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Monsanto moves to tighten its control over Latin America

For the past two months, the Latin American press has been inundated with news of a fresh offensive by Monsanto in several Latin American countries. The US transnational corporation appears determined to complete the invasion of GM (genetically modified) crops throughout the continent and to crush the resistance that has arisen in response to the company's attempt to control and dominate Latin American agriculture.

This time, the course along which Monsanto is rapidly and skilfully proceeding is to devise agreements with governments and some farmers' organisations. Many are cooperating with Monsanto and following in the footsteps of the largest manufacturer of GM crops in the world.

Global opinion is increasingly hostile toward GM crops. Small-farmers' organisations are denouncing the grave harm that ten years of GM crops have wrought in rural areas and on native seeds; informed consumers too are refusing, in growing numbers, to buy GM food. If Monsanto is to continue this GM invasion as in the past decade, it must promote the use of its seeds in more countries. If successful, the result will be the GM contamination of new land, the modification of laws to favour Monsanto, and increased pressure on farmers to pay royalties to Monsanto; all facilitated by willing participants in various governments and agricultural organisations. The inevitable outcome will be the imposition of these GM crops in Latin America.

In the past few weeks, we have seen a wide range of different initiatives taken at the local level which clearly illustrate Monsanto's intentions:

- In Chile, on 26 March 2007, Monsanto and the Ministry of Agriculture announced that Monsanto has chosen Chile in which to plant up to 20,000 hectares of GM soya for seed production. Monsanto also announced its intention to introduce GM maize and GM oilseed rape (canola) in Chile. According to an interview in the Chilean newspaper *El Mercurio*, the initiative has the full support of the Ministry of Agriculture. [1] Implicit in this initiative is the eventual GM contamination of Chile. Although the soya crop is being planted ostensibly for "seed production" only, there is no doubt that the GM soya will eventually contaminate other crops and food throughout the country. The fact that the proposal is moving ahead with the endorsement of the Ministry of Agriculture is cause for even greater concern.

- In Venezuela, after a presentation by a Monsanto representative whose main objective was to promote the benefits of transgenic seed production, the President of the Subcommittee for Industry and Commerce, Jhonny [*sic*] Milano, announced that the Commission for Economic Development of the National Assembly, together with specialists in biotechnology and agriculture, will undertake a joint evaluation on the viability of growing GM crops. Mr Milano indicated that the conclusions reached from this evaluation may lead to the partial reformulation of the Seed Law, Material for Animal Reproduction and Biological Inputs (approved in October 2002, Official Gazette No. 37,552), which contains some gaps in the area of biotechnology and agriculture. [2] This clearly shows that Monsanto has managed to take the first steps towards modifying the legislation in Venezuela, which until now has forbidden the growing of GM crops.
- In Mexico, Monsanto and the National Confederation of Corn Producers (CNPAMM) signed an agreement giving Mexican producers easier access to biotechnology. Monsanto will also set up a fund “to protect the native varieties of Mexican corn”. [3] Through this one agreement, Monsanto achieves several objectives: it gains the cooperation of a farmers’ organisation; it takes a further step toward obtaining authorisation for GM maize, which is forbidden in Mexico; and it moves towards gaining access to hundreds of native varieties under the guise of “protecting” them.
- In Argentina, the Argentine Agrarian Federation (FAA) recently announced that Monsanto “has once again opposed regulating transgenic seeds, in direct confrontation with the institutions responsible for their regulation. At the same time that their methods are being denounced by farmers, Monsanto, together with a group of seed producers, is trying to force farmers to sign a ‘contract of consensus’ to pay royalties.” [4] This is clearly a new strategy for coercing the farmers to pay royalties, after the failure of its earlier attempt to emulate its success in Europe where it got the courts to order the farmers to pay.

