

WTO Talks Collapse Amidst Protests In Cancun

By Eamon Martin, *Asheville Global Report*



NO WTO

"My warning goes to all citizens that human beings are in an endangered situation that uncontrolled multinational corporations and a small number of big WTO official members are leading an undesirable globalization of inhumane, environmentally degrading, farmer-killing and undemocratic policies. It should be stopped immediately, otherwise the false logic of neo-liberalism will perish the diversities of global agriculture with disastrous consequences to all human beings."

-- 56-year-old South Korean farmer Lee Kyung-Hae, from a statement he had passed out two days before killing himself in an act of political suicide on Sept. 10, 2003 during protests against the World Trade Organization in Cancun, Mexico.

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The demonstrations wound up the following day when thousands of protesters led by a contingent of Mayan, American, African, and Asian women marched to the barricades, then, using bolt cutters and ropes pulled them down. Immediately afterward, rather than engaging an army of riot police amassed before them, the demonstrators sat down and then maintained a sustained act of silence.

The next day, the unified group of 21 developing nations had effectively killed the WTO discussions.

Additional information: Cancun Indymedia

Cancun, Mexico, Sept. 15 (AGR) -- Small farmers, peasants, and global justice activists on the streets of Cancun, Mexico were jubilant on Sunday, Sept. 14, when it was announced that the Fifth Ministerial meetings of the World Trade Organization (WTO) taking place in the city had abruptly imploded. A united front of 21 poorer, developing nations involved in the talks, outraged over the evasiveness and inflexibility of the United States' and European Union's positions had walked out, stopping the meetings a day ahead of schedule, and preventing a planned formal agreement from being made. The news came after a week of dramatic anti-WTO protests struggled to be heard inside the highly militarized, elite vacation destination where a rare constellation of activists had gathered. The demonstrations were a mixture of both peaceful and violent confrontations with the suicide of a South Korean farmer and sabotage sustaining a general mood of high-pitched emotion.

Since its inception in 1995, the WTO's closed-door panels have ruled against an array of nations' health, safety, labor, human rights and environmental laws, which have been directly challenged as "barriers to trade" by governments acting on behalf of their corporate clients.

As a result, these standards and protections -- and by extension, whole indigenous cultures -- have been negated, crippled or rendered vulnerable to

negotiating the ways and means of continuing the crime of globalization," wrote Marcos. "We have in our hearts a future to build. They only have the past, which they want to repeat eternally. We have hope. They have death. We have liberty. They want to enslave us.

"This is not the first time, nor will it be the last, that the people who think themselves the owners of the planet have had to hide behind high walls and their pathetic security forces in order to put their plans in place."

Later ceremonies headed by Via Campesina, an international umbrella network of small farmers, and the KCTU concluded with a small march to the site of Lee's death at the fence where a minor stand-off with police ended with an impromptu camp-out by Koreans and their supporters.

The following night, a celebratory march of about 1,000 people -- some carrying torches, others banging on pots, pans and oil drums -- continued to protest, as well as to honor Lee.

Along the way, graffiti blossomed with phrases such as "Viva Lee".

Then the spirit of the march only intensified when dancing anarchists sabotaged the upstairs patio of a Pizza Hut franchise, smashing windows, destroying tables, and spray-painting phrases such as "No WTO" and "Assassinate Capitalists" on the walls to the roaring cheers of the crowd below.

Minutes later, the march reached an emotional peak, ending with a rally in a nearby park where hundreds danced, drummed and yelled out into the night.

The following morning, WTO trade ministers were greeted by a small team of Argentines who had hung a huge banner reading "Que les vayan todos/WTO Go Home!" on a giant crane outside the conference center.

Later that day, over 300 activists disguised as tourists actually penetrated the zone of the convention center and disrupted traffic outside of it for more than three hours. Some protesters sat in the road and sang, while earlier, another group of six Mexican activists blocked traffic with the aid of their car.

becoming disposable to the whims of international finance and global, corporate expansionism.

The WTO existed in obscurity until Nov. 30, 1999 when international activists shut down their Third Ministerial in Seattle, Washington. That action, accompanied by the rampant vandalism of corporate property targeted by black-clad anarchists, was followed by three days of police repression including mass arrests and martial law within residential city neighborhoods. The world took notice.

