

Occupy Monsanto: Occupy the Dialectic

by Don Fitz

According to Carmelo Ruiz-Marrero, Western powers have been grabbing seeds from the global South for centuries in order to develop new plant breeds. His talk provided a political and historical context to the current global battle around the patenting of seeds and crops with genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

It was September 16, the first day of GMO-Free Midwest, the St. Louis portion of Occupy Monsanto. On the panel with Carmelo was Dr. Ollie Fisher, whose first job after getting his Chemical Engineering degree was working at Monsanto. He left that position after becoming distressed with the way the company uses its technology to coerce Africa into producing food that compromises human health.

Priti Gulati Cox also joined the panel “GMOs as a Weapon of Global Domination.” She described effects of GMO crops on her native India. Monsanto advertises heavily to persuade farmers to switch to its new wonder seeds. After multiple crop failures, thousands of Indian farmers have gone bankrupt and committed suicide.

Post-activity discussion helps “synthesize” the thought/action dichotomy.

... people of color in the Global South are most often forced to give up sustainable agriculture ...

The following day, September 17, Occupy Monsanto sponsored actions across the globe. Beginning with a day of panels, the St. Louis event encouraged a dialectical interplay between thought and action. Occupy Wall Street (OWS) had expanded the practice of having discussions interspersed with activities. Panels and lectures provide core information. Demonstrations, marches and direct actions “concretize” or give meaning to ideas.

Nowhere are these processes more important than in combating GMO contamination of food. Several contradictions confronted organizers of GMO-free Midwest.

Contradiction 1. Currently, safe food is viewed largely as a white intellectual concern in the US. This creates an enormous contradiction because farmers, and especially peoples of Latin America, Africa and Asia most affected by the international campaigns of agribusiness. Today, it is people of color in the Global South who are most often forced to give up sustainable agriculture and adopt industrial growing methods.

Multi-ethnic panels strengthen the movement as participants realize that they share a common opponent with their allies. But, until the US safe food movement becomes truly multi-ethnic, its effectiveness will be severely limited.

The St. Louis forum covered the basics: Daniel Romano described Monsanto’s role in advancing herbicides and pesticides; Suzanne Renard looked at the specific effects of chemicals on bees; Stan Cox went into the big picture of industrial agriculture; and, Eric Herm gave a personal account of a farmer making choices about using GMOs. Anne Petermann linked these US experiences, the global advance of genetically engineered trees, and the cur-



Rich Martin threatens to throw out organizers & journalists. Photo: Petermann/ GJEP



Irina Ermakova, a leading scientist at the Russian Academy of Scientists, joins GMO-Free Midwest picket. Photo: Don Fitz

rent push to drive indigenous forest protectors from their homes.

Contradiction 2 The time is more than ripe for safe food efforts to move from symbolic to substantive actions. Symbolic actions are necessary for building a movement. The Gateway Green Alliance (GGA) continually meets people coming from the other side of town or from across the globe because marching at its world headquarters is personally significant for them. Never underestimate the importance of ritual. Whether singing, chanting, standing in a circle, or picketing Monsanto, symbolic actions strengthen the bonds of community.

Yet, picketing Monsanto World Headquarters (MWH) is not substantive — if there were a thousand times as many pickets, it would not affect Monsanto's profits. A substantive action against Monsanto would interfere with its functioning in some way. It is difficult (but not impossible) to organize substantive actions against Monsanto because it distributes to other companies rather than to consumers. But Whole Foods Market (WFM), a newly arrived stepchild in the Monsanto extended family, distributes directly to consumers. This makes it a potential target for substantive actions. Even more so because those who shop at WFM think that higher prices buy them better quality food. WFM customers very often suffer the illusion that it does not sell GMO food.

A picket in front of WFM or signs on top of cars in its parking lot are symbolic actions which may irritate its management but do not interfere with its business. In contrast, a shop-in slows down the check-out line as participants ask if each item contains GMOs. It is substantive because of its potential. If thousands of people were to participate in dozens of cities, sales at WFM would plummet. Facing a potential boycott, WFM might reverse its hidden love affair with Monsanto and begin labeling GMO foods.

