

# Lessons from a Summit Hopper – from Cancun to Miami

By Lisa Fithian, a member of the RANT Collective

In the wake of the failed WTO talks in Cancun, the success of the FTAA negotiations in Miami this November are critical to the Bush Administrations plan for economic and military corporate domination. Their efforts to marginalize us and criminalize us are likely to surpass anything we have seen yet. As we prepare to step together into the streets of Miami, it is more important than ever that we have a clear analysis of our work together in the past and sound strategies for confronting and overcoming the internal and external structures of power over. More than ever we need to access the power that each of us holds within ourselves and the power-with that we access when we speak truly and act in solidarity with those with whom we may not agree.

I offer these observations based on my experience during years of organizing locally and globally. I have had the privilege “summit hopping” to Seattle, DC, Los Angeles , Prague, Quebec, Ottawa, Genoa, New York, Calgary, Evian and Cancun. These were for mobilizations against the WTO, the IMF and World Bank, the National Democratic Convention, the World Economic Forum, the G-8 and the FTAA. I have also organized in and with diverse sectors including grassroots direct actionist including anarchist/anti-capitalists, labor unions, students, immigrants, queer, women and religious/spiritual communities. All of this is influencing my thinking toward Miami.

Since Seattle there have been ongoing questions about: violence, nonviolence and a diversity of tactic; about revolutionary versus reformist strategies, about racism, sexism, ageism, heterosexism and how we build alliances across our diverse communities; about our relationship to corporate media and about organizing locally versus globally. These discussions have been rich and challenging as we have explored our different perspectives and these different perspectives have kept these discussions and questions alive precisely because we do not agree.

In my work, my goals are building enough power to dismantle the structures of power-over (the State) while creating a world and a practice of power-with each other and power-within ourselves. Building power to me means organizing people into processes and structures that enable them to be their own authority where they know and have confidence in their ability to take action. Their ability to make things happen. This requires trust and respect as well as taking risk and acting with courage despite our fears. One of the tenets of this practice is known as “Do as you will and harm none”.

The challenge before us, as I see it, is how do we move forward, take action and build power with when we are so different in our perspectives and experiences. We are “products” of this racist, capitalist, sexist and violent society. It is threaded though us. We have all been damaged by it and we easily fall in to programmed patterns of competition, judgment, and oppression. We are an angry, alienated, depressed and tranced out society. Even with conscious work it takes time, energy and vigilant commitment to stay awake, open and develop a new practice for how we each exercise our power.

We spend so much time, as individuals, groups and sectors, trying to convince each other of who is right, better, more important. That we don’t focus on learning the lessons and

carrying them forward in our struggles.

As I said above I have been to many of these summits, but I'd like to share some of my experiences/stories from Cancun to illustrate some of the lessons I am learning.

In Cancun, there were many diverse sectors present yet we all working separately for the most part. Campesinos, NGO's, unions, Koreans, internationals and students were the primary groups. We all had different spaces for sleeping and organizing. We had different action plans and we never as a larger community came or really worked together. Within each of these sectors as well as between I experienced what some have called a "wrestling" for space. Who was right, better, in charge etc and while the ideas of solidarity and respect were talked about a lot, it wasn't until Farmer Lee from Korean sacrificed his life on Wednesday, September 10<sup>th</sup>, that our talk became a practice.

The same night that Lee died, Mexico threatened to deport the Korean delegation. The Koreans immediately went and established an encampment at Kilometer Zero, the site where Lee died, which is also the beginning of the road that went out to the Ministerial. Internationals, students and campesinos mobilized to stay the night acting as witnesses and human shields.

On Thursday, the first real coordination process of all the different sectors began. First, we focused on how best to support the Korean encampment and second, on how to take action together. This process culminated in the action on Saturday, Sept. 13<sup>th</sup>

The action on Saturday was one of the most powerful I have ever experienced and I've done a lot of actions! The action began with a march from the Casa de la Cultura, the campesino encampment, to Kilometer Zero.

As the march approached the fence, women from around the world moved to the front. With bolt cutters, wrenches and wire cutters in hand, we systematically began to take the fence apart. Other women and then a line of men, held this space for us. After we had cut away whole sections and we opened a space for the Korean Delegation to move forward.

