



Cancún: Why So Happy?

There was a great deal of rejoicing when the WTO meeting in Cancún broke down recently. Now, I don't want to be too much of a grouch about this, because there is certainly something satisfying about working together to get one's message out. The message I heard, though, was "This is bad! This is bad!

Stop this bad thing!" I have been trying to figure out who is better off because the talks broke down, and, aside from the happy protesters, I can only think of one group: those special interests who continue to benefit from tariffs and subsidies for their own industries — at everyone else's expense.

This is not to suggest that the World Trade Organization is any great liberator of suffering humanity. It is a political forum, made up of representatives of national governments (and which makes its decisions, by the way, by consensus). Each of those trade ministers



comes to a WTO meeting constrained by a strict negotiating agenda, and none of them has horns and a tail — so why the hatred?

The current round of international trade talks probably had little chance of success anyway, say some analysts, because of the unilateralism of the United States, and the tenuous bond between a group of 21 developing nations who have banded together around Brazil, China and India in an attempt to balance the US and EU. Yet, it could still have accomplished things, and some of the world's poorest countries dearly wish it had. It could have lowered subsidies and tariffs on their agricultural exports, especially cotton. That would have relieved real suffering.

So why rejoice over the breakdown of talks? WTO meetings have come to symbolize the Death Force that is taking over our world, which we citizens feel powerless to understand, much less control: *Globalization*. But if we stop people from negotiating about farm subsidies, capital flow issues or intellectual property, have we reversed the deepening of poverty, the march of wealth concentration, the rape of the earth?

What *is* globalization, anyway? It's not "internationalization", because that is generally a good thing — putting people in contact with people in faraway lands, exchanging ideas, goods and insights — how could that be bad? It also isn't "imperialism", because that is something that a nation does on its own behalf, and many Americans tend not to think Globalization is helping us one bit, domestically — why, lately (*continued on page 39*)

even the Bush Administration has begun to notice the stampede of manufacturing jobs. Of course, everybody knows who does benefit: *The Corporations*.

Is that why people are so mad? The corporations are running amok; they're exploiting people and the earth, and the WTO, like a permissive parent, is doing nothing to make them behave? But the WTO is not the corporations' parent. If anything it is more like their harried, ill-equipped kindergarten teacher. If your kid is behaving like a thug, should you blame the teacher? The school secretary? The bus driver? The last time I looked, all of the things that corporations do to exploit workers, pollute groundwater, make profit, etc., are done on land that is part of someone's sovereign territory. And at this stage of global organization, we still recognize and affirm the power of nations to enact laws.

But it's a race to the bottom, they say. Like the long-suffering moms of those latchkey kids, developing nations simply cannot exercise the necessary discipline; they are too desperate for foreign exchange. Those debt-saddled, struggling poor nations must be allowed to lift themselves by their own bootstraps — and in the meantime, the corporations had better behave themselves, or face — what? A stern talking-to from the WTO?

Too many people still view trade as predation. Even George Monbiot, an otherwise sensible chap, affirms the need for developing countries to “protect their infant industries” with tariffs. Rich nations don't need this, Monbiot argues, because of the industrial power they enjoy, established in large part by their long history of protectionism. So folks are mad at the global trade negotiators for trying to force Mali and Pakistan to “liberalize” their markets by removing protective tariffs. If that were all the WTO were doing, of course, we could make a (misguided) case for its heartlessness. But the most entrenched and destructive protectionist policies are those clung to by the USA! The fact is that no nation has ever prospered *because* it used tariffs to artificially raise the price of goods. Protective tariffs are poor policy, regardless of who uses them.

To those who worry about the encroachments on national sovereignty, I say, “Baloney!” People wring their hands about the outrage of corporations “having the rights of a person”, but let's not forget that corporations, like individuals, are bound by laws — and laws are made and enforced by nations. Must a nation be afraid to pass sensible anti-poisoning laws, lest the poisonrendering factories relocate? Well, what of it? Is multinational poisonrendering the only way we can make a living? Do we not have land, and hands to work it? Indeed we do — and if this kind of thinking is too far outside the box our leaders are in, then we had better educate them. **GJ**