

Patrice Jones

America's dissenting call

By Ammara Durrani

Bush speaks only one language: the lexicon of dollars and cents. Only if his corporate sponsors become disenchanted will he change his course...It's up to the people of the world to vote with their wallets and stop supporting the companies that support (him)

Born in 1961 in Baltimore, Maryland (USA), Patrice Le-Muire Jones has been at the forefront of rights activism in America since 1976. She has worked in various feminist, peace, anti-racist, anti-poverty, gay liberation, and animal liberation movements. She has been affiliated with several organisations in the past, including Ella Baker-Nelson Mandela Center for Anti-Racist Education, Ann Arbor Tenants Union, Coalition for Community Unity (a feminist/anti-racist alliance), AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACTUP), and United Poultry Concerns.



Jones currently co-ordinates Global Hunger Alliance, which she founded by bringing together the initial partners in the coalition. She also runs the Eastern Shore Chicken Sanctuary from her home, providing a safe haven to animals who have escaped from or been abandoned by the poultry industry.

She obtained her BA in psychology from Towson State University, Maryland, and her MA in clinical psychology from University of Michigan. At present a doctoral candidate, she is also working on a book about the role of hunger in human history.

Jones recently visited Pakistan to participate in the Fifth Sustainable Development Conference organised by SDPI in Islamabad. In an interview with Political Economy, she talked about various aspects of global hunger, food production and political dissent in America. Excerpts follow:

PE: Tell us something about the Global Hunger Alliance.

PJ: "Global Hunger Alliance (GHA) is an international network of non-governmental organisations with more than a hundred partners from all over the world. It opposes industrial animal agriculture and supports effective, equitable, ethical, and environmentally sustainable solutions to hunger and malnutrition.

"We are united in our understanding that hunger is a political problem. Hunger is not the inevitable result of worldwide food shortages. Quite the contrary! We have more than enough food to feed everyone well into the future. Only inefficient usage and unequitable distribution of world food resources keep people hungry in the midst of plenty. These inefficiencies and inequalities are rooted in the choices made by corporations and governments."

PE: How successful, do you think, was the UN World Food Summit (Five Years Later) held in Rome this year?

PJ: "Like most of these big international meetings of governments, the official summit was a joke but the parallel meeting of NGOs was useful. It was originally scheduled for November 2001 but delayed to allow the US to begin its war on Afghanistan, showing that the political aims of the US are considered more important than the needs of 840m people who live with hunger and malnutrition.

When WFS:fyl was eventually convened in June of 2002, US and other wealthy nations sent low-level delegations to interact with the Heads of State of low-income nations. Besides being insulting, this ensured that the event would not result in significant progress, since the real decision-makers from the most wealthy and powerful countries were not present. One incident stays in my mind as a symbol of the lack of seriousness with which the event was approached by wealthy nations. The President of Italy, Silvio Berlusconi, served as the chairman of the event. On the final day, Berlusconi closed the event two hours early in order to watch Italy play in the World Cup. To Berlusconi, the outcome of a football match was more important than finding real solutions to hunger and malnutrition.

"Will the agreements made at WFS:fyl make a real difference in the struggle against hunger and malnutrition? I doubt it. But, we must remember that, if they had truly wanted to do so, the governments of the world could have used the summit to not only halve, but actually end hunger and malnutrition. Their failure to take any real action shows us that we cannot rely on the governments to solve the problem. Only the people, working together across boundaries of geography and identity, can bring about real change."

PE: Despite criticism against it, governments across the world are adopting corporate farming to manage their agriculture sectors. What, do you think, could this practice lead to in the long run?

PJ: "Corporate farming is a misguided policy that can only lead to more hunger, more rural poverty, and more pollution and depletion of natural resources. It produces cash crops for export rather than food for local and regional consumption. It is a for-profit enterprise that enriches the owners at the expense of the local farmers and workers. It cares only for short-term profits and does not hesitate to deplete and pollute scarce natural resources.

"The long-term solution to hunger and malnutrition is local production of a diverse array of sustainable and culturally appropriate crops for local and regional consumption. That can

and should be augmented by production of suitable high-value crops for national or international trade but should never be replaced by mass production of cheap crops for export.

"I am particularly worried by Pakistan's recent embrace of the corporate agriculture model. The implementation of CAF in Pakistan will have the opposite effect, worsening the position of the rural poor and further degrading valuable natural resources. The inevitable consolidation of farms will displace small farmers and favour unsustainable production of cash crops for export over sustainable production of healthy food for the people of Pakistan. Pakistan and its people will become even more vulnerable to changes in international markets and therefore less able to maintain true independence. Instead of embracing CAF, Pakistan could embrace the traditional skill, wisdom, and energy of its farmers and workers."

PE: Tell us something about the many problems currently being faced by the farming community in the US.

PJ: "The US is a case in point of corporate agriculture taken to its logical conclusion. Even before the US was formally founded, colonial agriculture was based on a cash crop model. Not surprisingly, given that beginning, agriculture within the US today is dominated by a handful of powerful corporations. Each year, there are fewer and fewer farms because more and more land is owned by corporate agribusiness. Often, the small farms that do exist are still integrated in some way into the supply chain of a major corporation and are therefore beholden to that corporation.

