

## **Cancun Journal #20: Sunday, 9/14/03 and Monday, 9/15/03**

Siempre Victoria!

### **Sunday:**

It is the last day of negotiations at the WTO. Things are not going well, and they have until 11:00 p.m. to come up with agreements. Some of us want to make one final push into the conference center area, make one last show of opposition.

The group of exhausted people who met the night before could only come up with a time and a meeting place: a beach just south of the security zone. While I'm on my way there with a carload of us, we get a call that the military have blocked off the beach. We try to spread the word that the location has changed to a beach farther south.

On the ride we have a discussion about the actions the day before. Tristan was frustrated--somehow on his section of the fence the women stopped cutting and then just stood and defended the fence from men. That wasn't the plan...we were supposed to move back after a short while and let anyone who wanted to have at it, but no one had apparently communicated that to the women. I had been so busy fending off media and aggressive "helpers" at the center that I never made it out to the edges. There was no clear system of communications nor any pre-march planning sessions, as the march only got organized late the night before and early that morning, and all and all there was a lot of confusion. And while the power of pulling down the fence with the ropes was transformative for all who took part in it, there were many people on the sides and the back who only vaguely saw what was going on. And then having the whole group sit down and listen to speeches broke the energy that might have carried us all through the fence and given everyone a sense of triumph. The hasty planners had decided not to go through, not to risk a police confrontation in order to gain a few more feet of ground when the Conference Center was still nine kilometers and two more barricades away, but no one had asked the crowd or even clearly communicated

the thinking. All the speeches were on the order of "down, down, WTO!" and not "Here's the strategy we were thinking of at 8:00 a.m. this morning." But that is just a reflection of the challenges of working with so many different groups who have such different organizing styles, ideas about time, and senses of what is to be done.

When we get to our fallback beach, the military have blocked that off too. But I get a call from Brush that they are up at the first beach, have gone through the military blockade, and that there's lots of press there. We get there quickly, park, and walk past a line of soldiers standing by orange, metal barricades that open and let us walk through.

A group of 20 or 30 of our friends are standing in the sand, and more are in the water. We quickly strip down to our bathing suits and run into the waves. For most of us, it's the first time in this action that we've made it to the beach. I see lots of pale activist flesh around me, a contrast to the deep tans of the tourists. The water is clear and cool and the waves roll in gently and everyone is tumbling around like a pack of baby seals. I don't actually care whether we do an action, or just play in the water together. It could be a powerful action and a great contribution to the movement for this group of hardworking and overly responsible people to just relax, to demonstrate that self-care and pleasure are as vital a part of a sustainable movement as self-sacrifice.

And the action is organized as fluidly as children organize their games. "What shall we play now?" "You be the cops, I'll be the robber." The media are there, and we can't resist playing with them. We get out of the water, and one laughing group bares their butts to the press while Valerie writes on them with lipstick to say "Ya ganamos! We are winning!" The media crowd in to snap photos: the message will prove prophetic.

The soldiers up at the road are blocking people from getting in. When we walk up to them, they open the barricades but when we go back to the water, they close them.

"Let's open the barricade," Lisa suggests. We all run up to the top--well, they run, I slog more slowly through the sand behind. We take the orange metal fences out of the hands of the surprised soldiers, and carry them down to the beach. They just stand there, a bit stunned, as we run off with their barricade.

We are arranging the sections of it on the sand to spell "No

WTO!" when they rouse themselves to come down and get it back. They are clearly under orders not to attack us or get violent, and in fact several of them are laughing as they pull on the barricades one way and we pull another. Finally we get the idea of lying on top of them. Valerie fends off the soldiers while we arrange a metal/human living message, "No WTO!" Then we take pity on them and let them take them back, but the beach stays open.

We run back into the water, trying to have a meeting as the waves bob us up and down, crashing over our heads and tumbling us into one another. Offshore are two big battleships, and some want to swim out to them, or at least to tell the media that's what we're going to do. Others object to giving the media false stories, or to putting ourselves in a position where we need rescue by some agent of the state, be it only a lifeguard, and we eventually decide to just march up the beach toward the security zone.