The Korean delegation had prepared three thick strands of rope. Several of them climbed to the top of the fence and tied the rope on. Hundreds of people – men, women, campesinos, Koreans, internationals, young and old began to pull on the ropes. Heave, Heave, SNAP – a section of fence breaks off. The rope is retied, we pull again and again and again, another section of fence is ripped free. Water was passed from the back to thirsty protestors in the front. The ropes were tied again. We pull, "duro, duro, duro" (harder, stronger, tougher) the crowd yells. Another section is torn away.

The Black Block, (both Mexican and Internationals) had made agreements with the campesinos to keep provocateurs from getting in the mix (there were lots paid by the police) and did so successfully. However another group of provocater--the riot police-- had begun to mobilize on a road behind us. As pieces of the fence were torn away, the Black Bloc and others gathered them up and built an amazing barricade to keep the police at bay. It was a beautiful, powerful, massive barricade that kept us safe from behind.

Finally, the fence was gone and the road was wide open. We faced row upon row of riot police, a water cannon, batons, tear gas with more police and barricades to come. In that moment, the words of Rosa Park came to mind..." I knew somebody had to stand up, so I sat down." Which is exactly what we did.

We sat down. We did not attempt to enter the area or engage them in a fight. Instead we

held the space, our space. We heard from some of the Koreans, the campesinos, the students and then burned effigies of the WTO and an American flag. Afterward, everyone was given a flower to honor Brother Lee and invited to lay it in a pile at the feet of the police. We did so and we left.

We returned to Kilometer Zero to hugs and joy. Most felt complete in our powerful act of nonviolent property destruction. We had torn down a symbol of the police state that divides our world and protects the secret meetings of government officials and corporate leaders. In its place we left beauty and love.

The action was not perfect. We made mistakes. Not everyone was in the meetings where decisions were made and the decisions were not communicated well to those who just showed up or who did not have representatives. Some felt dis-empowered by leaving or being asked to leave the fence after the opening was made. They would have preferred a decision-making process in the streets to decide whether we should have stayed, continued forward or left the fence. Better communication and decision-making could have clearly improved the action. But it was a strong and powerful and amazing action despite it all. This action was a culmination of our experience from the whole week and the coordination process that unfolded in the final days.

Some lessons I left with, again re-inforced from other summits as well are these:

**1) We are all needed:** G21 countries walk-out of the negotiation causing them to collapse. NGO's worked with these delegations before and during Ministerial to bolster their positions. The NGO's also engaged in disruptive direct actions inside the WTO proceedings. The NGO's also set up spaces and organized educational and cultural events that were critical in our outreach to the community. The Campesinos brought the largest numbers and had a moral authority and clear stakes in the fight. The Koreans were clear, organized and unequivocal in their intention to Down, Down the WTO! They also brought to the eyes of the world the real life and death impact these policies are having on people all over the world. The Mexican students brought numbers, energy, creativity, and some awesome actions. The International protestors brought money, set up a convergence, built a model eco-village, organized puppets, housing, food, medical and planned and implemented some great direct actions. The Black Bloc brought edge, contained the provocateurs and demonstrated that solidarity and agreements can work. The IMC videographers, techies, radio folks and more who brought our actions to the world. All of our work, inside and outside was critical to the collapse of the WTO and the sense that together our movement is still growing its power.

**2) Our offensive strategies work:** Starting about 2-3 months out, the State consistently does a massive propaganda campaign in the media and directly in the community (through leaflets, meetings and videos--mostly of Seattle) of how scary and dangerous the global justice movement is. They find or create local laws to limit protest activity. They create such fear that people in the community are terrified and leave town if they can. People in the movement are afraid to come or if they do come they are afraid of other sectors of the movement. People who want to take direct action are afraid of police brutality and start to question what is possible.

