

Cancun Journal #19: Saturday, 9/13/03

A Rope Twined of Many Strands Can Pull Down a Wall

The march begins from the Casa de la Cultura remarkably early. It is called for 9:30 a.m. and gets off before 11:00. I am almost late, writing and sending yesterday's update while the house has breakfast, and when we get the call that it is starting, I run off without breakfast.

Again we head down the now-familiar route to Ground Zero, chanting, drumming, with banners and puppets and song. This time we pass Ground Zero and go on to the newly erected barrier. It's a strong, orange steel fence, built in sections linked to each other and braced to make multiple cages. The chain link sections are hooked to metal supports and the sections are held together with thick steel chain and anchored in big concrete blocks. Behind it is a line of Federal Police in riot gear, but they cannot reach us through the fence, nor can we reach them.

Our plan is to destroy it. To cut the fence, take it down, and move it away, as a powerful symbol of our opposition to the barriers that keep us away from the places of decisionmaking, to the borders that confine people while allowing corporations free run all over the globe.

The plan is for women to move forward and begin taking down the fence. When they have cut it apart, the Koreans will tie on a big rope and we will all pull it down together.

But there is some disorganization to begin with. The women's contingent is not at the front, and eager young men are already all over the fence, shaking and worrying it like a pack of young dogs. Juniper and I run in front and begin drumming with some of the men to hold some of the space and energy, while we wait for the women and some of our friends begin to form a line to hold the crowd. Finally a women's contingent arrives. I run forward, link arms and march the final yards with them, arm in arm, feeling how strong and wonderful it is to be together as

companeras, as sisters.

We file in and form a line in front of the fence. As soon as we do, Chac the Rain God, registers his approval with a sudden, soaking downpour that ends a few moments later, leaving us cooler but dripping wet. Elisabeth, in a mask, jumps up onto the fence and waves our spiral flag. Photographers crowd forward like sharks in a feeding frenzy and we are practically crushed against the fence while we wait for the tools to arrive.

A blonde young woman tries to move us all to the side to let the Koreans into the center. "We have to take orders from the Koreans," she says. I rebel. "The agreement is that women are going to begin taking down the fence, and that's what I want to do, not stand here symbolically and then let the men do it. And I want to do it here, in the center, where the media is, not off to the side as women have always been pushed to the side. At least let the women decide themselves--and don't tell them what to do."

Her Spanish is better than mine, and she translates what I've said. The women want to stay where they are, and cut down the fence. At last Lisa arrives with a backpack full of bolt cutters, which disappear quickly down the line. Lisa has been on the run since early morning, going to the coordinating meetings that I skip, buying the bolt cutters, taking care of a thousand details. She manages to hold onto one pair of bolt cutters, and starts cutting away at the links that hold the fence to the metal supports. The other women join her, and soon they are working away at the fence like lionesses tearing apart a carcass.

But the Koreans are upset. Somehow they don't seem to understand that this is supposed to be a women's part of the action--they only know that they are being held back when they want at that fence themselves. They are awesomely strong, unified, and disciplined but feminism does not seem to be part of their political analysis as yet, and they are trying to push forward. I manage to stem the tide with the help of many of our companeros from the student coordinadora, and some of the other men from the mobilization who hold their line tight as I try to explain to them what is going on. Finally I recognize one brother who speaks English, and when he understands the plan, he becomes very helpful, calling the rest back, grabbing a few who are revved up and madly going for it and making them wait. That leaves only the media to deal with, who are pushing and shoving and trying to bash their way forward. And a few of our own compas who want to help us, or protect us, or just take over the damn tools and do it for us. I remove a couple of

them by the simple expedient of grabbing them around the waist from behind in a gently hug, and then turning my body and hurling them into the waiting arms of Jorge from the student coordinadora who shoves them back behind the lines.

Soon enough of the fence is removed that there are holes through all the double sections of cages, giving the police access to us. We decide to send a line of women through to hold back the police. I go forward, followed by Sue and Roberta and Rae. We stand pressed up against the riot shields, but separated from our sisters by uncut side sections. It is not a great place to be, tactically speaking, but I don't actually believe these cops are going to start beating us, and in any case most are a head shorter than me, which lessens the intimidation factor. Sue is helping Rae breathe and ground, and I just talk to the police in Spanish, telling them that we are peaceful, that we are not going to use violence against them and hope they won't against us. Somewhere down the line, one of the women gets hit in the head with a billy club, but overall they don't attack. Then we get the word that the Koreans are ready to pull down the fence, and we climb back out.

