

WAKE UP!! IT'S YER MULCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING...



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NO STRAIN NO GAIN

AS SCHNEWS GETS TO THE ROOT OF PROBLEMS WITH SEEDY BUSINESS

Last week, in France, the independent seed-saving and selling Association Kokopelli were fined €35,000 after being taken to court by corporate seed merchant Baumaux. Their crime was selling traditional and rare seed varieties which weren't on the official EU-approved list – and, therefore, illegal to sell – thus giving them an 'unfair trading advantage'. As the European Commission met this week to prepare new legislation for seed control, due in 2009, which will further restrict the geographic movement and range of crop varieties, this ruling will set a dangerous precedent.

Kokopelli, the non-profit French group set up in 1999 to safeguard endangered seed strains, may be driven out of existence by the fine. Their focus is biodiversity, food security, and the development of sustainable organic agriculture and seed networks in the 'global south'. They have created one of the largest independent collections in Europe – with over 2500 sorts of vegetable, flower and cereals. Other non-government seedbanks are held by large agro-industrial companies like Limagrain, Syngenta and Pioneer – and guess what their main interest is money rather than starving subsistence farmers.

You may think that in an era of mass extinction it would be a no-brainer that we need to protect biodiversity and the heritage of the crop varieties which have been built up over centuries... but no. Since the 1970s, laws in the UK and Europe mean that to sell seeds, the strain needs to be registered – and everything else becomes 'outlaw' seeds, illegal to sell. In the UK it costs £300 per year to maintain the registration and £2000 to register a 'new' one – which all disadvantages smaller organisations.

Garden Organic in the UK run a Heritage Seed Library (www.organicgardening.org.uk/hsl), and they get around the law by not selling 'outlaw' seeds, but getting individual gardeners to become 'seed guardians' who pass around seeds for free to other members of the Library. Unlike other seedbanks, seeds are not kept in cold storage, but are living species which are continually grown and allowed to adapt to new environmental factors.

Another law-busting approach is seed swaps – which in recent years have sprouted up and down the country. People freely share seeds for another year's growing – a co-operative way of maintaining genetic diversity. Most are around February – see www.seedysunday.org for the remaining events this year.

DIGGING THE DIRT

There's so many types of potato – why not just use the best ones and forget the rest? Seed

varieties which have been developed over the centuries have adapted to environments, and the genepool has to survive unforeseen factors such as pests and diseases – or climate change. The Irish potato famine was caused by an over-reliance on blight afflicted spuds, or, to take another example, a variety of cauliflower grown in Cornwall was abandoned in the 1940s for a French cauli which gave a higher yield, but turned out to be vulnerable to fungal ringspot – but the old ringspot-resistant Cornish type is now extinct.

Limiting the varieties means limiting the genetic base – presumably to leave GM technology in the clear as the only option.

While mass extinctions are taking place in natural ecosystems, the same has taken place in domesticated seeds. Today there are only half a dozen apple types grown in the UK, down from 2,000 a century ago. Over 90% of crop types listed in the US have been lost in 80 years, and China now grows fifty types of rice, down from 8,000 just twenty years ago. The whole human population is supported by just 30 main crop varieties – a recipe for disaster.

LIFE INC.

Originally laws regarding seeds were brought in during the 1920s – mostly to regulate quality and make sure they did what they said on the tin, and not disease ridden, full of stray weed seed or stones. At the time these laws were a good thing but guess what! It's all been twisted around and now companies use these and subsequent laws to get control of the market. By cutting out the independent networks of farmers, gardeners, and independent seed-sellers – on a worldwide scale – ten companies now control two-thirds of seed distribution. And which companies are we talking about? It's yer bio-tech giants like Monsanto and Syngenta. Unsurprisingly governments around the world are building up the legal framework to support these firms.

When you register a seed type, potentially anyone growing it is liable to pay you royalties – making 'intellectual property' out of plants which have evolved over thousands of years. These companies take an interest in the myriad of varieties with a view to splicing genetic traits into other types, and take out patents on the genetic content. Monsanto have a European patent on a type of wheat which is derived from a traditional Indian one, the sort used to make chapatis.