We reorganize, and a few stay behind with our stuff while the rest of us embark on what I am soon calling the Cancun Death March. The sun is blazing hot and is searing new parts of our flesh that have previously been decently covered under cargo pants and bandanas soaked in lime to give that special Mexican flavor to tear gas protection. We don't really have enough water for this and the sand is deep and hard to move through. All the youth are nonetheless striding ahead at a great pace while I am falling farther and farther behind, wondering why I keep doing this, keep trying to keep up with twenty-three year olds, why I can't just admit my age and settle into some more sedate form of activism. Finally I yell at them to stop for a moment, and suggest we drum and chant as we pass tourists at the big hotels that front the beach, but that I can't drum and walk that fast in the sand. They put me up front, and we process up the sand, chanting, "No OMC!" or "On the beaches, in the streets, we'll shut them down, anywhere they meet!"

One of the hotels has a bar fronting on the beach and we stop there for a moment in the shade. They offer us water, and we line up and fill our bottles from their garrafons. As we are relaxing, Lisa gets a call on her cell phone from Antonia, who is inside. The Kenyan delegation has just walked out. She asks us to hold back on spreading the news until it is made official.

We sit there, looking at each other, too tired and sunbaked and stunned to quite take in what it means. If it is true, the meetings are over. They have failed to reach their agreements.

Then Leslie gets a call. It's true. The Kenyans have walked out, and the ministerial has collapsed. We've won!

The march becomes a jubilant procession. We continue on, drumming and chanting and cheering, announcing the news to surprised tourists courting skin cancer in lounge chairs. All my fatigue has fled, and even the sand seems firmer underfoot. We meet a small police barricade and sweep through it, simply taking their barricades away and running on down the beach. Then we get another call--some of our friends are trapped up near the Conference Center where they were marching in the streets, and are asking for us to come support them. We are still several kilometers away but a few of the young men are eager to charge ahead. We have a kind of moving meeting, trying to decide whether to keep to the beach and try and go around the point or to head up into the street where we will probably be corralled ourselves.

A line of rocks juts out into the water up ahead, and we see that the military have made a stand there, with a serious line of men and the metal barricades planted on the rocks. It looks like a difficult situation to try to push through, so we head up, climbing a rock outcropping, scaling a low wall, and pushing through the line of the hotel's security guards in more or less nonviolent fashion. They aren't too serious about hurting us and we don't want to hurt them, we just want to get to the street. But we end up on a green lawn that leads nowhere, trapped between walls and a high fence with barbed wire. Now masses of security guards and hotel workers have come down to see what's happening. We try to negotiate a safe passage to the street, but before we can one of the government officials shows up and offers us a free bus ride back to Cancun or wherever we want to go, if we will only go voluntarily and quietly.

We sit down and have a consensus meeting about what to do. A few want to try to stay and make some kind of stand. "Why?" I ask. "We don't need to block anything or disrupt anything any more. It's over--we've won!"

There seems to be general enthusiasm for that point of view, although one voice cautions us that just because we've won is no reason to abandon the struggle. Clearly there's still some momentum to do something more, but we also have a debrief meeting planned, and we're hungry. While we're talking, the hotel workers bring out a whole case of water for us. Finally we agree to go, file onto an extremely comfortable air-conditioned bus, and head back. The exuberant students once again pop the skylights and ride on the top. Lisa joins them, but I remain

firmly middle-aged and safety-conscious inside.

Because of the threat we posed, marching on the beach, and because of our friends who got deeper into the security area, the authorities have apparently shut down the entire security zone, and no traffic has been moving. The roads are lined with workers, waiting for their rides home. Their travel time has been extended, they've been waiting in the sun instead of relaxing on their off time, and yet they cheer and wave and flash peace signs and raised fists as we pass, sharing in the victory.

Back at the Parque de Palapas, it seems that everyone from the action has gathered. We are all greeting and hugging each other in a moment of pure, radiant joy. I am looking at each of them and thinking how each one contributed to this victory. All the students are getting ready to leave: Everardo and Carmen, Abram and Praim and Mary Carmen and Anna and Otto and Daniel. I'm thinking about all the organizing and strategizing they've done and their grueling bus ride here and back. I'm hugging Tristan who has stalwartly organized security for the Convergence Center, and Luke who pushed so hard for our action inside the zone, and Rodrigo who came down from Mexico City to help build the eco-village, and Eileen who took on so much of the media work, and Gloria who cleaned the kitchen and fed us breakfast every day, and so many more, the whole self-organized volunteer army who have come to fight with puppets and drums and our bodies and ideas as our weapons. And the choices each one of us has made, the tasks we've taken on, the work we've done, have all been part of this moment. Finally Lisa and I throw our arms around each other. We've been working on this together for so long. I can't even begin to count the tasks she's done and the things she's pulled together and grueling work we've both been doing for this and the times we've sworn we'd never do it again. But we smile at each other, knowing damn well that we will, that there is nothing we'd rather do than help twine together the strands of the rope that we can grip to move the world.

