

Turning the Trolls to Stone: Strategy for the Global Justice Movement

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July 2002

In Tolkien's book *The Hobbit*, Bilbo Baggins and his friends the dwarves are caught by trolls and about to be stewed for dinner. They are saved by the wizard Gandalf, who keeps the trolls busy talking and squabbling until daylight. Sunlight turns trolls to stone.

That fantasy story could be a good model for a direct action strategy for the global justice movement. Essentially, we're all in the stew pot, with the trolls of corporate power feasting on the resources and labor of the world. But global corporate capitalism depends on hiding its true nature and functioning in the shadows. It cloaks itself in the rhetoric and semblance of democracy. Exposed to light, it cannot continue to function.

What is corporate globalization? It's an ideology that elevates corporate profit to the highest value and determining factor for all human activity, individual and collective. It says that corporations must be unfettered in their pursuit of profit, that all natural and human resources should be open to exploitation, that services and infrastructures once collectively provided by governments should become arenas of profit making, and that while some people will gain more than others under this regime, following this program will make everyone richer and benefit all.

Corporate globalization is implemented by certain institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund that impose its constraints on the heavily indebted countries of the third world in return for participation in the global economy. It is enacted through trade agreements such as NAFTA (The North American Free Trade Agreement), the proposed FTAA (Free Trade Agreement of the Americas -- the extension of NAFTA throughout the hemisphere), and many others, including the global GATT, (Global Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), enforced by the World Trade Organization. These agreements and institutions override democratically made laws of countries, allowing them to be struck down in decisions by a tribunal of the WTO which can rule, for example, that a law restricting imports of goods made with child labor is "restraint of trade," and not allowed. Many of them allow corporations to sue governments for loss of projected profits if laws restrict them: a Canadian corporation has won a judgment of hundreds of millions of dollars from the State of California for banning an additive in gasoline that pollutes groundwater. A U.S. corporation has sued Canada for banning an additive that causes brain cancer in children.

This program is backed by the vast military and police power of the state -- primarily

the U.S. but aided by our friends. The "war on terror" is the perfect excuse for extending that power until it becomes a true global hegemony.

This program is problematic on a number of different levels: it is blatantly unjust, it runs counter to every human impulse toward compassion, generosity, and mutuality, it contradicts the teachings of every religion or system of social ethics, it is destroying the basic life support systems of the planet, and it doesn't work. It allows corporations free movement across borders to seek the lowest common denominator of wages and regulations, and lowers the global standard of living for workers everywhere. It appropriates the resources that should belong to all and concentrates wealth and power in fewer and fewer hands. In fact, it creates misery, poverty and despair for billions.

Trying to counter that system may seem an overwhelming and hopeless task. How do we confront a system that can commandeer such vast economic resources, control the major media, and mobilize all the military, police and judicial power of the state in its defense?

As powerful as the system seems, it rests on the compliance and tacit consent of the very people it exploits. The vast, vast numbers of us who don't truly benefit from the system support it through our participation. Without our labor, without our obedience, without our willingness to police ourselves, the system cannot function.

The public complies with this system in part because the system hides its true workings under fancy rhetoric, obscure economic theory, and the trappings of democracy. Trolls breed in the dark.

So a strategy for global justice involves exposing the trolls to light: telling the truth about the system, showing how it affects people on an everyday basis, pointing out clearly where it doesn't work. Ultimately, our goal is to undermine the legitimacy of the system and erode the tacit consent that supports it.

There are many, many groups, from organizations such as Public Citizen or the Council of Canadians to independent media, working on shining that light. But in a world overloaded with information, how do we get people overburdened with messages of fear and urgency to pay attention?

Educators speak of the concept of the "teachable moment," that instant when a bored and apathetic student suddenly becomes eager and able to learn. People become teachable when they realize that they have a need for information.

That is one of the key purposes of protest: to create so much excitement, so much urgency and drama around an issue that people who have previously tuned it out suddenly feel a need to pay attention.

But people are also controlled by fear. We might hate the system, but we also depend upon it. What will happen to us if we act against it? How can we trust those urging us to take action, or believe that what they propose will be better?

People comply with the system because they don't see an alternative or believe that they have any choice. Systems of control always work by limiting our perceptions of our options.

Our challenge as a movement is to delegitimize the current system, pose a wider range of choices, empower people to risk opposing the current system, and to embrace an alternative vision.

We've been relatively good at shining a spotlight, creating drama, and delegitimizing the current system. In the two and half years since Seattle, we've awakened public awareness of many of the institutions of corporate globalization, shifted the terms of debate, and undercut the unquestioning acceptance of their policies.

We've been less successful at posing a clear, alternative vision, and building public trust.

Trust is built over time, of course. The global justice movement is not centered on charismatic leaders or ongoing institutions that give a face to trust. It's an amorphous, ever-evolving, self-organizing mass. But if people involved in the movement devote time, attention, and their skills as organizers to their home issues and support local community-based organizations as well as large summit actions, trust can grow.

But trust has to grow from a vision. And I believe we do actually have a clear alternative to the ideology of global corporate capitalism:

We stand for democracy, community, and true abundance.

Democracy means that people have a voice in the decisions that affect them, including economic decisions. Democracy requires time and public space and quality education and freedom of information. And democracy means that no group can be excluded from power because of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical ability, or any other "ism."

We stand for the right of communities to control their own destinies and resources, whether that is indigenous community preserving its land and culture or a neighborhood deciding to keep its local hospital open. Enterprises and businesses must be rooted in communities and accountable to them.

We say that real abundance means protecting the life support systems of the planet, that there are things too precious to be bought and sold for profit, from ancient rain forests to the water that sustains all life. Abundance does not come from the extraction and concentration of wealth, but from its widest possible distribution. True abundance means security, and that can only come from an understanding that we have a common responsibility for each other, to see each other through hard times and support each other through misfortune.

We also say that democracy, community, and true abundance are the real antidote to the despair that breeds terrorism, and the best means of assuring our global security.

When we think about actions and tactics, we need to consider how they fit with our overall strategy. We need to create enough of a ruckus to arouse people's attention, while making sure it's the system that gets delegitimized, not us. Different tactics and actions serve different needs:

Protests that are safe, permitted, and legal serve an important purpose: they mobilize

people who might otherwise be afraid to take action. They give people a way to overcome fear, feel a sense of unity, and speak out, and can embody our vision and build trust.

Direct action, actions that directly confront oppressive power, actively withdraw our consent from the system, create drama and confrontation and urgency, and often make the violence inherent in the system visible. My own generally preferred set of tactics involve nonviolent direct action, because they allow us to both create urgency and trust. Nonviolent actions can be openly organized, letting us mobilize more people and encourage people to move beyond fear and take higher risks.

The most powerful actions are those in which we create confrontations that also embody our vision. When we live the alternatives, in our organizing, in our coalition building, in our daily lives, in our courage to act, we become the sunlight that can freeze the trolls in their tracks.

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