Be very afraid: the fifth WTO Ministerial is coming

What you should know about the WTO

by Daron Letts

From September 10-14, the World Trade Organization (WTO) will convene in Cancun, Mexico, for its historic fifth Ministerial round of negotiations. Massive protests are planned in Mexico and throughout the world. In Fredericton, concerned citizens are seeking to educate their neighbors about this un-elected organization and its consequences.

The WTO formed on January 1, 1995, following the Uruguay round of negotiations of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), an international trade pact established in 1948 that set rules regulating trade in goods among its signatories. In addition to the GATT, the WTO now envelops over 20 other multilateral trade agreements to which all 146 member states must conform.

The WTO polices trade disputes among its member states through a secretive panel of three trade bureaucrats (traditionally former GATT or high level trade officials). In every challenge of a country's environmental or public health laws brought before the WTO Dispute Settlement Body to date, the state laws have been ruled illegal and quashed. This reflects the neo-liberal strategy, sometimes referred to as a global "corporate constitution," that the WTO, in concert with other international bodies such as the International Monetary Fund, seeks to entrench worldwide. It is an ideology that privileges corporate profit-making over any state's ability to protect local markets or standards of health, environment, labour or human rights.



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Women sew Nike shorts for North American export in a free trade zone sweatshop on the Island of Cebu in the Philipines. The WTO is criticized for driving down labour standards in the global south.

The round of negotiations to unfold in Cancun will advance plans drafted at the fourth WTO Ministerial that took place in the police state of Doha, Quatar, in 2001. The world's wealthiest industrialized nations will push for private control of services (such as health care and education), agriculture and intellectual property at this latest meeting. Indebted countries of the global South will be pressured to sign on to new agreements that will further their submersion in neo-liberal globalization, including the General Agreement on Trades in Services (GATS - not to be confused with GATT mentioned above) and investment provisions that increase the ability of corporations to sue governments for loss of profit if a state legislates measures such as environmental or labour protections.

The undemocratic WTO process excludes all civil society (including indigenous peoples, trade unions and Non-Governmental Organizations), which is why WTO meetings are greeted by crowds of disruptive protesters of all ages and socio-economic backgrounds. Rather than admit the global citizenry into the process, the WTO charges host countries with the responsibility of controlling protest through disinformation, intimidation, tear gas and mass arrests (as witnessed in Montreal this summer during a WTO mini-ministerial meeting). This paramilitary reaction to protest is expected again in Cancun next week.

Fredericton activists are planning their own response to the upcoming Ministerial.

The local Council of Canadians chapter is holding a public teach-in on the WTO that will include a presentation on the impact of neo-liberal globalization in Atlantic Canada by UNB political science professor and author Thom Workman, as well as a live CHSR broadcast of a Cancun panel discussion featuring Walden Bellow (Director of Focus on the Global South), Vandana Shiva (founder of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology) and Maude Barlow (Voluntary National Chairperson for the Council of Canadians), among other dissenting voices from around the world. Fredericton's Raging Grannies will perform some satirical WTO-related songs and attendees will be encouraged to take home a variety of educational resources detailing a wide range of WTO-related issues.

"We want to raise awareness about what's happening in Cancun, focusing on the effects these WTO deals have locally in Fredericton," said Chris Rundle, who is coordinating the educational event alongside other Council of Canadians activists. "There is a need for more public involvement and more public information as to the sorts of agreements that are being negotiated on our behalf without our explicit consent."

The teach-in is scheduled for 6:30 pm on Tuesday, August 9, at Cravings restaurant on King Street across from the Tannery. All are encouraged to attend - quiet activities for children will be provided on site.

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- www.indymedia.ca
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The moral pendulum

Do we really learn from the past?

by Wayne Ma

(U-WIRE) CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — He once sent a telegram to Henry Kissinger saying, "You are not intelligent because you never come to see me when you need advice." At one point, he added King of Scotland to his official title and ordered the Scottish guard to accompany him to a Commonwealth conference. He had the heads of his enemies frozen and placed at his dinner table, where he'd have imaginary conversations with them in front of guests.Bizarrely enough, when asked if he ate human flesh, he replied that it was too salty for him.

Yes, Idi Amin — one-time dictator of Uganda — was one crazy bastard. He was charming, funny, eloquent and yet totally insane. During his reign of terror from 1971 to 1979, it's estimated that he murdered over 300 000 Ugandans. Earlier this month, he died of kidney failure in Saudi Arabia, where he had been living in exile for the last 20 years.

What a man like Idi Amin was capable of frightens me. But what frightens me even more is humanity's indifference to the past.

Generally speaking, when I hear about the actions of dictators from afar - the atrocities and war crimes perpetuated on thousands if not millions, all I can usually do is shake my head and shrug. It doesn't matter whether it's 10 people, 100,000 or even one million — in the end, it's just numbers and statistics to me. I typically fall short of fully comprehending the horrors that occurred in places like Uganda, and most of the time, I fail to realize just how extraordinary these events really were.

Looking at places like Zimbabwe, Chechnya and Myanmar makes me realize that we still live in the Dark Ages when it comes to policing human rights.

Does morality lie on a pendulum that swings back and forth with the birth of each new civilization, or does it slowly become progressive with time? In all honesty, I'd say we're no better off than we were a thousand years ago. In fact, I'd go even further to say our current society is much worse, now that we have the ability to annihilate the planet with the push of a button. With the advent of the breech-loading rifle, the machine gun and finally the atomic bomb, our ability to oppress and kill one another has only become easier.

So the big question is: Will there ever be a time when men like Idi Amin will cease to exist? Will there ever be a time when humanity will evolve to the point where brutal oppression is eliminated?

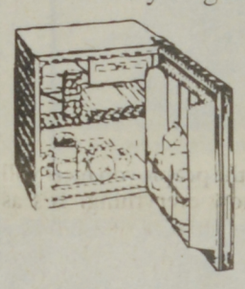
Don't hold your breath. As long as wealth and power are the driving forces behind our culture, ruthless dictators like Idi Amin will continue to thrive. And although human rights may appear to be higher on the international agenda then ever before, I doubt the age of genocide is over.

The world is still filled with flawed but powerful men who truly believe they are doing the right thing for the right cause — men who have morals and ethics just like the rest of us. Too bad it's not enough.

As Idi Amin once proved, you can be sincere in your beliefs and still be sincerely wrong.

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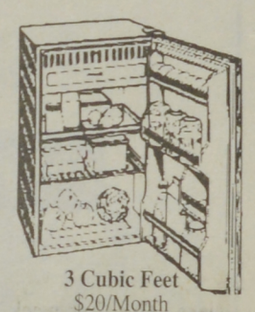
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