

SPEECH NOTES FOR INDIGNEZ VOUS! CONFERENCE

By Maude Barlow, October 21, 2011

Welcome to *Indignez –Vous*, a safe place to share our rage, our plans for resistance and our hope for the future. Our conference title is taken from a book of the same name, an international phenomenon written by French Nazi resistance fighter, Stephane Hessel, who urges us to recapture the wartime spirit of resistance by rejecting the “insolent and selfish” power of money and markets for the “social values of modern democracy.” These very well may have been the words of inspiration behind the global Occupy Movement that has given us all such hope and vision in the last few weeks.

There is a site called *We are the 99 Percent* where people who support the Occupy Movement tell their stories. There are now 139 pages of these stories. Here are a few:

- I am 37 years old and I work at four jobs. I spend more than 50% of what I earn on gas. I was assaulted and I have medical bills I cannot pay. I had to default on my student loans and now they take most of what is left of my salary. I am one vehicle away from financial ruin.
- I am a teenager living at home. My mom has been looking for work for 3 years since her husband’s business went down with the economy. Her husband died suddenly last year and 3 months later, she was diagnosed with colon cancer. She has no income and cannot afford treatment. The money is gone. What will happen to my mommy?
- I am a 37-year-old self-employed hair stylist. I have had to file bankruptcy because people can’t afford to get their hair done anymore.
- I am 27 years old with no debt. I have paid all my bills this month and have no money left over to eat for the next 9 days.
- I am a 53-year old church office manager. My husband is a skilled labourer who cannot find work. Nobody is building. I have 2 children in college and I still owe \$65K for my own student loan. One child suffers from depression, another is autistic. We have no insurance that covers their needs. We are 1 paycheck away from homelessness.
- I am 45 and have been working for the last 2 years at one fourth the salary my company paid before it went into “corporate downsizing.” Now my company calls me an “independent contractor” and I am not eligible for health or unemployment insurance. A head hunter I spoke to said I am too old to ever find a full time job. In two months, I will be homeless. I think about suicide a lot.
- I am not part of a mob, nor am I slothful. I don’t cause riots. I didn’t drive the world economy into this ditch.

These are American stories of course, and they mirror the reality that the top 10% of Americans now own two-thirds of the wealth of the United States while leaving the rest to share the remaining one third. Almost 90 million Americans are “twice poor,” meaning they live in households with income less than two times the poverty threshold.

But these stories and statistics are mirrored all over the world. The world has divided into rich and poor as at no time in living history. The richest 2% own more than half the household wealth in the world. The richest 10% hold 85% of total global assets and the bottom half of humanity owns less than 1% of all the wealth in the world. The three richest men in the world have more money than the poorest 48 nations.

While those responsible for the global recession were bailed out and even rewarded, the International Labour Organization now tells us that the global jobless rate for youth has reached an unparalleled 13% and that over 1.5 billion people – half the global working population – are either unemployed or working in vulnerable and insecure conditions. Importantly, says the ILO, the largest increase in unemployment in the last three years is in the developed economies. A breath-taking twenty five per cent of European youth are now unemployed! This global financial crisis has been the great leveller.

These tragic statistics are the legacy of 30 years of neo-liberal market capitalism, which is now being exposed for the fraud it is. And make no mistake; this situation was driven by deliberate policy by the powerful for the powerful and has had its desired effect. It started when the Reagan administration eliminated banking controls in 1981 and was advanced in 1999, when the Clinton administration further deregulated the banks to remove the firewall between deposit and investment banks. Europe followed with its own banking deregulation and we know the story the unfolded: out of control financial speculation based on empty promises; global hedge funds buying up resources, land and water in desperate countries of the global South; loans to millions and millions of people on the edge who never had any chance of paying them back; government-bankrupting bailouts to the very financial institutions that caused the crisis in the first place; and billions around the world cast into an abyss.

Today, the uncontrolled frenzy of the financial speculators continues outside the rule of law and is more false than ever. While global trade in goods and services dropped 15% in the last three years, financial transactions are rising steadily and now amount to \$40 trillion a day. Yet all calls to bring the rule of law to these institutions is met with steely resistance from the lords of finance. U.S. lobbies alone spend more that \$200 million a year to fight new regulations. Jamie Dimon, Chief of J.P. Morgan Chase, says that any attempt to control the banks is “anti-American.”

