

TAKING IT TO THE TOP: GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING IN THE NEW CORPORATE ERA

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The power of multinational corporations is a pretty enormous topic that can make us feel pretty small if we think about it too much. I first want to look a little at the relationship of corporations to government, which can be an even more boring and abstract concept. I then want to talk about some more exciting real-life experiences we have had in fighting the Crandon mine, and explore how independent grassroots movements can become powerful when they unite different kinds of people and develop a strong base in local communities. I also want to put forth some ideas on grassroots organizing, and make some observations on techniques that have worked and haven't worked in taking on corporate power.

But first, let me tell you about my summer vacation. It was great. We drove on the "Circle Tour" around Lake Superior, and it was absolutely gorgeous on the Canadian side--with beautiful mountains and white sand beaches, and little smoked fish stands everywhere. Yet we hit one area of Ontario with full of of enormous gold mines and paper mills, around the town of Marathon. I was hungry for smoked trout, so we went to the two large grocery stores in town. All I found in the stores were frozen fish sticks. I noticed that not only did the stores not have smoked fish, but the store clerks didn't seem to know what it was, and this is only a matter of 100 meters from Lake Superior! They thought that maybe we could buy Lake Superior fish at an Ojibwe reserve an hour down the highway. Upon leaving the town, we began noticing that no building was older than about 1970. Then we noticed that all the pick-up trucks had mining company logos on the side, and finally figured out that the town itself had gotten its name from the Marathon Oil Company.

So this was the prototype of the company town--a concentration of human beings that has little or no connection to the place where it is located--no cultural history, no ties to the land, and no economy outside the clutches of resource extraction corporations. It appeared like a nightmare of our future, of a North America

made up of wandering souls, whose primary bond is not to their family or their ethnic culture or their surroundings, but to an abstract transnational corporation based thousands of miles away in Toronto or Green Bay or Denver or.....who cares?

This power of multinational corporations is nothing new. The first settlements on the east coast were established not directly by the British Crown, but by the Virginia Company or the Massachusetts Bay Company. Our region of the western Great Lakes was first colonized not by Canada or the United States, but by the British Northwest Company and the American Fur Company. Wisconsin was first carved out and developed as an economic and political entity not by government officials in Madison or Washington, but by the timber giants like Weyerhaeuser, the all-powerful railroads, and the iron mining companies.

From the beginning of the colonial era, corporate power has been established before political power. The governments that did emerge based their policies on the ideology of "corporatism." The Canadian author John Ralston Saul describes corporatism as an almost religious faith in a consensus between institutions, rather than free individuals, as the way to build a common economic future. Saul wrote, "In place of the democratic idea of individual citizens who vote, confer legitimacy and participate to the best of their ability, individuals in the corporatist state are reduced to the role of secondary participants." When government stepped in to offer reforms, curb monopolies, or recognize workers' rights, the purpose was often to save the corporate state from crisis, to protect corporate leaders from their own self-destructive greed. The effect was often to reinforce corporatism, not to find a new way of doing things.

The power of multinational corporations is also nothing new to those who have faced its brunt the longest, particularly working people, people on the land, and people of color. Corporate power may appear to have grown since the early 1970s, but the only real difference is that now it is affecting the white middle class more directly through downsizing, runaway industries, environmental crimes, unsafe products, the destruction of family farming, and a lockgrip on the media and popular culture. The Muskogee Creek elder Philip Deere summed it up when he said in 1981, "The time is coming. Multinational corporations don't care what color you are; they're going to step on you. They'll slap you in the face like they did the Indians. So you are going to be the next Indians."

Today, every facet of our individual and social lives is directed or controlled in some way by corporate power. Within the workplace, certainly, free expression and employee creativity is stifled. Our

needs and desires are manipulated through sophisticated advertising to create markets for products we never would have longed for otherwise.

