

# **What I Learned from the World Social Forum:**

**by Starhawk - January 31, 2001**

Although I've spent a lot of the last year and a half at antiglobalization actions and meetings, many of which included forums of various sorts, and although in at least some of my incarnations I am a Respectable Adult with a college education and books to my credit who even gets asked to speak at conferences and universities, and even though some of my best friends work for NGOs, this is the first time I've actually made it up out of the direct action trenches and into the conference rooms. I found it highly educational (although like most university education it had its moments of airless, deadly boredom.) The amazing number of participants, thousands more than expected, coupled with limited translation facilities and a high degree of confusion meant that I often didn't get to workshops I would have liked to attend or didn't know about events until after they happened. What follows, therefore, is an extremely limited picture of all the immensity of discussion and debate and strategizing and organizing that went on around hundreds of issues. In order to get this out, I've limited my focus to issues that affect groups I'm currently working with.

## **Water:**

Water is a key issue worldwide, as there is a strong push from corporate interests to privatize water resources and water delivery services. The FTAA, the WTO, and a whole list of smaller bilateral and regional trade agreements open the door to the privatization of water. For me, this issue had eerie echoes of the negative society I imagined in my novel *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, where the poor could not afford to drink and people were imprisoned for stealing water. The antiglobalization movement now must assert that water is a human right, linked to the right to life. There is no substitute for water; therefore there must be a limit to private ownership and control of water resources.

## **Women's Issues:**

Are key in the antiglobalization struggle. There was a powerful workshop on feminist perspectives on globalization, and many other workshops on women's issues. The main morning panels, however, tended to be quite male dominated, and there was much talk of the need for an even stronger focus on women. I was able to connect individually with some of the women working on antiglobalization, and hope that our women's action in Quebec City in April will bring our issues more to the forefront. There was great

interest in it among women I met and as soon as the call is finalized I will be able to get it out to some of the women's networks I've connected with here.

### **Indigenous Peoples' Struggles:**

For me, the most moving and clear talks I heard in the entire five days were two indigenous speakers who spoke so heartfully and poetically (and in such clear, blessedly slow Spanish!) that I felt like I was drinking cool, spring water after days of stale coffee. There was an encampment of youth, the MST (Landless Rural Workers' Movement) and indigenous groups, but unfortunately it was separate from the main campus and also there was no clear announcement of the fact that there were ongoing meetings, speeches and presentations of the indigenous people's networks. Had I known, I probably would have spent most of the conference there. As it was, I got there only almost at the end, in time to learn that the situation in Chiapas is not happily resolved under Vicente Fox, that he is also trying to outlaw abortion, and that the growing struggle in Chiapas will also focus on water rights. High on the corporate agenda is control of the hydroelectric potential represented by Chiapas' rivers: Bay Area folks, take note in light of our current energy 'crisis'!

### **The FTAA:**

I knew about the FTAA, I knew it was bad enough that I'm devoting most of my time currently to organizing against it, but I didn't know in detail just how bad it is:

**Privatization of services:** Education, medical care, libraries, water delivery—the FTAA would open those areas to regulation by international trade agreements. It's one of the things the WTO hadn't quite gotten around to yet. Presumably, that could mean a corporation that runs prisons could sue a government for providing its own and thereby limiting its potential profits. Ditto with water, schools, health care, etc. Of course, for most countries in Latin America the World Bank and the IMF have already dealt with their health care and educational systems. But the FTAA would make it difficult or impossible for local or national governments to take control of their own schools, health care programs, or utilities and run them for the benefit of their own citizens instead of for corporate profit.

**Agriculture:** probably the most important aspect for the South, for farmers and indigenous people. The agreement would make it impossible to support small farmers, to ensure biosafety standards around genetically engineered foods and seeds, to prevent market manipulations and crop dumping that destroys traditional cultures.

**Natural resources and the environment:** The agreement would undermine every legislative and regulatory tool for conservation of resources and environmental protection, from the Endangered Species Act on down, and override local and federal laws.

**Investment:** remember the Multilateral Agreement on Investments, that was defeated back in '97 by the opposition of civil society? This agreement brings it back, opening the door to 'investors' rights' to control of government regulations and financial systems.

**End run around the WTO:** The FTAA, along with a whole lot of other bilateral and smaller multilateral agreements, are part of the new strategy of the corporate globalists. Since the body blow that was dealt to the WTO in Seattle, what they're trying to do is put in place piecemeal the provisions they couldn't yet put into the WTO.

### **The WTO:**

May or may not hold its next meeting in Qatar in November—although the media is reporting it as a sure thing, it will actually be a couple of weeks before they confirm the decision. It is less of a priority for corporate interests, however, because their strategy has shifted to bilateral and regional trade agreements that essentially put its noxious provisions into place.

### **Direct Action:**

We did do one forum on direct action in FTAA organizing, with groups from Brazil and Argentina. But in general direct action is sort of the stepchild of the NGO world. It happens around the edges: the MST (The Landless Rural Workers Movement) did a great action pulling up bioengineered crops on the first day of the conference. Unfortunately we were still en route and couldn't take part. They Respectable Adults know about direct action; they often support it, and some of them actually take part in it. The introduction to the Forum Schedule credits the movement sparked by Seattle and DC and Prague. But many of the groups seem to have a bit of difficulty actually focusing on the direct action component of that movement or thinking about it as part of their strategy. Of course, they have funding to protect, so maybe they're better off not linking to us too directly. Maybe we don't need joint strategies and these parallel worlds can just continue to exist semi-separately. But I can't help but think that we're their best friends—we're the reason why the World Bank is going to read a letter of protest with alarm and concern, or look at a petition, or pretend to have a dialogue. And that it might be nice occasionally, or smart strategically, for that to be a little more

clearly acknowledged. Our direct action movement gains a lot when we do work together with the groups which have a level of sophistication and expertise that paid staff can develop—for example, in our San Francisco organizing around the FTAA there are a number of NGOs and also some union people who bring an incredible amount of knowledge and sophistication to the issues. But I'd also like to see more of the high level strategists come down to the convergence center and actually listen to the anarchists and the dreadlocked youth and the black bloc who have a level of radical clarity that can get lost after years of reading reports and pressing for minor policy changes. Anyway, I amused myself by tossing out radical proposals: "Great—you guys send out a joint letter of protest and meanwhile we'll shut down every major stock exchange on the planet." And some people seemed genuinely interested.

There are, however, awesome groups down here that are organizing around direct action. There are groups in Sao Paolo, Belo Horizonte and Buenos Aires that did solidarity actions around the S26 protests in Prague and are now gearing up for actions around the preliminary FTAA (ALCA in Spanish) meeting April 7 in Buenos Aires. They're serious, determined and radical—the Argentinians want to make the Quebec City protests unnecessary by shafting the FTAA before it ever gets to Quebec. It's a joy and a privilege to be down here sharing some of our experiences and helping in that endeavor.

Yours in Persistent Opposition to Authority, -- *Starhawk*

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