

World Farmers' alliance Challenges Food Profiteers

Review of Annette Aurélie Desmarais' book

By [John Riddell](#)

Global Research, May 31, 2009

[Socialist Voice](#) 31 May 2009

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

Annette Aurélie Desmarais.

La Vía Campesina: Globalization and the Power of Peasants.

Fernwood Publishing, 2007.

The neoliberal assault that has driven labour into retreat over the last two decades has also sparked the emergence of a peasants' international, La Vía Campesina. Rooted in 56 countries across five continents, this alliance has mounted a sustained and spirited defense of peasant cultivation, community, and control of food production.

Annette Desmarais's book on La Vía Campesina has given us a probing and perceptive account of the world peasant movement's origins, outlook, and activities. (La Vía Campesina means "Peasant Path" or "Peasant Way." See "Peasants or Farmers?" at the end of this article.)

The movement began as a response to globalization, which Mexican peasant leader Alberto Gomez has defined as "a global offensive against the countryside ... against small producers and family farmers" whose existence poses a barrier to "an industrialized countryside."

Such coercive industrialization involves "delinking" food production from consumption through the intrusion of agribusiness corporations that usurp different stages of production: provision of inputs, food processing, transportation, and marketing, Desmarais says. Industrial products replace farmer inputs: chemicals in place of manure, hybrid seeds in place of farmers' seed stocks. Many peasants are shackled to corporate production contracts, which, Desmarais notes, now control about 90% of U.S. poultry farms.

"Farmers are no longer considered producers of knowledge," Desmarais says, but rather as consumers of the marketed wisdom of agribusiness, mere cogs in the gears of corporate industry.

Meanwhile, neoliberal trade policies have destroyed institutions and tariff barriers that provided farmers with market leverage, leaving them isolated victims of profiteering by gigantic worldwide agribusiness concerns.

The entire process recalls capitalism's "de-skilling" of industrial workers, which replaced independent skilled craftsmen by assembly-line labourers. The logical end point would be replacement of the family farm with factory-style capitalist estate farming. But this has not happened.

Peasant survival

Family farming, Desmarais reports, has remained a prominent form of cultivation, in rich and poor countries alike. She cites data from the U.S., where farm technology is most advanced. There, family-owned farms made up 85% of all units in 1990s, although a significant proportion of them are dependent on wage labour. There is growing evidence, she says, “that small farms are more ‘efficient’ than large corporate farms” and are more “sustainable.” Indeed, “ ‘re-peasantization’ is going on as the absolute number of peasants grows.”

Farmers have survived – but have been subjected to extreme levels of corporate exploitation. Indeed agribusiness has learned to take maximum advantage of small-scale farmers, who carry the costs and risks of farm production but are robbed of almost all the proceeds. Added to that is predation by the banks, whose mortgages suck the lifeblood from farms before ultimately destroying them.

Even harsher exploitation is imposed on agricultural workers, concentrated in labour-intensive fruit and vegetable farms.

Desmarais reports National Farmers Union (NFU) findings that farmers in Canada earned just 0.3% return on equity in 1998, while “agribusiness corporations earned 5%, 20%, 50%, and even higher rates.” Since then, the situation has worsened. In 2004, the NFU reports, farmers in Canada could not even cover basic costs from their product sales.

In this context, peasants have both motivation and means for concerted resistance. The neoliberal era has in fact seen a revival of peasant activism, much of it coordinated by La Vía Campesina. Desmarais chronicles the dramatic intervention of Vía Campesina contingents in protests at successive World Trade Organization (WTO) gatherings. Among their achievements: “After having all but disappeared ... over the past 25 years, agrarian reform is now back on the agenda.” Moreover, Vía Campesina has succeeded in maintaining unity of member organizations in both the richest and poorest countries of the world.

The Vía Campesina website <www.viacampesina.org> reports member organizations’ activities in the first four months of this year in no less than 17 countries, nine of them in the Global South. Among these were a series of initiatives on behalf of the farmers and other citizens of Gaza under assault by Israel.

The peasants’ alliance has gone beyond defense of members’ immediate economic interests. It advocates the “right of peoples to define their agricultural and food policy,” which it terms “food sovereignty.” This program defends the interests of peoples of the Global South under pressure from the world’s richest states, while providing some key elements of a platform to unite working people and the oppressed both as producers and as consumers of food.

Food sovereignty embraces the principle that food is a basic human right, demands sustainable management of natural resources by those who work the land, and asserts the need for genuine agrarian reform.

In addition to calling for food self-sufficiency and strengthening family farms, La Vía Campesina’s original call for food sovereignty in 1996 included these points:

** Guarantee everyone access to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food in sufficient quantity and quality to sustain a healthy life with full human dignity.

- ** Give landless and farming people – especially women – ownership and control of the land they work and return territories to indigenous peoples.
- ** Ensure the care and use of natural resources, especially land, water and seeds. End dependence on chemical inputs, on cash-crop monocultures and intensive, industrialized production.
- ** Oppose WTO, World Bank and IMF policies that facilitate the control of multinational corporations over agriculture. Regulate and tax speculative capital and enforce a strict Code of Conduct on transnational corporations.
- ** End the use of food as a weapon. Stop the displacement, forced urbanization and repression of peasants.
- ** Guarantee peasants and small farmers, and rural women in particular, direct input into formulating agricultural policies at all levels.

