





# THE BATTLE OF CANCUN

## ANATOMY OF AN UNEXPECTED VICTORY

BY RAMOR RYAN / WRITERS BLOC

*"Cancun is more than just a passing geopolitical battle. It represents the interment of a neo-liberal offensive that started in the 1970s... The WTO is now effectively dead. It will survive on paper, as do many other interstate institutions, but it will no longer matter."*

'Cancun: The Collapse of the Neo-Liberal Offensive', Immanuel Wallerstein (October, 2003)

**T**HE collapse of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) talks in Cancun, Mexico in September of 2003 was no doubt a great victory for the global justice movement. While it is true to say that the failure to produce a deal at Cancun was the result of a revolt inside the corridors of the Ministerial by the G23 of developing nations (led by Brazil, India, China and South Africa), there is no question that the protests outside on the street also contributed directly to the fall of the WTO. This article will take a closer look at the anti-globalisation/

global justice movement as it mobilised in Cancun; explaining how the infrastructure of resistance was set up, outlining the aims and objectives of the mobilisation, and evaluating the impact of the various different forms of protest and direct action on the general proceedings.

An unprecedented level of unity and common cause was achieved among almost all the different strands of protesters on the streets. This unity paralleled the endeavour of the developing nations inside the Ministerial who managed to scuttle the plans of the US, the European Union, Japan and

sundry allies, stalling the implementation of the latest round of global trade liberalisation.

Outside on the streets, a Korean farmer committed suicide, reminding everyone that the issues at stake were a matter of life and death. Later, the protesters spectacularly tore down the fence and a series of impressive direct actions were carried out. The WTO exited Cancun in disarray, and the protesters danced in the streets in triumph, joined by official delegates from developing countries and accredited NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) from inside the Ministerial.

This surprising tactical convergence of uncomfortable allies produced extraordinary results that have to be taken into strategic account for future mobilisations.

So how did it happen?



Clashes outside the Conference Centre

## THEY MAKE PLANS, WE PLAN TACTICS

The stated aim of the mobilisation was to “De-rail the WTO”, and while this was achieved beyond all expectations (surprising the protesters themselves!) it needs to be asked - de-rail what exactly? What were the WTO trying to achieve in Cancun and why was it urgent to de-rail those plans? What was at stake in Cancun? What tactics could we deploy to put a spanner in the works?

The 5th Ministerial at Cancun was the WTO's latest attempt to cobble together a constitution for the world that will supersede national and local legislation, and empower transnational corporations to hold down wages, monopolise markets, wipe out small farmers, and wreak havoc on the environment. After

a disastrous 3rd Meeting in Seattle in 1999, when protesters famously blockaded the convention, the WTO scurried to the faraway Kingdom of Doha in the wake of September 11th to try to revive their fortunes. There they set down a blueprint for future global neo-liberal plans. The guidelines set down in Doha (the Doha Round) were up for negotiation in Cancun. These included a set of development issues that didn't appear on the table in Cancun, much to the chagrin of the G32, a developing nations' coalition led by Kenya.

The stakes were huge. The US, European and Japanese governments and the big corporations were seeking a major liberalisation of services, agriculture and intellectual property rights as well as bold new initiatives to copper fasten control on investment, competition and government procurement. Suffice to say, what was on the table was an attempt to lock the world economies more tightly in a neo-liberal regime of privatisation and deregulation, thus giving ever more control to transnational corporations.

In a script that seemed more out of a Star Wars movie than everyday life, protesters were confronted with a challenge to bring down the most powerful rulers in the world, the omnipotent corporations and their lackey armies. What could be done? How could the neo-liberal empire be stopped?

From the protests at Seattle and elsewhere we learned how people's power can disrupt proceedings. By protesting, raising our collective voices and blockading with our bodies, so we can disrupt the actual workings of the Ministerial. If we are enough, and our tactics are creative and daring, then we move from protest to resistance and we can affect change. If we are few, we need to make alliances and find spaces where we can make an impact. Ultimately, the Cancun mobilisation fell into the latter category.

