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Australia

Blockade a stunning success

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The three-day blockade of the Asia-Pacific wing of the World Economic Forum (WEF) here on September 11, 12 and 13 has been a stunning success. The blockade was organised under the general slogans of "From Seattle to Melbourne, fight corporate greed!" and "Stand up for global justice and the environment!"

The S11 Alliance, the umbrella organisation behind the protest, largely kept its promise to "Shut down the World Economic Forum". As one tired, but elated, picket said in a spirit of friendly internationalist rivalry: "Hey, Seattle! Melbourne's right up there with you!"

It rained, on and off, throughout the three days, sometimes torrentially, and a cold wind blew off Port Phillip Bay, but neither that, nor the brutality of 2000 police and a small army of security guards, could dampen the enthusiasm of the tens of thousands of protestors. The Forum was effectively blocked off for the duration, and its gatherings sparsely attended. Small wonder that Australia's right-wing Prime Minister, John Howard, looked more than usually petulant, and Microsoft's Bill Gates looked glum. For their part, the protestors enjoyed a huge range of bands, performers, giant puppets and other entertainment that compensated to some degree for the weather and police violence.

Appropriate location

The Forum was held, most appropriately, in the ugly skyscraper tower of the Crown Casino on the Yarra bank: an apt symbol of the corporate cowboys and bribed intellectuals who make up the WEF. Crown's owners include Australia's richest man, Kerry Packer, who recently lost US\$34 million in a single weekend at Las Vegas. Packer will be even further out of pocket after S11. Crown was forced to suspend operations for the duration of the conference, and admits to having lost \$10 million in takings. But more than Crown's profits have taken a hammering. Rumour has it that the WEF organisers are so demoralised that they are considering holding future events by teleconference rather than brave the wrath of a new generation of anti-capitalist campaigners.

The success of the S11 blockade shows that the world-wide upsurge of revulsion against capitalist globalisation that began last year at Seattle is set to continue. Tens of thousands of demonstrators sealed off the conference and effectively disrupted its proceedings. All the entrances to the conference venue were blocked by pickets. Ironically, a four-metre high chain mesh fence erected by the police to keep out protestors also served to keep out WEF guests and personnel, and its metre-high concrete base was convenient for the spray painted slogans of the demonstrators. A number of high-ranking conservative political figures tried to run the gauntlet but turned back. The premier of West Australia, Charles Court, a virulent opponent of Aboriginal land rights, was trapped for an hour in his car by a group of Aborigines. "This is the way you've had us for 200 years," jeered one burly Aborigine at the clearly discomfited politician. "Now you know how it feels."

The S11 blockade culminated in a "victory march" around the central business district, with around 15,000 protesters in a jubilant mood. The blockaders had maintained the pickets around the clock for more than three days, despite massive police brutality and uncertain weather. The march was a gigantic anti-capitalist carnival, with drums, whistles and ear-splitting rap music. However, the shouts of "shame!" from thousands of throats whenever the police were spotted underlined the serious purpose of the marchers and their determination not to be intimidated.

Giant banner

A feature of the march was a gigantic banner inscribed with messages of solidarity from individuals and groups (including supporters of the Fourth International) who took part in the blockade. The banner will go to Prague for the S26 protests against the World Trade Organisation there: a symbol of the anti-capitalist internationalism that has taken root around the world since Seattle.

The march wound through the city streets past the offices and shops of such transnational icons as Nike (closed for the duration of S11), McDonalds, the banks, and the Melbourne Stock Exchange; all heavily guarded by riot police. True to his form as an unmitigated liar, deputy police commissioner Neil O'Loughlin insisted that the marchers would "ransack" the city. Like all of his other ridiculous allegations, it proved baseless.

The blockade was organised by a loose coalition of forces, including socialists, anarchists, trade unionists, environmentalists, indigenous people, church groups and campaigners against Third World debt. The umbrella group, the S11 Alliance, was responsible for the co-ordination of events, but members of a bewildering number of "affinity groups" essentially did their own organising and came together with others on the days of the protest.

Inspiring

One of the most inspiring aspects of the whole struggle was the relative youth of many of the blockaders. Many thousand high school students attended some or all of the protests, giving fresh hope to older generations of activists that the struggle for a better world will continue. Although reactionary media and political figures attacked S11 for "involving children", these young people refused to be patronised and made it clear that they knew what they were fighting for.

Government and media hypocrisy was shown when many of these young people were bashed by the police - we hear no cries of "child abuse" from moralising newspaper editors and shyster politicians. Dozens were hospitalised after unprovoked attacks by the notorious "Swat Squad", the paramilitary tactical response unit. The police rode their horses into crowds, savagely batoned passive demonstrators, and even stamped on heads in a rampage of violence. In one of the worst instances, the police bashed pickets early in the morning when other gates were unattended. Several hundred police suddenly erupted through the gates, catching a much smaller number of pickets by surprise from the rear, and flailing indiscriminately with their fists, boots and three-foot-long batons.

All in all, several hundred demonstrators were injured, compared with a handful of police. The attack followed demands by WEF officials the day before that the police get tough with the pickets. In another incident, the police turned fire hoses on demonstrators around 3am, with temperatures around 4 degrees Celsius, presumably in order to amuse themselves, as the pickets were sitting down with their backs to the police.

