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Photograph by Alain McLaughlin

Bus tour delegation members. TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: Mark Weisbrot, Center for Economic and Policy Research; Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA); Rep. John Conyers (D-MI); Cheri Honkala, Kensington Welfare Rights Union; Sarah and Zayd Zaidi, Center for Economic and Social Rights; Jeff Perlestein, campaign coordinator, Food First. BOTTOM LEFT TO RIGHT: Anuradha Mittal, co-director, Food First; Roger Normand, Center for Economic and Social Rights; Isao Fujimoto, board member, Food First; Jessica Bartholow, Alameda County Community Food Bank.

THE 2001 ECONOMIC HUMAN RIGHTS BUS TOUR:

The Movement Builds Momentum

From the Bay Area to the Central Coast of California, testifiers came forward to break the silence surrounding the daily violations of their human rights in the world's most affluent society. Freeman Davis, a 71 year old veteran and client at the Oakland Homeless Project, said "I worked for 48 years as a machinist and I helped build the Alaska pipeline. I served my country well and now I don't have enough income to rent an apartment and for basic needs like clothing and food."

Food First organized the 2001 Economic Human Rights Bus Tour from May 29-31 to strengthen the movement for economic and social human rights in the United States. The bus tour was endorsed by the fifty-seven member Congressional Progressive Caucus and more than two hundred organizations from across the country. The tour drew the attention of policymakers and the media to growing poverty and hunger in rural and urban areas of California, as well as the powerful grassroots campaigns that address these human rights violations.

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FOOD FIRST empowers citizens to address the root causes of hunger, poverty, and environmental decline. Our research and educational materials reveal how anti-democratic institutions and belief systems promote hunger and environmental destruction.

Agroecology in Resistance: ZAPATISTA COMMUNITIES USE ALTERNATIVES TO BUILD AUTONOMY

On April 26 Food First co-director Peter Rosset and a handful of other agroecologists traveled deep into the Lacandón jungle in Chiapas, Mexico. For three days they met with more than fifty agroecology “promoters” from three autonomous Zapatista “municipalities in rebellion,” for a meeting titled, “Agroecology in Resistance: After Three Years, Which Way Forward?” Each day they walked hours through the jungle to visit isolated farms, and returned to meet in small groups to evaluate experiences and discuss options. Pictures could be taken, but only outdoors and not of faces. It is a rare occasion when outsiders are invited to see Zapatistas without ski masks and bandannas.



Photograph by Peter Rosset

Promoters visiting a farmer with a permanent parcel. For security reasons close-up photos of Zapatista faces could not be taken.

In December of 1994, almost a year after the initial uprising, 38 Chiapas municipalities containing 1,111 Zapatista communities rose up and threw out government authorities. They declared themselves autonomous and under local independent governance. In at least three of the communities a consensus decision was made not to accept any government assistance or allow any government programs. As part of this resistance to the government, they also decided to be as self-sufficient as possible in meeting basic needs, and refused to buy or use any pesticide or chemical fertilizer of any kind, because these products “promote dependence on the outside” and “kill the soil.”

These communities have their own schools, which reject the official curriculum. Instead, the children are taught math, science, and cultural history in the corn fields, learning to calculate area and how many kilos of seeds are needed, the biology of crops and pests, and the role of corn in their history.

The agroecology promoters are primarily indigenous men, 16 to 30 years of age, and mostly Zoques, with some Choles, Tzeltales, and Tzoziles. The promoters are motivated by how to turn their resistance into something positive, a model that others will follow, and a deep concern that unless agricultural practices change, their generation will inherit degraded land that has lost its fertility and ability to sustain life. This will leave them with no alternative but to migrate and lose their communities, families, and

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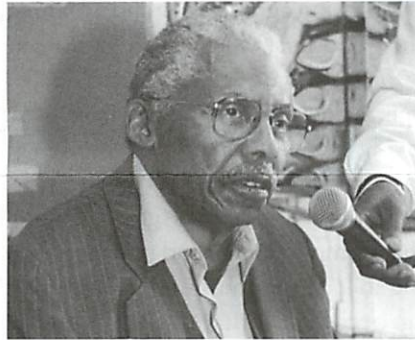
“Even with my disability benefits, my income does not cover my basic expenses. Everyone ought to be able to afford the food necessary for good health without having to worry about whether to instead pay for other necessities like rent and medications. If it weren’t for the good lunches I receive at St. Mary’s Center I wouldn’t eat very well,” said Lynn Hoberg, a 62 year old former waitress, secretary, and administrative assistant. “I was upset to learn that I was only eligible for \$10 in food stamps, even though I had no income at the time.”

Listening to these testimonies as part of Food First’s delegation were Representatives Barbara Lee (D-CA), John Conyers (D-MI), and Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, along with state and local elected officials, community members, and the media. Delegation members from Food First’s national network of endorsing organizations included Cheri Honkala, director of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union; Mark Weisbrot, director of the Center for Economic and Policy Research; and Roger Normand and Sarah Zaidi, co-directors of the Center for Economic and Social Rights. The distinguished delegation heard testimonies and policy recommendations directly from service providers and community members, emphasizing the need for bolder legislative initiatives and a greater community role in policy making.

