

Lessons from Cancun

Report on the Fifth Ministerial of the WTO

Mouse

2003

“...[A] small number of big WTO Members are leading an undesirable globalization that is inhumane, environmentally degrading, farmer-killing, and undemocratic. It should be stopped immediately. Otherwise the false logic of neo-liberalism will wipe out the diversity of global agriculture and be disastrous to all human beings.”

—Lee Kyung Hae, Korean farmer & activist who took his own life on the barricades

The Fifth Ministerial of the World Trade Organization went down in defeat for several reasons this past September in Mexico. Due to complex interplay between various entities—NGOs, grassroots and revolutionary movements, and governmental officials of less-developed nations (i.e., the Third World Network)—enough pressure was created to push back the WTO. For now.

Police and soldiers guarded the Convention Center in the Zona Hotelera with barricades on both ends of that strip of land covered with monster hotels, the convention center itself and expensive shops. Police boarded busses going across the barricades to check the IDs of passengers and their bags. Soldiers were present around the clock on beaches and streets throughout to immediately apprehend any protesters that were able to get past the barricades into the controlled area.

Despite the overwhelming show of force, campesinos and protesters tore down the barricades several times during the first few days of the WTO. Battles between police and protesters were much more militant and tactical than I remember witnessing in Seattle. It must have been obvious to the government forces there that the barricades could and would be circumvented, should that be the will of the resistance groups present.

Perhaps it is the result of Lee Kyung Hae’s sobering suicide on September 10 that engendered an atmosphere of restraint on both sides of the barricades. Lee’s words, issued as a statement in Geneva and re-iterated moments before his suicide, are a telling testimonial to the ravaging effects of the WTO’s policies on the lives of people in less-developed nations.

Having chosen Mexico as a cooperative and brutal government, and Cancun as a militarily controllable location, the WTO delegates must have been surprised to realize that not all of the resistance to their negotiations could be put down outside the barricades.

Several issues were raised by a consortium of 70 “developing” countries and presented on the inside. This official statement to the WTO is reminiscent of angry missives by rebels everywhere. Words like “outrageous,” “dangerous,” “held ransom,” and “tricky” dot the document and are a tribute to the intensity of the Third World Network’s resolve. At a press conference held to announce the departure of the group of 70, an official showed us the individual statements of several countries. One in particular was notable for its 16-point, bold type and underlining of the phrase “We will never, never...[never is repeated several times] agree to this outrageous and morally bankrupt process.”

In large part, the WTO's failure to force an agreement on the less-developed nations is attributable to the current treaty's increased brutality in the area of competition and investment. Whereas the previous agreements were unfavorable to less-developed nations in the area of tariffs and market access, the new agreement is even more severe. Developing countries would have to cut their own tariffs, protecting their own farmers at a steeper rate than the more developed countries. There would be no way to keep foreign products or investors from competing with domestic markets. Lee Kyung Hae's story is the ultimate indicator of the effects felt in the lives of farmers under the WTO agreements.

What most impressed me as being different from the WTO resistance process in Seattle, where the negotiations broke down in large part due to the pressure of insurgents in the streets, was the increased understanding and cooperation between the forces of resistance outside of and within the WTO negotiations. The resistance was present and powerful in the streets of Cancun, but now, its reach extended into the convention center as well.

Just one example was the cooperation between delegates and protesters from South Africa. The South African protesters met with their delegates at the end of every day of negotiations and protest, information was exchanged, and that information went to the barricades.

Despite strategic questions for anti-authoritarian global justice activists about working with smaller governments in the struggle against both larger governments and organizations like the WTO, this kind of tactical alliance seems to be paying off. The people outside knew they were winning against the WTO even as consensus was falling apart inside the negotiations. Many less-developed nations saw the robust and determined movement in the streets as a mandate to stand up to the WTO and the more developed nations. In the bright light of mass defiance, the WTO crumbled to dust like the vampire it is.



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