Even efforts to educate or organize people to protect their childrens' futures, or their little piece of ground, is reliant on corporate funding if they try to reach large numbers of people. Music and other artistic expression developed to enrich our souls is coopted to enrich multimedia

conglomerates. The folk-punk rocker Ani diFranco is one of the few to keep her independence from the record labels; she says "I wanted to base my career in a community, not a corporate system based on greed and amassing fame." Lauryn Hill of the Fugees puts it best when she raps "They keep their pockets full but their souls runs empty."

Our language becomes subverted when corporatism is described with such positive terms such as free market, privatization, and the global village, or somehow equated with democracy, even though it often flourishes happily within dictatorships. Corporatist society has used democracy not as way not to empower free expression, but as a pressure relief valve to protect the so-called free market. We are told that a few minutes in a voting booth every year means that we have power in determining the course of society. But I don't remember the last time I was asked to vote on anything that really affects our lives--on whether calves should be cloned, whether factories should be moved to Mexico or China, whether armed cops should patrol our schools. The decision-making that counts is kept in corporate hands. If you control the economy, you preempt opposition by creating fear that changing the complex corporate order will lead to bare shelves in our grocery stores. If you control the media, the primary means of mass expression, you usually don't need violence to keep control because you have prevented opposition from arising in the first place.

Yet opposition does arise, and in its most grassroots, independent forms poses the main challenge to corporate power. If an opposition movement becomes effective, whether among farmers and workers in the 1930s, African Americans and students in the 1960s, or environmentalists and Native peoples in the 1990s, the velvet glove of corporate democracy is quickly taken off to reveal the fist always lurking underneath. The main weapon in the arsenal is usually not brute force, but the strategy of divide and conquer. Corporate tacticians are usually very experienced in dividing and conquering those parts of society that may stand in their way, and extremely good at it. Much of American history has been the story of people blaming their economic problems on the people below them in the social hierarchy, rather than the people above them. Racism, in particular, has been used as a tool not only to control communities of color, but to prevent poor whites from seeing that they could advance their own interests

by respecting and working with those communities.

Let's take northern Wisconsin's anti-mining movement as an example. The movement has brought together Native Americans and white sportsmen, and environmental groups with unions. Every step of the way, it has been met by corporate efforts to divide its ranks. First, the companies and the Thompson administration tried to split the movement by race, by simultaneously targeting treaty rights, tribal environmental laws, and Indian gaming, assuming this would win over the rural white population, but the movement showed how treaties could legally protect the environment for all northerners regardless of race. Then the companies tried to divide people by region, presenting the anti-mining groups as made up of urban yuppies and hippies who don't care about rural jobs, but the movement turned it around by showing its own rural base among northerners, and tapping into regional resentment against Madison bureaucrats. Finally, the companies tried to divide the movement by class, by putting a Milwaukee union president on TV to say that mining would create jobs in equipment plants, but the movement showed the poor health safety track record of the mining companies, and many unionists passed resolutions to protect their hunting and fishing grounds in the north.

The companies are used to white, young, upper and middle class, urban-based environmental groups that talk about endangered species, but they're not used to multiracial, older middle and working class rural-based environmental alliances that also talk about endangered economies and endangered cultures. These are folks who get choked up when they start talking about the Wolf River, or Mole Lake's wild rice beds, and angry when they talk about repression of unions or Indians by mining companies in Latin America. That's why the companies are losing, and that's why the grassroots movement has gained so much legitimacy in the north--it has not just been negative in working against a project, but has helped bring people together to build positive relationships with their neighbors.

How did the anti-mining movement gain this legitimacy? The companies had based their strategy on money--Exxon alone spent \$2 million last year on lobbying and advertising--unsuccessfully. That's because the northern anti-mining movement had based its strategy on People Power--on educating, organizing and mobilizing large numbers of people in the frontline areas

most directly affected by proposed mines. It put its emphasis not on forming professional activist groups that would take on government environmental policies, but on building a grassroots base in the communities along northern rivers. We had speaking tours that reached 40 towns with a message not only about metallic sulfide mining, but about communities working together. Many in the audience, in fishing

clubs, high schools, churches, town halls, heard a Native American speak for the first time in their lives. The tours got the snowball rolling, and the campaign took on a life of its own, as little grassroots groups sprang up, and began to organize their own communities. The groups meet every month as part of a decentralized alliance called the Wolf Watershed Educational Project. I'm usually one of the youngest people at its meetings, and not the most radical. And right now in the north there is strong majority opposition to the Crandon mine.

