

La Jornada

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Crusade Against the Hungry

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Once again, people have raised their voices against transgenic maize, this time during a session of the Permanent People's Tribunal in Oaxaca. Over five hundred people came from various indigenous regions across the country as well as from social and civil society organizations to accuse the Mexican government of responsibility for the transgenic contamination of native maize, in complicity with the transnational seed corporations. The people demanded the government prevent the commercial planting of GM maize in the north of the country.

Zapotecos, Mixtecos, Nahuas, Mayas, Rarámuris, and Wixárikas, alongside campesinos from Tlaxcala, Veracruz and Guanajuato, agreed on a set of strategies to contain transgenic contamination of the maize inherited from their ancestors: plant only native and locally adapted criollo varieties; do not allow unknown maize seeds to enter the communities; do not accept government programs or food aid; do not plant corn purchased in DICONSA stores; avoid hybrid seeds that may be contaminated; closely monitor the cornfields and prevent pollination of plants that seem strange or malformed.

Vandana Shiva, who made a sojourn of more than 30 hours from India to participate in the defense of maize, stated that Monsanto has declared war on farmers around the world, by turning the ancient farmer practice of saving seed for planting the next cycle into a crime.

Farmers who do not depend on seed corporations are free. Shiva explained the pattern used by Monsanto and the government of India to introduce transgenic cotton in its center of origin: first, the state dismantled the public production of seeds, then Monsanto bought the local seed companies and forced them to sell only GM cotton seeds, but under the brand recognized by the peasants, and finally Monsanto promoted transgenic seed with the false promises of increased productivity and profits. In just one agricultural cycle, the diversity of native cotton seed was lost and producers who had previously obtained their seeds for free, selected from their own harvest, found themselves in bankruptcy and unable to cover the debt incurred to obtain the transgenic technology package. Many chose to commit suicide rather than stop being peasants.

In Mexico, more than a third of corn production (8 million tons) does not enter the market, as it is intended for sustaining the communities that produce it. But as part of the Crusade Against Hunger, the Ministry of Agriculture is promoting a subsistence agriculture program that, under the guise of increasing productivity, undermines the essence of peasant agriculture by trying to make it dependent on external inputs that must be purchased from agribusinesses. The program aims to replace native seeds--many of them endemic, improved for generations and adapted to the ecological niches of each community--with uniform hybrid seeds, owned by corporate seed companies, or with criollo seeds enhanced by research centers. Once again, the program fails to recognize the peasant knowledge that centers on organic and traditional farming techniques to produce food for communities, and instead encourages the use of pesticides, fertilizers, herbicides and insecticides that rather than stave off hunger, cause environmental damage, harm the health of the population, and pollute the fields. The barns and *coscomates*, traditional

corncribs built with local materials that are true works of art, would be replaced by purchased metal silos, which furthermore are not even appropriate for use in places with high humidity.

The petition lodged by the indigenous peoples, campesinos, conscious scientists and civil society gathered in Oaxaca is the defense of native maize and the culture and identity of the people of corn. The government has the opportunity to listen and place its trust in the strategies defined by the communities, rather than favor business and the hunger for profits of a handful of agribusiness corporations.