## PUENTE A CANCUN OR BUILDING A BRIDGE WITHOUT SUPPORTS.

A group of us based in Chiapas, Mexico (Mexican, US and Irish nationals) moved to Cancun five months beforehand to set up a solidarity space for the mobilisation. The aim of our group (Puente a Cancun - Bridge to Cancun) was to support the logistical effort on the ground and provide information and orientation for people arriving from other parts of Mexico, the

US, and we hoped, all over the world. The situation on the ground we met with was a shock - there was little local infrastructure with which to hook into. A new city of 600,000 inhabitants, Cancun was completely geared towards the tourist industry and its spin-offs, and appeared to have no community organisations, workers groups, social movements or activist base.

The Cancun Welcoming Committee, the local group supposedly organising the protests involved a handful of NGO types and environmentalists, whose mobilising capacity never seemed to rise above... a dozen. A little investigation by *La Jornada*, Mexico's left-wing daily, revealed that the Committee was an opportunistic front for some local PRD (opposition party) politicians to make a name for themselves (and maybe a few dollars) by hopping on the anti-globalisation bandwagon. These suspicions were confirmed when the Committee closed the gates of its offices in late August to activists and only 'welcomed' press and a few well-endowed NGO figures. As D-day approached, the Welcoming Committee, (riven by splits and now consisting of maybe a half dozen operatives) had ceased to be a main player and was ignored by most protesters. Ironically, preparations for the Cancun mobilisation were made autonomously of the 'official' local organising body. The lesson to take away? Sometimes our movement of movements can be hijacked by bandwagon shysters. Beware opportunists!

From early on, things were looking bad on the ground in Cancun. Several meetings in our new Puente space broke up with ugly altercations between rival personalities within the Welcoming Committee as various insults as well as accusations of infiltration were thrown around. It became clear that if the organisation was left to this lot, it would be a disaster.

Were there infiltrators involved? Yes, probably. This is inevitable in mobilisations like this with so much at stake for the authorities. But sometimes it's hard to distinguish infiltrators and provocateurs from wing-nuts or hot-heads.

In Cancun accusations flew, and it was damaging to the early organisational efforts. We had no mechanism to deal with suspicion or infiltration; people severed, broke up and worked independently. Since the mobilising effort was transparent and our aims and intentions public, there seemed no fundamental damage an

infiltrator could wreak. More blatantly however, both the Welcoming Committee offices and the Puente a Cancun house were under surveillance from security forces. Some slick thieves broke into our house and carried off a lap-top computer and some bits and pieces. Cops? Maybe.

So right up to the very cusp of the Ministerial, some three weeks beforehand, we still didn't have the infrastructure for the expected 20,000 protesters nailed down. We needed a large convergence space for meetings, an alternative forum site, camping facilities with a water supply and toilets, a media centre, a medical centre, legal help. We had nothing; the organisation on the ground resembled a big black hole.

The local Cancun municipal government dragged their feet negotiating with the Welcoming Committee as even they realised that the Welcoming Committee didn't represent the arriving protesters. Adding to the confusion, the local mayor began concurrent negotiations with representatives from the farmers' organisation Via Campesina. This organisation promised to bring 10,000 militants for the *campesino* march (September 10th). They had already had a quarrel with the Mexico City NGOs and their name was not popular in Chiapas with the Zapatistas, where our sympathies lay. Nevertheless, sectarianism aside, we were in this together, so alliances had to be formed. Meanwhile, students and anarchists from Mexico City threatened to ignore all the official negotiations for space and camping and go ahead and squat the city centre when they arrived.

But eventually things came together: a small group of experienced and disciplined cadre arrived and together with the group formed around Puente a Cancun, made things happen. Some money came from a rich donor and activists dug deep in their pockets. A big convergence space, a media centre and a medical house were rented, camping facilities were nailed down in the local sports centre free of charge from the Mayor's office, and a city park was booked for the duration of the protest actions - for camping, political and social events.

