

Peace Bikers Use Pedal Power to Shut Down the SOA

sandorkraut

Three Tennessee activists bicycled back roads through Tennessee and Georgia for more than a week to join the annual demonstration to shut the School of the Americas (SOA), held in Columbus, Georgia, each November. The SOA is a U.S. government school dedicated to teaching Latin American military forces combat skills; thousands of its graduates have been implicated in horrific forms of state terrorism throughout Latin America. We biked 360 miles to the SOA from the neighboring queer communities where we live, IDA (MaxZine and TomFoolery) and Short Mountain Sanctuary (Sandorkraut) in middle Tennessee.

Our journey brought us through starkly contrasting environments and cultural milieus. Our first stop was Moonshadow, a family homestead, eco-education center, and community in Tennessee's Sequatchie Valley. In Rome, GA we were hosted by Matt and Amanda, friends we met at a demonstration in Oak Ridge. Out of their apartment, they have started a local Food Not Bombs and are active in the Coosa River Basin initiative, a group trying to clean up the river and its watershed area of PCBs released there decades ago by General Electric. It was inspiring to see young activists organizing and working in this small, conservative city, rather than fleeing to an already-established activist scene.

From Rome we continued south. As we approached Cedartown, we were greeted by a South African fellow named Grieger riding a handcycle (he had no legs). Grieger cycles fast, and competes in the Paralympics; it was not easy keeping up with him as he escorted us into town. Actually, he told us we deserved a police escort, but thankfully that never materialized.

That night we camped in a state park. Amidst thousands of acres, camping was restricted to a small area, complete with floodlights. Apart from us, this camping area was populated exclusively by huge RVs, each with a satellite dish and the sounds of television.

Everywhere we rode in Georgia we saw young pine forests, all one type of tree, all the same size. Where once wild, diverse ecosystems flourished, clearcutting has left a legacy of managed wood production areas. Another ubiquitous sight throughout the Georgia countryside, from Whitesville to Whitesburg, were signs with the confederate flag and the words "let us vote." Our ride followed the election of Georgia's first Republican Governor since Reconstruction, his victory fueled by redneck outrage at the incumbent Democrat's modification of the state flag to de-emphasize the symbol of the Confederacy.

Though we met with much kindness and generosity everywhere we stopped, some drivers felt that we were asking too much to share the road with them. Some drivers impatiently honked at us, and one gave us the finger. Other folks we encountered were mystified and amused that anyone could travel like this.

The events at SOA were fun and uplifting. Friday night we attended a queer caucus, which made the folks who attended visible to one another, and we kept running into each other all weekend. At the Sunday demonstration, we were recruited into the Hott Block, with pink flags and hot pants. At the SOA gate, instead of angry or somber confrontation, the Hott Block sat on the ground and played spin the bottle with each of us representing a nation. As Belarus, I actively modeled world peace and love by tenderly kissing the luscious lips of many other nation-states.

Our bike ride to the SOA was a bridge-building experience: Trannies, peace and solidarity activists, bikers, food activists, eco-activists, queers, and communitarians. Though diverse in focus, we are connected, in the margins

of American life where our subcultures exist and thrive. Biking through strip malls, subdivisions and clearcuts, we experienced plenty of despair. But the human connections we made as we rode reminded us that allies are everywhere.



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