Present in the World Economy

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (1996–2007)

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We do not face the world in a doctrinaire fashion, declaring, “Here is the truth, kneel here!” . . . We do not tell the world, “Cease your struggle, they are stupid; we want to give you the true watchword of the struggle.” We merely show the world how it actually struggles; and consciousness is something that the world must acquire even if it does not want to.

— Karl Marx to Arnold Ruge, September 1843

In the two decades that have passed since the inception of what was then called the “new left internationalism” of social movements (Waterman 1992), through the rise of the variformed “movement of movements” (Klein 2002) against the neoliberal “globalization project” (McMichael 2000), how social forces install themselves on the terrain of the world economy, and how they move through it, has been widely documented by researchers working on qualified objects at the periphery of established fields of inquiry: “multi-sited” ethnographers (Marcus 1995), “international” and “transnational” sociologists (Sklair 2000; Evans 2005; Beck 1999; Castells 1996) and anthropologists (Kearney 1995, 2004), “international” political economists, “glocal” (Köhler and Wissen 2003; Roudometrof 2005) and “post-national” geographers (Herod 1995a, 2001; Scholte 1996; O’Brien 1992), and the like.

These literatures have unearthed a wealth of information on particular goings-on, and they have brought some much-needed historical perspective to bear on the present juncture. But they have contributed surprisingly
little to our understanding of how political subjects actually make themselves in the world economy, principally because they have looked at it as an abstract space far from experience, peopled by demigod figures that have fallen ready-made from the heights of Bilderberg or Davos—whose hegemony we can only concede—or by would-be counterhegemonic heroes born in fleeting moments of global togetherness, in Seattle or Genoa. Far from the clammy world of Brechtian struggles where actually existing human beings sometimes make themselves into flawed subjects of their own imperfect history, and indeed far from what the new literatures actually document, cosmopolitan icons appear to overdetermine our thinking about matters political.

To move beyond cosmopolitan revelries and think through how global subjects might actually be making themselves in the world economy, we must rise to the political without ever breaking the thread of situated experience. Travel, then, from locality to globality, while staying in materiality, and without ever losing sight of what Anton Pannekoek would have called “real concrete organizations” binding people together.¹ Only then can we begin seeing what might be most substantial, and radical, about the global movement of the multitude: the putting into dialectical relation of two relatively autonomous, spatially specific, modes of struggle—a local “wars of position” and a “war of movement” taking place on the terrain of the world economy.

This article deals with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), arguably the most significant migrant workers’ organization to have been born in the United States since the founding of the National Farmworkers Association (later the United Farmworkers Association) in the early 1960s.² Founded a little more than a decade ago, the CIW started out campaigning to raise the income and better the living conditions of tomato pickers in southwest Florida. Because their necessity for food, raiment, and housing required it, they have taken what had been a positional struggle for autonomy beyond its place of birth, to Chicago, California, Ecuador, Colombia, and elsewhere in the Americas.

The CIW’s first globalizing campaign was a boycott of Taco Bell and its parent company, Yum! Brands, the largest restaurant firm in the world. This ended in victory on March 8, 2005, when Yum! agreed to cooperate with the CIW to improve working conditions in the field and pay a penny per pound more for the Florida tomatoes it uses at its 6,500 Taco Bell restaurants—in effect doubling the wages of field hands working for its suppliers (Nieves 2005a). After more than a decade of actions, CIW militants got the centavo más they had organized for. This victory, UFW President Arturo Rodriguez called “. . . the most significant . . . since the