These same companies are narrowing the market down to the few mono-culture

Safe as houses at Svalbard
Protecting our heritage for generations to come...



"Seeds are the very beginning of the food chain. He, who controls the seeds, controls the food supply and thus controls the people." - Dominique Guillet, Kokopelli

crops they are flogging, reducing diversity. Once farmers limit theirs to these few types – often hybrids which produce defective seeds – they are forced to return to 'the man' to buy next year's seed rather than being able to save and use last year's. This is the next thing down from the prospect of 'terminator' seeds – genetically modified to be sterile, and deliberately unable to supply future yields (See SchNEWS 557).

The farmers were in a far stronger position with their traditional varieties which were open-pollinated, carrying a wider genepool, and better able to adapt to new conditions and diseases.

SEWING WILD OATS

Seeds – and ultimately the control over production of food – becomes another front in which communities and individual farmers across the world have to fight against the forces of neoliberalism and corporatisation.

Via Campesino – the international peasants movement – held a gathering last weekend in Austria, bringing together small farmers from sixteen countries on 'food and power'. They are increasing networking and solidarity amongst farmers across the world both to protect biodiversity and increase the sharing of crop choices and farming techniques. And it's not just the corporations and large-scale agro-industry they are up against – due to climate change they are being forced to adapt quickly to new environmental factors and more than ever need to pool knowledge and resources. For more see www.viacampesina.org

JUDGEMENT DAY

But don't fret – whatever catastrophe, armageddon or ecocide befalls us, measures are at hand to make sure that if we survive a nuclear winter or total desertification, we'll be able to recreate a bucolic paradise: This Tuesday (26th), Norway opened the Svalbard Global Seed Vault on the island of Spitsbergen in the Arctic circle. The vault is over 500 feet inside a mountain, and 130 metres above sea-level – in case the polar ice caps melt. Seeds are stored at below -20 degrees in moisture free packs and it is claimed that many will last a hundred years – longer for some cereals. Maybe after all the cyborg mutant terminator seeds have all long since sprouted legs and run off into the sunset, the traditional common-or-garden varieties will be the ones saying, "I'll be back".

* See www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Svalbard_Global_Seed_Vault

* For more about Kokopelli see www.kokopelli-seeds.com

PLUMBING THE DEPTHS

In case you (like us, if truth be told) hadn't heard the high-pitched tones of whistle-blowing website Wikileaks above the general din of the internet, allow us to blow their horn in your general direction...

Set up with an interface very like Wikipedia (SchNEWS' lazy journalists favourite source of approximate 'facts'), the idea is give an untraceable, anonymous platform for the disillusioned or conscience-laden in high places to leak documents exposing the corrupt shenanigans of the rich and powerful, in the interests of transparency and the public good.

The site has received over a million submissions in its time and has published some important exposés in the past, such as the Rules of Engagement for Iraq, the Guantanamo Camp Delta Standard Operating Procedures and evidence of major bank fraud in Kenya that apparently affected the Kenyan elections.

Naturally this kind of public-spirited behaviour has not endeared the people behind the site to those around the world who run things. However, luckily, the loose collection of Chinese dissidents, journalists, mathematicians and geeks from the US, Taiwan, Europe, Australia and South Africa know what they are doing. The distributed nature of the web has allowed them to stay one step ahead of the game, managing to keep the site up online from multiple anonymously registered locations.

Concentrating on exposing oppressive regimes in Asia, the former Soviet bloc, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, little has been done to stem the flow - but now leaks flagging up the dodgy dealings of the global elites have been ruffling a few feathers.

There were stern legal threats after the recent publication of a confidential briefing memo relating to the dramatic collapse of the Northern Rock bank (suits you, Darling) and last week a somewhat more profitable Swiss Bank took action in the US and obtained a legal injunction which led to serious attempts to shut the site down.

