

Miami: A Dangerous Victory

By Starhawk

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For those of us who participated in the protests against the FTAA, the Free Trade Area of the Americas, in Miami the third week in November, it's a bit hard to feel victorious. We are bruised, battered, worried about companeros still in jail, and grieving for Jordan Feder, a young medic who died of meningitis after the action. We've been harassed, arrested, tear-gassed, pepper-sprayed, hit, beaten, assaulted, lied about, and in some cases literally tortured and sexually assaulted in jail, and we've stared directly into the naked red gaze of the New American Fascism.

Nevertheless we have had a significant victory that we need to understand and recognize, not least because it throws us into a new and very dangerous phase of activism.

Our victory was not tactical. None of our own attempts to physically enter or disrupt the conference were very effective. I've heard rumors that one group did actually take down a section of fence, but most of us just managed to march up to it and maintain a presence close to it for short periods of time before being driven back by police riots. And while I could list numerous missed opportunities and tactical errors we made, I can't honestly think of anything much we could have done, given the overwhelming police presence and the physical layout of Miami, that would have made for a significantly different tactical outcome.

We were Iraqed--that is, we were attacked not for anything we'd done but for someone's inflated fears of what we might do; shot, gassed, beaten and arrested for weapons of destruction we did not have; targeted for who we are and what we stand for, not for acts we had committed. The 8.5 million dollars that was allocated for the policing of this event came out of the 87 billion dollar appropriations bill for Iraq. Miami was the Bush policy of pre-emptive bullying brought home.

There is a certain visceral sense of satisfaction in breaching a barricade and directly blocking a meeting, but those are not actually the measures we should use to judge our success. The direct action strategy in contesting the summits is not really about physically disrupting them. It's about undermining their legitimacy, unmasking them, making visible their inherent violence and the repression necessary to support them, and undercutting public belief in their beneficence or right to exist. And there, we are winning, not because of any tactical brilliance on our part, but because in truth all we had to do was show up, to be there as a visible body of opposition and withstand the onslaught.

Our most effective direct actions may have been those we did in the days and weeks before the meetings: the outreach, the community gardening, the door-to-door flyering downtown, conducted under the constant threat of arrest by a police force acting like Nazi bully boys, arresting protestors for walking on the street, standing on the sidewalk, talking to people or witnessing other arrests. In spite of the major fear campaign and the negative propaganda being put forth by the police and the media, just about every interaction we had with ordinary Miami folks was positive. Locals were told by police that dangerous anarchists would burn their shops, would shoot them with squirt guns full of urine and feces, would smash their windows, and destroy Miami if not contained. Nevertheless, local people were scared, but interested in what we had to say. The poor and immigrant populations of downtown Miami understand the issues of underlying economic injustice. They could quickly grasp what the FTAA might mean for their jobs. They told us stories of water privatization in their home countries, of 16-hour-a-day workshifts on cruise ships that unions couldn't organize because they are registered in other countries, of their daily struggle to survive on the streets, of the ongoing police brutality faced by the homeless and the poor.

When we were driven back into Overtown, Miami's black ghetto, people smiled and waved, came forward to help us, offered places for hunted activists to hide, sheltered our puppets in their back yards. Other local people came forward to offer housing and shelter, to donate food, plants, and time to the mobilization, to hold vigils at the jail and to provide support after most of the action had left town. It was as if the bulk of the population pressed the mute button on the soundtrack spewed by the media and the police, noticed what their own eyes were telling them, and knew who their true allies were.

That disconnect, that gap between the reality the power structure was attempting to construct and the actual reality of ordinary people, is the fertile political space we need to nurture and explore in order to move forward. For it leaves the bullies building a more and more elaborate fortress of control that is unsupported by any foundation of credibility or legitimacy. Where there should be the concrete of credence and the rebar of faith, there is only air, and such a structure is bound to fall. In its fall, it may well take a lot of us with it, and therein lies both the danger and the opportunity of this political moment.

Miami was a clear example of the New American Fascism brought home. I don't use the word "fascism" lightly. I use it to mean that combination of brutal state power applied ruthlessly against its critics, backed by surveillance, media distortions, hate propaganda, and lies, allied politically and economically with those who profit from the industries of weaponry, prisons, and war.

In "The Lord of the Rings," the evil Sauron is represented by a red, glaring, all-seeing eye. To be in Miami in November was to suffer that searing, hostile gaze. The red eye of fascism is a double-barreled gaze: the eye that watches, that records, that holds you under surveillance and videos your comings and goings and compiles the records; and the media/propaganda eye, that frames the story, that defines and distorts you and tells everyone just what the justification is for your repression.

For true totalitarian control, misrepresenting facts, telling a false story, is not enough. Total control requires control over the frame of the story, the meaning of the language you use, the boundaries of what it is possible to think about. So "violence" becomes a word whose meaning changes radically when it is applied to protestors as opposed to agents of the state. "Violence" is simply not applied to police by the media or the political powers that be. The use of sound bombs, pepper spray, rubber, wooden and plastic bullets, wooden batons, bean bag pellets, and tear gas, illegal arrests, beatings, deprivation of basic human rights, medical care, food and water, overt torture and sexual assault are characterized by the word "restraint," as in "the police acted with restraint."

