

Mother Jones

<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2005/03/people-power-interview-david-solnit>

## People Power: An Interview With David Solnit



**N E W S :** A direct-action organizer talks about waging common-sense social revolution.

David Solnit

Interviewed By Katie Renz

Photo: [Jacques-Jean Tiziou](#)

March 22, 2005

David Solnit has been trying to change the world since high school, when he joined a campaign to abolish draft registration. Since then, the Bay Area-based carpenter, activist, and puppeteer, now 41, has been on the frontlines of direct action, protesting the US role in Central America, in the 1980s, free trade deals in the 1990s, and, lately, the US intervention in Iraq.

As a member (and co-founder) of [Art and Revolution](#), a loose-knit collective combining art and theater with direct action. This creativity-with-a-purpose stands in a colorful tradition of theatrical dissent, from the Diggers, the Yippies, and the French Situationists of the 1960s. Solnit and his predecessors subvert the system, and point to alternatives, showing, by means of blatant contrast, how fundamentally flawed the “normal” state of affairs can truly be.

For the past five years Solnit has worked with the [Coalition of Immokalee Workers](#), going on a cross-country “truth tour” to pressure Taco Bell to improve working conditions in the “sweatshops in the field” where its tomatoes are grown. After three years of ignoring the coalition’s demands, the

corporation finally agreed to meet with them after they staged the mock marriage of a ten-foot tall Queen Cheap Tomato and King Taco Bell (a Chihuahua, of course) in front of their world headquarters in Irvine, California. And in early March, the coalition agreed to end their three-year boycott of the fast-food giant after the company agreed to increase wages and end unfair labor conditions.

Solnit's activism isn't limited to clever stunts and bodies in the street, important as these are. Any workable strategy for social change, he argues, has to be grounded in a hard-headed analysis of the current reality even as it puts forward concrete alternatives to business-as-usual. Such a strategy is explored in *Globalize Liberation: How to Uproot the System and Build a Better World*, a collection of 33 essays written by a diverse group of global activists and edited by Solnit. The book is filled with stories of effective actions that exemplify a "new radicalism," wherein means (what can be done with some energy and creativity) determine the ends. "Do we in the U.S. have the guts and imagination?" Solnit asks. (His answer, by the way, is Yes.)

Solnit is currently active in opposition to the war and occupation of Iraq with the People Powered Strategy Project, a framework that puts pressure on key institutions—or "pillars"—that support the war. Specifically, this strategy identifies the military, corporate war profiteers, and corporate media disinformation as three main pillars, which are made focal points of campaigns—including counter-recruitment, targeting privatizing companies, and holding the media accountable—that chip away and eventually remove those support systems. Simultaneously, people power strives to build genuinely democratic institutions: That way, when the pillars crack and crumble, in place of the mansion will stand affordable housing, locally-owned businesses, schools—a society created for the pursuit of happiness, for all.

Solnit recently discussed puppets, protest, and "People Power" with *Mother Jones*.

MJ: What inspired you to use puppets as a protest tool?

DS: It was an effort to find new language and use culture to articulate ideas and inspire ourselves and other people. The key is to bring creativity into movements so the point is not to expand a predictable formula and go, "Yeah, okay, now we add puppets into the predictable formula," but to be like a boxer, to always be on our toes and find new ways of doing things. Puppets are one way but there are a million others.

MJ: The Immokalee workers recently achieved a huge success. Aside from the street theater, how did this happen?

DS: Through a people-power strategy. They had everything from general strikes in Immokalee to students shutting down Taco Bell franchises in colleges. Low-income farm workers and their allies forced the biggest restaurant corporation on planet Earth to negotiate with them.

MJ: Another big event for you this past year was your tour promoting *Globalize Liberation*. What was that experience like?

DS: I figured, "I'm not going to read from a book, that's boring." So I took the ideas in the book, painted them up on giant sheets of fabric, dressed up as Robin Hood and talked about the history of when they took our commons away 500 years ago in England and how I was a campesino and took to the woods in rebellion. And then I proceeded to ask a bunch of questions as Robin Hoods. "Is it true that they're even charging you for your water? Is it true that a dark wizard named Karl Rove is mesmerizing your whole population and convincing you that 51 percent of your population has become fundamentalist fanatics?" People were like, "Yeah." "Can we just get together with bows and arrows and attack them when they come through the woods like I used to?" People were like, "That doesn't quite work anymore."

MJ: Whom were you doing this for?