"The region where I live provides a good example of how corporate agriculture can destroy communities. This region is dominated by the poultry industry and is actually the area where so-called factory farming of animals was first invented. Most of the farmers either grow chickens for a corporation like Tyson or Perdue, or grow corn and soya to be sold to those corporations as feed for the chickens. Thus, the economic fortunes of the community rise and fall with the fortunes of the corporation. Because the economy is not diversified, the whole community must fear the day when a trade embargo or disease outbreak leads to the decline of the industry. Moreover, even when times are good for the corporations, times are bad for the local farmers and workers. The farmers who grow chickens have no control over the process and make far less than the legal minimum wage for the work that they do. Most are in a form of debt servitude to one of the corporations, having borrowed the money to install the expensive equipment needed for industrial animal agriculture. The local citizens who are not farmers end up as workers for the industry. They make very little money for dirty, degrading, and dangerous work. Both farmers and workers are often demoralised by the cruelty towards animals that the corporations mandate. Local citizens who are not affiliated with the industry suffer too. The water has been severely polluted by pesticides, fertilisers, animal waste, and meat processing effluents. Because the local economy is so depressed, due to the low wages paid by the industry and the lack of economic diversification, all of the problems associated with rural poverty are also present."

PE: American intellectual Gore Vidal has often referred to Oklahoma bomber, Timothy McVeigh, as a product of America's politically disenfranchised and aggrieved farming community. How much of political dissent have America's farmers shown in recent years?

PJ: "Timothy McVeigh is a good example of the perverse misdirection of legitimate rural anger in America. American farming communities know something is wrong. But, they are often very confused about the cause of their troubles. All too often, they blame the UN or foreigners or Jews for problems that have been caused by the agribusiness corporations and

their friends in government. Conservative rural folk often fervently support the politicians who are hurting them the most because they have confused the interests of corporate agribusiness with their own best interests.

"Some farmers are not deceived and do correctly perceive the sources of their troubles. But, too often, these farmers feel impotent rage in the face of what seem like forces beyond their control. Because the days of progressive activism by American farmers are long past, it's not easy for farmers who want to oppose corporate agribusiness to organise themselves in order to undertake effective collective action. Like many dissidents within the US, dissatisfied farmers are often estranged from one another and from political organisations that might be useful to them.

"Despite all of these difficulties, there are farmers who have managed to express their dissent in the most effective way possible--by beginning to build an alternative agriculture system. The organic farming movement grows stronger every year and can be expected to grow stronger still as more and more consumers adopt more healthy plant-based diets. Urban community gardens and rural community-supported agriculture systems are increasingly common."

PE: Despite the criticism against President George Bush's foreign, trade and environmental policies, he continues to follow them unhindered. How do dissenters in the US perceive his actions?

PJ: "Some dissenters within the US see George W Bush as a puppet of the powerful corporations. Remembering that his father once ran the CIA and that members of the Bush family have held either the presidency or the vice presidency for fourteen years and counting, some people see GWB as a man who is very powerful. Both perceptions may be true. Either way, it is very clear that GWB will stop at nothing to increase his own personal power. GWB now claims the right to declare any American--potentially including his political opponents--an "enemy combatant" and to jail that person secretly and indefinitely without the possibility of judicial review. The new Homeland Security Act gives the president broad new powers to suspend or ignore civil liberties. Most Americans are not aware that their rights were sharply curtailed by the Patriot Act of 2001 and will be further limited by the Homeland Security Act. Even fewer understand that GWB might actually want perpetual warfare, since that would mean big profits for his friends in the oil and defense industries.

"Dissenters understand very well what Bush is trying to do. Unfortunately, dissenters within the US do not have any idea how to counteract him and the powerful forces that support him. There are two problems: (1) dissenters are not effectively reaching the masses; and (2) even if they did reach the masses, there is no guarantee that GWB would heed the will of the people. In other words, dissenters are acting as if the US were a democracy in which ideas are fairly debated and the rulers abide by public opinion. But, in fact, the corporate media does not allow the views of dissenters to reach the masses. A massive peace march in Washington will merit only a very brief article in national newspapers and may not be covered at all in local newspapers or news programmes.

"Dissenters make very clever arguments in leftist newspapers and magazines, but these are not read by the masses. By concentrating their energies on marches and leftist magazines, dissenters are essentially ignoring the people, who must be reached by other means.

"This is why I am always saying that we need outside help if we are to end American aggression against other countries and restore democracy to the US. It seems to me that GWB speaks only one language: the lexicon of dollars and cents. Only if his corporate

sponsors become disenchanted will he change his course.

"I wish that the EU and other important trading partners would act to reign in Bush, but it seems that the nations of the world are following a policy of appeasement in relation to this aspiring dictator. So, it's up to the people of the world to vote with their wallets and stop supporting the companies that support Bush. When the big American fast food, tobacco, oil, and chemical companies begin to feel the pinch, then we will see some changes."

PE: And how do the dissenters perceive their own socio-political role in the future?

PJ: "I think that many dissenters in the US are consciously or unconsciously feeling a kind of helplessness. Many are struggling with depression, finding it hard to do anything at all. Others seem to be living in a state of denial, just going on with the same old activist tactics, heedless of the fact that these tactics failed to prevent this state of affairs and are not likely to change it. But, I am happy to say that a small and growing number of dissidents are regrouping, rethinking, and trying to come up with creative ways out of the terrible situation we are in.

"On the one hand, individuals and organisations are making more and more alliances across geographic and cultural boundaries, helping to build the emerging movement for a better world. On the other hand, individuals and organisations are remembering that local actions are also needed in order to turn the dreams of a better world into a reality. Both very local and expansively global actions are needed. A growing number of dissidents are seeing and acting on that insight. In short, American dissidents are struggling with despair but determined to have hope."