent in fact throughout the proceedings. An entire small stadium was devoted to the parallel Indigenous Forum that took place. And a large tent had non-stop activities sponsored by CLOC and Via Campesina, peasant organizations from across Latin America. Never had a forum been so heavily weighted toward rural justice oriented organizations, indigenous peoples and rural social movements as in Guatemala. I think that is due to the fact that the most progressive and active social movements in Guatemala, among them those responsible for organizing the forum, are deeply involved in land struggles, struggles against free trade, against the privatization of seeds, against the destruction of campesino economies and communities and in favor of land reform, and restored indigenous identity and autonomy.

Another tent held various activities sponsored by organizations from Cuba and Venezuela, and the **Cuban V, political prisoners** held in U.S. jails for working to prevent acts of terrorism, were held up as in need of international solidarity and their cause was raised high. (Coincidentally, just days before I set out on this journey, my family and I had the honor of hosting a visit at our home in Louisville, Kentucky from the wife and two daughters of one of the Cuban V who had been transferred from a Texas jail to a Kentucky jail and were doing weekend visits to their imprisoned hero-father-husband.)

Despite a nearly 98% media blackout in mainstream Guatemalan media coverage of the forum, I think it was a great success. Despite the robbery of one of our group of Salvadoran delegates while on a moving public bus by two thieves, one armed with a gun, despite a complete lack of support for the Forum by any governmental entity in Guatemala, despite the fact that Bolivian president Evo Morales was announced to come but did not (he sent a message instead), despite all these adversities, the Americas Social Forum in Guatemala was pulled off magnificently by the nearly thirty Guatemalan organizations on the host committee, aided by U.S. Social Forum organizers and members of the International Social Forum Council. It was a space of great energy, much learning and networking and great youthful passion and creativity. A woman who approached me with a petition between events on one of the walkways on campus, in support of transparent investigations into the deaths of people, men, women and youth, disappeared during the 80s, 90s and beginning of the 21st century got to talking. It turns out one of her sisters is an immigrant worker in Louisville, Kentucky, of all places! The Guatemala forum brought home to me just how small and interwoven the destinies of all of us are. To deny that inter-connectedness and our mutual responsibilities is to deny reality itself. **The peasant and indigenous struggles of Mesoamerica are interwoven with the immigrant rights movement in the U.S., which itself is interwoven with the broader civil rights struggles in the U.S.** and by extension, abroad. Responses in Honduras, Guatemala and later in Mozambique asking for solidarity with the U.S.-based immigrant rights movement was uniformly positive and strong.

If this was not enough excitement and fulfillment, my next stop after catching my breath with my family for a day at home, was to board a series of airplanes headed for the unlikely destination of Maputo, Mozambique, in Southeast Africa. The flight itinerary including layovers took over 30 hours and I was fighting a cough and incipient flu I had caught somewhere in Guatemala (cured with the aid of homegrown garlic and selected tree bark powders to boost immunity), and I did arrive in Maputo, Mozambique with an appetite enough for a meal of Kentucky Fried Chicken (the only restaurant open at that late hour to stave off hunger for a bus load of evening Via Campesina delegate arrivals). This is a confession: this is the one time I have eaten KFC food in more than 20 years, despite the fact that I actually live in Kentucky! We had to wait half an hour for this food, as a man with a box full of food came out ahead of us and dashed off

in another vehicle, a box of food we were soon to see at the Via Campesina gathering itself. The ironies of peasant organizing to have to eat such food! Fast food as emergency rations for social change activists.