DS: A mix. I went to community college classes in Philadelphia, mainstream but independent bookstores in Toledo, radical anarchist bookstores in places like New Orleans. People are very hungry for figuring out how to change the world. The old ways (see the Democratic Party) are breathing their last gasps. There are thousands of people who a few years ago or even more recently would have believed in the established channels, but like the rest of the world, they're fundamentally failing to give people control, and so people are looking for new ways.

MJ: How did you come up with the Robin Hood idea?

DS: For a lot of us, the people who have challenged the corporate framework of reality have been the Zapatistas--they've really told a different story. So we thought, who do we have, like Emiliano Zapata, where every eight year-old kid knows what the story is? Every kid knows Robin Hood. He's a rebel who takes direct action and robs rich people, and that's good because he's taking back the stuff they stole from us.

On the eve of the ministerial meeting in Quebec City against the Free Trade Area of the Americas in March, 2001, we actually got together about 15 of us as Robin Hood and his Merry Band and went into the front entrance of the Pacific Stock Exchange in San Francisco. It's tricky because there's this huge

security entrance and you have to show a card and go through a turnstile and there are security police, so we said, "Okay, how is a group of people dressed in green with funny hats in boots going to get in?" So we brought a big bouquet of balloons carried by Maid Marian, and told them we were "Balloons and More" and had a singing telegram, and we had the name of someone who worked inside.

MJ: Did that get you in?

DS: That distracted the guards, while the rest of us dove through the turnstiles and I body-blocked this 220-pound security guard for the necessary three seconds for everybody to rush the floor, unfurl a banner about the lords of industry, and make their best efforts of medieval pronouncements against capitalism. And then the whole floor—we actually shut it down for about half an hour—all of the traders either started throwing food at us or were picking us up and helping us sneak out. We were all eventually dragged out of the Stock Exchange, even though we told the police that we didn't acknowledge the authority of the Sheriff of Nottingham.

MJ: When you were on tour, did you notice any stark difference between regions--the whole red state/blue state thing?

DS: Actually, I don't think that's that helpful of a framework to understand people. The best tools to deconstruct why people voted the way they did between two parties that have little difference are advertising tools about why different constituents buy different types of soft drinks. People live in kind of a magician state under spells of advertising, and being able to understand and deconstruct the stories politicians tell is a lot of what I've been trying to do with street theater, and what we're trying to do with strategy.

The difference between liberals and conservatives, or Democrats and Republicans, is really their dichotomy. If we enter their story, or let Karl Rove or John Kerry define reality, we're always going to lose. If we redefine it and realize it's people versus corporations, or communities versus capitalism, if we can articulate the story clearly, we'll find that actually most people are on our side and there's a small minority on their side.

MJ: You recently said that Bush's re-election is an incredible opportunity.

DS: I did preface that by saying I thought it would be good to un-elect him! I don't believe in a strategy of making people more miserable, but since we're stuck with him there are a bunch of openings: It's become transparent that elections don't equal democracy, that the Democratic Party is

a political space that is a coffin for social movements, that the conflict between elites and the rest of us is completely transparent, that they don't understand social power but they understand how to manipulate and use the psychology of advertising. Just look at what's happening in Iraq: they have no idea how people operate. So, if we can apply people power in the United States and stand up to the repression, it bodes well because they don't understand it. And I believe the Bush Administration is so arrogant they're going to bring about the collapse of empire and global capitalism.

MJ: Just on their own?

DS: It needs a push, especially from those of us in the United States. A big push. People in the United States are in such a privileged position in that we are located within the Achilles heel of the most powerful and dangerous institution in the history of planet Earth--the U.S. empire and the global economy. There's actually no time or place that I'd rather be alive and fighting than right here and now.

MJ: So you're not fleeing to Canada?

DS: No. People around the world have much more developed social movements and are fighting so hard, and we can do just a little bit and have a huge impact. What happened in Seattle, for example, or downtown San Francisco the day the United States preemptively invaded Iraq--it was really not a big deal for a lot of social movements in places like Bolivia or India. But because of who and where we were, it reverberated around the world.

MJ: Is there anything that stands out from the anti-war movement or the efforts to defeat Bush that were exemplary of this more experimental and creative movement?