The people power movement has brought some success on the political level, such as the moratorium law (which many people mistakenly think has stopped the Crandon mine entirely). We are having a rally at the State Capitol to demand a stop to the Crandon permit process, on Saturday October 17, 1998, at 1 pm.. But on the more important local level, many governments have passed resolutions against the mine project, and those that cooperated with the mining companies got booted out of office.

Three Assembly candidates have even come out of the movement in northeastern Wisconsin. Our alliance never sought to become a party or recruit candidates, but it is currently doing as well or better than some third parties that have tried to for years. The candidates came out of the movement; the movement did not come out of their candidacies. It was people power that created political change, because it came from a position of strength and legitimacy; if a few activists had sought to take on the mining companies, they would have lost because they would have come from a position of weakness. A mass-based movement was able to shape the questions, not just react to the latest company moves, and in doing so put the companies almost constantly on the defensive.

Why are grassroots, independent movements such a challenge to the corporate order? Because they talk about democracy not simply as an exercise in voting, but as increasing our direct control over our economy, our culture, our land, our daily lives. Because instead of simply begging political officials to change their minds, they initiate change themselves at the base of society, within the culture, within people's consciousness. Political leadership does not create this change; it is generally the last to be affected by it. The movement starts the snowball rolling in order to create the avalanche, and then politicians take credit for the very avalanche they are buried in. Even judges within the legal system are not "neutral," but just as susceptible to changes at the grassroots as are politicians.

Political programs mean very little; President Nixon spent more on social programs than President Carter, not because he intended to, but because there were marches in the streets creating fear within the elite. The fear of social "instability" is what causes the elites to shift their thinking, not petitions from a tamed, loyal

opposition. The mining companies are fearful of Wisconsin not because a particular new law has been passed, but because the state has become "unstable," it has become a risky long-term investment, even riskier than parts of the Third World. They even now say at their conferences that "Wisconsin is trouble." They express fear that environmental groups in different countries are hooking up through the Internet, and may begin to coordinate simultaneous global actions against the same companies.

In our opposition to corporate policies, we should constantly be thinking of the society we want to create, and prefiguring it in our actions. We should stop begging for politicians within the corporatist state to shift their votes, and start demanding that real power be ceded to local communities, and economic decision-making be put in the hands of people that it most affects. Even the progressive notion of "justice" implies that someone else holds the power, and we want him or her to decide matters in a just way. We should start thinking rather about other people gaining the power to make those decisions. Grassroots organizations should think less as pressure groups to influence government, and more like parallel institutions that function as the real representatives of our communities. When the Solidarity union began organizing in Poland, a friend pointed out that the union had put up "No Swimming" signs on polluted beaches, right next to the government signs saying the same thing. Solidarity had gained the legitimacy to give voice to public concerns, and it eventually replaced the government entirely. We can also learn from opposition groups in Latin America or Southeast Asia that face dictatorships, which they have no illusions about reforming, and yet still manage to win victories.

Government functions as a buffer protecting the corporations from the communities, to absorb and redirect opposition. Instead of appealing to the state, we should directly take it to the top, and confront the corporate leadership in their own home bases, their home cities. The Corporate Campaign did this for unions in the 1980s. We're now making links to Toronto groups to help us fight Rio Algom. We should recognize that the real story is always the direct conflict between communities and corporations, and that the government is not a neutral referee, but is putty in the hands of the side in the conflict that builds the greatest legitimacy at the base of society.

