

George W. likes to say that "everything changed" on September 11. But one thing that's remained constant is his enthusiasm for doing special favors for greedhead polluters.

In late October, while America was focused on terror attacks and anthrax, the Bureau of Land Management quietly altered its rules so global corporations that mine lead, zinc, copper, and gold from our public lands can do so without having to worry about the contamination they cause to the land, water, or surrounding communities.

These corporations take billions' worth of minerals out of our public lands without even paying us royalties or fees. Worse, they make deadly toxic messes, then simply walk away.

A modest rule was adopted last year allowing the Interior Secretary to nix any permit for mining on public land if the mine could cause "substantial and irreparable harm" to the community.

Mining executives squealed that this was unduly burdensome, but they needn't have worried. George W. quickly came to the rescue, delivering the goods for these important campaign contributors.

An Interior Department spokesman explained the policy reversal by declaring that it was "not fair" to hold corporations to such a tough standard.

ECONOMIC  
DOUBLETALK

Hey, consumers, you're supposed to be spending money like crazy!

Even before September 11, our economy was sagging and corporate leaders and public officials were saying with tight smiles that they were counting on us consumers to bail the country out by spending more.

Since the economy really began to tank, the smiles have disappeared as corporations and politicians alternately beg and demand that we go shopping.

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The



# LOWDOWN

Edited by Jim Hightower and Phillip Frazer Vol. 3 No. 12 December 2001

## Introducing the Rolling Thunder tour Let's all build some downhome democracy

In my constant travels and talks throughout our country, I find that something big is happening at America's grassroots that the media power centers are either missing, misreading, or plain ignoring: Democracy is breaking out!

From coast to coast, in just about every place that has a zip code, there's a rising assertion of a truly American, democratic patriotism that has nothing to do with Osama bin Laden. What I see—especially in America's newly activist and idealistic young people—is an enduring, positive patriotism of ordinary folks doing the essential work of citizenship, organizing to take on the power structure (local and global) that's running roughshod over them. In hundreds of communities in every region of the country, people are questioning authority, confronting the corporate order, and challenging both the conventional wisdom and the complacency of the elites.

These outbreaks of unauthorized democracy are widespread, well-informed, largely successful, truly inspirational, immensely important and, therefore, almost entirely ignored by the establishment media. It takes bifocals to read America today—one lens for reading the close-up, official version of what is happening, and another for lifting our heads and looking

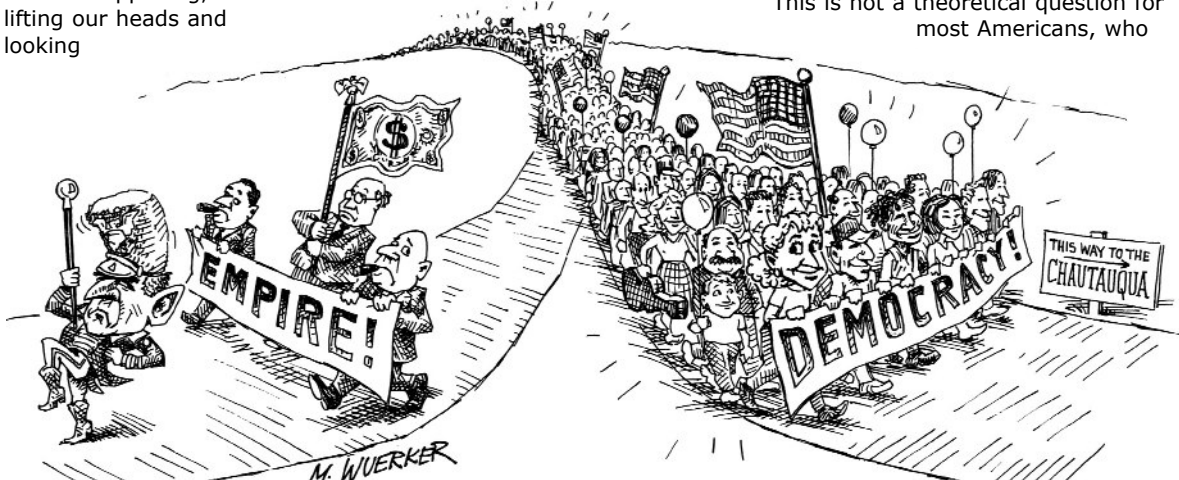
out to see an entirely different reality.