DS: In opposing the war, there were some key exercises of people power. When the Irish anti-war movement shut down Shannon Air Force Base so it couldn't be a re-fueling stop for bombs and troops to invade Iraq. When longshore workers in Britain refused to unload war cargo. When Italian anti-war activists stopped trains carrying military equipment, and when the Turkish people rose up so that Turkey wasn't going to be used as a staging ground or a welcome mat for the invasion. And when we in San Francisco shut down the city the day after the war and then proceeded to disrupt some of the key war profiteers like Lockheed and ChevronTexaco and Bechtel.

We were tapping into the people power sense that we could change things ourselves and impose a political, social, and economic cost. But the question I have is, what if we had already had a strategy to try and assert people power all over the country so our actions could have escalated instead of

petering out because there wasn't a sense of what it was adding up to or how were we going to win? Or, similarly, what if ten major cities in the United States could shut down their financial districts next time the U.S. preemptively invades?

MJ: Where do activists start?

The United States needs to become literate in people power. If the wealth of countries was based on their social movements, it would flip the world upside down, and Bolivia, Brazil, India, Mexico would be the wealthy nations and the United States would be a very poor, underdeveloped country. For example, in El Alto, Bolivia, at the same time they were kicking out the multinational water corporation, Suez, that was poisoning their water system and making it unaffordable, they were creating an alternative water system that would de-commodify water and be controlled by the community themselves, as they did earlier in Cochabamba.

Part of the challenge for us is to learn from past social movements. A lot of the ideas I learned came from the civil rights movement and the farm workers movement. But they're not in people's heads. It's an amnesia of our own history. We have to learn how to organize, and create models that are replicable and not just dependent on non-profits and professionals. On the other hand, there's a quandary about how the most overworked people on planet Earth find the time to organize ourselves. But, if you start to look around, there are people organizing themselves around all of our basic needs and organizing positive alternatives. There are a lot of pieces of my community--in my utopian vision of the world--that would remain essentially intact, just probably with more resources and more freedom, from the public library to the cultural centers to neighborhood organizations, community gardens to bicycle transportation. The challenge is to try to couple our oppositional organizing with the constructive alternatives, because often they end up in separate worlds.

MJ: This all sounds great, but aren't these pillars you identify--the military, corporations, and corporate media disinformation--pretty huge? It seems that struggling to knock them down, even as you're creating new alternatives, could be quickly discouraging.

DS: One key thing people do is pick achievable goals along the way so we can have milestone victories and break it down into little pieces. Can we do counter-recruitment work in this particular high school and get this many students not to go into the military? If your goal is to topple the empire, break it down. If everybody fights for achievable goals within a framework of stopping the war and occupation, they can add up. If we see ourselves as part of the same movement operating on some of the same systemic analyses, then our efforts become cumulative. You get overwhelmed if you

think, "Oh my god, our small local group has to fill the vacuum after the system collapses AND help it collapse!"

MJ: In *Globalize Liberation*, you write that the world is waiting for Americans to join them in rebellion. So the world hasn't completely lost faith in us?

DS: If you look at our struggle as a battle of competing stories attempting to define reality, in some ways the world was hopeful when we told the story of Seattle. But then the elites came back and told the story of the war on terror after September 11th. And then we came back and told the story of the global anti-war movement on February 15, 2003. And they came back on November 2, 2004, and told the fabricated myth that 51 percent of the people support empire and right-wing fundamentalism. It's our turn now to deconstruct that.

MJ: So if a huge part of this new radicalism is about creating a new world, what's your vision?

I don't have a grand, post-revolutionary vision. People constantly do all kinds of incredible things to take care of each other and make decisions collectively that go unnoticed, so it's clear that very different ways of organizing our lives already exist in small pieces. Even in places people don't traditionally think of, there's often a lot of mutual aid. I've lived in small towns where when the neighbor's house burns down, the community gets together and rebuilds it.

It's not a question of whether some abstract, utopian vision is possible. It's just a question of taking the things that already exist and expanding them and trying to remove the institutions and the values that strangle them. My housemate, who I do a lot of organizing with, hates when people talk about community gardens. She says, "Whenever people talk about the world they want, all they say is 'community gardens'. But what are we going to do about the sewage system?" For a lot of protests we've had art parties, like for the World Economic Forum, where we made all these blue globes of the earth that say, "Another World Is Possible". People come and say, "Can we paint our image of what a better world would look like?" I was in New York City doing this and everybody was painting idyllic rural places. I said, "You know what? You all live in the city. If you all move out to the country, which is what you're painting, there won't be any left. So paint your city the way you want it to be."

Katie Renz is an editorial intern at *Mother Jones*.