Just a few days before the Ministerial, the infrastructure was secured, and now all that was needed was the arriving multitude to fill up the space. Would there be sufficient space for the expected 20,000 arrivals?

### **WE ARE EVERYWHERE (BUT SOMETIMES NOT THAT MANY OF US)**

The 20,000 never came. Maybe a quarter of that made it. The massive caravans from Mexico City never materialised, nor the mass nationwide student mobilisation, nor the 10,000 *campesinos* from Via Campesina, nor the Zapatistas, nor the thousands expected from the US and Canada and Europe. Instead we got modest numbers of all of the above. None of the expected popular Mexican bands turned up, and few of the luminaries of the anti-globalisation movement came - not even stalwarts like José Bové, Arundhati Roy, Michael Franti or Manu Chao. Why did the mobilisation not attract a big turnout?

Primarily, there was the financial expense involved - Cancun is an

expensive place to reach. But also we should take into account the uninspiring logistical organisation on the ground from early on, that resulted in a general lack of confidence that the whole thing could be pulled off. Furthermore, there was the conflict in Mexico City causing a split between the more NGO types and the *campesino*/activist grouping. The long silence from Chiapas did not help, as we expected the Zapatistas to put out a call to mobilise, and send a delegation. Neither was forthcoming. The icing on the cake was some US NGOs putting out the word to the activist community NOT to travel to Cancun, but to concentrate on local organising, specifically, against the FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas) Summit in Miami in November.

Meanwhile, the Mexican authorities were busy trying to dissuade people from coming. Byzantine visa requirements foiled many Central and South Americans. For those who could make it, memories of the vicious beating of protesters at the hands of the riot cops at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Cancun in 2001 led to a real fear of police brutality, injury or even death. The less than generous human rights record of the Mexican security forces (including the massacres at Acteal and Aguas Blancas) were not forgotten. Local police forces boasted in the press that they were ready to 'trade an eye for an eye' with protesters, and rumours circulated that the local bullring was being prepared as a gulag for activists. It was an almost foregone conclusion that thousands would be rounded up, security forces would be out of control and that we would be lucky to get out of the tourist Mecca in one piece. Predictably, as the opening day of the Ministerial approached, the climate of intimidation increased.

Despite all this, spirits were ebullient as the few thousand protesters - farmers, activists, students and a handful of locals - mustered in Cancun City. An unsettling sense of the morbid pervaded the proceedings as if the anti-globalisation movement was here to attend its own funeral. Critics had argued that this Ministerial could be the graveyard of the WTO, but now the gravediggers appeared to be dressed in riot gear as they trundled around in armoured vehicles.

### **SOCCER IN A TIME OF GLOBAL CRISIS**

Let us employ the metaphor of a game of soccer to describe the situation



Women's action to dismantle the fence



A makeshift battering ram is used to try and break through the perimeter fence

on the ground in the week preceding the Ministerial. Our team, Anti-Globalisation United, were trailing badly. The hostile environment of Cancun was an away game - 1-0 down already. Our weak defence, the Welcoming Committee let in an early goal - that's 2-0 to the WTO. Half our team not turning up to play, low numbers - that's another goal conceded, 3-0.

However, hard work on our side to organise the Huracan Alternative Media Convergence attended by hundreds of people participating in workshops on subjects ranging from radio transmitter construction to the history of Indymedia, brings us an opener. That's 3-1. The construction of a small model ecological village at the camping ground by green-bloc activists put us on the attack again. Our autonomous media-bloc flyer'd the local communities and made a few creative radio slots for local stations conveying our positive and constructive vision - putting home a goal for the Anti-Globalisation side, 3-2. The WTO were rattled and brought out the heavy artillery, flooding Cancun with cops, and putting fear into the heart of the Anti-Globalisation attackers. A heavy fence was erected around the venue, allowing the security forces to score another goal for the WTO - 4-2. But Anti-Globalisation United rallied and snuck a naughty one in with players taking to the beach in the forbidden Red Zone and spelling out "No WTO" with their naked bodies. The local media loved it! 4-3! Then as Anti-Globalisation United gathered for a big strike - the opening *campesino* march, the soccer game got cancelled as greater forces invaded the pitch. The Koreans had arrived and things got deadly serious. Game over.