Despite a decade of steady hype about "the best of times," the experience of a majority of Americans is that the workplace is indeed leaner and meaner, reducing workers to disposable cogs; politics is a money game in which people don't matter; the marketplace is bullied by a handful of monopolistic conglomerates that manipulate everything from prices to the very DNA of the food supply; the ethic of the Common Good is trashed and elitism is celebrated; the essential American ideal of self-government is being brazenly usurped by assorted world-trade scams that enthrone global corporate rulers; and the lofty goal of creating a democratic republic is shoved aside by the powerful few who prefer empire to democracy.

Conventional wisdom says that Americans want to go back to the way things were prior to September 11. But I believe that an unconsulted majority yearns to reach forward, rather than return to a status quo antebellum that had shown little interest in their economic and political status and no respect for their voice.

Last spring I spotted a bumper sticker on a pickup truck here in Austin: "Where Are We Going? And What Am I Doing In This Handbasket?"

This is not a theoretical question for most Americans, who



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Never mind that these gasbags have for years been cheerfully engaged in busting good-paying union jobs, shipping manufacturing overseas, downsizing, privatizing, and stiffing America's workforce. Now they want us to spend, spend, spend!

But wait a minute, consumers—haven't you heard? You're *not* supposed to be spending like crazy!

This totally contradictory message is being shouted by such financial giants as Citigroup, Morgan Stanley, and Bank One. They issue most of America's credit cards, and they're now in a panic, claiming that we've been "overusing" them and running up a debt load that we can't pay back.

Indeed, the typical U.S. family owes \$8,000 on credit cards. Never mind that these same banks have been flooding our mailboxes with come-ons, offering everything from 0% interest rates to free backrubs. They pushed the equivalent of 20 credit cards a year on every man, woman, and child in our country. Now they insist that we need to be restrained.

## THE RISE AND FALL OF ENRON

Some strutting peacocks of the "new economy" are ending up as feather dusters. Kenneth Lay, for instance, used to think it was his cock-a-doodle-doo that made the sun rise each morning.

And why not? He had taken a Texas natural-gas firm and turned it into mighty Enron, the biggest energy corporation in the world, drawing more than \$100 billion a year in gross income.

Not that Enron produced any energy. No, no, that was old thinking. Lay ran what was essentially a computerized roulette wheel, buying and selling energy supplies that others produced. He asserted that it's the trade that matters, not the product. He even intended to trade in such "commodities" as water and weather.

Lay was George W.'s top funder in his gubernatorial

have seen the privileged few steadily separate themselves from our society's commitment to the common good. From the Nixon presidency forward, a narrow class of corporate, investor, and political elites has commandeered practically every lever of economic and governmental decision-making in our country (and globally), and is pulling those levers to advance its wealth and power at the expense of working families, small farmers, independent businesses, our communities, our health-care system, our air and water and food, our privacy and liberties, and even our basic right to self-government.

This is a daily assault on America, coming from the bastions of privilege on Wall Street and in Washington, and it's now striking millions of people. At its core, this is a profound assault on America's middle-class possibilities, on the viability of small-d democracy, and on our nation's sense of being a united society with a shared destiny.

The story of this assault is plenty big, but bigger yet is the story of how Americans are not meekly surrendering to it, but teaming up to whack the assaulters right in their snouts. It's a story about American grit, about how people are rallying beneath the media and political radar screens to retake our democracy street by street, issue by issue, greedhead by greedhead.

## We're already moving

I've heard, read, and seen too many Washington-based progressive leaders and pundits who take a deep draw on their pipes, furrow their brows, and ask with a dismissive shrug: "Yes, but where is the Next Big Issue that can catch the public's imagination and create a progressive movement?"

Hello? Is the ongoing fight for

American democracy not big enough?

**From battling HMOs to GMOs, from stopping sweatshop goods to providing public financing of local elections, from running living-wage campaigns to running polluters out of town—grassroots people are taking control of their own democracy and destinies, not waiting on George W. or Tom Daschle to do right by them.**

Beyond the pipe smoke of the clueless cognoscenti is a growing middle-class and working-class rebellion against the very corporate and political elites who keep telling us to keep our heads down, be happy, go shopping.

This is a movement that's very much on the move, that involves millions of people, that's at work in practically all of our communities, that is informed and purposeful, that is not controlled by any party or faction, and that offers the brightest hope for advancing both political and economic democracy in our nation.