Contradiction 3 In seeking to make the WFM action more substantive, organizers faced the contra-

dition of openness vs. guardedness. Everyone agreed on guardedness. After the 2003 Biodev-astation 7 Gathering in St. Louis, an ACLU inquiry discovered our personal emails in files of Homeland Security, which had been working with Monsanto. Similarly, several reports on OWS actions in 2011 noted how police knew of plans before events happened.

A guarded approach in 2012 meant not putting details of the shop-in on the website or in email or discussing them during phone calls. As a result, police and WFM management had no idea of what we were doing until we were in the middle of doing it.

But there was a downside. More open planning has the advantage of reaching a larger number of people eager to participate in direct action. Discussing plans with everyone weeks in advance gives them a chance to rehearse it in their minds. In our post-action discussion, we covered ins and outs of how the shop-in went and how it could be improved on. These thoughts are now being shared via personal contact with multiple organizations.

One type of open inclusiveness did not enter into planning because it recently proved so damaging to OWS. That is "consensus decision-making" by dozens or hundreds of people who come to a General Assembly. It has the advantage of empowering people who have been excluded from corporate society. But it means that weeks of planning can be thrown out the window by 1 or 2 people who may have little commitment to the movement but decide to "block."

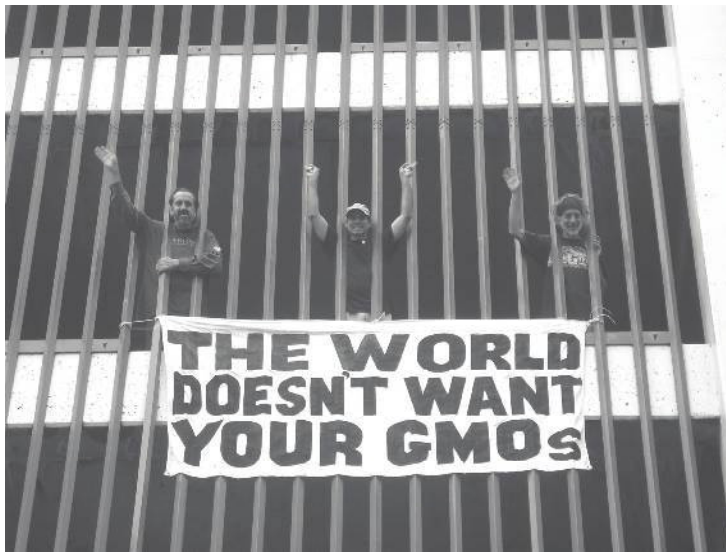
The time is more than ripe for safe food efforts to move from symbolic to substantive actions.

Consensus is not only useful but necessary when practiced by a direct action group willing to risk arrest or coordinators who must make on-the-spot decisions during an action. Consensus by an undefined membership is so self-destructive that it is time to give it a belated burial.

Occupy Monsanto can become stronger by building on and learning from Occupy Wall Street. To grow, it needs to carry out more substantive actions.

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Collective self-reflection on how to build a multi-ethnic movement, how to undermine the power of agribusiness, and which tactics are most effective are the foundation of synthesizing our knowledge and experience. It is also essential for our most important goal — contemplating the type of new society we wish to build.



Banner hung across the street from GMO industry conference. Photo: Sandy Griffin

“Stop Talking or You Will Be Removed from the Hotel”

As we began the second day of “GMO-free Midwest,” we found that the Millennium Hotel had moved us to the other side of the floor. The new room was half the size of the one we had paid for. Conference coordinator Barbara Chicherio went to find the supervisor in charge. On the other side of a roped off area guarded heavily by hotel security were attendees of the industry-backed “International Symposium on Biosafety of GMOs.”

It appeared that the Millennium Hotel was as interested in making sure that we did not contaminate its audience as we were interested in preventing GMOs from contaminating the environment.

“Sir, are you in charge here?” Barbara asked. “Uptight” can barely describe the Millennium supervisor who starred back at her, stiff as a board. “I need to talk to you,” she continued. “Why were we moved from the room we rented?”

There was no answer.

“And why were we moved to the far end of the hall? And why were we put in a room half the size of what we paid for?” And when can we get the table to go up in front of the room for the book signing that I explained we were having?”

“Did you read your contract?” finally came the response from the cardboard supervisor. “Read the BOE part of your contract.”

“What does that have to do with our being moved to a smaller room?”