For a Living Wage and Universal Health Coverage

“Over the last two decades, workers have faced a drastically different workplace economy,” said Hina Shah, staff attorney for the Asian Law Caucus and board president of Sweatshop Watch. “While corporations have reaped tremendous profits by the free flow of capital, workers have seen their basic rights to decent wages, health benefits, and protection from discrimination steadily erode.”

At the packed meeting hall of Teamsters Local 890 in Salinas, community members described some of the struggles they are facing in the new economy. “I worked for two weeks at minimum wage packing roma tomatoes and chilies. The owner paid everyone a week late because he said he had no money. When I was



Photograph by Josue Ramirez

Freeman Davis testifying at the Oakland Homeless Project, a site threatened with closure due to insufficient funding.

paid the check was more than 10 hours short with no overtime.” Paula Placencia of *Lideres Campesinas* described some successes and the ongoing struggle of her and her co-workers for their basic rights: “After seven months of negotiations we signed our first contract. We got basic things like small wage increases above the minimum and paid sick days. Two years ago in our second contract we were finally able to negotiate for family medical insurance.”

With 43 million Americans lacking health insurance, 85 percent of whom are working, Frances Payne of Neighbor-to-Neighbor argued that “Health insurance has become a commodity to be bought and sold to the highest bidder for the highest returns. We need to work together to ensure that health care is seen as a human right, as an endeavor to alleviate suffering and promote the well-being of our diverse and vibrant communities.”

The 2001 Economic Human Rights Bus Tour in California demonstrated through first-hand accounts that the violations of people’s basic human rights in the

world’s wealthiest nation continue to accelerate. Encouragingly, the bus tour also documented powerful community-based campaigns for justice in California. Site visits and hearings included a downtown Oakland walking tour, led by Building Opportunities for Self Sufficiency (BOSS), of low income housing slated for demolition, the soup kitchen of the St. Anthony’s Foundation in San Francisco, and the fields of the Central Coast to witness the United Farm Workers’ fight for fundamental economic human rights to safe housing and working conditions, and basic health care.

Next Steps

This tour was one part of Food First’s ongoing efforts to spur legislative action that meets the needs of the nation’s poor. The tour called for:

- ✓ Truly adequate federal funding for education, health care, and child care;
- ✓ A minimum wage that is a living wage;
- ✓ Measures to address the relationship between race and poverty;
- ✓ A re-ordering of federal priorities toward meeting the needs of the nation’s poor;
- ✓ Ratification of the International Covenant for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

In the coming months we will continue working with policymakers, service providers, and community-based organizations to fight for every American’s right to an adequate standard of living. We are now urging Congressional and California State officials to hold committee hearings based on the delegation’s findings. California State Assembly Member Wilma Chan has already agreed to conduct hearings on child poverty in California this fall.

Join with us in demanding economic human rights for every single person in the United States. To get involved with Food First’s *Economic Human Rights: The Time Has Come!* campaign, please contact us at humanrights@foodfirst.org or call (510) 654-4400 x235.

culture. For them, agroecology is the only viable alternative to enable them to stay on the land and in the community.

In their grandparent's time, there was enough land, they said. Each family would cultivate about two hectares each year. It would be cleared from the jungle and burned to add a pulse of nutrients to the soil for the new crop. They would then let this land 'rest' in fallow for seven to ten years, while other patches would be cultivated in a rotating fashion. The re-growth of natural vegetation would restore the fertility of the soil, which would yield as much as 3.5 tons of corn per hectare (a family needs just 2.5 to live for a year). But when they divided the 20 hectares among the families of the children, the parents of today's young people, there wasn't enough for

the full seven to ten year rotation, and the fallow period had to be shortened. As they soon discovered, if you burn at intervals of less than seven years, the soil doesn't recover its fertility and yields drop rapidly. Today they often harvest as little as 0.7 tons per hectare, far too little to support a family.

By studying agroecology and watching the Food First video, *The Greening of Cuba*, they developed the idea of "permanent parcels." They have been trying them for three years now, based on continuous corn cultivation with *nescafé* beans grown as a 'green manure' that pumps biomass and nutrients into the soil. The farmers told the group of agroecologists that in the first three years of green manure with no burning, corn yields have been rising

continuously and new soil, rich in organic matter, was being formed.

These and other experiences, both positive and negative, formed the basis of the discussions. The example of Cuba was foremost in the promoters minds, and how this tiny island with more than 40 years of resistance was also now using agroecology to strengthen that resistance. Cuba was a shining example of the resistance and autonomy they fervently hoped would lead to a better world in Zapatista territory and in Mexico. On the last day, Peter Rosset told the young agroecology promoters that their shining example of resistance, and their commitment, motivation, and enthusiasm, will inspire people the world over in the struggle against corporate-dominated globalization.

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