## WTO KILLS FARMERS - "TODOS SOMOS LEE"

From Korea had come 200 small farmers and trade unionists. This group knew how to demonstrate and had a lot of experience of militant resistance and hard struggle. All of them embraced radical direct action as a way of protesting against the WTO, and all were prepared to physically combat the riot cops. But none of them expected the individual action of one of their number, Lee Kyung Hae.

On September 10th, as the *campesino* march reached the barricade, Lee climbed up on the fence separating the protesters and the WTO, seven kilometres from the Convention Centre and there, at a point called kilometre zero, committed suicide by plunging a knife into his heart. Everything changed, changed utterly, and suddenly the gravity of what the protests were all about became stark. So too the business behind the fence. Before falling, Lee held up a placard - "WTO Kills Farmers", and led the chant, "Down Down WTO."

What impact did Lee's sacrifice have on the WTO and the protests? "The sacrifice by Lee marked the difference," said Mario Menéndez, editor of a local newspaper, "When he died, the WTO died with him: we called it the symbolic death of the oppressors."

Lee's death also had an enormously radicalising effect among those who had come to protest. The world turned upside down. The scattered militancy of the first mobilisation evolved over the next few days into a more coherent tactical unity. Militancy inspires more radical politics. The obvious affinity between the Korean and Mexican

farmers was augmented by the participation of sundry direct action groups, anarchists, black bloc-ers, students from Mexico City and a motley variety of others. The whole was infused with a moral authority engendered by the power of Lee's ultimate sacrifice. Strengthened by the emotional unity born of the shared grief, the demonstrators were inspired not only by his death but also by its symbolic register of the millions of deaths which his gesture evoked: "Todos somos Lee."

All week long, hundreds of hours had been invested in meetings to determine what exactly we would try to achieve here. The 'Day of Direct Action', September 9th, produced a day of almost no action. The internationals had concocted a daring plan for shutting down the WTO, but nobody was willing to actually put themselves out to do it. The Mexico City students, the supposed 'direct action' crew, politely refused the role of fall-guys for the internationals' plan, saying "their plan is effective, but it's not ours..." The failure to do anything on the 'Day of Direct Action', the disunity and bad feelings left from the breakdown in communication among the protesters, became moot as almost everyone unified behind the Korean delegation in an unscripted but singular objective: to destroy the fence.

As a motley crew of militants, led by the Koreans, tore down the fence and attacked police lines with sticks, bricks, appropriated police batons and not a few well aimed karate kicks, why did the security forces not respond? They kept their line, ten deep, and the water cannon remained idle. Gas was not fired, nor rubber bullets - nothing. The cop lines took a pasting all afternoon and responded only by swinging batons and chucking rocks back.

Probably the word came from above for no more blood to be spilt. Lee's action rattled the Mexican authorities and the WTO officials. From here on in, it was going to be kid gloves with the protesters. In this sense, Lee's sacrifice also saved countless arrests and injuries. Over the next few days a variety of daring, creative and provocative actions took place and the sum total of arrests and serious injuries remained zero.

## PROTESTERS ON A MOVE: WE ARE WINNING

The next day, a rambunctious 'cacerolazo' of 1,000 people snaked its way across downtown Cancun. Some



The fence surrounding the Conference Centre is finally pulled down

black bloc-ers took advantage of the event to smash up a Pizza Hut, causing the usual immediate arguments in the ranks about property destruction. When the police responded by sending hundreds of riot cops to the vicinity, a sense of unity amongst the marchers was re-established. Emboldened protesters were not intimidated and the police dispersed, allowing the dance to continue into the wee hours under the warm tropical sky.