“If you don’t stop talking to me, I will have you removed from the hotel,” was the most thoughtful answer he could come up with. His name tag read “Rich Martin, Director of Catering and Convention Services.”

Orin Langelle with the Global Justice Ecology Project (GJEP) pulled out his camera to film the interaction. Rich put up his hand, growling “No photos! You get away from me or I’ll have you removed from the hotel.” Nearby, Anne Petermann

slid her camera away as she quietly caught Rich on film.

Months before, Barbara heard that a major pro-GMO symposium would be happening in Monsanto’s home town of St. Louis during September 16–20. Greens thought that it might be interesting to have an event critical of GMOs at the same time and place.

In St. Louis, virtually every large institution has received major funding from Monsanto. There is a history of people reserving hotel or college space for events critical of Monsanto having to confront the problem of rent zooming up or other pressure to leave the location.

With a contract signed months in advance of the event, we went to the National Lawyers Guild (NLG) to ask about our legal options if history were to repeat itself. One of the many pieces of useful information the NLG gave us was that the hotel would have the right to prevent us from entering if we were wearing T shirts with slogans they did not like. So, we covered our T-shirts with jackets before entering and took jackets off once inside.

Just as we were about to begin the panel, a woman came in wearing a name tag of the Biosafety Symposium. We wondered if she wandered into our room by mistake. She introduced herself as Dr. Irina Ermakova and said she wanted to find out about our forum.

The author of some of the most important papers documenting dangers of GMOs, Dr. Ermakova is a Russian scientist who replicated work of Dr. Arpad Puztai. Dr. Puztai gained notoriety in 1998 when after reporting his research finding damage to the gut of rats fed GMOs. He had been a supporter

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of GMOs prior to his research but announced that he would never eat them after what he discovered. His employer, the famed Rowett Institute, then suspended him. Later, it came to light that Monsanto had given Rowett Research Services a grant of \$224,000.

Dr. Ermakova found that offspring of female rats who had been fed GMO soy had a death rate of 50% within three weeks of birth. The death rate of infant rats whose mothers had eaten non-GMO soy was 10%. Offspring of GMO-fed rats were smaller and unable to reproduce when they reached adulthood. After reporting her findings, Ermakova experienced frequent verbal abuse from biotech enthusiasts and discovered charred remnants of papers placed in her office. We delayed the panel on “Green Economics: Reality vs. Fantasy” so that Dr. Ermakova could review her research and concerns with GMO food.

The final panel of the conference explained how GMOs are part of an overall thrust by neoliberalism to control the world economy. Orin spoke of

the tragedy of Monsanto workers dying from chemical poisoning in addition to the contamination of entire communities. He detailed how false solutions for climate change such as the Green Economy and Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) only serve to make corporations richer.

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I pointed out that, during the twentieth century, the food industry faced the problem of how it could continue to grow once it became possible to feed the entire global population. It invented needs for pesticides, herbicides, processing, packaging, storing, advertising, and genetic modification, none of which increased the nutrition of food. The food industry is typical of other areas of production, which have grown not by improving people's lives, but by developing wasteful and destructive processes and products.

With the discussion portion of GMO-free Monsanto over, we went across the street and ... were joined by large puppets of mutant GMO corn and pesticide resistant larva. A banner was soon hung from the fourth floor of a neighboring parking building which read "THE WORLD DOESN'T WANT YOUR GMOs" A few minutes later we were joined by Dr. Irina Ermakova who posed by our pickets for a photo that ran in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* the next day.

"Ma'am, Please Don't Take Off Your Shirt in the Parking Lot"

Several dozen people went from picketing the industry-sponsored "Biosafety" symposium at the Millennium Hotel to Whole Foods Market (WFM) in Brentwood, Missouri. The action at WFM built on previous demonstrations and caught store management and local police completely off guard.

June 9 had seen a creative picket of WFM that provided an opportunity to talk with WFM workers who have been led to believe that the store does not sell GMOs. A few shoppers joined the picket upon learning that WFM brags that it labels GMO food when it only labels non-GMO food, leaving customers uninformed about potentially contaminated products.

On August 18 a new tactic challenged WFM. WFM aggressively censors "soliciting" which it says includes telling customers of dangers that GMOs poses to health and the environment. So, we went into its parking lot with signs on top of cars saying "GMOs Contaminate Food" on one side and "WFM Sells GMOs" on the other. Other cars had the same message on window signs or on home-made bumper stickers.

