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Them Against the World, Part 2

By Austin Bunn

On a rain-soaked October night in Miami, the police have commandeered downtown. It is midnight, and patrol cars cordon off the streets of run-down delis and dollar stores. Dozens of black-clad officers maneuver and bullhorn in the distance, practicing their tactics. "We're expecting about 70,000 to 100,000 protesters to come down here in November," says a beat cop, guarding a corner from his squad car. "Our guys are doing exercises all around."

A few blocks over, at a red light, Lisa Fithian pulls her compact rental car behind a squadron of city police cruisers. Hers is one of the few civilian cars in this area, certainly the only one carrying an advance guard of that human wave heading for Miami. While most people have been ushered out of the downtown area, the 42-year-old Fithian wants to go into it, to do reconnaissance with three fellow activists. Weeks from now, she will be marching in these streets, and the police will no longer be practicing. Since it is difficult to find our way about, Fithian decides, boldly, to follow the cruisers. "You know," she says, "it's kind of nice to tail the cops for once."

When, like Fithian, you have been arrested some 30 times, the police become less of a fearful authority than antagonists in a battle you just can't wait to begin. Fithian, who lives in Austin, Tex., has been involved in planning protests in Seattle, Washington, Prague, Genoa, Quebec City, New York, Sacramento and Cancún, and she has come to Miami in advance of the Free Trade Area of the Americas meeting that will start Nov. 17. Her intention is to scout the city -- to understand the layout, to meet with every local activist group willing to meet with her and to plan how to "derail" the negotiations.

"For want of a better word, I'm a professional at this," she says. "My eye is trained. I walk through a city, and I see a parking garage, and I think, That'd be a great place to drop a huge banner, or I see an open restaurant, and I think, That'd be a good place to escape to if things get crazy. Sometimes places will tell me what they want."

What Miami wants, Fithian says, is crisis. This week, representatives from the 34 countries in the Americas (minus Cuba) will meet at the Intercontinental Hotel to broker the world's furthest-reaching free-trade agreement, known among critics as "Nafta on steroids." The premise of the Free Trade Area of the Americas is to expand 1993's Nafta agreement from the three original countries (the United States, Canada and Mexico) all the way through South America. To Fithian and others, the Free Trade Area of the Americas is a corporate land grab created by a

nondemocratic institution that is stamping out indigenous culture and threatening the environment as it goes. While delegates will hammer out details inside, hundreds of different N.G.O.'s and social-justice groups and thousands of union members will march and rally outside, on the other side of what will assuredly be a heavily guarded metal fence, on Nov. 20.

Fithian will join them, but she doesn't care too much about the march. It doesn't need her. It needs numbers. Direct action -- to physically "shut it down" -- is her calling. Blocking the Miami airport, preventing delegates from getting inside the conference center, ripping a hole in the protective fence -- these things need her. Anticorporate globalization protests like this one will attract everyone from agitprop puppeteers to Quakers to rowdy anarchists who would love to see a Starbucks on fire. Fithian stands in a willful, but not reckless, middle ground. She is peace-oriented but not passive. Destruction of "illegitimate" barriers is fine with her as long as it's nonviolent (a line that can be hazy) and not a senseless publicity stunt (also hazy).

So you don't go to Fithian when you want to carry a placard. You go to her when you want to make sure there are enough bolt cutters to go around. The tradition of direct action is civil disobedience staged at the "point of power": civil rights era sit-ins on segregated Woolworth's stools or Act Up "die-ins" during speeches by Food and Drug Administration officials. But since the enemies in the global social-justice movement are transnational corporations ("like on the 14th floor of some office building," said one activist) and the abstractions of liberalized trade policy, trade meetings like this one provide the most tangible target. For a handful of days, activists like Fithian work to create "dilemmas": situations that might force the police, the delegates and the media into recognizing their dissent. "When people ask me, 'What do you do?' I say I create crisis," she says, "because crisis is that edge where change is possible."

Miami offers real stakes. The city is bidding to become the hemispheric headquarters for the Free Trade Area of the Americas, and "if we create enough brouhaha," Fithian maintains, "we might be able to undermine that city's ability to host it, and that would be a big win." Miami officials are taking no chances; they recently received an \$8.5 million federal boost from the massive Iraq war bill to plan security for the trade meeting.

Cruising around the deserted downtown, Fithian finally spies a cluster of armored police vans and officers down a blocked street. Parking the car, she counsels her passengers to leave their ID's behind and walks determinedly toward the police. At the corner, 20 officers, wielding plexiglass shields and tear-gas guns, are rehearsing with a group of beefy fake protesters in civilian clothing. The riot police notice Fithian and in seconds force her into a corner. A nonuniformed sergeant in a Marlins shirt steps to the fore. "What are you doing here?" he yells. "This is a secure area!"