This movement involves not only activists, but also the stressed and angry majority of ordinary folks who have thousands of kitchen-table conversations every evening about their place in a society that is out of whack and under the control of a wealthy power establishment that doesn't give a damn about people like them.

The rebellions against this everyday reality are cropping up in the workplace and on campuses, on farms and in the suburbs,

on the Internet and at backyard barbecues, at noisy protests and in quiet discussions. These rebellions are centered exactly where they were in 1776: in people's deep desire for democracy, for real self-government that values them, includes them, and offers a chance to build a more perfect union.

The fundamental question being asked is this: Who the hell is going to be in charge—We the People or a handful of greed-heads?

## Shall we Chautauqua?

I believe that we're in an exciting moment in our history, one that is ripe with progressive, democratic possibilities. Now is the time to advance those possibilities by collecting up and connecting up the phenomenal activist energy that is lighting up our countryside.

Go into any city, state, or region—as I do on a regular basis—and you'll find myriad groups fighting for the same values: economic fairness, social justice, and equal opportunity for all. Each group is battling the same basic power structure in its own way, over its own issues, and all are battling for the same democratic ideal: *participation* in power.

The critical mass of grassroots agitation over real grievances is there. What's missing is the essential next step of *connection*. People are moving, but we are largely separated from each other as we struggle with one tentacle or another of the corporate octopus that has usurped power and wealth from all of us. Hence, people fighting a toxic polluter on one side of town don't know the people fighting for a living-wage ordinance on the other side of town, and neither of these groups know the people just outside of town who are fighting to stop a

## Do something!

Just as democracy has to be built person by person and community by community, so does our **Rolling Thunder Downhome Democracy Tour!** We won't be rolling in as outsiders to give local folks a pre-packaged medicine show, but to give all of us the chance to become more deeply involved in the essential, unifying work of democracy-building. And here's a crazy notion: Let's have fun doing it!

To get involved, contact the National Field Coordinator, Darci Andersen (1615 Broadway, 9th Floor, Oakland, CA 94612; tel. 510-645-1027; fax 510-663-8569; thunder@california.com).

This is a volunteer, grassroots, everybody-pitch-in effort, and we need you and your organization to join us for the heavy lifting of getting both the tour and the grassroots coalition-building effort rolling. We need more national planning partners, local organizers, *funders*(!), experienced event planners and stage managers, food and drink donors, top-notch entertainers, expert trainers and facilitators, media specialists, graphic artists . . . and, especially, hordes of spirited volunteers from every city along the way who'll roll up their sleeves and do what has to be done. That's the way democracy works.

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huge hog factory . . . and so forth.

One way to get together is simply to get together. That's why I have teamed up with a growing and enthusiastic bunch of progressive leaders and organizations to launch the **Rolling Thunder Downhome Democracy Tour!**

Throughout 2002, we will work with progressive groups in a dozen cities across the country to organize local democracy festivals that will bring thousands of people together for a weekend so we can get to know each other, get connected, get involved in coalition building . . . and get down to some serious fun.

Yes, fun! As Plato put it nearly 2,500 years ago: "Unmitigated seriousness is always out of place in human affairs." Or, as I put it, "Let's put the party back in politics!"

Our Democracy Fests are loosely modeled on the old-time Chautauqua movement, which began in Western New York in 1874 and spread across the country town by town via 93 Chautauqua circuits. It was a Methodist-led but secular Enlightenment movement, bringing people together in the summertime at encampments where they could hear speakers of great renown, listen to music, form glee clubs, participate in plays, eat and play together, and hold open discussions. At its peak, the movement reached 35 million people a year, and Theodore Roosevelt was so moved by its

**Your group's name here**  
**T**he following national organizations and leaders have joined as backers and organizers of the Rolling Thunder Downhome Democracy Tour, and the list is steadily growing as word spreads.

To get your group involved as a national planning partner, contact Darci Anderson at 510-645-1027.

