

We'll claim what we've won, but we aren't just going to make demands: that would let those we're addressing believe they can just make up for all that they've taken away. To satisfy our needs we prefer to go looking rather than just ask. It's something we're proud of. We have already found allies, and by coordinating our shared disgust we begin to get beyond it. Three weeks have gone by, banishing boredom and bringing hope back alive. We don't want to stop!
WE INVITE EVERYONE TO JOIN OUR STROLLING COMMITTEES, OUR GAMES, OUR DEBATES.

Both extracts from *Le Lundi au Soleil: Recueil de textes et de récits du mouvement des chômeurs, novembre 1997 – avril 1998*, Paris: L'insomniaque éditeur, 1998

English translations by Brian Holmes

When French unemployed activists got together with Indonesian fisherfolk, Columbian U'wa tribal elders, and South Korean strikers, they were participating in the birth of a unique radical network which was to provide the impetus for many of the summit-disrupting actions which were to hit the headlines over the next few years.

The idea of Peoples' Global Action (PGA) was born at the Second Encuentro (encounter) in Spain. It arose out of the need to create something more tangible than the encuentros, which were ostensibly international talk shops. Aiming to be "a global instrument for communication and coordination" of grassroots groups who believe in taking confrontational direct action, "while building up local alternatives and people power", the PGA was one of the first networks to target the World Trade Organization (WTO) specifically, and capitalism in general.

The WTO, reckless promoter of 'free' trade and corporate rule which, according to its director-general, "is writing the constitution of a single global economy", was to have its second ministerial meeting in Geneva, in May 1998. The founding PGA conference was held a stone's throw away, that February. Over ten chaotic days, activists from a mind-boggling array of cultures and backgrounds drafted a manifesto and hatched plans for the first global day of action against the WTO and G8 summits the following May.

While the PGA does not define itself as an organization, it holds a distinctive organizational philosophy based on decentralization and autonomy. It has no head office, no central funds, no membership, and no representatives – a difficult way of working on a local level, let alone a global one. But despite the disparity, chaos, and confusion that pepper the process, thousands of grassroots organizations from every continent have participated in the global days of action called by the PGA, and it continues to be a catalyzing focus for global action.

Peoples' Global Action: the grassroots go global

by Olivier de Marcellus

"It is difficult to describe the warmth and the depth of the encounters we had here. The global enemy is relatively well known, but the global resistance that it meets rarely passes through the filter of the media. And here we met the people who had shut down whole cities in Canada with general strikes, risked their lives to seize lands in Latin America, destroyed the seat of Cargill in India or Novartis' transgenic maize in France.

The discussions, the concrete planning for action, the stories of struggle, the personalities, the enthusiastic hospitality of the Genevan squatters, the impassioned accents of the women and men facing the police outside the WTO building, all sealed an alliance between us. Scattered around the world again, we will not forget. We remain together. This is our common struggle."

– **Letter from the Geneva PGA Welcoming Committee**

For Geneva, the job of hosting the PGA conference was an interesting challenge. As in many places, the Genevan activist scene, allergic to traditional organization and hierarchy, has never been capable of organizing itself in numbers that go beyond 15-20 which can function in spontaneous small group dynamics. In practice, other potentially interested people were excluded simply because it isn't possible to give more people a hearing, or a clear task to do with that sort of organization. And of course people who didn't correspond to the usual profile of the 'alternative' scene rarely felt like they could fit in.

The huge practical necessities and the amazingly wide response to the PGA perspective got us past that way of functioning. Already the Zapatista calls "against neoliberalism and for humanity" had attracted very diverse kinds of people to meetings. Preparing the conference allowed us to organize half a dozen different practical groups for accommodation, food, visas, translations, fund raising, etc. At least a hundred people worked on it in one way or another, none of them receiving a wage, of course.

are smashed, furniture broken, ledgers burnt, and utensils flung into the streets. Over 100 people are arrested, and the KRRS spokesperson, Professor Nanjundaswamy, is accused of attempted murder. He uses Ghandi's words to defend his actions against property: "If you had a goods train carrying arms, blowing it up does not amount to a violent act. It would however be violent to blow up a passenger train."