Police told drivers that they could not enter the parking lot with "protest signs" on their cars. But

they were hard pressed to explain what was and what was not a protest sign. They were particularly befuddled at trying to figure out if they should order the removal of bumper stickers, since so many cars at WFM have safe food slogans on them. As we discussed what constitutes a protest message, other drivers came in, parked, and let their cars with signs on top remain throughout the afternoon.

A new level of action On September 17, we took activities at WFM to a higher level. A few carried signs on the sidewalk. But most walked to the front of the store.

"If you are here to protest, you need to go to the sidewalk," the police motioned. I buttoned up my jacket over my "Genetic Engineering — Don't Swallow It" T-shirt and walked through the police. Since we didn't appear different from typical WFM customers, others in our group did the same.

Some said, "I just came here to pick up a few items" as they walked past the police, who were again unsure of what to do.

Apparently warned that we would be there, WFM staff could be heard saying "What's happening? They're all coming in to shop." Safe food ac-

the food industry faced the problem of how it could continue to grow once it became possible to feed the entire global population.

tivists wandered through the store looking at labels carefully. They did not put items in their carts if they read, "GMO-free," "organic," or "365," which is the WFM house brand.

As shoppers went through the check-out line, they picked up each item and asked the cashier if it had GMOs in it. If so, it went in the "don't buy" pile. Cashiers often weren't sure; and that meant it also went in the "don't buy" pile. One cashier



Activist ties up the checkout line at Whole Foods by asking the clerk whether each of the items in her cart contains GMOs. Photo: Langelles/GJEP

claimed that everything WFM sold was GMO-free, which led to each item in turn being put aside by a disbelieving shopper.

Shoppers took the opportunity to explain our concerns to every employee. And there is no better opportunity to discuss potential food contamination than doing so with a customer waiting behind you in line. WFM is particularly vulnerable to such a tactic because the vast majority of its customers are concerned about food quality.

From chatting with us, customers found out that, though WFM products cost more than those at

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other grocery stores, they are very likely to contain GMOs. With a bad rep for extreme anti-unionism and buying out competitors in order to destroy them, WFM is also resented for reversing its former opposition to GMO foods. It now babbles about “informed customer choices” but fails to inform customers by labeling food that might have GMOs.

From Shop-In to Talk-In Many safe food shoppers asked for the manager to come and verify whether food in their cart was GMO-free. At one point, a frazzled manager began grabbing handfuls of food and pushing it aside, saying “Yes, all this food has GMOs.” The manager seemed obsessed with keeping the check-out lane flowing as rapidly as possible.

Managerial distress was caused by two dictums: WFM policy says that every customer question must be answered; and, WFM also says that shopping must be a “pleasant experience.” But the shopping experience might be made unpleasant either by a slowed check-out line or by customers watching someone being hassled by police for the crime of asking if food quality is compromised. This particular manager decided that pleasant shopping would best be maintained by confirming that a large amount of WFM items might be contaminated with GMOs.

The National Lawyers Guild (NLG) had told us that WFM could order us to leave and those who refused could be arrested. But it would have been impossible for WFM to determine who con-

stituted “us.” WFM could have brought police from inside to harass those they thought were “protestors.” But doing so would run the risk of intimidating everyday customers who go to WFM concerned with the quality of food and happen to ask a question or two about what they are buying. Its liberal façade again makes WFM more vulnerable to a shop-in than any other supermarket chain.

Our friendly shoppers left the store with a single purchased item, confirming that they were, in fact, WFM customers. Others asked what all the commotion was about and what we were trying to accomplish. Some asked if they should boycott WFM. We explained that they could help lay the groundwork for a future boycott by telling everyone they knew about the true face of WFM.

The WFM ban on “solicitation” had been broken in store aisles, in check-out lines, and at the store entrance. Unable to distinguish “protestors” from “legitimate” customers, neither WFM management nor Brentwood police could stop people from asking “Why should we be concerned about what we buy at WFM?” Getting people to ask that question was the point of the action.

