

WTO BREAKDOWN

REFLECTIONS ON A PEOPLE'S VICTORY IN CANCÚN.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KERA ABRAHAM

I started to sweat the moment I got off the plane. Not only because of the sweltering weather — 100 percent humidity is typical in Cancún — but because butterflies were staging a riot in my gut. This Mexican resort town was about to become a battlefield, and I'd be in the middle of it.

The World Trade Organization (WTO) held its fifth ministerial meeting in Cancún Sept. 10–14. The organization was already standing on shaky legs after its last two ministerials; talks collapsed miserably in Seattle in 1999, and then barely made headway in Doha, Qatar, in 2001. Critics of the WTO claimed that a third consecutive breakdown could be the fatal blow that would at last slay the world's great trade behemoth. And so, even as the Mexican police trained to maintain order, thousands of anti-WTO forces amassed in Cancún with tricks up their sleeves.

Intrepidly I set off for Cancún to record the people's resistance to the WTO. Wobbly I arrived, full of doubts and misgivings. Would I be shot at during the protests? Carted off to the notorious Mexican jails? Detained at the border and interrogated by a mean man with a buzz cut and halitosis?

To my relief, I discovered a very well-oiled resistance mobilization underway in downtown Cancún. At the Convergence Center — a grimy four-story building rented by activists — meetings took place nearly every hour to coordinate actions against the WTO. Medics were ready with ample supplies for the sick and wounded. Lawyers were on hand to advise protesters about their rights under the Mexican Constitution. And youth poured in from all corners of the globe — Mexico City, Chile, the U.S., Canada, South Korea, Italy, England — to beat on the drums of resistance.

Critics hurl a pungent slew of complaints against the WTO. They say that it is not democratic, but rather controlled by and for the world's biggest corporations.

They claim that nations from the global South are bullied and manipulated by big dogs like the U.S. and the European Union. And they assert that by placing profit first, the WTO tramples the things that matter in life, like human rights and natural resources.

In other words, the WTO is like a planetary Wal-Mart: It shuts down small businesses by offering lower prices for goods that are mass-produced by giant corporations with no regard for workers' rights or the environment.

"The majority of the people in the world — the farmers' groups, the environmental groups, the human rights groups, women's groups — are all shut out of these negotiating procedures," says Kevin Danaher, co-founder of the San Francisco-based NGO Global Exchange. "Our basic position is, look: The WTO is creating global government, and it's secret global government. They're writing a constitution for the entire planet, and that constitution will lay down law that will supercede national law and local law. It will make it impossible for you and your community — let's say Eugene, or



THE INFERNAL NOISE BRIGADE CAME TO CANCÚN FROM SEATTLE TO PROVIDE MUSIC FOR THE MOVEMENT.

Portland, or San Francisco — to pass laws to protect your local environment, your local living standards, your wage standards, any kinds of local policies that you want to pass to protect your standard of living."

Danaher pressed his palms together and licked his lips. "We're at a crossroads historically. If we allow them to consolidate a constitution for the world that puts money values above life values — that is, human rights and the environment — our future generations, our own grandchildren, will curse us for having flubbed this opportunity."

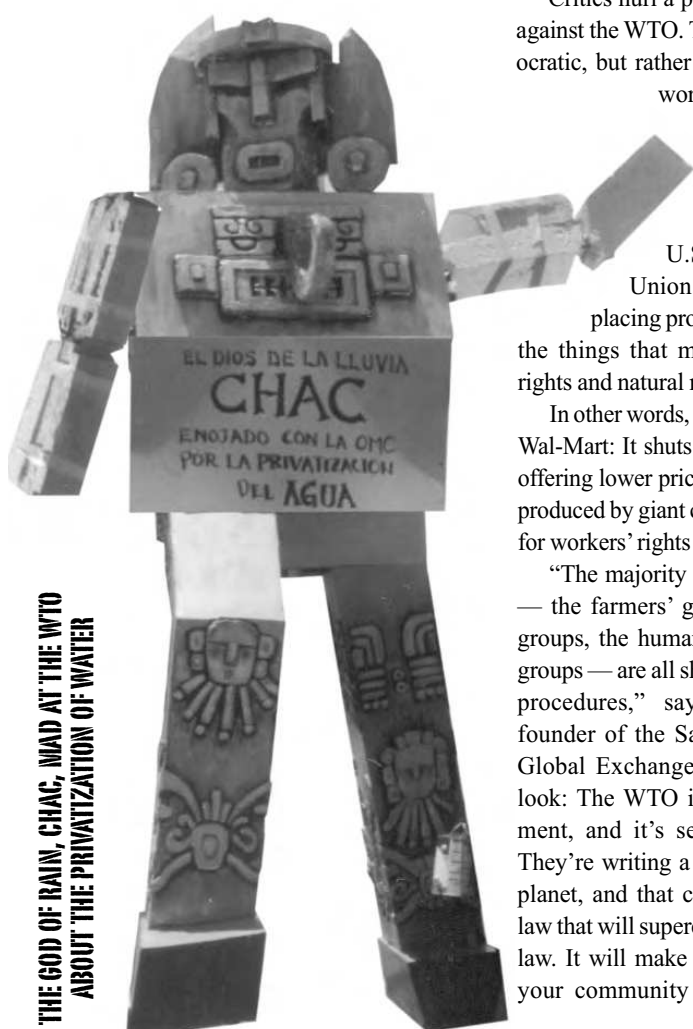
The anti-WTO forces vowed not to flub. More than 100 events organized by dozens of NGOs sought to build alliances and educate the public about the impacts of free trade on common people. The Global Biodiversity Forum held its annual conference in Cancún the weekend before the WTO ministerial opened. The International Farmers' and Indigenous People's Forum hosted workshops on agricultural policy. The Fair Trade Fair showcased goods from around the world that were produced by environmentally and socially sustainable means.

THE GODS ARE ANGRY

And then the carnival came to town. The "Puppetistas" from Mexico City constructed giant puppets of Mayan gods like Chac, the God of Rain, angry with the WTO about the privatization of water. The Infernal Noise Brigade, a radical marching band from Seattle, contributed booming drums and eerie wails to the protest marches. Filmmakers aired their documentaries at a public park in downtown Cancún. Fire dancers twirled and youth cavorted. The locals thought they were weird — but they weren't the raging, window-smashing "globophobes" the media had primed them for.

California-based writer, pagan leader and veteran activist Starhawk explained that activists were committed to demonstrating not just against the WTO, but toward an alternative model of a better world.

"The groups that I've been working with here in Cancún are doing creative actions that can embody something of the vision of the world that we are fighting for," she said. "We want a world where the things we basically need for our lives, like water, are not priva-



THE GOD OF RAIN, CHAC, MAD AT THE WTO ABOUT THE PRIVATIZATION OF WATER