

Miami Journal #1: Wednesday, 11/12/03

On the Ground in Miami

By Starhawk

I'm sitting in another gray cement-walled warehouse in yet another city. Already the walls are full of signs, schedules, lists of the scarce housing resources here in Miami, of the workdays and marches and puppet fests planned for the next few days, sign-up grids for staffing and security, a small pile of tarps that will be used to catch rain and to cover the serving area in the parking lot where Food Not Bombs will feed us all. Beautiful young women are sprawled on old couches in the center of the space, busy helpers are arranging informational material on long tables. In the room next door, activists earnestly check their email and write stories on the computers set up in the small Indymedia Center that is already up and running, over a week before the ministerial is due to begin. The weather is balmy-tropical, but I am sunburned from a long press conference earlier today in the blazing noon heat, and suffering deeply from caffeine deprivation. There is nowhere in this building to heat water. But I'm happy. The mobilization is underway.

We've come here to protest the FTAA, the Free Trade Area of the Americas, a trade agreement that will be negotiated in a ministerial here in Miami November 20-21.

The FTAA has been described as "NAFTA on steroids": it extends to the entire hemisphere the North American Free Trade Agreement which currently covers the U.S., Mexico and Canada. Since NAFTA was signed in 1994, the U.S. has lost 785,000 manufacturing jobs. Mexico gained jobs but lost hundreds of thousands of small businesses: average income from manufacturing has fallen 21%.

The FTAA is being negotiated without true public participation. CEOs of corporations and top business leaders are afforded a chance to give meaningful input through the American Business

Forum, meeting here during the week before the FTAA ministerial, but the text of the agreement is not being released to the general public, and environmental and labor groups are offered only a token meeting with the ministers. The FTAA contains a clause which allows corporations to sue governments for loss of their "projected profits" if environmental or labor regulations cut into their bottom line. Rulings on those suits are made by tribunals in secret hearings not open to the public, by bureaucrats who are not elected nor accountable to us, and their rulings override the laws we make.

Many of us who are here early to organize were also in Cancun, where delegates from the global south walked out of the ministerial of the World Trade Organization and the meetings collapsed. That victory, which has stopped the WTO in its tracks, has made regional agreements like the FTAA even more important as a way of furthering the global corporate agenda. Since Cancun, we've been busy, planning, writing, trying to secure all the necessary pieces of this mobilization. We've worked on raising the money to rent this warehouse, to provide food and housing and information and medical supplies to thousands of people in a place where the authorities are less than welcoming. We've held consultas, or organizing meetings, in cities all over the country to help shape actions and form clusters and blocs, groups of affinity groups who will plan their own unique approaches to the actions. We've held virtual spokescouncils in the form of conference calls--try facilitating fifty people who cannot see each other! Some people have been on the ground here for weeks: Abby and Rebecca have been scoping out spaces and materials for a community garden project for the Green Bloc. Tim and Meddle have been down here for weeks, helping to find spaces and housing, being followed by police cars as they bicycle downtown. Personally, I've been running around the country, talking, training, and encouraging people to come, and in the last week, I've been in four different cities in Florida doing trainings, rituals and talks.

This mobilization is looking big. After Cancun, we talked about trying to organize at a slightly less frantic pace, trying to find ways for new people to step up to larger responsibilities and spread the work. That's happening. But like Cancun, Miami does not have a large, radical community to draw from. There are some dedicated, mostly young activists here from the local area, but much of the experience and drive for the actions is coming from outside.

Still, things seem to be moving along, with people quietly taking up their tasks and doing them We had a meeting earlier in the

day, scheduled regular, daily spokescouncils for 8 p.m. each night, the kind of orderly regularity we North Americans love, that makes us feel secure and that things are being well organized by responsible people--a regularity we never achieved in steamy Cancun. We already have the full component of working groups, from Medical and Legal to Trainings and Convergence Center. And we've already had our first arrests--three medics arrested yesterday as they were walking to the convergence center.

But let me back up a day:

Tuesday, 11/11: I fly down from Tallahassee, pop into the Convergence Center long enough to say hi to twelve dear friends whom I don't have time to talk to. The arrests have shaken everyone up and the women who came and got me from the airport have been dealing with the legal situation all day, and can't leave to go to the event I'm speaking at. But another young woman named Cara whisks me away for a two-hour drive through rush hour traffic, with "Dancing on the Ruins of Multinational Corporations" playing on the car stereo, to Lake Worth, where the Free Carnival Area of the Americas has been building puppets for a month. They are creating a pageant and a giant puppet contingent to march this coming weekend with Root Cause, a coalition of local groups of color who are joining the mobilization. Some of the Lake Worth organizers have asked me to be on a panel they've set up about anarchism, to dispel some of the myths and charge around that word for the community and the press. I've been dispelling myths--or creating them!--about one charged word or another for many decades now, it's one of the things I can do, along with drumming a steady rhythm for hours on end without speeding up, and unclogging toilets. So I've agreed.

We pull into the parking lot of the Quaker meeting house only to find it full of media trucks, complete with satellite dishes and tall antennae. I have the feeling I often get before a media onslaught: I imagine it's similar to the feeling one might have before leaping into a cold and foaming rapid wearing only an inadequate life jacket. Adrenaline begins pumping, and I wake up from my road travel sleepiness, and go inside.