The following day showed a great increase in activity. An audacious early morning banner drop in front of the Convention Centre demanded "*Que se vayan todos!*" - "They ALL must go!", a slogan from the Argentina uprising. Inside the Ministerial, accredited NGOs continued to disrupt proceedings and an African delegation led by Kenya was threatening revolt. A WTO spokesperson held a press conference during which he intimated that the Ministerial Conference was almost unsalvageable. That evening about 100 demonstrators posing as tourists infiltrated the Red Zone and blocked the road in front of the WTO Convention Centre. The front line locked arms and sat facing traffic while the rest sang and danced behind them, reclaiming the real sense of the place, the so-called Party Zone. This very effective action demonstrated our

ability to breach police lines and cause more than just symbolic disruption. Some WTO delegates and NGOs came out to applaud the action.

Though pressure increased from police throughout the action, the kid gloves strategy remained - demonstrators managed to negotiate an exit from the blockade in which they were provided with luxury buses that carried them to kilometre zero and a festive welcome from the Koreans and mourners at the memorial site for Mr Lee.

Tactically astute as ever, groups of Koreans would intermittently (and throughout the night) arise from their mourning rituals at the kilometre zero site, to go off and attack the fence. This mischievousness kept the cops on their feet, uncertain, confused, and probably well intimidated by these determined Korean cadre kicking and beating the fence at regular intervals.

That same day 400 people reclaimed an abandoned building downtown. Several dozen riot police gathered nearby. However the mood remained festive and non-confrontational. Traditional music was played and free food served.

By the time of the big march, The 'Global Day of Action' against the WTO, September 13th, we were brimming

with confidence and knew the WTO was on the rack. The local media had moved over somewhat to our side and the local people began to come out. The Korean delegation led the 10,000 demonstrators to the reinforced eight foot fence the police had erected to replace the one dismantled on the 10th. A far more formidable blockade, it was actually three fences, one behind the other. Everyone was united and clear in the aim of this protest - to destroy that fence. We went about our work gleefully. First up, a couple of hundred women amassed along the long barricade and set about it with many bolt cutters. Next, heavy ropes were attached, and through a great communal effort of hundreds of disciplined and spirited activists, the fence was pulled to the ground. The atmosphere was otherworldly as the mammoth structure began to buckle and sway, and a great collective "oh my god, we're really fucking doing it!" gripped the crowd. The fence torn asunder, lines of riot cops edgily filled in the gaping holes, batons drawn. What now?

In an unorthodox but tactically brilliant move, the protesters surprised all by turning their backs and sitting down. We had achieved our aims. Another battle with the cops would be counter-

productive. A ceremony was held for Comrade Lee and then the electrifying news was announced in Korean, Spanish and English that not only had a group of Koreans made it into the Convention Centre but also that the G21 had declared their refusal to support the proposal of the USA and the EU. We are winning!

## LESSONS FROM CANCUN

*I learned that nobody respects someone who negotiates with his head bowed. Nobody respects anyone who negotiates as a lackey. With our heads lifted, defending our self-interest, we shall be able to grow and open extraordinary spaces..."*

President Lula da Silva of Brazil, September 16th speech about the collapse of the WTO Meeting in Cancun.

*"The derailing of trade agreements at Cancun was crucial for us. Though our governments try and take the credit, we know that it was the result of years of struggle by many millions of people in many, many countries. What Cancun taught us is that in order to inflict real damage and force radical change, it is vital for local resistance movements to make international alliances. From Cancun we learned the importance of globalising resistance... Radical change will not be negotiated by governments; it can only be enforced by people."*

Arundhati Roy, World Social Forum, Mumbai, January 24th 2004.

And that is the lesson of Cancun. The summit mobilisations are the tip of the iceberg, representing the ant work that has been done beforehand, with each and every local struggle contested at community, municipal or city level. The sum of all these struggles leads to a critical mass of resistance where even the national governments must take heed, and the combined pressure of all these little struggles comes to bear on these global summits.

What do we marching in the streets have in common with strange bedfellows like the G21? There is no common ground between anti-capitalists and the ruling class cut-throats of countries like China, Colombia, Nigeria, Pakistan, or Guatemala. The dissenting delegations of the G21 were no doubt the product of many years of pressure exerted by the anti-globalisation movement.

