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All Has Changed

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September 17, 2001

It's now official: In the wake of the September 11 disaster, the IMF and World Bank have indefinitely postponed their planned late-September meetings, and the raucous street protests that were to greet them have effectively been canceled. (At this writing, the Anti-Capitalist Convergence, the more radical of the two organizing coalitions, has still not decided what it's going to do.)

There still will be teach-ins and at least one large interfaith vigil in D.C. that week. Meanwhile, the International Action Center – front group for the Stalinist Workers World Party, with a long history of supporting murderous dictators like Nicolae Ceausescu, Saddam Hussein, and Slobodan Milosevic – is planning to go forward with a September 29 "March Against War and Racism" in Washington. I suspect a lot of other groups may sign on, because there's a widespread desire to do something. But you won't catch me supporting a "peace march" organized by a bunch of authoritarian opportunists who have no problem with slaughter, so long as it's committed by their pet tyrants.

Excuse my angry tone: I'm awash in emotion today. For days after the World Trade Center was destroyed, I was in

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numb shock and responded with frenetic action – going to hastily called meetings; handing out thousands of leaflets for Friday night’s massive peace vigil in Union Square; putting up posters all throughout Midtown Manhattan and, yesterday, the just-opened part of the Financial District. With exhaustion, the tears have finally come, mourning mixed with rage at what has happened and fear about what’s to come. Today is supposed to be the day when people begin returning to normalcy, but there’s nothing normal about life now in a city where the newspapers scream ”CRUSADE!” and ”WAR!” on their front covers, where fighter jets fly overhead and military vehicles prowl the streets, where Arabs and Muslims are being harassed and beaten, where lampposts and bus shelters remain covered with heartbreaking ”missing” posters bearing photos of people who will not be found alive.

When the wind from Ground Zero catches you, this city smells of war and death. The first meeting I went to, held outdoors in Union Square because our usual meeting spot was in a restricted zone, had to quickly decamp when the horrible smoke began blowing north, overpowering us with its toxic stench. (”I left Kosovo to get away from that smell,” a woman told a friend of mine.) Several friends and I had caches of gas masks in our apartments, many covered with rhinestones and glitter, that we were planning to distribute at the D.C. protests. When the call went out that rescue workers urgently needed respirator masks, we donated them all, first pulling off the festive decorations that were now so inappropriate.

So much is inappropriate now that just one week ago made political sense. Some of it is darkly comical: Just two days before the World Trade Center was reduced to rubble, people were meeting here to plan direct action against the Financial District in November, when the World Trade Organization was scheduled to meet in Qatar. (No word yet on whether the WTO meeting will even take place; the direct action, needless to say, will not.)

More broadly, the September 11 attacks definitively interrupted the unfolding logic of the movements for global justice. The IMF/World Bank protests in D.C. were going to be simultaneously broader, more diverse, and more intense than any demonstrations in recent U.S. history. The AFL-CIO was pouring unprecedented resources into the events, mobilizing its membership on a massive scale, and faith-based and non-governmental organizations were activating thousands of people who had never come to a globalization protest before. Meanwhile, more and more people were embracing the philosophy of "diversity of tactics," shifting away from the strict nonviolence guidelines that have been the hallmark of large-scale direct actions for two decades, and agreeing to respect those who chose to engage in more confrontational or property-destroying tactics, so long as they didn't directly endanger other protesters.

"Diverse tactics" are clearly off the table for the time being, especially in New York and Washington, where the sound of breaking glass connotes death and devastation, and the masked uniform of the Black Bloc will only inspire fear.

And with the world's greatest symbol of global capitalism having been reduced to a smoldering mass grave, it's going to be difficult for a while to present anti-capitalist critiques in a way that will resonate broadly, and not seem to justify an unjustifiable atrocity.

Our movements' vision of global justice is needed now more than ever; we will simply need to take great care in presenting that vision in a way people can hear.

In the meantime, a huge upsurge of activism for global peace is already well underway. All around the United States, meetings to discuss progressive responses to September 11 have been overflowing. Groups everywhere have thrown themselves into organizing everything from rapid-response teams to counter racist attacks to antiwar teach-ins and rallies. Here in New York, we were all astounded and inspired by

the thousands and thousands of people, of every race, class, and age, who converged on Union Square last Friday night to stand for peace.

I know that one part of the deep mourning I feel is for the global justice movements as they were before those planes crashed into the Twin Towers: steadily growing in scope and influence, increasingly occupying a central place on the global stage. We were blown off that stage on September 11, and the context for our ongoing activism is now utterly transformed. Action is essential: May it be prudent, strategic, and effective.