From Talk-In to Gawk-In A foam-board sign with holes for zip-ties can be fastened with bungee cords to the top of a car in 10–15 seconds by people who have practiced doing it. As cops and store managers were trying to figure out if they could do anything about the growing number of GMO conversations among customers, two people tied a six foot long sign saying that “WFM Sells GMOs” atop a station wagon. By the time the cops figured out what had happened, the two were long gone.

Cops walked over and asked the people looking at the car who owned it; but they just shrugged their shoulders. Most picketers left their sidewalk location to see what the cops were doing. Friendly shoppers walked toward the car. Customers drifted over to hear everyone asking about why police were concerned that a car had a sign on its hood.

There are few things that people gawk at more than cops looking at something while a small crowd looks at the cops. Barbara Chicherio asked what bothered them. “Protest signs need to be on the sidewalk and not on cars,” a cop huffed.

Barbara described the car signs, window signs and bumper stickers, asking



Eric Herm, anti-GMO cotton farmer from Texas, stands by car sign in Whole Foods parking lot.

Photo: Petermann/GJEP

which needed to be removed. The cop scowled. Remembering that she was wearing a “Millions Against Monsanto” T-shirt, she had a flash: “Officer,” she asked, “If everything critical of Whole Foods and Monsanto is a protest sign, do I have to take off this T-shirt?”

“Ma’am, please do not take off your T-shirt in the parking lot!” The crowd laughed and even the cop chuckled. The absurdity of trying to wrestle through the twists and turns of exactly what type of free expression WFM could suppress was too much.

Effects of the police presence had turned into their opposite. Intended to be soft-core harassers, the police were less than totally dedicated to protecting WFM customers from the horror of people asking about food contamination. The show of police force served to increase discussion about WFM, thereby furthering goals of the action.

Within half an hour of the mini-confrontation in the parking lot, the police gave up efforts to get the sign off the car and walked off. Soon the crowd drifted away but the sign remained until the end of the action. Having reached over 10 times as many WFM workers and customers as all previous efforts combined, safe food shoppers boarded a bus and cars headed for their final destination of the day: Monsanto World Headquarters in Creve Coeur, Missouri.

“Rats Who Eat ‘em Already Know...”

The Gateway Green Alliance/Green Party of St. Louis has over 10 years of experience picketing Monsanto World Headquarters (MWH). Long before the company was contaminating and dominating the food supply, it was producing toxic chemicals such as PCBs for insulation and Agent Orange for the Vietnam War. Its herbicide Roundup links its chemical past to its present focus on genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Two-thirds of GMOs are created to make herbicide- and pesticide-resistant crops.

With two highly successful events, safe food activists expected the demonstration at Monsanto to be an uneventful repeat of the many actions held previously at that location. It was not. For years, the company had pretended to be accepting, even

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having pitchers of water and cups prepared for protestors on some occasions. But not on the day of Occupy Monsanto.

No corporate greeters were on hand. A sparse line of police stood in military rigidity behind yellow rope. One cop walked over, saying, “You can demonstrate on your side of the rope as long as you stay on the grass and don’t step on the pavement.”

As he swaggered away John Wayne-style, a woman muttered to me, “Last time I was here they



Monsanto had a history before GMOs.

MWH, Sept 17 2012. Photo: Don Fitz ordered me to stay on the pavement and not get on the grass.”

Among the many banners and signs were three sets of signs that had to go in the right order if they were to make sense to motorists driving 40–60 mph down Olive Blvd. Each sign had 1 or 2 words:

“WHY IS – MONSANTO – SUING – FARMERS?”
“STOP – MONSANTO’s – GENETIC –
CONTAMINATION – OF OUR – FOOD”
“WHY IS – MONSANTO – PUSHING – FOOD
THAT – RATS – WON’T EAT?”

I asked several people to go to the other side of the road and be sure to comply with police wishes for us to cross over at the light. Several came back saying a cop had told them that they had to stay on this side of the road and could not cross over. “It must be my friend, John Wayne,” went through my mind.

National Lawyers Guild (NLG) observer Maggie Ellinger-Locke asked the cop about his interpretation of safety law and he replied, “Oh, yes, you can be on the other side of the road, as long as you stay on the grass.” Maggie and I glanced at each other, both aware that an argument explained by an attorney can be effective while the same statement put forth by an average citizen can be ignored.

That problem was solved and everything was going dandy. So, the cops invented a new problem. “Cars in Stacy Park can be towed if the driver is not using the park,” they told us.