"We're citizens," Fithian answers calmly. "We have a right to walk these streets."

As the argument escalates, the police pull the rest of us aside and threaten us with jail. With the exception of Fithian, we take this news with nervous, humbled nods. Fithian, on the other hand, gives it right back. "So you're saying that just by coming down here where businesses are closed

that we're breaking the law?" she says. "Get a load of that. That's just wild." She demands names and badge numbers, which are all eventually provided.

"We're just trying to protect the citizens and training to protect this city," says Sgt. Mario Hernandez, Badge No. 4048. "That's all."

"Yeah, but you're intimidating us," Fithian responds. The sergeant throws his hands up in the air. "Come on," he says. "You're intimidating me!"

On Nov. 30, 1999, thousands of street protesters, trained and organized days in advance, divided and occupied 13 intersections around the Seattle conference center, where delegates to the World Trade Organization were trying to meet. When the police tried to disperse them with tear gas and pepper spray, they were joined by others from a much larger, separate march of 50,000 unionists, who broke free and joined the civil disobedience.

A small number of "black bloc" anarchists -dressed in black and kerchiefs to hide their faces -- notoriously smashed windows all over downtown Seattle, obscuring the more peaceful efforts. About 500 people were arrested, including Fithian, and amid the chaos, the W.T.O. talks collapsed.

That may very well have happened anyway; representatives from the developing countries simply refused to participate in a negotiating process they considered rigged against them in the first place. But within the anti-corporate globalization community, Seattle was a tremendous victory, a watershed, the metaphor for the movement. The direct action "took this institution out of the dark and put it on the front burner," says David Solnit, a Bay Area organizer and carpenter. "All of a sudden, people knew there was a W.T.O. Who could say that in 1998?"

In the eyes of many activists, the greater success of the battle of Seattle was the validation of their decentralized, leaderless model. Loosely inherited from the anarchists who fought in the Spanish Civil War, "affinity groups" committed to holding specific sectors and consensus-based "spokescouncils" directed the affinity groups. When the police swept one group away, another took its place. "No centralized leader could have coordinated the scene in the midst of the chaos," a Bay Area activist named Starhawk wrote in a widely circulated essay titled "How We Shut Down the W.T.O." "Our model of organization and decision-making was so foreign to their" -- the police's -- "picture of what constitutes leadership that they literally could not see what was going on in front of them."

But each mobilization since Seattle -- from the marches against the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund on April 16, 2000, to the W.T.O. protest in Cancún this September -- has had to contend with a critical lack of surprise. Fences, a heavy police presence and pre-emptive arrests have all become standard procedures. Six hundred activists were rounded up the day before the "A16" protest against the I.M.F. and World Bank, and on July 20, 2001, in Genoa, Italy, where 100,000 activists gathered to protest the G-8 summit, 200 officers raided a school that was serving as a dormitory and alternative media center, arresting 92 people. The first morning of a W.T.O. mini-ministerial protest in Montreal in July, 342 activists were rounded up many blocks from the

site of the march, in the designated nonviolent "green zone."

Just as the global social-justice movement entered the conversation, the terms of the conversation changed irrevocably. The post-Sept. 11 Patriot Act has given government agencies wide latitude in preventing terrorism, such that the notion of pre-emptive arrests gets promoted as a prudent safeguard. Rallies and marches, even huge ones, can be ignored. In February, when somewhere between 6 and 10 million people worldwide marched against the invasion of Iraq -- the largest synchronized global dissent in history -- President Bush casually dismissed it, saying, "You know, size of protest, it's like deciding, Well, I'm going to decide policy based upon a focus group."

The possibility of shutting down a summit meeting, as it was shut down in Seattle, seems to be increasingly remote. Still, Fithian says, direct action "has the most possibility for change in the quickest amount of time." Given the new reality of heavily prepared security forces, how do activists do something that doesn't end up merely highlighting their own powerlessness?

Lisa Fithian doesn't want to be the center of attention. In our conversations, she would often ask, "You're talking to other people, right?" (I was) and then emphasize there are 1,000 other Lisa Fithians -- global activists-trainers-organizers equally as important as she. There are no leaders or spokesmen or women, just clusters of voices acting in coordination, though not necessarily in concert. The politics of the global social-justice movement are as fragmented and as postmodern as the technologies that helped give it life. "That's the nice thing about being a hydra," one eco-activist told me. "They can't assassinate our leader."