The ever neutral (read: we don't care where your big pile of cash came from) Swiss were upset by the release of hundreds of documents which showed that Bank Julius Baer, and its Cayman Islands subsidiary, had been involved in offshore tax evasion and money laundering - implicating extremely wealthy and, in some cases, politically sensitive clients from the US, Europe, China and Peru.

Usually in such cases of disputed or unprovable documents appearing on the web, orders are made to merely take down those particular pages until they can be substantiated. However, in this case the bank got a judge in San Francisco to order that Wikileaks' DNS registrar, Dynadot, remove all DNS hosting records for the entire domain name, preventing it routing internet traffic to anything but a blank 'park' page. There have also been reports of attempts to lock down the site through Denial of Service attacks and threats to its DNS record.

Heavy stuff for documents the bank claim are all just mere forgeries by a disgruntled ex-employee - one they have rushed to gag and press charges against in Switzerland. Something to hide fellas? Not so claims a bank spokesman, all praise for the concept of freedom of speech and transparency...except that, "Wikileaks should publish whatever it judges to be accurate, but not stolen or forged documents that concern us." (our emphasis on what presumably are the three key words in his statement.)

Luckily the site's founders know know that governments and institutions will go to extreme lengths to censor the truth, so they've got an network of cover names from which to operate. So even while www.wikileaks.org is down, you can still see for yourself at mirror sites like www.wikileaks.be and www.wikileaks.cx There's also a forum site with more info about the case, which now has mainstream journalist organisations lining up to support it - see www.wikileaks.org

BACK IN HARMS WAY

Last Friday a jury at Southwark Crown Court acquitted four men of conspiracy to commit violent disorder during a riot in Harmondsworth asylum seeker detention centre in November 2006 (See SchNEWS 571). Despite getting off, the four - all asylum seekers - are back in Harmondsworth for their other 'crime': fleeing war or persecution in their homeland and seeking refuge in Britain. To celebrate the acquittal, activists from the Support The Harmondsworth 4 Campaign held a demo at the London headquarters of Sodhexho, who through their subsidiary Kalyx, run the privatised centre. At the end of the trial the judge commented that 'one might feel sympathy' for those people detained in immigration detention centres.

* For more see www.ncadc.org.uk or email harmondsworth4@riseup.net

THERE WILL BE BLOOD

On Saturday 23rd February, a number of actions took place in response to the callout by the **Hands Off Iraqi Oil** Campaign for an international day of action to show solidarity with the Iraqi peoples' struggle against the plunder of their oil reserves.

In February 2007 the Iraqi cabinet approved an oil law which, if passed into law, would allow the likes of Shell, BP and Exxon to take over control of most of Iraq's oil reserves, depriving ordinary Iraqis from seeing any of the scores of billions of dollars. Shell and BP, with the help of the UK Government have been actively pushing for this law and these contracts since 2003, intent on overcoming all Iraqi resistance to the plans (see SchNEWS 578).

The day saw at least 31 protests take place, with 26 in the UK, four in the USA and one in the Netherlands. A typical example was from Birmingham, where 15 people shut down a Shell petrol station for two hours in Kings Heath to protest against the multinational plundering and show some solidarity with the Iraqi Oil Workers on the front line (as opposed to the forecourt) of this struggle.

Links to reports and pix from all the actions, including those in Birmingham, London, Liverpool, Wrexham, Coventry and Amsterdam, and more at www.handsoffiraqoil.org

PARTY & PROTEST

MARCH: 2nd - Seedy Sunday, Oxford - Bring seeds to swap, or get yours from stalls. 2pm-3.30pm, Fusion Arts, 44b Princes Street, Cowley, www.seedysunday.org ** **8th - International Womens Day: Million Women Rise** - a demo against violence on women - Hyde Park marching to Trafalgar Sq. 12 noon www.millionwomenrise.com **Demo against Serco** - owners of Yarl's Wood Immigration Detention Centre, where many women refugees are escaping from rape in their home countries. Meet outside Serco Research Institute, 22 Hand Court, London, WC1V 6JF, 4.30pm www.feministfightback.org.uk **International Womens Day event at Faslane Peace Camp** Meet 1pm at North Gate of Faslane Naval Base, Tel 01436 820901 ** **8th - Fitwatch** - Pissed off with political public order policing? Discussion to build momentum and resist police harassment. Meet 2pm, Room H103, LSE, Connaught House, Aldwych, London. www.fitwatch.blogspot.com ** **8th - Seedy Saturday, Hereford** - seed swap plus wholefood shop and cafe. 10am-4pm, The Art of Living, St Owen Street, Hereford, HR1 www.seedysunday.org ** To use our new all singin'n'dancing **Party & Protest listings** (cheers, Andy!) see www.schnews.org.uk/pap

