

# The Movement to Defend Traditional Maize

By Laura Carlsen | June 24, 2004

A major battle in the movement against neoliberal globalization is being silently waged in Mexico. This battle does not take place in the streets of major cities, like Genoa, Prague or Seattle. It does not target multilateral organizations or groups of world leaders. Its activists do not buy plane tickets to voice their views.

They call their movement “In Defense of Corn.” Not nearly as in-your-face as “Abolish capitalism” or “Derail the WTO.” And yet, judging by the reaction of the powers-that-be, the movement is every bit as subversive as the most militant measures.

Corn production in Mesoamerica represents one of the last bastions of agriculture that does not function solely in the logic of the global market. In Mexico, over half of farm families produce for self consumption and an estimated 35% of corn production never makes it to the market. Maize is, at once, a food staple, a social safety net, a survival strategy and a cultural icon. Its ten-thousand year history in the region parallels the rise of the great Mesoamerican civilizations, and today corn continues to be the anchor that enables indigenous communities to preserve their way of life.

Nothing could be further from the goals of the great globalizers. Transnational companies have long sought to convert “the people of corn,”—as the holy book of the Maya the Popol Vuh calls them—into consumers of processed food. The World Bank continues to pressure mightily for a new land anti-reform, that would eventually abolish Mexico’s ejidos (collective farms) and indigenous communes—legal forms of collective land-use recognized in the Mexican Constitution.

Euphemistically dubbed “market-assisted land reform,” the World Bank plan is to bring all productive land onto the real estate market. This conversion of earth into merchandise is anathema to the indigenous culture. It would also be disastrous for peasants and small farmers. Under the precarious conditions of the Mexican countryside, saddling marginal farmers with bank debt is a sure path to bankruptcy, expulsion and expropriation. For neoliberal planners, however, the hemorrhaging of rural communities as farmers migrate to cities and the United States is a planned part of the rural conversion process.

The discovery in 2001 that native corn had been contaminated with genetically modified (GM) varieties catalyzed the movement in defense of corn. This latest market offensive against the Mexican peasant economy has its roots in the rise of corn imports from the United States. Under the terms of GATT then later under the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Mexico has been importing an average of five million tons of corn a year. Since the U.S. widely cultivates GM corn, experts estimate that at least a quarter of Mexico’s U.S. corn imports are genetically modified.

GM corn from the United States rapidly found its way into Mexican cornfields. Since Mexico is a world center of origin for maize, the contamination became an international issue of food security. For Mexican indigenous and peasant communities, it became a question of survival.

These communities have cultivated their own maize varieties for generations, saving the best seed to steadily improve their crops according to their own climatic and culinary needs. If their crops become widely contaminated, their native varieties will be overrun and huge stores of biodiversity lost.

To add insult to injury, these small farmers would also be liable to pay Monsanto and other GM seed manufacturers for inadvertent use of their product. It sounds absurd, and it is, but numerous courts have upheld the newfound right to contaminate under intellectual property laws. The practice of seed-saving and local food systems would be destroyed in favor of integration into transnational circuits that produce seed (and the chemical fertilizers and pesticides required to grow them) and processed food products.

To protect their native maize varieties from contamination, some Mexican communities have carried out their own genetic testing, carefully conserved native varieties



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and demanded a moratorium on GM corn imports. In workshops in some of Mexico's most remote rural areas, monolingual Indians study genetic modification and the dangers of contamination to develop their own programs to defend their corn.

The simple message, "In Defense of Corn," is also becoming a banner of the movement against neoliberal globalization. Although they number in the hundreds of thousands, maize activists rarely gather in large demonstrations or marches. But their power to convene bodies and imaginations is increasing. Via Campesina, the global expression of the movement, groups 97 organizations in 43 countries that in turn represent millions of small farmers. This organization, including thousands of Mayan farmers from the surrounding area, was by far the largest contingent in the marches in Cancun at the Fifth Ministerial of the World Trade Organization.

What Mexican writer Ramón Vera calls "the invisible movement" has profound implications for the future. Perhaps the most symbol-laden plant on the planet, native corn has become the mine canary for globalization plans in the countryside. If it dies, it means a life-and-death battle has been lost. If it continues to be a major source of physical, spiritual and cultural sustenance, there may be hope yet.



San Andrés Cohamiata, Jalisco. Photo: Yuriria Pantoja Millán/Ojarasca

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