

Since 1999 the media image of French anticapitalism has been a comic book caricature, an Asterix for the twenty-first century – the Gallic, pipe-smoking figure of José Bové. His interventions from Millau to Seattle and Brazil to Palestine have fascinated journalists – but the story told here is a little different. In August 1999, the destruction of a McDonald's in Millau by farmers from the union Confédération Paysanne established Bové as a national hero, but as we learn here, the media icon is merely the tip of a rather large iceberg.

*This act of strategic and symbolic property destruction was not a riot but a community carnival, organized to convey a clear message about WTO sanctions and the cultural imperialism of the United States. Above Millau is the Larzac plateau, where the small farmers that dismantled the McDonald's come from. Famous for producing Roquefort cheese, their livelihoods were threatened by WTO-approved sanctions imposed to punish Europe for refusing the import of US beef injected with growth hormones. Punitive sanctions of this type, which included a prohibitively high import tax on Roquefort entering the US, can devastate local economies, but in picking on Roquefort, the WTO had unwittingly stumbled upon a rather deep seam of resistance.*

*In the 1970s, newcomers to the Larzac arrived to oppose its transition into a military testing range. Traditional ways of living were soon transformed, and in no time large communal plaques with quotations from Mao and Marcuse appeared. The Larzac community launched a newspaper and a satirical journal that continue to this day and the sheep farmers of the Larzac organized themselves under the umbrella of Confédération Paysanne, which has since become a key node in the growing network of peasant farmers' organizations worldwide, La Via Campesina. In this piece, the Larzac plateau remains a beacon of resistance and a symbol of continuity and solidarity, a place where Roquefort and rebellion go hand in hand.*

## The Roquefort Rebellion

by Norm Diamond

It is early afternoon, 30 June 2000. We are part of a vast chain of people hiking down from the plateau of Larzac to the town of Millau. We walk mostly single file, along what our guides tell us is normally an obscure path for sheep. Much of the time we have fabulous vistas: over the river Tarn and its narrow valley, over the tiled roofs of the ancient town, across to the other plateaus that squeeze Millau. When we are able to look up from the steep path, we see others like ourselves, hundreds, perhaps thousands of us, snaking down the cliff face. We are the impatient ones, the ones who wouldn't wait for organized transport. Eventually we reach a road and have to cross between the steady flow of shuttle buses bringing thousands more. On foot and by bus, we are a guerrilla army taking over the town.

We are in southern France for the trial of ten sheep farmers accused of dismantling a McDonald's and using their tractors to haul away the debris. One of the farmers is José Bové, one of the media stars in the anti-WTO protests in Seattle, who distributed smuggled Roquefort cheese and spoke effectively about the horrors of corporate agriculture. We are in his home territory, and his popularity is immense. National polls show him winning the presidency of France, should he choose to run. Unions, peasant organizations and leftist groups have chartered trains and buses from all across France to show their solidarity.

Along the road we pass the refurbished McDonald's. It has

been open for business, but today it is shuttered. Riot police with three-quarter body length shields surround it, barricaded behind buses and armoured cars. Given our numbers, they hardly appear menacing. Indeed, they are nearly the only police we shall see this day. Even the courthouse relies on marshals from the demonstrators to keep order in the street.

“Seattle on the Tarn,” is what organizers name the day, and French media are quick to use the catchy appellation in their headlines. J30 is what we call it for short, identifying it with a continuing list of date-named protests against capitalist globalization worldwide.

So far, each of these protests has gained inspiration, legitimacy, and momentum from the ones that precede it. Each one of these events, however, came out of concrete local conditions, out of the specifically local ways people have been affected by the generalized spread and penetration of the capitalist market. That J30 happened here and now is the product of a particular history and organizing effort. Understanding and building on these events requires recognizing the importance of place.

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surrounded by a ten foot high fence of mesh steel. A member of the CAW said: “The corporations have their global links with institutions like the WTO, IMF, and OAS in privatizing everything, taking away our self-determination. As their agendas increase globally, so must ours. Workers must fight for each other.”

