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The Fast of Those who Feed Us

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Peasants from the National Union of Autonomous Regional Peasant Organizations (UNORCA), a member of Via Campesina, have taken non-violent social protest to its ultimate level: they've initiated a hunger strike. The fast accompanies the pronouncements and demands issued by committed scientists, peasants and indigenous peoples, environmentalists, students, urban movements and neighborhoods, and the many citizens who have rallied in recent months seeking to prevent the government from approving Monsanto, Pioneer-Dupont and Dow's applications to sow GM maize commercially for the first time in the country.

On January 23, one of the coldest days this winter, about 30 hunger strikers, accompanied by hundreds of their colleagues from various institutions and the National Union of Indigenous and Peasant Women, installed themselves at the Angel of Independence. The strike draws the attention of society and government to the urgency of preventing the commercial planting of GM maize in Mexico, the country of origin and diversification of this staple grain for humanity.

The protestors come from Guanajuato, Guerrero, Hidalgo, Michoacán, Morelos, the State of Mexico, the Federal District, Tabasco, Tlaxcala and Zacatecas, and, along with those from Puebla and Oaxaca, they know that planting GM maize will contaminate native varieties. They also come from Veracruz, Campeche, Chiapas, Yucatan and San Luis Potosi, where in addition to the threat of GM maize, they have experienced the threat of GM soybeans and the European export ban on their honey if it contains GM pollen. They are joined by farmers from Sonora, Chihuahua, Durango and Nayarit, states where the government has already authorized pilot and experimental plantings of genetically modified corn. They also come from Sinaloa and Tamaulipas, where companies producing genetically modified seeds have applied for the first permits for unrestricted commercial planting of transgenic maize on all irrigated hectares.

Some of these farmers grow corn commercially, designed to feed the population of the cities, others grow it to feed their families and communities, but all recognize themselves as people of corn, and are determined to defend it.

The hunger strike by the campesinos of UNORCA disputes the claims of transnational seed companies that they are the key players in the National Crusade Against Hunger, launched a few days ago by President Enrique Peña Nieto. One of the biotech industry's promises was to end world hunger. Agrobio, the Mexican civil association of these corporations, is quick to proclaim that GMOs are the solution to feeding the world and that the government must approve the applications for commercial planting of GM maize, in order to increase agricultural production and rural incomes and reduce dependence on food imports.

However, UNORCA dismantles their corporate propaganda in its press release of January 24. Based on a 13-year analysis by U.S. scientists, genetic engineering has failed to greatly increase corn yields: between 1990-1995 and 2004-2008, yields increased by 28 percent, but 25 percent of this increase was due to conventional breeding and improved agricultural practices such as agroecology. In contrast, between 1996 and 2008, GM crops led to an increase of 144 million kilos of pesticides. Between 1996 and 2001, the end result for all U.S. farmers who used transgenic insect-resistant Bt maize was a net loss of \$92 million, equivalent to a loss of \$3.24 dollars per hectare. GM seeds are more expensive than conventional ones and require farmers to pay a licensing fee, hence without increased yields, farmers cannot sustain the increased costs.

The expectation that imports will decrease depends not only on increasing domestic production, but also on the policy of agricultural liberalization promoted by the neoliberal government. Last year, farmers in Sinaloa could not find buyers for their corn—some of which is still in storage—because the government of Felipe Calderon decided to import white maize (most likely GM) from South Africa, without any tariff, and saturated the domestic market.

The hunger strike of the UNORCA farmers reminds us that in the midst of the 21st century, it is farmers, not multinationals, who feed the world.

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