>> **February** >> In Britain around 5,000 march against the construction of a road to bypass the town of Newbury.

>> **February 7** >> Over 20,000 students in 30 cities across Canada go on strike in a national day of action against cuts in education and social programmes by the federal government.

>> **March 10** >> The largest gold mine in the world,

located in West Papua, a colony of Indonesia, and owned by US company Freeport McMoran, is closed down for six days by riots. The company has dug out the top of a sacred mountain, an act Papuans describe as "beheading our mother". More than 90 per cent of the mined mountain ends up as tailings, poisoning rivers for miles downstream. The company has also been responsible for the murder and torture of independence



Grassroots rebels from every continent are brought together by the Peoples' Global Action network. S26, Prague, Czech Republic

On a political level, we managed to combine the decisive participation of the Genevan squatters/alternative scene (who offered most of the lodging and work, cooked the meals in the Usine – the local alternative culture centre) with the political and financial support of some progressive trade unions, ‘Third World’ support groups, and NGOs. Finally, even the left-wing parties were obliged to declare their support. Geneva makes a business of hosting all kinds of international gatherings, but it had never hosted a conference of radical popular movements. With people coming to represent a ten million-strong Indian farmers’ movement, it was easy to ask for support; the legitimacy of the request was difficult to deny.

At the same time the PGA’s proposal for direct but nonviolent action provoked an excited political discussion, particularly when the Indian Karnataka farmers’ union leader Swamy, on a preliminary speaking tour of the country, threw a bottle of Nestlé iced tea (which had very incorrectly found its way onto the speakers’ podium) against a wall, proclaiming: “This is not violence! Violence is only actions directed against living things!” This he

“There is no centre anywhere that could hope to organize and oversee all this mutual thickening of ties. It would be like trying to instruct a forest how to grow.”

– PGA bulletin five, February 2000, UK edition

followed with his favorite story about Gandhi’s judgement that blowing up a British munitions train was not really violent. Radical anti-WTO groups started springing up behind his stops across Switzerland.

Typically for PGA, it all seemed megalomaniac and doomed until the last moment, when more than 300 delegates finally made it, almost half of them from the global South – 71 countries in all. It was preceded by four days of workshops and six large public meetings which drew an unprecedented number of Genevans to hear and discover the most diverse people and struggles: from Medha Patkar from India – with her goddess-like style and

fighters who have fought a long struggle against the company, and the colonizing Indonesian military who get rich defending the mine.

>> **March 28** >> Thousands of people take to the streets in La Paz, Cochabamba, and Santa Cruz, Bolivia, demanding a raise in salaries and denouncing the privatization of Bolivia’s oil fields. In Cochabamba, 250 people, most of them elderly, are

detained while on hunger strike, protesting for the same reasons. On the same day, workers in Paraguay initiate a general strike demanding salary increases of 31 per cent and calling for a referendum on the rapid privatization of their nation’s wealth and resources. Meanwhile, in São Paulo, Brazil, more than 5,000 students are attacked and detained by the police while protesting against tuition fee hikes and other

neoliberal policies on education.

>> **March 29** >> Adding their voices to the continent-wide uprisings, thousands of farmers in southern Chile block national highways in protest against Chile’s imminent inclusion in the ‘free’ trade agreement, Mercosur, which will result in the unemployment of at least 80,000 Chilean farmers. At the same time, street vendors in Lima, Peru, confront

gestures – denouncing the Narmada Dam project, to a towering Maori – expert activists on neoliberal policy. A particularly significant discovery for the Genevans and other Europeans was from less far away – the attractive example of that strange post-Thatcherite phenomenon called Reclaim The Streets, whose practice of ‘street parties’ would be imitated the world over during future global days of action. The press was very good, particularly the local progressive daily that worked with us on an excellent 12 page supplement, entitled ‘WTO: A world government in the shadows’, and even designed a snappy PGA logo, which we promptly adopted.

The conference itself brought together far too many fascinating people and experiences for anyone to appreciate them all (and we Genevans were generally too busy carrying around mattresses etc, anyway). I am often still surprised when looking through the list of participants to see how many organizations we work with now were present back then!