>> June 5 >> The Nigerian government imposes IMF-

mandated cooking fuel price hikes, and in response the country is crippled by the most serious general strike since the end of military rule. Oil workers are joined by public sector and transport workers in shutting down Lagos’ port, highways, airport, and all petrol stations. Sporadic violence is reported across Nigeria’s cities, leading to 40 dead, hundreds injured, and more than 1,000 arrested. After a week the

## Spirit of place

I begin with two vignettes: in the first, we are driving along the top of Larzac some days after the demonstration. We are on a modern highway which obliterates the Roman road I knew from past visits. My teenage son is hungry, too much so to wait until we reach the old walled city I want to show him. We pull into a roadside restaurant and are already seated before we notice that the walls are covered with blown-up photos from the Seattle protest. My son walks the perimeter, identifying each of the places where he faced off with WTO delegates or city police.

When I express my surprise to the waitress, she says we’re in luck. By coincidence, the photographer is eating with his young son a few tables away. He tells us they are celebrating his return from Colombia, where he had been travelling with Bové to talk strategy with organizations of small farmers like themselves. When the waitress brings us a bottle of the house wine, the label is the same symbol we’ve seen already on hillside banners, t-shirts, flyers and postcards: a globe with two sites indicated, Seattle and Millau. Half the globe consists of a voracious sesame-seed burger bun. Rising from inside one

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government backs down. One observer comments: “In a country where, after several doses of Monetary Fund medicine, the average income is somewhere between one quarter and one tenth of what it was in 1980, SAP is practically a swear word.”

>> June 9 >> In continued defiance of the new IMF-prescribed labour laws, Argentina is paralyzed by a 24-hour general strike supported by more than 7.2 million

hemisphere are two hands, handcuffed but raised in triumph, effectively holding off the attacking corporate breadstuff. The day before, when we remarked on one of the postcards in our hole-in-the-wall North African restaurant down in Millau, the counter man told us, “Those guys up on Larzac, they’re magnificent. They’re all anarchists, you know.”

In the second vignette, I have found an injured sheep while wandering outside a small hamlet, also on Larzac, where I spent time in the 1970s. Now my son and I are waiting for two of the farmers to bring her back, to make sure they could follow my directions. In the hamlet, prominent on the rutted trail that winds through it, serving as its main street, we come across a wooden plaque. It is a sort of public penance, a communal expression of regret and atonement.

Here is the story it tells: in the early 1960s, France was engaged in a bitter war to retain Algeria as a colony. Algerian prisoners, small farmers turned independence fighters among them, were brought back to the military camp on Larzac. Though fairly remote, this camp became the target of antiwar and anticolonial protesters, who tried to block its gates and scale its fences. The protesters, nearly all from outside the region, attempted to enlist the small farmers of Larzac. But the latter were “apathetic” (their self-description on the plaque). They saw nothing in common with the prisoners. Instead, they served in the army when they couldn’t get out of the obligation and ignored the protesters.

Now they feel ashamed that they let nationality divide them from small farmers like themselves who happened to be from a different country. The plaque is their declaration that

**“Faced with a little local image problem, McDonald’s [France]... has retired Ronald McDonald as the company’s public face and replaced him with Asterix the Gaul...”** – *New Internationalist* magazine, September 2002

they should have joined the protesters 40 years ago against the government. It also says they have done more than offer a remote, carefully carved apology. They have established a program that brings the children of Algerian farmers to live and study on Larzac.

The public nature of the plaque is as remarkable as the vision and practice of class solidarity it expresses. What could account for this extraordinary transformation from the 1960s until now? The key is a series of events in the 1970s that rocked Larzac and, then as now, mobilized France and beyond. J30 shows the continuing significance of this remote plateau to solidarity all across France. It is also an indication of the way that an earlier solidarity has evolved to become anticapitalist.

### **The struggle for Larzac**

In the early 1970s the French government decided to convert this sparsely settled plateau into a facility for West European militaries to practice tank manoeuvres. France would both take a small step toward independence from NATO and further French-German rapprochement. All this would

happen by means of heavy tank treads on a fragile landscape. An advance guard of German tanks rolled in by invitation, less than 30 years after German occupiers were driven out. Speculators began buying properties for resale to the military. The Ministry of Defence issued an edict forbidding any new farm building on the entire expanse of Larzac. Peasant attachment to their own land became a drive for local autonomy which quickly bloomed into anti militarism and found resonance worldwide.