We can counter their propaganda with our own offensive strategies.

a) **Community Organizing:** We need organizing as well as mobilizing. We need to go door-to-door and introduce ourselves and offer information. We must get on local/community groups, associations, and unions agendas and explain who we are and why we take action to oppose the FTAA. We need to leaflet (in multiple

languages) at business in the demonstration areas as well as grocery stores, public transportation, churches and in people of color communities.

b) **Political Organizing:** We must assess the Mayor, the City Council, neighborhood associations, school boards, state and federal elected officials. We can sponsor resolutions, attend public meetings, organize delegations and we can put demands on these officials to respect human rights, respect first amendment rights, and to prohibit the use of lethal weapons including chemical and biological weapons against protestors.

c) **Legal:** We can document police abuse before, during and after the mobilization. We can use litigation to restrain the police demanding injunctions against them raiding our spaces, confiscating our puppets and other materials as well as against unjust laws, ordinances or permit procedures.

d) **Media:** We can organize delegations to editorial boards, we can organize issue breakfasts or lunches – smaller more intimate opportunities to educate journalist about the issues. We can hold press conferences or tours of our spaces and our puppets. We can organize press conferences with representatives of diverse groups to show our unity. We can encourage community or local interest groups to organize their own press conference calling on the city to respect their community.

These different ideas have been tried and worked at a number of the mobilizations since Seattle and they can work in Miami too!

**3. Agreements are Essential** – within our broader movement we have different kinds and amounts of power. Some of us are more marginal than others and feel more oppressed. The same dynamics we feel in our society play out in our movement. There are often feelings of resentment, distrust, anger and disrespect.

In September of 2001 we created a document called Solidarity in Practice that grew out of a process involving labor, religious and anti-capitalists. This document can be found on our website [www.rantcollective.org](http://www.rantcollective.org) and offers some ideas on agreements that might be possible for Miami. Some of the things it tries to focus on are concrete behaviors and actions that we agree to that can equalize power and encourages respect.

Things such as: we will not intentionally put any groups or people at risk that have not chosen it. No group will speak on behalf of any other group. We will talk about our strategies, not others, nor will we publicly criticize or put down any other group. We will not turn anybody over to the police. That we will not bring our tactics into another group using different tactics, nor will we let other people in our group disrupt another groups action. We will respect each groups right to do certain types of protest at certain times and places. That we will not negotiate on behalf of any group that has not requested it and so on. We will share food, water and medical supplies and help anyone who is hurt.

These are just some examples of agreements that we can make with one another and it would be great if each group could start now to think about what they need to feel safe and effective in carrying out their actions.

**4) The Art of Action** – in Cancun, the spirit of the Zapatista movement was always present which meant that we were challenged to think differently about how we took action. We were challenged to create our own terrain instead of falling into the plans that the State had created.

In Cancun this meant: we marched to the police lines and built sacred altars in the streets; we opened community restaurants that had been closed and served free food; we were tourists slipping behind security lines to disrupt the area at the Convention Center and we physically removed barricades to open up public beaches that the military had closed. Instead of allowing them to continue the myth that millions of dollars of security money was needed, we demonstrated peacefully and powerfully with our humanity, our creativity and our heart.

We need to keep the same perspectives in mind for Miami, especially since it appears that we are being set-up by the city. Miami is one of the poorest cities in the nation and the area where the fence is being set up and the march is being held is in the more devastated part of downtown. There are mostly small, run down immigrant businesses with lots of empty buildings, small streets and congested areas. This area completely shuts down in the evening. Just south of this area across the Miami river is the big, open, fancy financial district and big hotels.

Many of the local activists continue to express about the brutality of the police, the lack of a progressive community and the ongoing impact these actions may have. There are several strong groups that are organizing communities of color into the global justice movement. They have also raised concerns about what kinds of direct action will take place and when.

In light of all these conditions, we have opportunity to think different. To create dilemmas or the unexpected. When planning the clearer we are about our goals, our targets, our message and our chance for success.

In Miami, there is a question emerging about the effectiveness of mass action versus decentralize autonomous actions. For experienced people who are well organized, autonomous actions help bring pressure to a variety of targets and help divert the police. Mass actions create opportunities for large number to concentrate and focus energy, enable newer people to join in and feel "safer." We can do both. Whenever we begin to choose one thing over the other, when there is clearly no consensus we lose power, because we are no longer taking advantage of our diversity. There is room for all of us and all of our efforts are what enrich the dish.

In Miami we have a chance to derail the FTAA. To do so will require each and everyone of us, our greatest creativity, enormous courage and serious cooperation. We often say Another World is Possible. In Miami, let's say that Another World in Now.

If we do not learn from history, we are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past. Crazy is when you do the same thing over and over again and expect different results