It is clear from these recent initiatives and past ones that Monsanto has developed a wide-ranging strategy for achieving what it wants in Latin America. Some of the main elements in this strategy are:

- To seek alliances within governments, agricultural organisations, or seed companies, in order to remove resistance from other sectors and to impose norms that make Monsanto’s goals viable.
- To spread contamination with GM crops, thus guaranteeing their inevitability.
- To suppress public and democratic debate and to get compliant local companies to present publicly its views on agreements and proposals.
 - To apply pressure through the courts or private contracts to maintain its earnings through royalties.

Public reaction to Monsanto’s activities has come swiftly. In Chile, the small-farmers’ organisation CLOC (Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo)–Vía Campesina released a press release in which it stated that:

“Monsanto’s initiative is one more act of aggression against small farmers and the health of all Chileans. We are informing the public, the Chilean Parliament and the Government that from this day on we will mobilise to prevent Chile from becoming another peon of Monsanto. We believe

that the government should fulfil its obligation to protect the health, food production, environment and well-being of Chileans, especially those from the poorest and most besieged sectors. Equally, we believe that Parliament has the duty to oversee government activity and to prevent the Ministry of Agriculture from supporting transnational corporations whose actions threaten the well-being and future of us all. We call on all small farmers and their organisations, as well as social organisations and citizens, to mobilise with us to force the government and Parliament to meet their obligations, and to apply social pressure to prevent Monsanto from adding us to its long list of countries that it has abused.” [1]

In Argentina, the FAA denounced Monsanto’s “new strategy, which is an attempt to counteract the negative image that the company has gained in Europe as a result of charging royalties. Such royalties are not allowed in Argentina. Agricultural producers should be warned of this strategy and oppose any imposition of transgenic seeds from seed suppliers.” [4]

At the Forum for Food Sovereignty in Mali in February 2007, small-farmers’ organisations made clear that “food sovereignty gives us the hope and power to conserve, restore, and develop our knowledge and capacity to produce food”, and that the organisations are prepared to fight against “technologies and practices that erode our capacity to produce food in the future, harm the environment, and put our health in danger. These include GM crops and animals; terminator technology; industrial aquaculture and destructive fishing practices; the so-called ‘White Revolution’ industrial practices of the dairy sector; the so-called ‘new’ and old ‘Green Revolutions’; and the ‘Green Deserts’ consisting of monocultures of industrial biofuels and other plantations.” [5]

Although the fight is unequal, these are the voices of the future, and they grow stronger each day through the formation of new alliances and networks. For small farmers in Latin America, the only possible road to travel is one of resistance through denunciation, mobilisation and civil disobedience, while promoting a different model in which seeds and agriculture serve the interests of the people in their battle for food sovereignty.

1) Asociación Nacional de Mujeres Rurales e Indígenas, “Chile: Monsanto y Ministerio de Agricultura anuncian nueva agresión a la agricultura campesina y a la ciudadanía” (National Association of Rural and Indigenous Women, “Chile: Monsanto and the Ministry of Agriculture announce new aggression on small farmer agriculture and the citizenry”), 5 April 2007. <http://www.biodiversidadla.org/content/view/full/31322>

2) Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias, “ABN evaluará viabilidad del uso de transgénicos en cultivo de alimentos”, (“Agencia Bolivariana will evaluate the viability of using transgenics in food crops”), 18 April 2007. http://www.abn.info.ve/go_news5.php?articulo=89268&lec=18

3) La Noticia Tiempo, “Monsanto acuerda con campesinos mexicanos acercarlos a la biotecnología”, (“Monsanto reaches an agreement bringing biotechnology closer to Mexican farmers”), 19 April 2007. http://www.tiempo.com.mx/not_detalle.php?id_n=25331

4) Analisis Digital, “La Federación Agraria Argentina denunció presión de la empresa Monsanto a productores”, (“The Argentine Agrarian Federation denounces Monsanto’s pressure on producers”), 19 April 2007. <http://www.analisisdigital.com.ar/noticias.php?ed=1&di=0&no=56759>

5) Declaración de Nyeleni, Mali, 27 February 2007. <http://www.nyeleni2007.org/spip.php?article291>

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