The struggle over Larzac merged initially with student and other opposition to the US continuation of the Vietnam War. It drew also on the established national network of small farmers. As various leftist groups joined in, the organizers on Larzac made it a priority to reach out to industrial workers. They began to send meat and cheese to workers on strike, and visited rallies at Renault and Peugeot and elsewhere. They developed especially strong ties with workers at the Lip factory, engaged in an extended occupation of their own. Joint posters identifying the two struggles appeared all over France.

Parallel to their own ritual of public oath-taking not to give up their land, the farmers of Larzac organized young

men across France to send back their military registration, the equivalent of burning their draft cards. With supporters, they launched a 425-mile march to Paris. Two years later, they camped for a week under the Eiffel Tower. When protesters were arrested at the military camp, they organized demonstrations outside the same tribunal in Millau where we waited for José Bové and friends.

Up on the plateau, in a brilliant organizing move and to defy the Ministry's edict, they began to build an 'illegal' sheep barn. The structure is typical for this region, shaped like a miniature vaulted aeroplane hangar, large enough for hundreds of sheep and made of limestone rocks. The building process and ornamentation, however, were anything but typical. Under its eaves, along both lengths, there are foot-high anti militarist quotes, on one side from Einstein, on the other from de Gaulle. Each quote is reproduced numerous times, in languages that pair peoples in conflict. Thus the same quote appears in Russian and English, Hebrew and Arabic, Vietnamese and Cambodian, etc. People came from all over France and all over the world to help with the construction, carving the name of their

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workers. The president, Fernando de la Rúa, is reported as saying that the government has no choice but to meet targets set by the IMF.

>> **June 14** >> Chanting Zapatista slogans, members of Italy's Tute Bianche, anarchist groups, and communist groups work together and blockade the OECD summit in Bologna, Italy, preventing delegates' access for several hours. Demanding access to the summit so that their

voices can be heard alongside those of corporate lobbyists, they advance slowly. The 6,000 police attack with truncheons and tear gas, as the Minister of Industry cries, "Let us meet!"

>> **June 15** >> Ecuador's new President faces his first general strike, organized by trade unions and church groups, against continued IMF economic reforms. Among those striking are more than 30,000

doctors, who join with teachers, oil and public sector workers in a 72-hour sit-in. In Quito, protesters who try to march on the government palace are met with tear gas and riot police, who open fire on the crowd, wounding a bystander. In Guayaquil, a bomb explodes outside Citibank and demonstrators are dispersed with tear gas.

>> **June 15** >> Rural villagers from Altiplano, Bolivia

organization or struggle or place of origin into the stones. Especially prominent were young German antiwar and new leftist activists.

The struggle lasted the entire decade before backing the government down. Its persistence and militancy probably contributed to the Socialist Party electoral victory in 1981. Newly elected President Mitterrand then conceded the victory the people of Larzac had already won. Within France, the struggle both reinforced organizational ties among small farmers and provoked splits in pre-existing organizations over tactics. It strengthened mutual support between peasants and industrial workers, and brought an awareness of struggles elsewhere in the world and other ways of thinking about struggle.



McDonald's closes down for the day anticipating May Day protest. London, UK

### Why McDonald's?

To the return visitor, rural Larzac looks much the same. The barn stands, as it probably will for centuries, though its soft stones are now weathered, their carved symbols mostly illegible. Roquefort cheese has become more of an international commodity, but it still requires land, sheep, and the distinctive mould found nowhere else. There are now some machines for milking the sheep, but the task is still mainly done by hand – by two fingers, to be exact. One of the pleasures of returning was to see the extraordinary 'illegal' barn in normal, sheep-filled, daily use.