And so the people have to take the hit. It is called “Austerity” and it is the new mantra whispered in the halls of power everywhere. While global military spending has now reached a staggering \$1.6 trillion a year, cuts to social programs, public services and environmental protection are ruthlessly removing a hundred years of democracy building in the global North and removing the dreams for a different future for untold millions in the global South. Europe has entered a frenzy of privatization, giving control of essential public services such as postal, energy, water and transit over to powerful corporations only too happy to step into the void governments have so shamefully abandoned. The government of Italy passed a law telling all municipalities to privatize their water services. The people were so outraged, they held a referendum that overruled that law. Never mind, said the European Central Bank in a directive to the Italian government, your austerity measures call for water privatization no matter what the people think. Watching the crisis unfold in Greece, I was not surprised to learn that the suicide rate there has doubled since the financial crisis hit.

Roberto Salvio of Inter Press Services calls these austerity measures a “financial neutron bomb” that has fallen on rich countries, destroying the people while leaving the infrastructure standing. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development says that the pursuit of austerity in this climate is pushing the world into “economic disaster” and savaged U.S. and European economic policies in a recent statement. Naomi Klein calls it the “great sacking” and says it has been fuelled by a pathological sense of entitlement, and done with all the lights left on as if there is nothing at all to hide. Perhaps one of the British youth who participated in the looting and vandalism of several months ago best stated it when he told a journalist that “the banks set the example.”

Now Stephen Harper is quick to tell you that these problems do not exist in Canada because we did not allow the deregulation of our banking institutions in the same way. He takes credit for this. So does former Prime minister Jean Chretien, which leaves me with a smile. For his government came very very close to deregulation in 1998 when the Bank of Montreal and the Royal Bank proposed a merger and a relaxing of the banking code and it was the Council of Canadians who led a passionate and ultimately successful campaign against it.

Nevertheless, after thirty years of these same economic policies, Canada too has changed shape from an egg to a pear, with fewer and fewer at the top and more and more either at the bottom or not far from it. The top fifth now take home 40% of the income leaving the bottom fifth with just 7.2% of the pie. Stephen Harper rules Canada like a dictator, making policy in closed-door meetings and committees, negotiating unregulated free trade agreements without public involvement, ruthlessly cutting funds to any groups who have or even may raise some concerns over his agenda, shutting down the democratic and fundamental right to strike, slashing Environment Canada so that we will not be able to even monitor the deterioration of our ecosystems, giving over regulatory functions to the corporations themselves, forcing privatization of public services on provinces and municipalities, and even promising better bonuses to senior government officials based on how many jobs they cut in their department.

Oh but we have money for more prisons and warplanes and war ships and so-called border security. Turns out we are not poor at all. We just have to change our priorities.

Am I angry? You bet I am! Am I defeated? Not on your life! I have never felt as energized in my life. The resistance is growing here in Canada and around the world and is unstoppable. Stephen Harper may claim a technical majority in that with only 39% of the popular vote he now holds 55% of the seats. But if we add the number of people who did not vote for him and combine it with the number who did not vote at all, he holds a "majority" with the support of less than one third of Canadians!

Every now and then in history, the people are called upon to call out entrenched power and refuse to comply with false authority. I deeply believe we are going to see an increase in civil disobedience in the coming months and years: First Nations saying no the pipelines carrying dirty tar sands oil over their territories; university students taking back the classroom from corporate control; workers becoming militant again in defence of their basic rights; communities standing up to big mining and fracking operations destroying their land and water; Canadians everywhere defending our public health care system from the death of a thousand cuts, knowing that it is the true intent of the Harper government to drive a knife through the heart of medicare once and for all.

When I was arrested a few weeks ago in a protest against the exports of tar sands bitumen, I have to admit to being afraid. I was brought up to obedient, a good citizen who trusts her government to do the right thing and to always obey authority. But it was clear to me that democracy has been compromised and now requires steps beyond the normal. I deeply believe that the mantra of more stuff, unlimited growth, corporate power, privatization and deregulation are killing the planet and creating class warfare unlike anything we have seen before. I have four gorgeous grandchildren and for them and all their age group, I am afraid.

So I stand. And you stand. And we resist. And we hope, for hope is a moral imperative. And we act. We act for justice. And in that act for justice we find our true, our best selves.