At the heart of the WTO's failure in Cancun was the WTO's Agreement on Agriculture, which has forced poorer nations to "liberalize" agriculture, allowing Northern-based agribusiness corporations to dump their products in Southern countries' markets. As a result, subsidies going to export-oriented industrial farms have skyrocketed while millions of small farmers have suffered from imports wiping out their traditional livelihoods and incomes as multinational companies gained control over their domestic agriculture and food supply.

The movement against this form of "neo-liberal" economic globalization is made up of a broad range of civil society groups representing women, farmers, students, anarchists, environmentalists, human rights defenders, and others.

But this week the WTO even provoked criticisms from the likes of United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who, himself blamed the rich countries for the problem of continued unfair trade.

"We are told that trade can provide a ladder to a better life and deliver us from poverty and despair... Sadly, the reality of the international trading system today does not match the rhetoric," Annan said in statement delivered to the opening session of the five-day conference.

Meanwhile, as the WTO delegates safely disputed their concerns inside Cancun's luxury hotel district secured by a 20,000-strong deployment of Mexican police and military, Annan's sentiments were severely amplified by activists and

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members of civil society outside.

Though a lengthy, cage-like fence kept most activists five miles away from the WTO convention center, throughout the week the structure itself became a focal point for some 7-10,000 demonstrators offended by their exclusion.

No greater symbolism illustrated this frustration than on Sept. 10, when at the very outset of the demonstrations, 56-year-old Lee Kyang-Hae, former leader of the South Korean Advanced Farmers Federation, in an act of protest climbed the fence and committed suicide by stabbing himself in the heart. Before his collapse, Lee clutched a sign reading: "WTO Kills Farmers".

The Korean delegation later argued that his death could have been avoided if the Mexican authorities had permitted them to bring their message to the meetings.

His death fell symbolically on the day of Chusok, one of the largest national Korean holidays when family and friends gather to give thanks to their ancestors for the food they have harvested.

Lee's act occurred not long after his delegation had led a march of thousands of Mexican farmers, students and internationals to the fence and began attacking it in varying degrees.

Large sections of the fence were demolished by internationals, students, and anarchists, many of whom used pieces of the fence itself as weapons against baton-wielding riot police standing behind its gates. With the playfully militant Infernal Noise Brigade marching band from Seattle drumming defiantly at their backs, the crowd upended a section of the heavy barricade while rocks and smashed concrete were hurled at police, some of whom threw the objects back at the crowd.

"It's time to step out of our safety-comfort zones," said Will Levin, age 50, a chef who had traveled from Portland, OR. "This is a choice between stepping into a culture of life or a culture of death."

By day's end, at least 40 demonstrators and 20 police had been injured and

Lee Kyang-Hae's political suicide had made him a martyr and a rallying spirit for those in Cancun who had come to stop the WTO.

In the evening, a series of ceremonies were held honoring Lee, infused with both somber tribute and passionate resolve to confront the WTO. At the first homage, Lee's delegation representing the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) sat on the streets in a candle-lit vigil in front of Cancun General Hospital to mourn and also speak with the press.

After they conducted a string of quiet Korean hymns and passionate orations, the KCTU accepted tribute from a diverse gathering who had come to pay their respects. After a group of Mexican Tzotzil Mayan women recited a traditional prayer, the KCTU warmly received a black banner as an offering on behalf of the anarchist Black Bloc of Cancun, honoring Lee as a martyr.

On the banner, written in Spanish and in English above and below a large circle "A" anarchy symbol, were the words: "With Love and Respect, In Solidarity, The Struggle Continues Onward".

Then, while holding the banner aloft, the leader of the ceremony then commenced an extensive fiery sermon against the WTO, pledging Korean solidarity with global activists and anarchists, shouting, "Our world is not for sale!"

Lee "committed suicide not only for himself but for all of us," he cried.

Afterwards, a senior KCTU member who had been a political prisoner for ten years approached the anarchists to thank them, saying, "You are our best fighters here."

The vigil closed with Koreans, Mexicans and internationals singing the hymn to the Zapatistas, the autonomist and insurrectionist indigenous movement based in the nearby Mexican state of Chiapas.

In the following days, Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatista National Liberation Army sent a message of solidarity read to the protesters in Cancun.

"Not far from where you are meeting, a handful of slaves to money are