The Koreans have spent the evening twisting rope, taking thin stranded cord and twining it together and twisting and braiding fat lines of it, thick as a thigh, long enough so several hundred people can pull each one. Some of them climb up on the fence and begin tying the rope on. The rest of us line up and grab hold. The sun is blazing so hot that I think I'm going to pass out. We are all sweating and thirsty and whatever water appears is drunk down immediately and sweated out almost instantly. I am standing next to Lisa and Juniper. Lisa and I are smiling: we have been working together on this mobilization for months, we have both given more than the full measure of our considerable energies and skills, we have worked ourselves to exhaustion and beyond, and this is the moment we've been working for.

Finally the order comes: "Pull!" We grab hold, and pull all together. I feel a tremendous surge of strength, not just my strength, but all of strength together, Mexicans and Koreans and internationals, tiny indigenous women in their bright dresses, big, burly men, students and workers and local people from the town, our friends from the NGOs who've come out to march with us, everyone linked in the same effort like this great rope twined of many strands. And the fence moves.

We pull, and wait while the ropes are repositioned and tied, and

pull again. One section of the fence is finally pulled away, and rolled off to the side. The black bloc take it up the street and use it to barricade a side road where the cops could come in and trap us. It's a perfect example of permaculture principles in action: using local resources, recycling, and illustrating that the problem is the solution. While we wait, we drum and dance.

The Korean drummers are on the side with a blond guy with a jimbe, and I join them for a while. A group of South African women are smiling in the center and dancing, and they motion to me to drum for them. Behind us, Chac the giant puppet looms, creating a mythic backdrop for this collective act. We form up and pull again, a mighty, powerful heave strong enough to pull an empire down. And it feels so, so good! I am thinking about all the fences and the barriers, the fence around Quebec City and the steel fence and giant container barriers of Genoa, the fence being built in Palestine.

After an hour or so, the final section of fence across the road is pulled away. Now the way is open for us to move through--but the plan is not actually to do that, but to hold a ceremony and walk away, as nine kilometers, two more barricades, and about ten thousand riot cops still lie between us and the WTO. The Koreans and the campesinos move forward, negotiate a truce with the police, and call on us all to sit down.

They begin a ceremony of burning the WTO in effigy, which seems to involve a lot of speeches, all of which have to be translated into Spanish and English, and eventually the crowd gets restless. Some of them want to go through the space we've opened, and weren't part of the decision to tear down the fence and then leave. Some of us are calling out to let a woman speak, as man after man takes the bullhorn. And in the midst of the speeches, Lisa gets a call from our friend Antonia who is just outside the WTO Conference Center with a group of Koreans who have torn down a piece of the barricade and are now in confrontation with the police. The police are advancing and the Koreans are hurling their bodies onto the police shields.

The Koreans are laughing but Antonia is terrified. We start calling all the press and NGOs we know who might be able to go to their aid.

At the torn-down barricade where we sit, the students want to make a proposal, but when finally the crowd pressure gets a woman student up there, one of the men takes the bullhorn out of her hand. When she speaks, and proposes that we hold a people's assembly in the park, she's booed and shouted down, and I find myself feeling very angry. It has been an incredible day, full of awesome power, but still women have to fight for

our space in the movement, and still women's voices aren't listened to.

We get another call that the Koreans are being bussed out, and have not been arrested. We wait to greet them, then leave, eat, go home, rest and write, and return for yet another meeting, involving the long and difficult process of deciding what to do tomorrow and how to close the mobilization. But in the process, one of the campesino women, Dolores, speaks of how important it was for her to be part of taking down the fence, how it represents a kind of power and action that she hasn't had much experience with, and how we need to struggle not just against neoliberalism, but against patriarchy as well. As the meeting ends, I tell her I appreciate her words, that I could have said something of the same myself because it was a struggle to find space for women. She pats my arm, and smiles. "Poco a poco," she says. Little by little.

The women's thread is one of the strands of the cord. The campesinos, the students, the black bloc, the internationals, the indigenas, all distinct, all maintaining their identity and autonomy, still struggling to work together, to be twined into the same braided rope, a rope twined of the many threads that can bring the empire down.

-- *Starhawk*

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