The **V International Conference of the Via Campesina** took place at the FRELIMO conference center in Matola, 20 minutes outside of Maputo. FRELIMO stands for the Frente da Liberacao Mocambicana who with their now-deceased former leader Samora Machel brought the country into independence from Portugal in the late 70s. Starting as a socialist political party, the current FRELIMO party president and his predecessors had morphed into proto-capitalism-friendly governments, and the lingering poverty of Mozambique was palpable and visible during any walk around Matola. Invited to the opening of the Via Campesina Congress, Mozambique President Armando Guebuza was reported (by UNAC women peasants) to have greatly improved his agricultural policy rhetoric, but to many of our ears it appeared that he had not really been listening to our opening *Mistica*, that stressed anti-capitalist solidarity economy solutions, the need to support small-scale agriculture, the evil of seed privatization or the ill-advised diversion of food crops into fuel crops. Guebuza spoke of small farmers being “raised up so that they could compete in the marketplace” and called for Mozambique to enter into the production of crops for fuels... he may have nodded off during those moments of our ceremony, but he was also speaking to the television cameras. Still, UNAC members were thrilled that Guebuza and his Minister for Agriculture got to witness firsthand the powerful allies from all over the globe who had come to Mozambique at their invitation, noting that Guebuza would have to take UNAC much more seriously in the future than he had up until then.

My job in Mozambique was with the translation team, with the four individuals, each of us working into one language (in my case from French, Spanish and Portuguese into English) to translate and edit the documents of the conference itself, with priority given to the official conference documents, followed by key internal documents and other working group documents. There were a whole squad of simultaneous interpreters from Europe, Africa, Latin America and North America doing the verbal interpretations, but this year we four were devoted exclusively to translation of written documents. We occupied our own office with internet connections to send documents we didn't have time for to our cyber translator allies around the world, and room to sit at our laptops and work through the days and nights of the conference.

The 600 plus delegates from all over the world conferring together in Mozambique represent a grassroots force of at least 200 million peasants (and growing each year as new organizations come on board) at the base of the organizations. But the size and diversity of the gathering did not prevent Via Campesina from refining and focusing its **agenda for the next four years**: first, to defeat the transnational corporations, principal threat to the peasant/family farmer, second to resist environmental destruction and reverse climate change; and third, to build our food sovereignty alternative, including passing a Convention of Peasant Rights at the United Nations. VC called for united work on the following campaigns: to end violence toward women in rural communities; to strengthen the struggle of the youth of Via Campesina; to strengthen the internal functioning of Via Campesina; and to move from tactical to strategic alliances, and for focused attention in the following areas: the issue of migration and migrants rights, promoting and practicing sustainable forms of agriculture, and the defense of biodiversity/ genetic resources/ seeds.

In an open letter from Maputo issued by the International Coordinating Council (ICC) of the Via Campesina the basic VC analysis at this moment of multi-faceted crisis is clarified.

The entire world is in crisis, a crisis with multiple dimensions. There is a food crisis, an energy crisis, a climate crisis and a financial crisis. The solutions put forth by Power - more free trade, more GMOs, etc... - purposefully ignore the fact that the crisis is a product of the capitalist system and of neo-liberalism, and they will only worsen its impacts. To find solutions we need to look toward Food Sovereignty as put forth by the Via Campesina...

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... we have witnessed the advance of finance capital and transnational corporations (TNCs) across all aspects of agriculture and the global food system.... food has gone from being a right of all people, to being just another commodity.

Noting that the principle theses of neo-liberalism are being stripped of their legitimacy and that it is clearer every day that the TNCs are our real enemies... a series of solutions are proposed based on the concept of Food Sovereignty, that is, the rebuilding of local food systems which will cool the planet and reduce hunger. Only agro-ecological peasant and family farming can de-link food prices from petroleum prices, recover degraded soils and produce healthy local food for our peoples, making it possible to end all forms of violence against women.

Seeds and water are sources of life and are the patrimony of our peoples. We cannot permit their privatization, nor the use of GMOs or of terminator technology.

No to the criminalization of social protest; yes to the United Nations Declaration of Peasant Rights, as proposed by the Via Campesina.

We are the women and men who produce and defend the food of all peoples.

Food Sovereignty Now! Globalize Struggle! Globalize Hope!