Monsanto World Headquarters is at two busy streets and the few neighbors are a church and businesses that have ties to or dare not offend the Bio-tech Master. Parking is a real hassle. For years, no one cared if people left their cars at Stacy Park, especially at the time of day of our picket when the park is barely used. So off went several people to

move cars, somewhat suspicious that Creve Coeur police might not be completely neutral defenders of public safety.

What a great victory it was! For years, Monsanto had judged us to be such a minor nuisance that they could ignore us or mock us with the feigned graciousness of water pitchers. But this day was different. For the first time, Monsanto was so much against the wall from global opposition that it felt the need to harass the picket at its front door.

Political activists do not use the word “transcend” to mean that some one’s mind is going into outer space, disconnected from reality. “Transcend” means to include while going into a deeper meaning. Occupy Monsanto was becoming transcendent. It included the basic concerns that people have with human health — the poisoning of our food and our families. But it went beyond personal experience and linked up people across the globe.

Those who had lost a family member due to poisoning while working for Monsanto. Low income communities of color which have become uninhabitable due to toxic releases. Veterans who still suffer from Agent Orange as well as Vietnamese who endure ghastly effects. Farmers who fear their land being invaded by seed police. Argentinians who see once diverse fields turned into Roundup-ready monocultures. Africans who watch traditional cultivation wisdom ploughed under mounds of greed. Indians whose neighbors commit suicide following GMO crop failures. On September 17, 2012, those who simply want to feed their families safe food knew that they had allies throughout the world and that they must stand with these allies if they are to win the quality of food they want.

One person who did not stand in solidarity was the woman going around with a camera obtrusively filming each demonstrator. As she walked up wearing a stern look, Crystal Washington asked, “Hey, why you got that gun on your hip?” Crystal is the Green Party Committeewoman for Ward 4 of the City of St. Louis.

Wearing no identification connecting her with Monsanto, Homeland Security, or local police, the woman did not answer but continued to film. Nor would she answer anyone else who requested that she identify herself.

Truly, the biotech company was not putting on its happy face for Occupy Monsanto.

As the departing hour of 5:00 pm approached, I asked Maggie to join me in posing a question for officer John Wayne. Standing well on the other side of the yellow rope, he yelled out asking what we wanted. I motioned for him to come over, indicating the seri-

ousness of the question. “Officer, there is something that you could help us with. We would like a group picture and wonder if you could snap it so we could all be in it.” I held my camera toward him.

“We don’t do photos.” He strutted off.

Oh, well. He had the chance to transcend his John Wayne role; but, he blew it and will never go down in history as the officer who took the culminating photo at Monsanto World Headquarters.

“Hey, why you got that gun on your hip?”

During the entire event at Monsanto, reporter Charles Jakko had his mobile TV antennae extended 20–30 feet in the air for recording. Jakko is the reporter known internationally for

interviewing Todd Akin, the candidate for US Senator from Missouri who educated the world on “legitimate” rape.

As people were putting their signs in a pile, Jakko’s cameraman shouted, “You’re not leaving, are you?”

“Yes, people want to be on the bus by 5,” I told him.

“We were going to show you live on the 5:00 news!” the cameraman let me know.

A quick huddle and we decided to march in a circle for the live shot. Rain dribbled down at first but slowly got heavier each minute we got closer to the taping. Remembering what she learned from the

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panel discussions, Crystal came up with the background chant as Jakko put us on the air...

“Rats who eat ‘em already know, GMOs have got to go!”

A few minutes after 5 and the camera shut down; rain was heavier; and people were off to the Community Arts and Movement Center (CAMP) for the final wrap-up and reflection.

At Biodevastation 7 in 2003, CAMP was one of several locations raided by St. Louis police for the Monsanto-inspired hallucination that we were bringing 50,000 anarchists to destroy downtown. In 2012, Anne Petermann had come from New York to speak at GMO-Free Midwest. Explaining that she was originally from St. Louis, she let everyone at CAMP know, “Today, I was told that I was unwelcome at three different locations. It feels just like the St. Louis I left. It’s so good to be home.”

Don Fitz helped plan GMO-Free Midwest and is active in the Greens/Green Party USA.



Crystal Washington at MWH, Sept 17 2012.

Photo: Don Fitz