

Bringing the Heat in Miami

An Analysis of Direct Action at the Nov. 2003 F.T.A.A. Ministerial

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Victory Before We Even Hit the Streets

It was almost a miracle, not to mention a victory for our movement, that the mobilization in Miami happened at all. Miami was one of the most repressive police states North America has ever witnessed; the \$8.5 million security plan, funded by federal anti-terrorism dollars, fortified an already incredibly brutal police force. In the days leading up to the event, paramilitary police stood guard on every downtown corner, arresting anyone who looked like they might be a protester. The media engaged in a smear campaign of lies and slander about anarchists, lionizing the police force that was to protect the city from these invading beasts. Plans for the protest seemed to grow murkier rather than clearer as the event approached. Many expected the worst.

Not to be deterred, anarchists entered a city with no infrastructure for direct action and set one up in a mere few weeks. The convergence and welcome centers, the legal, medical, and food support, the independent media and art spaces — these expressions of mutual aid, solidarity, and gift economics were living examples of the world we are fighting for. This infrastructure, pulled together in such a short period of time, was comparable to analogous structures that have taken months and even years to set up in cities that regularly host mobilizations. Our ability to put down such roots in the face of such repression is a moving example of the strength of our movement.

We Are Everywhere

On Thursday afternoon, as a mass of activists were beating a spirited retreat from the police line to the sound of marching drums and whistles, a legal observer turned to face his comrades. “As your legal observer, I advise you to...” he began, echoing the familiar words of many a legal observer before him, “...pull shit into the middle of the street and set it on fire!!” Cheering ensued all around.

This anecdote foregrounds a marked difference in our movement today from the atmosphere of even three years ago, when direct action tactics such as property destruction were extremely controversial. Many of the liberals who claimed we were going to wreck “their” movement with our confrontational approaches are gone — they’ve joined us or disappeared. And the new people who have gotten involved have, in large part, done so because they are attracted to the opportunity to confront power, rather than merely beseech it.

The mainstream media kept referring to an elusive minority of “bad” or “violent” protestors, the so-called “self-described anarchists” — as if there was any other kind! But make no mistake about it — besides the Root Cause and union marches, Miami was largely an anarchist mobilization. The entire infrastructure described above, including the convergence center, planning framework, and Indymedia coverage, was organized on decentralized anarchist principles. Nearly everyone involved was indeed a “self-described anarchist.” Even many of the N.G.O. employees in Miami were closeted anarchists! And not only that: people and press mobbed a forum in Lake Worth called “A New World in Our Hearts,” to hear about anarchy from anarchists themselves — and some of the attendees were inspired to offer assistance, or even join the protests themselves.

This is not to say that we anarchists are not still struggling with internal problems — with sensitivities to race, class, and gender, for example, which groups like Anarchist People of Color brought to the forefront. One manifestation of this was discrimination against older people or

people perceived, especially by the security crew, to be “normal,” i.e. from outside the anarchist community proper. In one episode which almost beggars belief, a group of long-time anarchist organizers who had dressed in civilian clothes to avoid police attention were set upon by some other activists who attempted to force them to give them their food! If we dismiss, alienate, or immediately suspect people who look and dress differently than the stereotypical black-hooded anarchist, we will piss off our most valuable allies — and many anarchists as well!

On the other hand, there were some remarkable bridges built across demographic lines. One of the best examples of this took place on Tuesday, November 18, when some anarchists typically associated with the Black Bloc got together for a ritual with the Pagan Cluster. Words cannot describe the feelings of solidarity and love experienced by these two groups, groups many would have written off as incompatible: singing, dancing, drumming, raging, and continuing an alliance built in the front-lines of earlier street battles, we wove a web that knit our communities together to be stronger and more inclusive. The black and gold bracelets that were shared that night could be seen on many a wrist over the following days, an uplifting affirmation of common cause and courage in the face of adversity.

Support From Unexpected Places

Presumably, one of the reasons the powers that be picked Miami to host the negotiations for the Free Trade Area of the Americas was the ostensible absence of an anarchist community. All sorts of rumors went around in advance about how the locals were all going to be hostile to us, would perhaps even attack us. The discovery we made upon arriving in Miami — that not everyone there is a pro-capitalist Cuban refugee, that there are people everywhere who are suffering under the heel of the corporate class and know it — should be a reminder not to get carried away by our own alarmism in the future. In countless experiences with locals, we received heartfelt support and encouragement. Most people don't believe everything they see on television, nor do they appreciate their neighborhoods being overrun by belligerent police officers — nor do they believe corporate capitalism offers us the best of all possible worlds.

The police and media spent months and millions spreading the lie that small family-run businesses in downtown Miami would be destroyed in an orgy of anarchist violence. In an effort organized from the convergence center the week before the days of action, many activists visited businesses with letters of solidarity explaining anarchist ideas, the content of the proposed F.T.A.A., and what to expect from the upcoming demonstrations — not to recruit, but to give people an idea of why the protests were taking place. Most welcomed these activists with open arms, glad to hear what they had suspected all along to be police hype dispelled by the protesters themselves. One person working at a local business said she had enough papers and letters from the police on the upcoming protests to start a fire — and she just might! In support, some shops even gave protestors free food or offered their stores as havens to those wishing to escape the police. Outreach efforts like these are powerful direct actions themselves, not to mention examples of successful acts of resistance in a city suffering such vicious police occupation that just walking downtown put individuals at risk of arrest.

