

In 2010, after news of Haitian peasants burning Monsanto seeds in a brave and united rejection of corporatized agriculture and food control in response to the “donation” offered farmers after the Earthquake, many Chicagoans were moved.

R.I.S.A. (Rising in Solidarity with Ayiti) was a grassroots network of Chicago organizers, health workers, activists, healers, historians, youth, and artists that came together in Chicago after the Haiti’s devastating Earthquake. Their work was based in grassroots organizing principles and connected to the agricultural, artistic, humanitarian and revolutionary spirit of Ayiti. R.I.S.A. quickly moved to affirm and stand in solidarity with Haitian Peasants by organizing a powerful community-affirming event in the 65th and Woodlawn community garden that I will never forget. R.I.S.A. called upon community members to “reject Monsanto in Haiti and our Hoods,” creating a space to honor the brave action of Haitian Peasants and acknowledge how that action touched us in Chicago on a personal and local level due to the dominance of subsidized corporate agriculture and GMO’s on corner store shelves and school cafeteria trays where black and brown families live.

Writing this now, I can not help be moved again by the power of the symbol of peasants burning these “gifts” for our Chicago families as foods stamps are cut for the “poor” and agricultural subsidies for corporations continue. R.I.S.A. created a stage area on



Chicago’s 65th & Woodlawn Urban gardeners stand in solidarity with the Haitians!

the ground with a microphone and invited poets, musicians; dancers, farmers and organizers shared prayers, words and art. Youth spoke up bravely. I attended with my daughter and shared a letter of solidarity from Family Farm Defenders, as well as, seed saving materials.

Later, a small fire was lit in a BBQ pit and people threw in items to burn like seeds, words, products and junk food. We celebrated seeds as tools by which we birth healing for our families and rejected the government subsidized corn syrup, endocrine disruptive soy fillers, poisonous bt cotton, rBGH hormonally contaminated dairy.

The event concluded with children being invited in planting healthy organic seeds like Okra, donated by Black Oaks Center for Sustainable Renewable Living in a community garden bed as a symbol for the future. We shared a wonderful meal and created new friendships and strengthened old ones. Although R.I.S.A. is not currently active, the work of this collective impacted me personally and profoundly as it celebrated the power, purpose and voice of grassroots, the spiri-

tual connection of the African diaspora and the deep connection that we all have to food and therefore protecting the relationships of common people to food and nourishment.

One of the many key R.I.S.A. organizers of that garden event was Mike Siviwe Elliot. Mike gardens at 65th and Woodlawn with his daughter. His urban gardening helps to nurture his relationship and connection with the Earth, his family as well as the other diverse gardeners. They help each other with gardening tips especially those elders who are from agricultural areas of the south. Mike is a community organizer and political activist. He has been active in International Solidarity work since the 1970’s particularly within the Anti-Apartheid movement. Much of his current work is to stop police crimes in Chicago. Mike is a third generation autoworker from Detroit and member of Chicago UAW. Mike joined us for dinner on Monday evening, which he didn’t want to miss because of the “rare opportunity to connect personally with the people that we love and support from Haiti and Brazil.” *(continued on pg 7)*

One of the most memorable moments was when Mike exchanged his UAW hat with Flavio’s MST hat. This was a beautiful moment of connection and exchange between “two representatives of labor unions” as Mike described it to me and as a symbol of “International Solidarity among Labor Workers.” It turned out to be practical too, as Flavio went on to wear that hat through the rest of the tour, some of which, in rural Wisconsin, was truly chilly. The following day began at the Growing Power’s Iron Street farm with a meeting with Erika Allen and a tour. After leaving the urban farm, the group travelled to Hyde Park where they presented a noon hour lecture at the University of Chicago. RISA member and local anti-eviction activist Toussaint Losier and Gregory Duff Morton then brought the group on a brief tour of Woodlawn after which they met with youth of FLY (Fearless Leading by the Youth) and community members at STOP (Southside Together Organizing for Power).

Gregory Duff Morton offered this statement about his experience: “It’s rare that Chicagoans get to feel a personal connection with people in Haiti or Brazil. It’s even rarer that we get to see that connection traced through a basic commonality: our need to have democratic control over the food that we depend on to live. I’m so glad that, in the shadow of the Chicago Board of Trade, this got to happen.”

Family Farm Defenders has a

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long-standing relationship with Friends of the MST. With the visit of Flavio, Friends of the MST in Chicago were critical in helping organize our events. They each provided tremendous support in translating individual and group conversations, enabling beautiful personal connections to transcend our various languages.

They translated into Portuguese and Flavio translated into Kreyol the language of Haitians. The friends of the MST joins Family Farm Defenders each year for our action at The Chicago Mercantile Exchange to draw attention to the unfair practices of the Dairy Industry and the need for a fair and stable milk price so that small family dairy farmers can continue to exist.

The corrupt and greedy practices by and allowed at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange devalue the real costs of labor for farmers while taking in record profits for dairy corporations. On April 17th dairy farmers come to Chicago as a symbol of solidarity with Peasants Worldwide and to make the effects of urban commodities traders on rural communities visible to the public through demonstrating, fliering, and holding educational public forums and a community dinner that promotes Food Sovereignty, builds relationships between urban food consumers and rural farmers.

The day was chosen by Via Campesina as a day of Action because of a terrible massacre of an occupation of Landless Rural Workers (MST) who were seek-

Family Farm Defenders

ing Agrarian Reform in 1996 in in Eldorado dos Carajás in the Amazonian state of Pará in Brazil.

The evening concluded at the Jane Addams Hull House dining room with a superb community potluck with the support of the UIC Social Justice Initiative. The Hull House brought their community seed library to the dining room so that attendees could check out seeds and learn about seed saving. I was struck by several important points that were clear as Rose Edith shared about “The Four Eyes No Lies” campaign which she felt could be of benefit beyond Haiti.

It comes from the original name of this peasant movement platform, which is Quatres Yeux Pas de Mensonges from a Kreyol proverb, written here in French. The four organizations who are members of the 4G are the MPP, the MPNKP, Tet Kole and KROS and comprise approximately 800,000 members. Within this statement she made clear the importance of genuine honest relationships, transparency, accountability, cooperation, and long-term commitment. She emphasized the amount of years each of these groups has been working and organizing. She radiated in her dedication. Many of us huddled together around them, eager to send them with our love, appreciation and thanks in the cold doorway to say goodbye, and it felt hard to let them go so soon.

It felt like the end of the Chicago tour was just a beautiful beginning.

pg. 7