India, for example, joined the G21 because the struggle waged by its massive farmers' movement, which uses suicide and the mass destruction of GM crops as tactics, was simply greater than the pressure coming from Washington.

With peoples' movements marching in the city center and NGOs demonstrating hourly inside and outside the convention hall from the opening session on, Cancun, as Walden Bello pointed out, became a microcosm of the power of global dynamics of states and civil society. The collapse of the Ministerial was a confirmation, not of the democratic nature of the WTO, nor of the faith we hold in our government representatives, but that global civil society is emerging as the worlds second superpower.

And as if to reinforce the notion of civil society (or the global justice movement) as an emerging global player, the final act of the day of global action against the WTO was the burning of a US flag. This action symbolized the shift of focus of struggle of the movement from global neo-liberal institutions to once more confronting the US war machine and its aspiration for empire.

## THE UNITED COLOURS OF RESISTANCE AND THE GLOBAL MOB

But let's not get carried away as to the extent of the success at Cancun. As a Korean delegate said, "This was a victory that was handed to us, not won by our strength..." The impact of Lee's extraordinary action cannot be underestimated, but nor can suicide enter the movement's repertoire of tactical deployments. So what can we take from Cancun, as an inspiration for future mobilisations and for the movement in general?

Let us remember September 13th 2003 at the fortified metal fence that excluded the protesters from reaching the WTO Convention Centre. Let us remember how many hands helped to weave dozens of little ropes into a half dozen 50-metre boa-constrictor-like super-ropes. And as that sturdy rigging was carried to the fence, let us remember the autonomous action by the groups of women who went ahead with bolt cutters to set about dismantling the fence. Confronting the lines of riot police, the women succeeded in weakening the fortification enough so that when the huge ropes were attached, already the fence was buckled.

Let us remember that while it was the Korean delegation who led the direct action, it was the anarchist contingent who protected their flanks, armed with sticks and their bodies to repel any pre-emptive police charge. And as the musicians played and the drummers

beat out liberating rhythms, and as the majestic puppet of Chac the Mayan God guarded over our actions, let us remember and cherish a very beautiful few hours as hundreds of people, egged on by thousands of others, pulled on the ropes to tear down the mighty fence. It was like a vision from a fanciful Sub-Commandante Marcos communiqué as the brown, yellow, black and white arms heaved in harmony, the sweat running down people's faces, this hard labour made light by the unity of men and women, young and old, and piece by piece the great odious fence was dismantled by the united colours of resistance.

Farmers from Korea and punks from Mexico City, fishermen from the Yucatan and AIDS activists from South Africa, indigenous from Oaxaca and media workers from Japan, NGOs from the USA and anarchists from Europe, *campesinos* from Honduras and land squatters from Brazil, all united in one act of creative destruction. A few ex-guerrillas from Central America, a few Zapatistas, a few Marxists, some students, some hooligans, and many, many everyday people - the guy in the photocopy centre, the labourer on the hotel site, the waiter in the pizzeria, the lady selling 'tortas' in the market, the artisan vendor, the sex worker - all united, all heaving on that sturdy boa constrictor of a rope to pull down that fucking fence and announcing - Behold the global mob, the new communists, the old masses, the future inheritors of the earth, the revolutionary class... and the other world that is now possible.

On a sunny day in Cancun, we saw walls come crashing down.

## RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

'Cancun: The Collapse of the Neo-Liberal Offensive' by Immanuel Wallerstein (October, 2003)

'WTO Collapses in Cancun: Autopsy of a Fiasco Foretold' by John Ross, [www.counterpunch.org](http://www.counterpunch.org)

'Poor Countries Set a Precedent for How to Beat Impositions by the Wealthy Countries' by Al Giordano, [www.narconews.com/Issue31/article872.html](http://www.narconews.com/Issue31/article872.html)

'Victory in Cancun' by Kevin Danaher, September 18th 2003, [www.globalexchange.org/campaigns/wto/1062.html](http://www.globalexchange.org/campaigns/wto/1062.html)

'Postcard from Cancun' by Christian Parenti