

Cutting Down the Pines: Why We're Taking Action Against the World Bank and IMF

By Starhawk

For the native tribes of California, pine nuts have always been an important delicacy. Not so long ago, their ripening was an occasion of celebration. Young men of the tribe would earn great honor and praise for their skill and daring by climbing to the top of the tall trees and shaking the branches to knock the cones down.

During the Gold Rush, it often happened that a European-American man would marry a Native woman. When pine nut season came around, she might ask her husband to gather some. Let's say that he was a kind and thoughtful husband, who loved her and wanted to please her, but that he was ignorant of the ways of her people and no longer young, daring, nor patient enough to climb the trees and shake the branches. Instead, he would simply cut down a pine tree.

When pines were plentiful and settlers were few, this might seem like a rational thing to do. At first, in fact, it might create an enormous sense of abundance and prosperity. The woman might have more pine nuts than she'd ever had before-- for a while.

But in time, if this practice continued, the pines would be gone and the pine nuts would be no more.

We are going to Washington DC this week because we see the globalized, corporatized economy cutting down the pines all around us. In the United States, we are surrounded by an illusory abundance that creates great wealth for a few, but it is the economy of the clearcut, that destroys the resources we should be cherishing. Globally, poverty and hunger deepen as corporate profits rise. Almost two billion people worldwide live in abject poverty. The lives, the cultures, and the lands of indigenous people are being destroyed in the name of development as surely as the pine trees were cut by the settlers.

The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are major architects of this situation. In the 70's, they loaned money to Third World countries for massive projects that enriched political elites and multinational corporations while providing little for the less privileged. In the 80's, when many countries could not repay those loans, the World Bank and IMF pushed them

deeper into the cycle of debt with "Structural Adjustment" programs that forced countries to refocus their economies on exports and debt repayment instead of food and goods to meet their own needs. Poor countries were made to reduce spending on education and health care in order to continue paying billions and billions of dollars in interest to wealthy countries. UNICEF and UN Economic Commission for Africa figures show that six million children under the age of five die each year as a result of these policies.

In the developed world, we feast among the fallen pines with a growing sense of uneasiness. We have seen the health of our own communities and economies compromised as job after job is lost to lands where pay is negligible and health and environmental standards unenforced. We see family farms lost, ancient forests cut down, wild lands and open spaces paved. The interests of trans-national corporations undermine our democracy and widen the chasms of wealth and power that more and more divide us. We are going to Washington this week to say that this system is wrong. It is unjust, unbalanced, unsustainable, and it causes untold suffering. We cannot challenge these institutions through our government because our democratic institutions are corrupted by the interests of corporate wealth. We have no recourse but the streets, no alternative but action. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization and the system they represent will not change from any one action. But they will and must transform or go down in the face of the rising social movement these actions represent. They will change when we all begin to ask dangerous questions.

Some of us will ask these questions loudly in the streets of Washington, DC.

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