Building legitimacy means not setting the organizers apart from the people. The best community to organize is your own. Organizing does not mean just putting on events or benefits that preach to the choir. It does not mean

looking inward to our own groups or networking with other groups.

Organizing is the art of convincing the unconvinced. It means getting outside our usual circles and reaching people who have not been reached before. Organizing is about changing minds, and recognizing that most people already have a split consciousness that contains both progressive

and conservative impulses. Organizing means not writing off someone because they sound like an angry redneck, but working with the that progressive half of their mind--finding out the conditions that make them angry, and help direct their anger toward the corporate or government structures that really created the conditions. Organizing means not overestimating the factual knowledge that people have, but also not underestimating their intelligence and wisdom once they have the facts. It means not talking over people's heads, or talking down to people. It means having faith in the ability of people to understand and change.

Above all, effective grassroots organizing in this era of corporate advertising means making some real link to people's everyday lives. No matter what the issue we are addressing, we have to make some simple and relevant connection to people's past experiences, the places they live today, or alternative ways of doing things in the future. We often talk about what appear to be abstractions to most people--free trade agreements, foreign policy conspiracies, Washington scandals--without showing how they affect human beings in a way they can see, hear and feel. We often talk about the negative violations of human rights at home and abroad, but forget that many people are drawn to political groups mainly for their positive visions of a better future. And too many activists attack "mainstream" people as nothing but consumers and TV watchers, without recognizing that people are passive because they feel powerless, and feel they have limited choices in their lives, The Native American poet John Trudell has said that "white people feel they are not oppressed, but they feel powerless. Indian people know they are oppressed, but don't feel powerless."

Most working-class people understand that economic power is concentrated in corporate hands, that they have to work longer for less pay and benefits, that the two political parties have merged, that American leaders bomb foreign countries to detract attention from domestic troubles, So why aren't they joining peace and justice groups? I would agree with Michael Moore that the insulated middle-class progressive culture creates a political language that regular people cannot understand. He says that progressives should be forming bowling leagues and watching sports rather than making speeches (like this one), to not leave the majority culture to the conservatives.

History confirms that German progressives were making boring peeches in the 1930s, while the Nazis were forming chorale groups,

hiking societies, and theater troupes. In the era of fast-paced corporate advertising, we sometimes just chant slogans and write position papers. We celebrate political folk musicians (some of whom I like a lot), without remembering that rap and metal and especially country music reach far more people.

If the majority of people are into a particular culture, we should respect it and learn about it. In the anti-mining movement, we use country music lyrics from John Anderson in our literature: "Ever since the days of old, men would search for wealth untold. They'd dig for silver and for gold, and leave the empty holes." . Folks in northeast Wisconsin have very successfully appealed to Packermania to help stop the Crandon mine, as you may have seen on the bumperstickers. For the day of the Super Bowl last year, we put out a call for a general strike to stop the mine. We called on the public to abstain from work, to support locally owned teams over corporate owned franchises, to wear green for the environment and gold for the tourist economy, and to wear the letter G for "Go Home Exxon." Not only did the press release get excellent coverage, but we had 99 percent compliance with the strike!

So in a little corner of Wisconsin, some people are hitting on the right combination. (The same kind of thing is happening around Badger Munitions, the Hardwood Range, and other places.) From the ground up, they have formed a grassroots movement that directly takes on corporate power, builds new bridges between very different communities, and uses the creativity and humor of everyday life to get its ideas across. It has already kicked out the world's second-largest resource corporation, and is now telling (not asking) another company to leave. But the movement is just one small part of a much larger effort around the world to reclaim democracy, and build community control of their economies, land and cultures.

As a cartographer, I have made many maps of world empires. The Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire-- they all rose and they all fell. Interestingly, the imperial elites were always their most confident right before their empires fell, as the corporate elites are today. It is not a matter of if, but when the global corporate empire will weaken in the face of its own top-heaviness, and the united resistance of thousands of local communities, and we can begin to talk about a world without multinational corporations.