The most important part of the conference was devoted to a collective elaboration of the manifesto by the delegates meeting in different working groups: indigenous peoples, peasant, trade unions, gender, education, migrations, and racism. The conference was finally prolonged a day to finish the job. Just by totally random chance, and unknown to us at the time, this was occurring during the week of the one hundred-fiftieth anniversary of the writing of the Communist Manifesto! Our manifesto, evolving slightly from one conference to another, has

“We have to start aiming at the head; we have been militants fighting against nuclear power, against homelessness, sexism – different tentacles of the monster. You are never really going to do it that way, you really have to aim at the head.” – Olivier de Marcellus at the founding conference of Peoples’ Global Action, 1998

proved to be one of PGA’s most important tools. With the four (later five) ‘hallmarks’, it gives a pretty clear picture of what the organizations and movements involved in the PGA network are like and stand for. It spares us a lot of tedious discussion with organizations and people that we don’t really have enough in common with. The manifesto, as it took form in Geneva, already reflected a significant evolution. PGA was conceived as a tool to radically oppose the WTO and ‘free’ trade, but it became increasingly clear that the movements committed to direct action against this latest form of capitalism, were in fact also for the most part against capitalism as such, and were looking for ways to reaffirm a revolutionary perspective internationally.

The last day of the conference, a demonstration marched from our meeting hall to the WTO headquarters.

It was the moment when a unifying characteristic of all those disparate delegates appeared: we like to talk, but we love to get into the streets! It was not a large demonstration, just a few hundred people, but no one there will ever forget it, for the sheer energy and passion that expressed itself. The Genevan police, used to dealing with unruly young people, were thunderstruck. Medha Patkar and other very 'respectable looking' women in magnificent saris suddenly were swinging themselves gracefully over the police barriers; a huge Maori woman, six feet tall and very broad, leaning over a helmeted young policeman, sticking her tongue out about six inches in the traditional grimace of provocation; an irrepressibly jolly young Spaniard, diving into the police lines, consistently being thrown back over the barriers and then diving over again; a nimble elf from Reclaim The Streets climbing like a monkey to the top of the WTO gates; the incredible, from-the-gut speeches of a Canadian postal worker, of our local *passionaria*.

Finally, a woman from the Bangladesh garment workers' organization burst into a diatribe of such fury

that I (who was holding the mike) was actually a little afraid that she might have some sort of a fit. Absolutely rigid, her eyes fixed on the top stories of the WTO building, she was *asking* for nothing. She was telling them, positively screeching, "We are warning you! You have caused enough suffering! Enough deaths! That time is going to end, because we are going to stop you!" The external relations officer of the WTO abandoned his attempts at dialogue and retreated into the building, no doubt thinking, "So that was what they mean by being opposed to lobbying." And we marched back to dinner, I think each of us saying to ourselves: "These are people after my own heart!"

Olivier de Marcellus fled the US (and Vietnam) in 1966, and has been happily hyper-active in many movements: anti-imperialist, anti-nuclear, squats, etc. They all pale, however, in comparison with the impetuous piece of history unleashed by the Zapatista uprising.

Resources:

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the police and defend their right to work as the police attempt to expel them from the historic (read, touristic) centre. And in Santa Ana, Costa Rica, thousands protest against the installation of a waste dump in their town which would add more than one thousand tons of rubbish a day to the heap already dumped on them by neoliberalism.

>> **April** >> Hundreds demonstrate against the

military government as a UN team tours the Ogoniland region to investigate the execution of writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa.

>> **April 17** >> About 1,500 families of landless peasants from the Movimento Sem Terra blockade the highway near the town of El Dorado dos Carajas in the state of Paraná, Brazil, demanding land reform and defying the authorities' insistence that the occupation of

a wealthy landowners' farm nearby end. Military police, their ID tags removed, open fire on the demonstrators. Nineteen dead men are left beside the highway, though survivors talk of an open grave containing women and children hidden nearby. 69 are wounded. The MST are still seeking justice. In memory of this day April 17 is henceforth declared International Peasants' Day.

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