Friends of mine who were watching the news on the days of action all reported a similar experience. They saw police move in on a crowd of peaceful protestors, swinging billy clubs and firing tear gas and rubber bullets. What they heard was commentary suggesting that protestors were violent, and that therefore the police were justified in whatever measures they

chose.

Applied to activists, violence means *any* act of opposition to total military and police control, any act of resistance from walking in the wrong place to talking to the wrong people to allying with other suspects. Above all, any attempts to remove oneself from the all-seeing gaze, to mask oneself, to carve out any space free of that hostile red arc light, are evidence of violence.

Totalitarian control is deeply racist, sexist, and homophobic, for it depends on division and separation. Police attempted to divide the unions from the direct action folk, by pushing the action into the area where the permitted labor march was scheduled to go, attacking the crowd there, attacking union members and punishing them for associating with "potentially dangerous" others.

Activists of color were singled out for special abuse by the police and prison guards, subjected to brutal beatings and outright torture in jail, in spite of solidarity efforts by other activists. Sexual assaults were carried out on women and transgendered prisoners. Queer prisoners were harassed and mistreated.

The greatest victory we achieved in Miami is that these strategies of division did not work. Instead of dividing labor and direct action, repressive police tactics angered the unions who are now calling for a congressional investigation. Our solidarity with labor remains strong, as does our commitment to stand together and support each other through the aftermath of the brutal attacks against our fellow activists, and to name and unmask the racism, sexism, and homophobia we encountered.

The overwhelming military force and brutality of the police was a measure of the utter bankruptcy of the policies they were defending. Neoliberal economics, the "Washington consensus" behind the various free trade agreements and institutions, is not hard to delegitimize because it doesn't work. It promises increased prosperity for all if we allow corporations free rein over the globe, privatize all public resources, and end government support for any arenas of human activity that actually increase health or well being or quality of life. Somehow the poor are supposed to benefit from this. But this promise has overwhelmingly proved false. Countries that implement these policies have lost economic ground or gone belly-up, like Argentina. The gap between rich and poor has grown into a vast chasm. NAFTA has been devastating to the US economy,

costing us over 785,000 good manufacturing jobs, allowing corporations to sue governments for loss of their projected profits if governments pass inconvenient environmental or labor regulations. The developing countries have not been able to use the WTO or any of these trade agreements as platforms to reduce tariffs for their products or persuade the US and EU to reduce the agricultural subsidies that have devastated small farmers around the world--hence the walkout in Cancun of countries from the global south.

No one was defending the FTAA with any passion. In fact, brute force seemed to be the major argument in its favor. And the FTAA summit ended in a glossed-over failure. To prevent its utter collapse, the conveners referred all controversial issues back to committee, ended a day early, and pulled back from the original vision of an overarching agreement to a truncated "FTAA-Lite"--which even in its watered-down form has little chance of being adopted.

Their failure was a result of the years of organizing, education, truth-telling, and direct action we've done in the north to create and foster that gap of belief, and perhaps even more, a result of the absolute social disruption that the policies of the neoliberalism have spawned in the global south, where governments have already fallen and ministers know their populations will not tolerate more of the same.

We in the north are left confronting an alliance between economic powers desperate to retain their advantage in a sinking economy, the most powerful military/police force ever amassed on the planet, and a subservient media willing to tell whatever story the rulers command. But the more ruthless and brutal the system becomes, the wider and deeper that gap of legitimacy may become.

Our political success and personal survival may depend on our ability to understand and deepen that disconnect between eyes and ears, direct experience and propaganda. At what point does it set in? When do people start to believe their own eyes, to question the authority of the commentators? How do we prevent the power structure from consolidating a new foundation of belief? How far does that gap extend? How do we widen and deepen the gap, and how do we mobilize and empower those who have ceased to believe to take action? And as the fortress of control begins to crumble over our heads, where do we find shelter from the falling debris, and what new structures will we build in its place?

If we can build on the successes of Miami--the solidarity, the deepened alliances, the trust--if we can turn those alliances into real political power, we will have a strong victory. If the combined forces of the progressive movements and the unions and the NGOs can succeed in making the political and police powers of Miami pay a political and social cost, we can stem the tide of repression.

There were actions we took in Miami that undoubtedly contributed to the support we received: we waged a proactive media campaign, we planted a community garden in Overtown and gave away dozens of trees, above all, we went out and talked to people on the street. In the worst moments of police assault, there were always those who moved forward to put their bodies on the front line and slow the assault of the storm troopers. People helped and supported and strengthened each other, and the shock of the violence we experienced was tempered by the sweetness of support and the inspiration of acts of courage. We can go further in making our actions and organizing welcoming and friendly, can perhaps devote more of our efforts to outreach and connection instead of obsessing on our tactics, can confront our own vestigial racism, sexism, homophobia and the other prejudices that can divide us, and we can frame our actions and organizing with a clear strategic goal: to broaden and deepen that gap of belief, to make strong alliances with the disaffected and to mobilize the political power of dissent, to unmask the violence, repression, and sheer ugliness of the structures of control, to counter them with the beauty and joy of our visions brought to life. Then we can stare back into that red, totalitarian eye and pierce it with a white-hot gaze of truth, a spear in the eye of the Cyclops. And we will have the support and strength we need to withstand the monster's crash, and to begin the process of building the world that we want.

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