The end result of such policies, Desmarais believes, will be to build and strengthen rural communities, which she views as “sites of diversity, differences, conflicts, and divisions” among people “engaged in the same argument” about “the common things in their everyday lives.” The Vía Campesina model, she states, “does not entail a rejection of modernity, or of technology and trade,” but insists that they must be inserted in a model “based on certain ethics and values in which culture and social justice count for something.”

La Vía Campesina was born out of collaboration of farmers’ organizations in several parts of the world, with Canada’s NFU playing a prominent role. Nettie Wiebe, based in Saskatchewan, was the only woman member of Vía Campesina’s initial coordinating committee. She spearheaded the formation of a Women’s Commission to develop women’s participation and leadership, a high priority for Vía Campesina, and led this commission until 2000.

In 2004, Vía Campesina recruited an energetic Quebec component, the Union Paysanne, dedicated to “a human-scale agriculture and vibrant rural communities.”

Struggle for independence

For 60 years, the world’s dominant farmers organization has been the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP), which functions mainly as a lobbying agency within international institutions such as United Nations affiliates, the World Bank, and the WTO. Desmarais describes IFAP as “reformist or conformist,” and as “representing the interests of larger farmers primarily based in the industrialized countries.”

The NFU has stayed outside IFAP because it “simply did not represent the interests of smaller farmers,” Desmarais says. With the onset of capitalist globalization, IFAP – despite internal divisions – mostly lined up in support of trade measures favourable to agribusiness. During the process of forming Vía Campesina, there were efforts to involve IFAP, but these broke down over such differences. “Dialogue was not possible,” writes Vía Campesina activist Nico Verhagen.

In Desmarais’ view, “the very existence of the Vía Campesina is clear evidence that not all farmers speak with the same voice.”

Indeed, the Vía Campesina experience confirms that agricultural producers are divided in terms of their relationship to agricultural production. On the one hand are owners of large-scale operations dependent on exploiting wage labour, and those who identify with this model. On the other hand are working farmers utilizing mostly family labour, who are victims of corporate exploitation. The fact that the working farmers now speak through their own international organization is a historic accomplishment, going beyond what non-farm workers presently have at their disposal.

Escaping the NGO embrace

During its formation process, Vía Campesina came into contact with a variety of groups from what is often termed “civil society,” that is, non-governmental actors. The term embraces everything from an indigenous Zapatista community in a Mexican forest to richly funded corporate research institutions. Quoting Catherine Eschle, Desmarais notes the “hierarchical and oppressive relations that exist within civil society.”

Among “civil society” groups, it was the NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) that posed a special challenge for the nascent Vía Campesina. NGOs exist to channel contributions from governments, corporations, and others to development projects. They vary widely – good, bad, and ugly – but mostly tend to reflect the agenda of the state and corporate agencies that provide most of the funds.

“In general,” says Desmarais, “NGOs have different aims, purposes, interests, organizational cultures and structures, and mechanisms for decision making and accountability than peasant organizations.” She quotes the stinging comments of James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer, who term NGOs a “neo-comprador class” that is “not based on property ownership or governmental resources but derived from imperial funding and their own capacity to control significant popular groups.”

NGOs claim to “speak for those without a voice,” Desmarais notes. Unfortunately, “many NGOs have not been comfortable with what the ‘formerly voiceless’ have to say” and “have not learned how to keep quiet when appropriate.”

For example, Wilson Campos, a Costa Rican peasant leader and founding member of Vía Campesina, commented in 1994, “We don’t need all those NGOs.... We farmers can speak up for ourselves. Already too many people have been taking advantage of us, without us getting any the wiser for it.”

At its formative stages, La Vía Campesina endured a concerted effort by an influential NGO, the Paolo Freire Stiftung, to take control – particularly by defining the alliance’s purpose in terms of research rather than militant action and promoting an orientation toward large landowners. The stakes were high, since NGOs represented the main potential funding source. Desmarais provides a vivid account of the ensuing struggle, which ended in a parting of the ways.

A web of alliances

The sweeping vision of La Vía Campesina includes concepts that link the interests of working farmers to those of all victims of neoliberalism. Among them:

** Food as a human right. Back in 1974, a United Nations’ World Food Conference

proclaimed with much fanfare that within 10 years “no family will fear for its next day’s bread.” Since then, amid evidence that hunger is growing, world bodies have retreated from the 1974 pledge, in part because of U.S. insistence that the right adequate food is merely a “goal” or “aspiration.” In 2002, Desmarais reports, a World Food Summit abandoned any promise of the right to food. This commitment is central to the Vía Campesina program.

** Down with junk food! Vía Campesina’s French affiliate won worldwide attention to its concept of malbouffe (bad grub). Its leader, José Bové, won fame when he was jailed in 1999 for his role in a protest that dismantled a McDonald’s outlet then under construction in the rural town of Millau. Malbouffe is “food from nowhere,” Bové explains, food that has been stripped of “taste, health, and cultural and geographical identity ... the result of the intensive exploitation of the land to maximize yield and profit.”