But I kept seeing differently. In Miami, I went with Fithian to visit a group of eco-activists who wanted to build a "permaculture" garden near the protests. "Hey, I saw you in that documentary from Prague!" said one, standing on a pile of fresh earth. She smiled at the spark of celebrity. "Oh, yeah, I was training like a madwoman." Fithian listened closely to their plans for compost demonstrations and vegetable gardens, but she wasn't offering anything except that, by the fact of her visit, they had taken on a bit of her momentum. "We're meeting with everybody down here," Fithian said to them, "and so we're learning a lot." These are the key words in Fithian vocabulary: learning, sharing, offering, meeting -- words that put everything into a process. "She just swings into town and gets everything rolling," an eco-activist told me.

I saw this in Cancún as well. When I first met her there in September, on the third floor of a dilapidated storage building, she was part of a conversation about the tactics for the impending W.T.O. protest. She was almost twice the age of most people in the room, dressed in Texas, khaki pants and a tank top that read "Art and Revolution." This was a building she had searched for and rented for \$1,800, and the options under discussion were things that she had been thinking about for more than a year, as opposed to pretty much everyone else there. To say that Fithian is not a leader is an admirable political idea, but it's not entirely honest.

As a teenager in upstate New York, Fithian was a troublemaker. "It wasn't unheard of for the police to come by my house and talk to my mother," she says. In high school, she started an underground

newspaper, *The Free Thinker*, to cover issues like littering in the cafeteria. She went to Skidmore College, where she led marches through the administration buildings to protest, among other things, the cutting of a nursing program. When she heard Abbie Hoffman speak, she said to herself, This guy is a sexist pig, but I should go work for him, and she did. Her first arrest came when she unfurled a huge banner that read "No Contra Aid" facing the Federal Building in Boston. "We tried to get arrested like 10 times, and they just wouldn't," she says. "But then I ended up for three days in the state penitentiary -- my feet and hands shackled. It was really powerful. At least we did end up teaching the inmates songs by sliding words under the doors."

Then the arrests really started taking off. She tried a shutdown of the C.I.A. in 1987, when 600 people were arrested. Eight hundred were rounded up at a gay and lesbian rights action she organized outside the Supreme Court, and another 500 were arrested at a commemoration of the assassination of Oscar Romero, the El Salvadorean archbishop, in front of the White House in 1990. Jail, in some ways, has been a networking opportunity for her. She met Starhawk in jail during Seattle, and the collective they formed, RANT (Root Activist Network of Trainers), raised the money that financed most of Fithian's trips. These days, after working in the labor movement through the 90's, Fithian pays her rent via short-term consulting gigs, helping to "escalate" laundry-worker strikes in Las Vegas and public-service shutdowns in Boston to, as she says, "create the political climate for settlements." It is an ideal role for the nomadic Fithian in that escalation doesn't require home-grown leaders as much as catalysts with tactics. She can fly in, "move the energy," as she says, and then join the fight.

The W.T.O. protests in Cancún were, in a way, a real test for Fithian and the global social-justice organizing model. Cancún offered no local taproot of activists, an unpredictable crowd size and an unfamiliar police force. As the last warm-up before Miami, Cancún needed to look like escalation. But with so many unknowns, it was at risk of disintegrating into noise.

In midafternoon in Cancún, the room at the convergence center was oppressively hot; it was, after all, an airless storage space with just two small windows, two barely working fans and Mexican blankets hanging from the walls. About 75 activists in alternating levels of excitement and heatstroke sat on the tile floor. This was the headquarters -- information center, puppet-making space, chill zone, networking spot -- with many taped-up signs recommending local hostels and vegetarian restaurants and making requests like "Some of Us Dirty Kids Need Clothes -- What Do You Have?"

With trade delegates arriving the following day for the W.T.O. meeting, Fithian laid out the possible direct-action plans, code-named "Justicia" (Spanish for justice). Of all the ideas for the W.T.O. protest in Cancún that never materialized -- the pirate radio station, the five-mile parade of thousands to the doorsteps of the W.T.O. -- Justicia was the most audacious. The city of Cancún is wholly separate from the narrow strip of land known as the hotel zone, where the W.T.O. conference was taking place. The hotel zone joins the city at just two juncture points: Kilometer Zero, near downtown, and Kilometer 22, at the far end of the strip near the airport. Kilometer Zero had been code-named "Pachanga" (after the Latin music style), the W.T.O. conference center

"Ballpark" and the Cancún airport "Justicia."

The idea was to block the airport road as the delegates were arriving. Fithian had actually taken groups out to the airport, looking for access routes through the mangrove jungle. There were an estimated 1,000 international activists in the city and about the same number of students expected to arrive by bus from Mexico City that night. Could the buses be used to block the road? Could students create an altar in the highway to force the police to let them either block traffic or be photographed dismantling a "sacred" space?

