

Summing up the Summit

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by Maude Barlow

The Quebec Summit is over. Heads of state, journalists and protesters (except those still in jail) have all departed the city. The wall is being dismantled as I write. This is a good time to share my thoughts and memories of this incredible week as well as some reflections for future events.

The occasion, of course, was the gathering of 34 heads of states of North and South America to further the economic and social integration of the Americas based on the U.S.-style free market model known as the "Washington Consensus" and to consolidate North American corporate dominance in the countries of the South. This integration will be accomplished by signing a "Free Trade Area of the Americas" based on the model of NAFTA, but extended to be "WTO compatible" and include a whole new agreement on services.

To offset the growing criticism of this plan (see my analysis of the FTAA), the Summit leaders publicly concentrated on what they call a "Democracy Clause" whereby any country not deemed to be "democratic" (by U.S. standards, no doubt) would be excluded from the FTAA. Hence, Cuba was not at the table, but Colombia, where labour leaders "disappear" at the rate of almost one a week, was. Our response, by the way, has been unequivocal: corporate-driven trade agreements already dictate our environmental and social policy. We certainly don't want them redefining our notions of democracy.

Besides, if our governments cared about democracy, they would have released the text to us months ago. As well, they would be involved in real dialogue with our groups and would not have allowed corporations to buy their way into the inner circle during the Summit - a practice questioned even by the conservative press in Canada.

To protect themselves from the escalating opposition to this process, the Canadian government erected a cement and chain-link fence around the entire city - dubbed the "wall of shame" - and triggered the biggest security operation in peacetime Canadian history. Six thousand and seven hundred police, thousands of soldiers on standby, armoured tanks, plastic bullets, and 5,000 canisters of tear gas (they ended up ordering more from a U.S. supplier) were assembled. A jail was emptied in anticipation of the protesters about to descend on the city.

Outside the wall, thousands of Canadians and other citizens of the Americas started streaming into Quebec City. They stayed anywhere they could find - churches, hostels, tents, university gymnasiums, bed and breakfasts. The Council of Canadians was well represented - over 100 chapter representatives, 16 staff, and 8 board members, all working as an amazing team. We stayed at motels on the Ste Foy strip; their hard beds and pillows grew amazingly more comfortable as the grinding week wore on. I arrived on Tuesday, April 17, to participate in the opening of the Peoples' Summit and share in the

reading of the official declaration. The Summit was sponsored by the Hemispheric Social Alliance and its Canadian counterpart, Common Frontiers, and ended Thursday afternoon. It attracted over 3,500 delegates who attended dozens of workshops, panels and speakers' forums on all of the social, human rights, cultural and environmental issues associated with the FTAA.

On Thursday evening, the Common Front on the WTO held a well-attended public forum on the GATS. And on Friday, over a thousand people participated in a lively Teach-In on the FTAA. These events were a tremendous success; they provided a wealth of information on every aspect of hemispheric integration and put forward powerful alternative visions to the corporate-dominated model of our governments. The official activities finished with a call from all the groups for a referendum on the FTAA in all 34 countries of the Americas.

During the week, groups released papers and alternative positions and held regular press conferences, many of which were well attended by the mainstream media. On Wednesday, the Council hosted a press conference with French farm activist José Bové, and I got my first taste of the paparazzi. Dozens of cameras met us as we disembarked from the van and aggressive journalists elbowed and jostled each other for access to the "star." Pipe in hand (one he had received from Zapatista leader Marcos in an exchange of pipes), Bové took it all in stride, including three days of intensive media interviews.

Later that same day, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy in Minneapolis posted on its Web site a leaked copy of the investment chapter of the proposed agreement. After a hastily called examination by a team of trade experts, we held a press conference and blasted our governments for including the infamous Chapter 11 of NAFTA in the FTAA. We used the occasion to demonstrate the empty promise to publish the text; once more, we had to get any scraps of information by stealth. We also pointed out that if the Canadian government, which said it would not sign an FTAA that contained Chapter 11, was so obviously lying about this, they are very likely also lying when they say the deal won't include services.

(Later in the week, Prime Minister Chrétien contradicted Trade Minister Pierre Pettigrew and declared that Chapter 11 is "just fine" and will be staying in NAFTA. How many times can one say "I told you so"?) On Saturday morning, the Council held a huge rally with fabulous speakers (including José, and other stellar activists from France and from Latin America), which was broadcast to thousands inside and outside the big tent. The feeling was electric and the crowd rose roaring to its feet dozens of times during the morning. Then, in the bright spring sunshine, a huge crowd of over 60,000 people joined the labour-sponsored march, complete with music, puppets, theatre and dance.

