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IMPRESSIONS* MIAMI AND THE FTAA

by Josefina M. Castillo.

I woke up in a run-down Miami hotel surrounded by a deafening noise that came out from helicopters flying over the city center. The day before, I had a hard time trying to get a cab to take me from the airport to the downtown area where the hotel was located. No driver was willing to get near that vicinity because it was encircled by police barricades. Indeed, thousands of police officers were stationed all over the area, with dogs, mounted police, riot police, artillery vehicles and the roaring helicopters day and night. It seemed more like a city in an emergency state than the touristy Miami city.

What is the meaning of this display of force? I asked myself. Are people's voices so threatening to the domination system that they call for such intimidating practices? All opponents of free trade are people working for peace and justice in the world and that has been the message we want to convey, contrary to the apparent suspicion of potential enemies of law and order. I was part of a group of 27 FSC national and international staff who attended the continental campaign of struggle against the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Workshops, panels, conferences, and non-violence trainings, were the context of interesting discussions with people from all over the American Continent. I was part of the Trade and Immigration panel together with Gabriel Camacho from the Cambridge office, Colin Rajah from the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, and Helena Wong from CAAAV-Organizing Asian Communities. We focused on the relationship between migration and globalization. We talked about some of the consequences of global economic policies: affected populations crossing borders for survival reasons, resistance strategies developed by immigrants to avoid exploitation, and military operations along the US-Mexico border. While people learned and listened how the FTAA, if passed, will affect whole communities of disadvantaged populations, there were also strategizing meetings on alternatives to this economic model. Fair trade opportunities and community cooperatives based on sustainable development are some grassroots responses to the free trade model.

On Thursday, November 20th, some 15 thousand people marched peacefully, in spite of provocations and intimidation from the authorities. Protesters issued a joint proclamation in solidarity with thousands of people in London who protested against George W. Bush's visit and with activists who would leave for Ft. Benning that weekend to join the annual caravan to close the School of the Americas. The declaration read: "The invasion and occupation of Iraq, the training of soldiers in counterinsurgency at the School of the Americas, and the expansion of free trade agreements such as FTAA, are strategies in the construction of an empire built on greed, violence and power. These policies are not making the world more secure, nor are the economic policies generating prosperity".

None of the positive side of the whole event was ever mentioned by the media. Instead, the meager media coverage targeted on the few groups of "globalphobics" who marched against the police barricades after the protest. They were halted with pepper spray, rubber bullets, and electric laser tools handed by police wearing new anti-riot equipment. I was shocked to hear through the TV news that 8.5 million dollars had been allocated to reinforce security in Miami taken out of the recent military budget of 87 million granted to support the war on Iraq. There were even 2 million more put forth by local business men. This militarized atmosphere brought to mind intellectual Antonio Gramsci's words regarding the political apparatus "with the loss of consensus, repression increases".

In the midst of this scary atmosphere, there were some positive highlights. One of this was the dialogue with the representatives of four Latin American governments: Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela and Bolivia. This is the first time that any government authority has agreed to step out of the official meeting to have an exchange of impressions with civil society. The crammed meeting was held at the First United Methodist Church. The representatives agreed that they are in a complex situation of economic crises and increasing poverty. All of Latin America is suffering the consequences of the imposition of the economic policies that best suit corporate interests. The agreement has internal contradictions and is not satisfactory to all nations, therefore each country will negotiate separately.

Never before has this hemispheric meeting been so full of meaning and importance. This is the final stage of negotiations so that the FTAA can be finalized in January of 2005. Historically this is one of the most convulsive moments when the U.S. government is strengthening its world power, establishing domination against the Iraqi population while institutionalizing the process of regional economic control in Latin America. The relevance of this hemispheric meeting lies in people coming together throughout the continent and organizing for social change, human rights and the convention of economic, cultural, and social rights. People coming together to bring peace and justice not violence!