There were also reports that police used capsicum gas spray and many police officers removed their identification badges before assaulting demonstrators. In fact, the police were sometimes so hyped up that they assaulted journalists and damaged their cameras. There is also evidence of plainclothes police acting as provocateurs. The writer's son, a 15-year-old high school student witnessed the arrival of a vanload of provocateurs at one picket. These individuals threw tin cans and other objects at security guards before being warned off by S11 organisers, luckily before the police could arrive to "restore order".

Discipline

It is to their credit that despite police violence, the discipline of the protestors held. S11 had promised that the protest would be non-violent, and the promise was kept. Pickets would link arms or sit down in front of the gates to prevent the so-called "delegates" from entering Crown Casino, but they would not fight back. Injured pickets were thus particularly incensed by the attitude of the Victorian state premier, Steve Bracks, who praised police for their conduct whilst condemning the alleged violence of the pickets. Bracks is a member of the Australian Labor Party, but his claims to have any meaningful links with organised labour are extremely tenuous. He attended the WEF conference at Davos in Switzerland early this year, and flew back to break a strike of electricity workers. He brought enormous pressure to bear on the leadership of the trade unions to boycott the S11 blockade, but was only partially successful. One of the highlights of the three days was a series of marches on the Casino by thousands of construction and metal workers.

Predictably, the bourgeois media attempted to whip up hysteria in the weeks leading up to S11. They told and retold the big lie that demonstrators had been responsible for the violence last year's demonstrations against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle. The implication was that the same would happen in Melbourne.

Yet, for all of this hysterical hype, the demonstrators remained uncooperatively non-violent and the police were able to arrest only 12 people. The non-violent tactics were very successful, however. Hundreds of the so-called "delegates" [1] were unable to get into the conference. Many others, who had arrived earlier, were unable to leave the premises except by helicopter and attendance at meetings was well down, with TV coverage showing dispirited clumps of suits in echoing halls. It must have rankled for these rich and powerful individuals to have to creep about under massive police protection, bleating about being "held to ransom by unrepresentative minorities".

In fact, it is organisations such as the WEF which are the real minorities, and which act against the interests of the overwhelming majority of people on the planet. Although Forum bigwig Claude Smadja claimed that the WEF has no real power, it is in fact it is an immensely powerful rich man's club. The WEF is made up of representatives of the richest and most powerful groups in the world. Its members include the CEOs of the top 1000 transnational corporations, besides influential political leaders, tame academics and gurus of neoliberalism, along with representatives of the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation, the Asian Development Bank, and the IMF.

Global outlook

It was founded in 1971 by Klaus Schwab as the European Management Forum, but was renamed in 1987 "to reflect its increasingly global outlook", according to WEF literature. The WEF's members are divided into a number of areas: media, mining, textiles, pulp and paper, and so on. They include corporations such as Exxon, Chase Manhattan Corp, De Beers Mining, Rio Tinto, Toyota, Western Mining Corporation, Turner International, Royal Dutch Shell, Microsoft, McDonalds, Monsanto, Boeing and Nike. Readers will be aware of the anti-social, even criminal activities of many of these corporations.

The WEF meets annually at the Swiss alpine resort town of Davos. There, amidst the kind of luxury that would seem like science fiction to the huge mass of the dispossessed and the hungry of the world, the WEF makes decisions which affect every citizen of the planet: and without being elected by, or accountable to, anyone save the shareholders, the corporations and the mega-rich. Contrary to the disingenuous claims of Claude Smadja, the WEF admits that its annual Davos meeting is "now considered the global summit which defines the political, economic and business agenda for the year."

WEF literature also admits that the organisation spurred the launch of the Uruguay Round which led to the replacement of GATT by the World Trade Organisation in 1995. It is also unquestionable that the WEF is instrumental in setting the agenda of the WTO Millennium Round. This latter round of talks aims to renegotiate the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) "with a view to achieving a progressively higher level of liberalisation" of the burgeoning service sector.

Agenda

The WEF's agenda, as the S11 Alliance has pointed out, is: "massive global poverty; ever-increasing inequalities between rich and poor; attacks on workers' wages, conditions, occupational health and safety standards; and widespread environmental and human rights abuses." It is an agenda of unchecked corporate power that quite literally means death for the poorest people on the planet.

It means the plundering of the assets of whole peoples in the name of privatisation and deregulation. It means a winding back of human progress in education and health care for billions of people.

Far from capitalist globalisation being a "rising tide that will lift all boats", it will sink those of the poor and fill those of the rich with more booty than the pirate and slave ships of old. Yet, as the protests in Seattle, Davos, Washington DC, and now Melbourne show, they face stiffening resistance from workers, students, farmers, environmentalists and many others.

This movement is broad, pluralist, democratic, anti-capitalist and internationalist in inspiration. It will prove wrong those bourgeois ideologues such as Francis Fukuyama who proclaimed free-market capitalism as "the end of history". The new generation coming into struggle will not settle for such hollow clichés, but will fight for a better world. Margaret Thatcher be warned: there is an alternative!

[1] The use of the word "delegate" is a corruption of the language in the same way that the neo-liberals have hijacked words such as "reform". Delegates are elected representatives and as such are accountable. The participants in the forum are unelected and unaccountable. They are the appointees of transnational corporations in the main.