Meanwhile, parallel to the Peoples' Summit process, the preparations were proceeding of those committed to direct action, particularly at the wall, which had become a much-hated symbol of government indifference and exclusion. Direct action and non-violent

civil disobedience have become a part of these events wherever they happen, from Seattle and Melbourne to Prague and Quebec City, and they are usually led by youth.

For many of these activists, governments are as much the problem as corporations and the global institutions that serve them. The activists have simply given up on lobbying or trying to get governments to listen to them and have chosen to put their bodies on the line for what they believe. Their tactics have been responsible for shutting down, or at least postponing, several major events and have grabbed the attention of the world's media.

For months ahead, our movement had been grappling with how to deal with these two parallel tracks. Many were worried that small elements of this faction of the movement might engage in vandalism or violence, something strongly rejected by most. We at the Council discussed this issue in many meetings. The question became how to support the thousands of young people who would be putting themselves on the line at the wall in front of the biggest police operation in Canadian peacetime history while also supporting our principles of non-violence. Added to this was our concern that the officially sanctioned march on Saturday was scheduled to march four kilometers away from the wall, leaving anyone protesting at the wall to protest alone.

The city was more or less broken into three zones of protest - green, yellow and red. Green zones were safe zones, away from the action or on government-permitted routes. Red zones were the obvious arrest zones, and yellow were the in-between. After much deliberation, the Council decided to support the march (in which many of our members participated) as well as go to the wall in an act of solidarity with the protesters - in other words, yellow-zone protest.

On Friday morning our members, including myself, joined about 3,000, mostly young people, in a march from Laval University to Old Quebec. At one point in the march, we were separated into two streams - "yellow" for those going directly to the wall and "green" for those going into the city where they could act as observers and supporters. Within half an hour, the wall had been breached and clouds of tear gas were rising through the air.

For the next two days, into the small hours of the morning, the police directed a merciless tear gas assault against the several thousand protesters anywhere in the vicinity of the wall. Four hundred and sixty-three were arrested; some having been picked up by police in unmarked vans, and were held in filthy conditions inside the jail. Women were stripped and doused with disinfectant by male guards and people were squeezed into tiny cells without toilet facilities or food.

On Friday and Saturday, our members chose to be near the action at the wall, both to express our deep opposition to the random, government-endorsed brutality being waged against innocent protesters and to serve as witnesses to the days' events. The terms "green" or "yellow" immediately became irrelevant. Anyone standing peacefully within the vicinity was a target of tear gas, water cannon and even plastic bullets. I was personally hit badly twice by tear gas and many other times less directly. Tear gas is truly

debilitating. You cannot see or think and you become totally disoriented. I actually witnessed one case where an entire wooden staircase leading down a steep hill was filled with people fleeing the gas. I counted 10 tear gas canisters thrown directly into the crowd. It is a miracle there were no casualties on that staircase. As anyone watching the news in those and the following days knows, many local residents were hurt by the tear gas and random plastic bullets. Several dozen protesters and several police were also hurt. Random and senseless acts of vandalism occurred against some local property and some media vans. While clearly deplorable, not more than a few dozen people were involved in these acts of vandalism, compared to the many thousands who participated peacefully in the march and protests.

I was called by many media outlets to ask what I was going to do about those on our side who violated the non-violence principles of the larger movement. I said then, and want to repeat now, that neither I nor the Council endorse anything but non-violent protest tactics. (We did support the breaching of the wall, which had been built as a provocation, but *not* the hurling of objects at police.) Our members, staff and board took repeated doses of tear gas without reacting with violence or provocation to demonstrate the Gandhian principles of non-violence in the face of aggression.

But I also emphasized that the anger among so many young people is born of years of government cuts to social programs, rising tuition fees, disillusionment with governments who do nothing about environmental destruction, and a toxic economy in which winners are separated from losers and the losers left to fend for themselves. These young people are the collective responsibility of our society, not our movement. I personally think Jean Chrétien has much to answer for both in his endorsement of these harsh economic prescriptions and by allowing the provocation of the wall and the overly aggressive behavior of his security forces.

Nevertheless, the time has come in our movement for greater dialogue. As we grow - and we are growing - we must cement the principles of non-violence if we are to be a movement for true social transformation. We must not let ourselves be separated into "good" protesters and "bad" protesters and divided as a movement. As long as we endorse the principles of non-violence, a diversity of tactics can continue to be an issue of consensus.

Now, we begin the task of the next stage of our work on the FTAA, demanding the text, getting the message to a wider public, putting forward alternative visions, building our movement. We have turned a corner and our powerful presence in Quebec City has changed the course of the FTAA process, perhaps irrevocably. Once again, our leaders tried to meet behind closed doors to decide our collective futures without us. Once again we said no. I can assure you our cry was heard around the world.