And so we go on, to a debrief meeting in the Convergence Center. The mood is high as we recount the highlights of the actions. So many things have come out of this mobilization--solidarity between campesinos and anarchists, students from the south and students from the north, street activists and NGOs, new connections and new networks that will strengthen our form of globalization: the globalization of resistance and vision. We recount the frustrations, as well, the lack of communication, the difficulties of ever getting a meeting of the

whole body of the action at the same time, of establishing even the simplest systems or regularity or consistency, of constant changes in plan and lack of systems for spreading information. There are a lot of lessons to be learned.

At the end, Antonia gives a report on what happened inside. The Kenyans were part of a "Green Room"--one of the small "informal" meetings where the real decisions of the ministerial are laid out, where the big, powerful countries represent themselves and the developing countries might have one representative for dozens. Kenya was representing not just themselves but the whole group of African, Caribbean, and Pacific nations and the African Union. The developing countries wanted agricultural agreements to limit the subsidies for US and European crops that keep prices artificially low and allow the dumping of grain in their countries that destroys the livelihood of their farmers. The US and EU wanted to put investments on the table, to craft a new version of the old Multilateral Agreement on Investments that civil society defeated back in the '90s. When it became clear to the Kenyans that the US and EU were saying they would have to accept the investment agreement if they wanted to talk about agriculture, they walked out. When they announced their decision, they were joined by South Korea and India. At least two of the delegates were now referring to the WTO in the past tense.

"And the delegates from Brazil and Swaziland both said that if it weren't for the actions inside and outside, they wouldn't have been able to stand strong," Antonia finishes. An electric shock of joy pulses through the room, and we all burst into cheers. That was our strategy--the hope we held throughout all the work and planning, that if there was clear, strong public opposition to the WTO in the streets and in the forums and in the conferences themselves, the disaffected delegates of the developing world would be empowered and supported to rebel. And they did.

"I don't know when I've ever felt so purely happy," Brush says to me after.

"Seattle," I say to him.

### **Monday:**

This is the last update. A day of cleaning up and carrying out the debris of a mobilization: the cardboard, the used paints, the leftover flyers, of scraping paint off floors. And of goodbyes.

In the midmorning, we sit down and have a meeting about

Miami, the next mobilization, just two months away, against the FTAA, the Free Trade Area of the Americas. It's a deep and thoughtful and creative meeting, and we come away filled with enthusiasm for the work, of communicating and mobilizing and learning from our mistakes, of building on what we've done here. And the meeting crystallizes for us all the many layers of our success. We've pulled a mobilization together out of virtually nothing. We've organized successfully with a wide diversity of groups, all of whom have come out of this with more respect for each other. We've created our own village here on Retorno Margaritas, where food and medical care and media access and organizing space and endless entertainment have all been provided for free. We've had such solidarity that the government decided not to risk the political cost of police repression, and treated us with respect. We've used the energy of the summit to further our own practice of organizing on a different model. We've learned from the Mexicans about the practice of Zapatismo, about the importance of not just contesting power but of articulating our vision and claiming space for it. We've mounted actions that have demonstrated a different kind of power, nonviolent but confrontational and immensely strong. And more.

We're sad, saying goodbye to so many people we've grown to know and respect and love. We're happy, with a deep, sweet sense of satisfaction at having derailed the most ambitious institution of corporate greed. We're eager to bring more people in and empower them more fully and communicate more clearly. In spite of the work, the exhaustion, the frustration, we're ready for the next joyful exercise in dismantling the institutions of injustice, and building a better world.

And now the sun is setting, and the streets are full of wandering activists with backpacks, moving out of the Parque de Palapas, out of the streets of Cuncun, out of Ground Zero. The delegates have gone home, the roads are open, the barricades are down. The sacred place of Lee's sacrifice becomes a traffic circle again. A cool breeze is beginning to blow, and Chac hints of a blessing of rain. The self-organizing wandering army releases its troops for some well-deserved R & R, and this organism that has sprung into being dissolves. The kaleidoscope turns, the pattern changes. No formal structures holds us together, no hierarchy, no contracts or pledges. But we know that we will come together again, and again, drawn by that sweet, insistent call, and by the threads of love that twine together stronger with each fight, each sacrifice, each space reclaimed, each life given, each vision made real.

-- *Starhawk*

[BACK to Cancun Journals Index Page](#)

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