BENEFIT EVENTS FOR TARA

March 5th - Tragic Roundabout gig, 9pm til late, £5/3 conc.
** **9th - Sunday Roast** - 2pm, cheap vegan food, SchMOVIE screenings and music... both at the Cowley Club, 12 London Road, Brighton.
See www.schnews.org.uk/pap for more details.

Into the Valley of DEFRA

Running scared of midnight crop-trashings, the transnational corporations behind GM foods are demanding the right to grow them in secret. DEFRA (govt dept for farming, and er, of the 'environment') are looking at new ways of clamping down on direct action. The corporations have warned that trials of GM crops are becoming too expensive to conduct in Britain because of the additional costs of protecting fields from activists. The Agricultural Biotechnology Council, an industry lobby group (slogan: 'promoting biotechnology in sustainable agriculture') is pushing for secret locations and stiffer penalties for croptrashers.

Last year only one GM trial went ahead in the UK, of potatoes developed by German company BASF. Two activists were arrested for damage to the trial site, which was later anonymously trashed and the trial abandoned (see SchNEWS 583).

BASF plans to repeat the trial this year, at the National Institute of Agricultural Botany in Cambridgeshire. Another trial is planned by scientists at Leeds University. Under existing laws, full details of every GM crop trial should be disclosed in advance on a government website, with a six-figure grid reference identifying the precise location of the field.

Last week, Friends of the Earth (FoE), using the Freedom of Information Act, finally obtained - albeit still partial - information which shows that the Government provides at least £50m a year for research into agricultural biotechnology, largely GM crops and food. This generosity contrasts with the £1.6m given last year for research into organic agriculture, in spite of repeated promises to promote environmentally friendly, 'sustainable' farming.

They also gained disclosure of letters which showed DEFRA (supposedly the watchdogs over the GM crop process) bending over backwards to accommodate BASF's needs when it came to the potato trials. Another campaigning group, GM Freeze, got hold of letters clearly demonstrating that DEFRA allowed the biotech giant BASF to help to set the DEFRA conditions for their own trials!

On the 1st of December last year, the company was given permission to plant 450,000 modified potatoes in British fields over the next five years, in a series of 10 trials. In one letter to BASF, a DEFRA official asked, "Please let me know whether or not the conditions as they stand would be agreeable to BASF or whether there are any conditions that would be difficult to meet."

Well SchNEWS knows who we'll be rooting for... We won't stop til the BASFs of this world have had their chips...

* See www.mutatoes.org www.gmfreeze.org and www.foe.co.uk/campaigns/real_food

...and finally...

Go-a-l-l-l (of stopping the Heathrow expansion!) As full time was called on the sham public 'consultation' over the third runway this week, it seems the final score was: activists (*slight pause, rising inflection*) tw-oo, (*deepening of voice, resigned falling inflection*) air-lobby... nil. Yes, for playing away and scoring all over the media with only a skeleton squad, it's hats off and a SchNEWS silver action medal to Greenpeace - a dazzling display down the wing as they scaled an Airbus after it landed at Heathrow... and gold goes to Plane Stupid, who skilfully dribbled around Parliament's defence and took triumphantly to the roof. Back of the met! The home teams were duly red-faced with embarrassment, but no doubt they'll be back on top soon. And don't forget, they're good at the penalty shoot-out...

* For highlights and commentary on the actions, see www.planestupid.com and www.greenpeace.org.uk

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SchNEWS warns all readers - don't let them weed out the seeds of revolution. Honest!

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