** Land stewardship. For Vía Campesina, Desmarais says, agrarian reform means not just land distribution but a transformation of agricultural systems to favour small-farm production and marketing. “Land is a good of nature ... and cannot be a marketable good that can be obtained in whatever quantity.” She quotes João Pedro Stédile, a leader of Brazil’s landless tenants: “We want an agrarian practice that transforms farmers into guardians of the land, and a different way of farming that ensures an ecological equilibrium.” Some Vía Campesina groups, Desmarais notes, favour taking land off the market “and practicing the principle of social ownership of the land, whereby families who work the land have usufruct rights (the right to use the land without ownership).” This system, which has shown its worth in Cuba, provides a foundation for ecologically sound and sustainable agriculture.

The challenge of government

Annette Desmarais’s book does not take up how farmers can achieve a government that represents them and responds to their demands. In this regard, her book reflects the character of Vía Campesina itself, which states that it is politically pluralist and non-aligned.

Yet the great rallies against oppressive trade treaties in which Vía Campesina has participated show us how the question of government can be addressed. Mass demonstrations like that in Quebec City in 2001 bring together militant farmers, labour activists, ecologists, Indigenous peoples, feminists, human rights advocates – a wide alliance of social movements.

Over the last decade, such alliances have been able to install popular governments in several Latin American countries, especially Venezuela and Bolivia, which brought to a standstill the plans for a hemispheric “free trade” treaty.

The case of Bolivia shows what peasants can achieve on a governmental level. A militant peasant movement, one of whose leaders was Evo Morales, gave birth to a broad people’s political instrument, the IPSP by its Spanish acronym. It now governs the country (as the MAS, or Movement Toward Socialism) under Morales’s presidency. Victory is by no means complete, but much has been achieved for a peasants’ agenda close in conception to that of Vía Campesina. Moreover, drawing on its Indigenous-peasant roots, the Bolivian movement has now adopted a vision for social transformation, which it terms “communitarian socialism.”

Annette Desmarais has provided us with a gripping account of Vía Campesina. Her book can

help awaken labour, socialist, feminist, and ecological activists to the importance of farmers as allies and protagonists in the world struggle for social justice.

A note on terminology: 'Peasant' or 'Farmer'?

"When Vía Campesina was formed in 1993," Annette Desmarais tells us, "delegates from Great Britain objected that the literal translation [of its name] - 'Peasant Road' or 'Peasant Way' - would be inappropriate not only because of the derogatory connotation attached to the term 'peasant' but also because peasants did not actually exist in the British countryside."

The dictionary distinction between "peasant" and "farmer" is indeed sharp. Peasants are defined as small-scale cultivators, who are "coarse," "boorish," "poor," and "uneducated." The dictionaries politely omit another connotation of the term: "non-White." Farmers, by contrast, are defined to include rich entrepreneurs who personally never work the soil.

In the 1993 Vía Campesina debate, many delegates objected to dropping the term "peasant." Ultimately, a compromise was found: the term Vía Campesina would not be translated into English.

Nettie Wiebe, a leader of Canada's National Farmers union and also of Vía Campesina during its first decade, believes English-speaking farmers must reclaim the term "peasant," pointing to its origin in the French word paysan.

"If you actually look at what 'peasant' means, it means 'people of the land,' " Wiebe says. Are we Canadian farmers 'people of the land'? Well, yes, of course. And it's important to take that language back.... We too are peasants and it's the land and our relationship to the land and food production that distinguishes us."

According to Desmarais, "reclaiming the meaning of peasant is perhaps one of the Vía Campesina's most important achievements."

She quotes Karen Pedersen, NFU women's president from 2002-2005, who notes that the term "farmer," too, has now become derogatory, carrying "the connotation of inefficiency" and obsolescence. "Well, I am a farmer and I am a peasant," Pedersen says. "Through my participation in the Vía Campesina I learned that I had much more in common with peasants than I did with some of my agribusiness neighbours.... Being a peasant stands for the kind of agriculture and rural communities we are striving to build."

Further reading: Socialist Voice on Farming

Fidel Castro on Global Warming, Biofuel, and World Hunger www.socialistvoice.ca/?p=176

Harvest of Injustice: The Oppression of Migrant Workers on Canadian Farms, by Adriana Paz www.socialistvoice.ca/?p=301

Food Crisis: World Hunger, Agribusiness, and the Food Sovereignty Alternative, by Ian Angus www.socialistvoice.ca/wp-content/uploads/2008/05/foodcrisis.pdf>

The Myth of the Tragedy of the Commons, by Ian Angus <www.socialistvoice.ca/?p=316>

Farmers Seek Defenses Against the Giants of Agribusiness, by John Riddell

www.socialistvoice.ca/?p=270

Venezuela Responds to World Food Crisis, by John Riddell and Suzanne Weiss
www.socialistvoice.ca/?p=267

The Epic Struggle of Indigenous Andean-Amazonian Culture, by Hugo Blanco
www.socialistvoice.ca/?p=198

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