Fithian carries with her the authority of experience, and when there is no hierarchy, that is a supreme authority. She obviously wanted Justicia to work, but it was a "logistical nightmare" and Fithian knew well enough to detach herself from the decision-making process. One necessary skill of operating inside an antihierarchical structure is learning to let go of your best ideas and to find instant enthusiasm for the next one. So when the group, through a torturously slow, open debate, elected to make Pachanga the location, Fithian went right along. "We will be able to create an alternate world at Pachanga," she ended up saying. The police were setting up a barricade between town and the hotel zone, but that would actually be an asset for the protesters. The fence would interrupt "the sense of normalcy" and provide a rallying point. There would be a march, a Mayan ceremony in three languages that involved corn and water and dirt and then an attempt to flip the fence.

With a plan in place, Fithian then asked, "Who wants to facilitate the next spokescouncil meeting?" It's not a position with any power -- you keep the agenda moving along, making sure the will of the group gets articulated -- but it is essential. There was no answer. "Then you'll keep seeing the same people up here time and time again," Fithian said. More silence. She wanted to give up the center, but for the moment, there were no takers.

"People can deny it, but there will always be leaders and followers," Fithian told me later. "The question is, How do we create an organization that is nonauthoritarian and nonhierarchical?"

The paradox is that, in Cancún, it was the union of Korean farmers -- the most traditional, patriarchal and hierarchical group there -- that ended up impressing almost everybody. Nearly all men, they dressed in red-and-white outfits, marched to a drumbeat and carried a giant dragon that they used to ram the fence at Kilometer Zero. "They are totally hard core," a "black bloc" anarchist named Randy told me with awe. (And this guy actually "rode the rails" to Cancún, hoboing it all the way from Pittsburgh.) Even anarchists could appreciate the Koreans' crisp lines and top-down precision.

The horror of actual crisis, the suicide of a 55-year-old South Korean farmer named Lee Kyung Hae at the fence, took everyone by surprise. But the total numbers in Cancún were low, around 8,000 protesters total -- more than 6,000 Mexican farmers, 1,000 Mexican students and the rest internationals -- not enough to take much of a political charge from Lee's death. As we milled around at the barricade for a second day in the crushing heat, an activist from Montana turned to

me and said, "Sometimes the march is the most demoralizing thing."

Fithian, meanwhile, seemed to be constantly in transit, urgently biking from one location to another. When I asked her to describe a typical morning in Cancún, she replied, unaware of how it sounded, "I met with the Mexican farmers and then met with the students and then with the farmers again, and then I went down to Kilometer Zero, where the Koreans were camped out, and we had a meeting with everybody where we decided, 'Let's keep meeting.'"

For the Americans I spoke to, there was a genuine sense of disappointment in the crowd size. "Before I came, I wanted to see 100,000 people here from 60 countries and the airport shut down," said Nick Wright, a 30-year-old Bay Area construction worker and activist who had flown in. "The worst-case scenario was just 5,000 people showing up. Essentially, that's what happened."

Before I went to Cancún, I had been warned that it would be "different" and not representative of the anticorporate globalization movement -- that many protesters were staying home for fear of being detained at the border or that they simply planned on making Miami in November and not Cancún. At the same time, the global social-justice movement has two strains: the "global north," which is largely white and fighting on the level of policies and argument, and the "global south," which is anything but white and fighting on the level of livelihood. Cancún was a chance to see the mixing that is the inevitable future of the movement.

But hardly anyone in the mobilization actually lived in Cancún: the students came from Mexico City, 48 hours away by bus; the farmers, from farther; and the American and Korean activists, beyond that. So the integration could only be provisional. If part of the premise of the global movement is that it allows activists to "radicalize" a new community no matter where the institutions go, it makes a terrible kind of logic that the institutions would choose places where there is no community, places like Cancún's hotel zone. Beyond that, there is a fundamental trickiness to bringing together a farmer who lives on a few dollars a day and an activist who can afford the \$400 flight to join him, and it's not strictly class. "At the beginning, we asked the Mexican coordinators, What are your action plans?" Fithian says. "And it was clear they had no plans. That's part of the way Mexicans organize: you just show up, and you do stuff."