The towns, however, have changed drastically with the new economy. Millau still has about the same number of inhabitants, about 23,000. But 20 years ago, 7,000 people worked in its factories, right in the heart of town, processing animal hides. Now those factories are mostly vacant. They are in transition, shuttered but not yet converted to housing or boutiques. There are still 600 workers, but they live off Millau's reputation, making fancy, one-of-a-kind pairs of gloves on special order. Mass production has gone elsewhere, to cheaper labour in Eastern Europe or the Third World. Instead, Millau has become the hang-gliding capital of Europe, with the northern lip of Larzac being, literally, the jumping off point, and tourism the main industry. This is the economic underpinning of the refurbished and new hotels and fancy shops. It is also the explanation for the, not one but two, new McDonald's.

At every level, international, national and local, McDonald's in Millau is a focal point for the strains and pressures brought by capitalist globalization. As such, it was

John Jordan

an evocative and well-chosen target. French cuisine is an integral part of French culture and national identity. This tour guide truism understates the assaults people have felt in the last few years from: mad cow disease, genetically modified organisms, dioxin contaminants, septic residues, listeria, and heavy metals. Each of these has been a significant scare to French consumers. All have been by-products of the new industrial agriculture, with its massive operations integrating fertilizers, feed, pesticides, herbicides, and seeds.

It is that background that stiffened European resolve around bovine growth hormone (BGH), even in the face of a ruling by the court of the World Trade Organization. This court held that Europe could not refuse hormonally-enhanced beef from the United States because such refusal would represent an unfair commercial advantage to its own farmers. (United States, chemicals, and beef: sounds like McDonald's already). Most European farmers don't use the hormone because they would be obligated to label it as such, thus deterring consumers. As a sanction, the US government was granted the right to impose tariffs on selected European products and chose, among others, Roquefort cheese! Add

only that McDonald's did not use local labour in its construction. Neither do they sell Roquefort in their cheeseburgers, not even in Millau.

### **The attack on McDonald's**

On 12 August 1999, the McDonald's we hiked by nearly a year later was still under construction. The first reports from the scene were that it had been 'sacked' by rioters. Within a day, damages were reported to be in the millions of francs and the perpetrators in hiding. Overseas accounts emphasized that this was an anti-American action. The impression, hearing about it from abroad, was that it had been some sort of stealthy vanguardist undertaking. Debray's old theories of guerrilla warfare came to mind in trying to make sense of press reports: perhaps the perpetrators thought they were demystifying authority and encouraging the cowed citizens eventually to act on their own. In nearly every respect, the press reports and official accounts were misleading.

What actually happened represents the kind of political organizing developed over the years of the struggle on Larzac. Exactly one week before, on 5 August, a delegation

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bring their deformed dead sheep to the city of Oruro to prove the seriousness of contamination caused by a massive oil spill from Enron-Shell's pipeline. The spill contaminated 120 miles of rivers and irrigation canals, and affected water used by 127 farming communities. When the police attack the demonstrators, they respond by throwing rocks, sticks, and foetuses of dead sheep. They then march to the corporate offices of

Enron-Shell and break windows, hurl stones and Molotov cocktails, and then throw themselves to the ground and refuse to leave when the police attempt to disperse them with tear gas.

>> **June 21** >> An unknown group hacks into the official Nike web site and all visitors are automatically redirected to an anticapitalist site prepared for the upcoming actions in Melbourne, Australia against the

World Economic Forum. In the six hours it takes Nike technical workers to undo the reroute, the activist site receives almost 900,000 hits.

>> **June 22** >> A 48-hour general strike is called in Paraguay in response to the government's plans to privatize its telephone, water, and railroad companies. The privatizations are conditions of an IMF programme that Paraguay must meet in order to access \$400 million

representing both the farmers producing sheep's milk and the industrial makers of the cheese met with the Minister of Agriculture, in Paris, to see what could be done to protect the thousands of people hurt by the punitive tariff on Roquefort. The Minister told them there was no way to challenge the WTO court ruling. At best, he could offer modest funds for a stepped-up Roquefort advertising campaign. Emerging from his office, the delegation held a press conference on the steps of the Ministry, linking McDonald's to the attempted importation of the BGH beef and identifying it as a symbol and purveyor of the worst of industrial agriculture.

