

Protesting Power at the G8

*by Gordon Laxer
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On June 26 and 27, G8 leaders will meet in Kananaskis behind a huge military build up, while citizens will be barred from Calgary's streets. Reporters like Dan Rubinstein of *Vue Magazine* are denied accreditation as journalists. This is not what democracy looks like. But citizens are meeting to inform themselves about the issues. At a CBC Learn at Lunch gathering at Grant McEwan College on June 19, over two hundred enthusiastic people came to discuss the G8. This is what democracy looks like.

What are the issues? Our task is to separate myths from reality. The big myth is that free market capitalism and free trade are compatible with democracy as rule by the people, protection for the environment and equality amongst countries and between people in the same country. We've heard this myth a lot. It's called globalization, trade liberalisation, the Washington Consensus, in this province the Alberta advantage. Now there's NEPAD, a programme to supposedly lift Africa out of poverty, death and misery.

Whatever the name of the myth, it is the trickle down idea of unlimited growth at all costs, even if growth brings environmental catastrophes and hurts many people. The myth says, to not directly improve people's lives through access to clean water, education and adequate health care for all and everyone's right to either land or a decent job at adequate pay. Instead, force the poor countries to accept foreign ownership and control. Some of the economic growth that is supposed to follow, will trickle down to average people even in Africa.

This is a false myth and has never worked anywhere. The reason we hear it so much that it becomes common sense, is that it is an idea that ensures that the rich get richer and the corporations make tons of profits regardless of the human suffering, dictatorships and environmental disasters that come with it. And the rich have access to the media to perpetuate their myths. Just look at the Aspers' firing of Russ Mills, the former editor of the *Ottawa Citizen*.

Why are we seeing a wave of anti-globalization protests and rising state repression of protestors? Because more and more people see through the myths and demand to change course before it is too late. They want to tear down the structures and ideologies which perpetuate exploitation, racism and ecological disasters. But traditional political systems seem unable to carry out fundamental reforms. No matter who gets elected to office whether they are Right wing or Left wing governments, many are convinced, corporations rule anyway. So activists hold teach-ins, develop alternative media and take to the streets to make their views known outside the narrow confines of political parties.

Why are protests and repression increasing now? Because the elites' myths are wearing thin. And when the myths no longer convince ordinary people that it is socially just to maintain the privileges and power of the corporate few, ruling elites try to discredit protestors and turn to force. It's an old, but dangerous game. And many citizens are mobilizing to prevent this. I believe we can build a more just society where the needs of people and nature are placed above those of the profits, destructive individualism and greed, in a system called capitalism.

What is the G-7 or G-8? It's the rich countries club in the minority world that tries to ensure that most of the world's people, resources and wealth continue to flow to the 15% of the world's population who live in these countries. Not exactly to all people in the G7, but to the rich and to a much lesser extent to the upper middle class. The G-7 countries meet annually as the creditors club to ensure that indebted countries continue to pay the rich investors in the minority world.

These seven countries, US, Japan, Germany, France, Britain, Italy and Canada control almost half the votes in the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund that determine the economic fate of many countries in the majority world the--global South.

NEPAD, the New Partnership for Africa's Development will keep Africa on its knees. NEPAD has good goals to negotiate a new relationship between Africa and the North, self-reliance, and participation. But this model will help only rich Northern creditors and the tiny elites who run most African countries.

Africa does not need more integration with the world economy. As Yash Tandon, the head of the UN development program in Harare Zimbabwe says, the way to start is with human needs, the 'people's way', not the foreign capitalists way. NEPAD risks the lives of Africans' access to basic essentials of life, by relying on foreign corporations to provide water, education, health care all for a profit, argues Tandon. We know what happens when the poor can't pay for a service. For-profit corporations cut them off. We are talking about being cut off from water, food, health care and education - the essentials for life. That is not what democracy looks like.

Gordon Laxer is the Director and founder of the Parkland Institute and can be heard on CBC Ideas programme Protest and Power on June 27 at 9:05 pm on CBC Radio One.