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|--|---|
| ACORN  | Joel Rogers                               |
| Alliance for Democracy                             | Julianne Malveaux                         |
| Alternet   | Just Act                                  |
| American Medical Students Assn.                    | Mother Jones                              |
| Barbara Ehrenreich                                 | Nat. Association of State PIRGs           |
| Ben and Jerry's                                    | Nat. Coalition for the Homeless           |
| Bioneers   | Nat. Council of Churches                  |
| Business Leaders for Sensible Priorities           | Organic Consumers Assn.                   |
| Campaign for America's Future                      | Organic Valley Family of Farms            |
| Center for Voting and Democracy                    | Patch Adams and the Gesundheit Institute  |
| Citizens Trade Campaign                            | Public Citizen                            |
| Dan Carol  | Rainforest Action Network                 |
| Democracy Matters                                  | Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr.                    |
| Doris "Granny D" Haddock                           | Ruckus Society                            |
| Ella Baker Center for Human Rights                 | Senator Paul Wellstone                    |
| Essential Information                              | Service Employees International Union     |
| Federation of Southern Cooperatives                | The Nation                                |
| Friends of the Earth                               | Tides Foundation                          |
| Global Exchange                                    | United for a Fair Economy                 |
| Global Resources Action Center for the Environment | United Students Against Sweatshops        |
| Greenpeace   | Utah Phillips                             |
| Inst. for Agriculture and Trade Policy             | Utne Reader                               |
|  | Women's Int. League for Peace and Freedom |
|  | Working Assets                            |

democratic value that he said: "The Chautauqua is the most American thing in America."

We want to revive that spirit. On the civic side, each of our Downhome Democracy Chautauqs will include:

- Two or three rousing speeches by the likes of me, Barbara Ehrenreich, Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr., and other national voices.
- Enlivening and interactive workshops on issues that local

groups want to focus on.

- Hands-on, how-to training sessions to develop people's civic and personal power—concerning everything from how to get better media to how to talk to your doctor.

- A book tent featuring an hourly schedule of signings and readings by authors.

- Open-forum "soap boxes" so individuals who want to vent, present, or rant can just have at it.

- An array of booths where participating organizations, both local and national, can present their materials, solicit memberships, and engage the crowd.

- Facilitated strategizing sessions where people and groups can get down to the gritty business of figuring out how to work together over the long haul, making us stronger as a whole than we are as separate parts.

- Some targeted group action, inviting the public to join in a rally, march, or whatever against a particular corporate bully.

- Petitioning, writing, and signing on issues or initiatives, voter registration and education, send-a-message-to-your-Congress-critter—every form of direct enlistment in citizen action.

While all the participating groups will bring their particular issues to the Fest, each is being asked to present them in terms of the overweening corporate power that threatens us all. Plus, no whining. This is to be a celebration of citizen power, not merely a recitation of all that is wrong. We want to focus on what we can do,

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 and presidential runs and also financed his Florida recount and inauguration. In return, Ken headed the energy transition team when Bush took the White House. He was poised to be a major player in the administration.

But stuff happens. Some of Enron's new ventures ended up in the ditch, the company's stock price went into a dive, and then there was the little matter of that scandal.

It's uncertain exactly what shenanigans were being played, but Enron suddenly had to "readjust" a recent earnings report because of more than \$1 billion dollars in losses from investments by secret partnerships run by company executives—losses they had kept off the books. The SEC is investigating, investors are crying foul, and the company is now careening toward bankruptcy.

**THE CORPORATE PLAY FOR CHINA**

"This is a defining moment," declared the head of the World Trade Organization. "The world has now changed."

Indeed. But he wasn't speaking of the crashbombing of the Twin Towers. What made the WTO chief so effusive was that his anti-democratic, secretive corporate cabal had managed to bring China into its ranks.

Most of our Congress critters rationalized their support of this by claiming that WTO membership means China will have to open its markets to more U.S. products.

Horsefeathers. China's people are overwhelmingly impoverished. The corporate powers are not after China's markets, but after the dirt-cheap labor, cheap land, and nonexistent enforcement of environmental protections.

WTO membership opens China's unlimited production capacity to global corporations, and it prohibits our country from putting any tariffs, quotas, or other restrictions on the China-made

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**The Hightower LOWDOWN**

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products that will flood into our markets.

There'll be a gold rush of corporations moving production to China. Motorola, an eager booster of China's WTO membership, said just a week prior to the vote that it would invest \$6.6 billion in new Chinese factories, abandoning more jobs and communities here.

## WOMEN STAND UP TO NIKE

When it comes to the treatment of workers, you can count on Nike to do the right thing. As long as it's forced to.

Take the example of Mexmode, a Mexican factory that employs mostly young, single mothers to churn out thousands of Nike sweatshirts each day. Until recently, the pay was abysmally poor, child labor was used, and managers verbally abused and harassed the women.

