

Beyond Buy Nothing Day

by jennifer bethune

Most people balk at the idea of buying nothing for an entire day.

"I'd have to prepare..." said many, indicating that they'd be forced to stock up on things like coffee and snacks before the big day. While international buy nothing day is a protest against consumerism, it seems as if protesters will have to engage doubly in their ordinary consumer activities in order to prepare for buy nothing day. Initiatives like international buy nothing day succeed in demonstrating the Western reliance on consumer products. But there are limits to the notion of abandoning consumerism. Consumerism is a direct result of the division of labour, a structure which has been at the core of most of western civilization since its inception. Granted, consumerism has evolved substantially since farmers and smiths exchanged millet for tools in the earliest civilizations. Now, on the eve of international buy nothing day, it seems as if consumerism is inescapable.

For most Canadians, buying nothing for just one day may prove difficult. Making a

lifestyle of the protest may be close to impossible. The millions of people living hand to mouth in the hearts of North America's

become the first global retailer - at an alarming pace.

Study after study confirms that the opening of new Wal-

are becoming institutionalized in international agreements like the General Agreement on Trades and Tariffs (GATT) to

they swell.

Many North Americans have neither the means, nor the will to abandon consumerism altogether.

They may, though, choose to protect the fabric of their neighborhoods and towns, by following the advice of Wal-Mart founder, Sam Walton, himself: "There is only one boss. The customer. And he can fire everybody in the company, from the chairman on down, simply by spending his money somewhere else."

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cities and towns, for the most part, face no other option than to continue to fuel their consumer society. They cannot grow maize in their window boxes, support aquaculture in their bathrooms, or raise sheep in their backyards. But it is this demographic that may be able to contribute the most to anti-consumerism protests like international buy nothing day. While these urbanites will continue to buy their food, clothing, and housing, they can mount an impressive assault on modern consumerism by combating the spread of giant retailers, thus maintaining the character of their neighborhoods by protecting small, family-owned stores.

Every three days, a new Wal-Mart opens somewhere in North America. With at least ten outlets in Argentina and Brazil, and three in Hong Kong, Wal-Mart is realizing its goal - to

Marts lead to both a net loss of employment and a decline in income for the community. Studies have shown that for every job created by Wal-Mart, as many as one and a half jobs are lost. Wal-Mart rarely pays its employees more than the minimum wage.

As well as fueling excess and consumerism, Wal-Mart, and other consumer meccas like it, works to unravel the fabric of the community upon which it imposes itself. Busy downtowns turn to ghost towns, as giant retailers succeed in luring shoppers to their havens of homogeneity. Researchers at the University of Massachusetts have found that a dollar spent on a locally owned business has four to five times the economic spin-off of a dollar spent at Wal-Mart.

Despite these, and other shortcomings, corporate consumer icons like Wal-Mart

name only one. Giant retailers may soon become the face of the global retail sector, suffocating small businesses as

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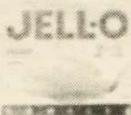
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Number of Shopping malls built between 1970-1990: 25,000