In the end, for the activists, this is what winning looked like: about midway through the week of protests in Cancún, word spread for people to converge in front of the W.T.O. conference center as the delegates were leaving for the day. Getting that far into the hotel zone required passing as tourists, so activists sneaked in wearing trashy Cancún T-shirts and carrying plastic, yardlong margarita glasses like college students on spring break. On a whistle call, a group of about 75 activists -- internationals like Fithian and Mexican students -- rushed into the middle of the road outside the conference center. Some sat down, others danced while the news photographers took pictures, tourists looked on confusedly and the traffic stopped dead. After days stuck haplessly under the surveillance of the police, the action was vindication, a quick, nonviolent redistribution of control.

The next day, the South Koreans fashioned a massive rope, and the crowd used it to rupture a section of the barricade. But nobody went through, which, it turned out, was the strategy. "This is what I call the art of action -- you need a beginning, middle and an end," says Fithian, who helped plan the fence maneuver. "If we had attempted to march to the conference center, that would have been a losing strategy. The cops were there, with guns. People would have been hurt, and the 'story' in the press would have been a melee. So how do you end it? The police thought their job was to close the road down. Our job was to open it."

But was this anything more than symbolic fodder for the countless photographers, journalists, filmmakers and documentarians vulturing around the hole in the fence? The next day, when it became clear the W.T.O. meeting would collapse, jubilation erupted among the activists. A block of 21 countries, including Brazil and China, had refused to negotiate until the United States and Europe agreed to drop their "trade distorting" agricultural subsidies (neither did; the talks fell apart), and one rebel delegate told one N.G.O. that "it was because of the protests that they could stand strong," Fithian says. But the diplomatic standoff had been announced before the W.T.O. meeting even began, just as another one looms this week for the Free Trade Area of the Americas. In Cancún, it wasn't that the protesters had created the predicament; it seemed more as if they had merely entered one, assembled there and made some resounding noise.

To Fithian, she couldn't not be there, handing out bolt cutters to women who cut through the fence in a prearranged feminist action. Once you go to a summit meeting and throw your lot in, not going to the next one equates to admitting failure. "Every choice you make is choosing to liberate something or oppress something," she says. "We have a role that is damage control to undo all the oppression. It's our obligation."

After our night with the police in Miami, Fithian is making a daylight tour of downtown, calling real-estate agents about renting a new convergence center for the coming activists. The location has to be close enough for people to walk to and from the fence, "since we know they can mess with public transport whenever they want to," she says. Though officials in Miami are bracing for as many as 100,000 people, she would be thrilled by a turnout of 30,000.

Most of the possible buildings look barricaded or squalid. Driving with her, I have a strong sense of the ceaseless responsibility of trying to remain at the front line of this struggle -- or rather, of trying to set everything up so that there would be a front line. Fithian lives in Texas, her cellphone area code is Los Angeles, in four days she'd be in D.C. for a march, and though she barely knew this area, she had to try to scout out a place for puppeteers and trainers for a whole lot of change to happen. She has articles she would like to write and a vague notion for a book (one chapter would be called "Lessons From a Summit Hopper"), if only she could stop moving from one summit meeting to the next.

When I asked her what she does when she's not protesting -- just how exactly she pays her rent -- she says, "I was just trying to figure that out." She takes a minute and says, "Well, I hope to finish my pond and garden."

A real-estate agent calls back and wants to know why she needs two floors and 5,000 square feet for just a month. Is it some kind of party? "It's for an educational project opposed to the F.T.A.A., for art-making and workshops," she says. There's a little silence. "We hope you won't discriminate, because we'd like to exercise our rights." They talk a bit more, and she hangs up. She's been having a lot of calls like this. "He thought that the F.T.A.A. would help the U.S. and Latin America in the long run, but maybe not in the short run," she says, immediately preparing to make another call. She smiles. "But he did say he'd come to one of our workshops and maybe learn different."

Photos: Miami: Lisa Fithian outside the Intercontinental Hotel. (Photograph by Jeffery Salter); Seattle, 1999: W.T.O. protestors at the county jail challenging the arrest of fellow demonstrators.; Prague, 2000: Letting fly at the Czech police during an I.M.F. World Bank protest; Washington, 2000: A face-off during an I.M.F. World Bank meeting. (Photographs by Mara Melina/Gamma; Mark Wilson/NewsMaker; Sean Gallup/Newsmakers); Montreal, 2003: Marching against the W.T.O. this summer; Quebec, 2001: Protestors are met with tear gas at the Summit of the Americas; Genoa, 2001: A demonstrator at the G-8 summit; Cancun, 2003: Overrunning a fence that was meant to keep protestors out of the hotel zone, where a W.T.O. meeting was being held in September. (Photographs by Steven E. Frischling/UPI; Christinne Muschi/Reuters; Philippe DeSmazes/Agence France Presse; Daniel Aguilar/Reuters)