The panel is in disarray--the sheer glare of the media gaze is upsetting, and the Quakers apparently didn't know until three days ago that they were about to become linked on national media with an anarchist coming-out party. But we talk briefly, get calm, and go upstairs to face a squadron of cameras trained on us, and a house packed with a mixture of activist puppet

makers, worthy local citizens, and Quakers looking a bit wary at the uses their meeting house is being put to.

Cara hosts the panel and introduces us, and reads a definition of anarchism from the dictionary: "A utopian society in which people have complete freedom with no government." The first to speak is Sarah. She talks about the development of the anti-capitalist groups within the global justice movement, how CLAC (Convergence Lutte Anti-Capitalist and I am probably spelling it wrong, but it means Anti-Capitalist Convergence in French) formed in Montreal to help organize the protests against the FTAA in Quebec City in April of 2001. They supported a diversity of tactics rather than having strict nonviolence guidelines, not because they wanted to be violent, but because they wanted to support a wider framework of tactics and not marginalize anyone in the movement. Then she describes the work the Anti-Capitalist Convergence in Washington DC has done to organize on local issues, like the closing of DC's only public hospital, and to link them with global issues. She gets a hearty applause.

Jonathan Luna speaks next. He is from Tallahassee, spent his childhood in Colombia, and tells us about how his group has taken their education into their own hands and founded the Center for Participant Education, the longest running free school in the country.

Javier del Sol is a Quaker anarcho-pacifist of Mexican/Cora India descent who lives right here in Lake Worth. He talks about indigenous cultures as models of anarchism, societies based on cooperation and organic forms of organization, and links anarchism with his Quaker religion.

Then I speak about the spiritual basis of anarchism--with a disclaimer that many anarchists don't identify with "spirituality" or religion at all. There is, however, a kind of spirituality that is not about dogma or belief systems or sacred texts, but about mystery--that is, approaching the most common things of life, birth, death, growth, healing, with a sense of awe and wonder. And seeing the earth as alive, a living being with a consciousness and a presence we can feel, in which all of us are deeply interconnected and interdependent. From that point of view, we are all mutually responsible for each other, and anarchism is about attempting to build a society based on those values.

By this time the whole audience is applauding us all, firmly on our side. The press asks the usual questions, about the

"violence in our movement," which Sara answers well and I follow up on. They ask a lot of other questions, and then finally go. We resume with the community portion of the evening.

Terra, who didn't want to be on camera, speaks now, and says she prefers the term "anarchy," with all its connotations of creative chaos, to "anarchism," which is a political system of thought put forth by dead white men with all its own rigidities. It's a new insight for me. Then comes David Solnit, puppetmaster extraordinaire, instigator of many pageants and projects to bring art into action. We've been doing actions together since the eighties, when he was an angelic looking twenty-something with a cloud of curly hair and eyes that glowed with innocence as he evaded police custody or performed some outrageous act of disobedience. He stands up and does a short Conte-story, an Italian form of popular education that uses big pictures and call and response to teach a political lesson.

"Here are some things that matter," he says, pointing to a chart. "When I say 'Air,' you say 'Matters.' Air!"

"Matters!" we chorus back.

"Water!"

"Matters!"

"Home!"

"Matters!"

We open a discussion with the audience, and by the end many are discovering with surprise that they may be anarchists, too. I go out to eat with Naomi and Susan, who drive me back to Miami. I go to sleep on a futon in a house of activists and small terriers, with a pool now turned into a giant fishpond, and awaken early to go down to the convergence center with Naomi and a stack of press releases.

I spend a short, happy hour designing our permaculture projects for the space and writing up a materials list. Just as I'm wishing for a pickup truck, Lynn and Suzie arrive in one and offer to go off to the salvage yard to look for tubs and to bring plants, manure, gravel and other treasures as we need them. I send Abby shopping for plumbing fittings and go off to the noon press conference in downtown Miami, at the Torch of Friendship, a statue in Bayview Park with an everburning flame and a plaque from Cuban refugees honoring the Bicentennial and expressing their undying gratitude to America.

The press conference is mostly for the NGOs, the nongovernmental organizations, who are organizing forums and

teach-ins to announce their events. Lisa thought it would be good to have someone represent a direct action perspective, and when the local organizer she first suggested didn't want to do it, I was drafted. All the speakers are good, short and clear and to the point, but the sun is blazing and by the end, I'm red and sunburnt. Several of the reporters have seen me quoted or on TV from the night before, and I realize I have now become Anarchist Poster Girl for this mobilization. The police have apparently contacted the church where I'm speaking tonight and told them there will be a plainclothes officer in the crowd. Nice of them to be open and honest about it.

Back at the convergence center, we meet, make phone calls, refine our permaculture plans, get some good, cheap Cuban food at a deli down the road, and then go off to a five o'clock meeting with the Community Relations Board, which is an agency set up to mediate in the local community around issues of tension, and to intervene in moments of great public tension such as this promises to be. They have been our allies in trying to prevent police abuses, taking a neutral role, neither with the police nor against them. We have a friendly but slightly frustrating conversation, but get some information on that always fascinating topic of speculation, "What are the police thinking?" and "What are they going to do?"

We spend the evening writing and working out a schedule for trainings, etc. Get little sleep--the rapids are running full now, and we just need to keep it on course to stay upright.

But the mobilization is seriously short on money. If any of you can help, please check the www.unitedforpeace.org website--you can donate online. We need money for food, medical supplies, copies, signs, banners, and all of it. A few more resources could really make the difference in how effective we are here.

Thanks, *Starhawk*

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