The women literally got fed up when they found worms in the cafeteria food. They staged a boycott—a small act of defiance that got them fired.

Nike did nothing about the firings or the conditions. But two U.S. advocacy groups did. The Workers' Rights Consortium and United Students Against Sweatshops sent investigators to Mexmode, then joined the women in an international protest campaign that included demonstrations in front of Nike stores and offices.

This put such a stain on the corporate swoosh that Nike was forced to clean up its act at Mexmode. The child labor was stopped, and the women won their jobs back, got a raise, were allowed to form a union . . . and got rid of the lousy cafeteria food.

Nike now cites Mexmode as an example of its commitment to treat workers fairly. But before we cheer too loudly, note that the women are still paid the miserable wage of less than \$5 a day—too little to support them and their children.

how we can take power back in every aspect of our lives—from the corrupting corporate cash in our elections to the corporate contamination of our food.

## Fight the power, have fun!

While we develop the civic side of our community, let's also wallow in the glorious cultural side. Remember, the Chautauqua spirit is a festive one, and these events are to be something that regular folks will want to come to, bringing their families, friends, neighbors, church members, co-workers, bowling buddies, and the whole community. The setting is not a lecture hall, but more like a county fair, with lots going on all at once, including:

- Great music, comedians, clowns (Patch Adams will be at all of our events), artists, and other top performers.
  - Food and drink—we're planning an Organic Food Kitchen (thanks to the great folks at Organic Valley and other organic-food companies); we'll ask local chefs, farmers, grocery markets, and other food makers to bring their goodies; and YES, we'll have beer and wine!
  - Stuff for kids, ranging from games and puppets to poster-painting and bumper-sticker making.
  - Crafts and hands-on demonstrations, including making patches and assembling quilts that express the grassroots, democratic theme of the Chautauqua.
  - A tent for poetry slams, storytelling, songwriting, and such.
  - Whatever else we can think of that's fun—a "Dunk-a-Lobbyist" booth, a baseball game, chess, a cook-off . . . you name it.
- If nothing else, the Rolling

Thunder Tour will be an uplifting celebration that brings all sides of town into contact, not merely gathering organizational leaders, but reaching into the neighborhoods, clubs, churches, bars, and wherever else will let the larger community get to know each other, learn from each other, laugh, eat, and see what we might do together. I think all of us will be surprised at how much progressive activity there is in our own town and how much potential we have to take our democracy back.

I find in every town I visit that there's a yearning for political family—especially since September 11.

Yes, we now have the Internet, e-mail, and other forms of high-tech outreach, but we're in desperate need of "high-touch" outreach, too. Let's get together and actually talk with each other through a democratic Chautauqua movement.

The tour is being initiated by a wide range of groups (see p.3 box), but local groups in each city will do the heavy lifting. Each of the Downhome Democracy events will be a catalyst for local coalition-building, beginning with the planning and production of the one- or two-day festivals.

To be part of the tour and the process, a broad base of local progressive groups will form a coordinating coalition that will be responsible for structuring their event, finding the right venue, working their membership lists and doing local promotion to turn out a great crowd, staffing the festival with volunteers, and doing the cooperative leg-work to make it happen. We'll also ask each coordinating coalition to

identify a unifying issue or two (living wage, public financing of elections, etc.) that local people can work on together beyond the event, thus keeping the coalition process in action.

The national Rolling Thunder partners will help with event coordinating, provide organizational support, add to the crowd-building effort, offer name speakers and entertainers, assist with media, provide engaging workshops and training specialists, and generally "be there."

In addition, we're planning to have a mobile electronics center at each festival. Sort of a Bob-Roberts-Mobile, it will arrive prior to the event and stay afterwards. Staffed with professionals, it will offer training for local activists in the use of these electronic tools for everything from canvassing to media.

It also will leave behind an invaluable resource: We intend to collect and compile, on the spot, a computerized list of those who come to the Chautauqua, and this list will be available for free to all of the groups that help produce the event, allowing them to stay in touch with the attendees and involve them in future actions.

Coordinating coalitions have begun planning Chautauquas in Tucson, Chicago, Austin, Atlanta, Madison, Seattle, and Colorado Springs, and groups from 20 other cities have approached us about being part of the tour. We hope you'll get involved with us—as a local organizer, funder, national planning partner . . . or at any level of participation.

Democracy is not something that just happens; it has to be built from the ground up. Let's roll.

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