In the days preceding 12 August, organizers met with the Millau police, agreeing on a time when the construction site would be cleared of all workers and negotiating over the parts of the building that could be dismantled as a symbolic statement. The police offered light switch boxes, the organizers countered with door frames, and bargaining went from there. The rally was publicized, the event billed as a family affair. About 300 people showed up, half from Larzac, half from Millau. Kids frolicked. People pitched in to load the (more or less) agreed-to pieces of the building onto carts. Tractors hauled the carts into town and deposited their contents at the police station. There were speeches, then everyone went home. The damage to the construction was not great. The organizers apparently did not even expect to be arrested.

The unanticipated arrests played into the hands of the experienced organizers, who used the prospect of a trial to hammer at the issues. José Bové focused attention by

**“During a counselling session, a corporate executive of Burger King was heard despairing at the fact that yet another McDonald's, and not a Burger King, had been targeted by anticapitalist demonstrators. ‘That's global brand recognition for you,’ he bemoaned.”** – Karen Elliot, *The Burger and the King*

refusing bail and staying in jail a few extra days. He was already well-known as a spokesperson for international and worker-farmer solidarity and an advocate for small-scale, environmentally sustainable farming. At the time of the McDonald's action, he was on parole for an earlier use of his tractor that destroyed a field of genetically modified corn. The French press treated him as a media star on his N30 trip to Seattle, and he milked the coverage effectively. Before giving one of the keynote speeches at the anti-WTO protests, he travelled across the US for more than a week, meeting with groups of small farmers and assuring everyone that his target was not the American people but corporate agriculture. Along the way he distributed samples of smuggled Roquefort.

### J30 - The trial begins

There were about 100,000 people in Millau for the trial and follow-up festivities. Long after midnight, the highways were still backed up for miles with arriving vehicles. The town undoubtedly was overwhelmed, but everything stayed peaceful. The atmosphere was that of a carnival and concert. The defendants turned the trial into a denunciation of corporate globalization, with witnesses from around the world. The judge tolerated the testimony, but acted uninterested. The real teach-in happened outside the trial, however, with forums and street theatre in the town and the witnesses repeating their testimony to the crowd on the concert grounds. Speeches and music lasted most of the night.

We left not knowing the verdicts. In mid-September, the judge ruled that only Bové would go to prison for three months – a harsher sentence than the prosecutor asked for.

Bové himself walks a fine line. He has become an international star in a movement, both local and global, that thrives on collectivity and professes egalitarianism. “We are all leaders!” has become an international motto. On our last day in Millau, my son and I came across an encouraging sign.

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in World Bank loans. Police meet the protesters with violence almost immediately, resulting in 20 injuries and at least ten arrests. About 300 protesters are dispersed by police with water cannons.

>> **June 26** >> Thousands of Honduran workers take part in a national strike demanding an increase in the minimum wage. Protesters block main roads and the state-run port company, and a number of banana

plantations are shut down.

>> **June 30** >> In an effort to defend the forests surrounding Bloomington, Indiana, US, activists in the Earth Liberation Front network spike trees in areas designated to be logged this summer. Communiqués are sent and the area containing the spiked trees is clearly marked in order to prevent logger or millworker injury.

There is an age-old working class slogan that radically rejects hierarchy: “Neither God Nor Master.” As we wandered one last time in Millau’s medieval passageways, we found freshly painted graffiti. Along with support for the defendants, it said: “Ni Dieu, Ni Maître, Ni José Bové.” (Neither God, nor master, nor José Bové).

**Norm Diamond was president of Pacific Northwest Labour College. He co-authored *The Power In Our Hands* and hosts *The Old Mole Variety Hour* on KBOO-FM in Portland, Oregon.**

**Note: This is an abridged version of the original, “Seattle on the Tarn, French Solidarity Against Capitalist Globalization”, published in *New Politics*, vol. VIII, no. 2 (New Series), Winter 2001**

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#### Resources:

» *Confédération Paysanne's site*: [www.confederationpaysanne.fr/](http://www.confederationpaysanne.fr/)

>> **June 30** >> One Hundred thousand people descend on the tiny town of Millau (population 20,000), France to support José Bové and nine other defendants from the *Confédération Paysanne*, on trial for causing \$114,000 damage to the McDonald's they helped dismantle last August. An enormous festival commemorates the event, with bands, and speakers. “Yes, this action was illegal... The only regret I have now is that I wasn't able to