Direct Action Planning

Despite all the pressure and police intimidation tactics, or perhaps even partly owing to the ambience they created, there was an incredible energy among activists in Miami in the days leading up to the F.T.A.A. ministerial. The convergence space was buzzing with activity; spokescouncil meetings were held every night to plan for the actions. The spokescouncil meetings focused on a direct action framework for what was to be the main day of action, Thursday, November 20, as well as a jail solidarity plan, preparations for smaller actions throughout the duration of the convergence, and general logistics for the convergence space itself.

Arriving in Miami, everyone wanted to know what the direct action plan was. As a large percentage of those participating in the actions came from far away, much of the organizing was done in a decentralized fashion. Consultas were held regionally throughout the U.S.; affinity groups and clusters made plans to implement when they arrived. In the months leading up to the event, it really seemed like people were coming with tight, organized plans to contribute to a larger collective action. Early the preceding summer, the plan for a Padded Bloc emerged, and organizers in Pittsburgh announced that a large number of people equipped with armor and shields would be ready to defend areas from police. This plan didn't actually materialize. Word of this plan helped to build momentum as people prepared for the protests, but it also spread the illusion that more people planned to attend than actually did, and that people were more prepared than they ended up being.

What happened in the end was far less organized than many expected. In conference calls and a consulta in Gainesville, a small working group was formed to plan a structure for direct action. This group planned a very basic framework that relied heavily on the independent planning of those who were to participate in it; but it seemed that the plan was not clear enough for many to know how to plug into it, even if they were prepared to do so in the first place. A 7 a.m. gathering was planned at Government Center a few blocks from the fence surrounding the hotel where the summit was taking place. The idea was that people would rally and then march towards the fence to carry out actions to "bring down the fence and shut down the F.T.A.A. meetings."

In an attempt to placate the A.F.L.-C.I.O., there was an agreement made at the spokescouncil meetings that the direct action would stay clear of the intersection of Flagler and Biscayne between 11 a.m. and 5 p.m., the hours when the union march was to take place. Some felt that this decision was forced through without regard for the perspectives of many activists. Flagler and Biscayne is the main intersection in downtown Miami; it was the area outside the fence closest to the F.T.A.A. meeting site, and it ended up being the only place close to the fence that was accessible. This plan disregarded the rules of thumb that have helped to make direct action successful in the past: it meant that direct action activists would be alone out on the streets, with no permitted areas or safe zones to retreat to. Essentially, agreeing to a separate time of day for direct action offered the police a perfect excuse to brutalize and arrest everyone on the streets of downtown Miami outside the hours of the permitted march.

Naturally, this situation scared off many people who were uncertain about participating in direct action; it also gave the police a justification for picking people off before they got to the action, or at least blocking them out. These considerations may explain why the turnout for direct action in Miami was so much lower than expected — in the end, it was not so much the intimidation of the police as a lack of concrete and convincing preparation on our part that discouraged more people from joining in.

This submissiveness to the wishes of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. hierarchy compromised the times and places of the direct action while gaining little except empty words of “solidarity” from the union officials. After months of frustrating negotiations with them, representatives of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. hierarchy were still being introduced as “allies” by facilitators and certain others at spokescouncil meetings. We anarchists can choose our own allies, thank you very much; we should not unquestionably accept such loaded terms as descriptions of organizations that have done little in the past to warrant being called allies. And, not surprisingly, while affinity groups of rank and file union members did join the protesters in the streets, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. hierarchy urged union members to flee the protests into their buses as soon as their permitted march ended.

Ultimately, this “direct action free” period during the main hours of the protest reinforced separation between members of unions and direct action activists, a separation that must be destroyed for both our sakes. Yes, it is important not to provoke unnecessary conflicts, but when representatives of a hierarchical organization that has a history of selling out workers’ struggles inform us that the best way we direct action activists can show solidarity with them is by not engaging in direct action... well, even if a spokescouncil of anarchists decides to honor their request, that shouldn’t prevent the rest of us from making up our own minds about the issue responsibly, and being prepared to do the organizing to make another approach possible if we deem it worthwhile.

If You Attack One of Us, You Attack All of Us

Despite all these factors, the protesters made the best of their situation. At the last minute, a section of the Black Bloc decided to meet at the Convergence Center, many blocks away from the fence, where it was felt they could at least marshal a whole bloc to defend themselves, and travel into downtown side by side with puppeteers and foreign media for safety; but the puppeteers with automobiles, and most of the media, ended up driving to downtown, leaving them isolated on foot. For a time, this bloc march had the advantage of surprise, and it took a few minutes for the police to mobilize to block their route; but after a scuffle the bloc was contained, and attempted negotiations with the police only resulted in the bloc being contained again and brutally attacked with tasers and clubs. Ultimately, the group was forced to disperse, and some were arrested.

The larger group of protesters met as planned in Government Center at a peaceful rally, and then marched to the fence. Once there, a single grappling hook was successfully thrown and hooked on the “anarchist-proof” fence — and it did wobble! But as the Padded Bloc didn’t end up coming together, the police were able to attack an essentially undefended crowd. They attacked mercilessly with concussion grenades and rubber bullets, and charged peaceful and dancing protesters with their clubs and batons, brutally beating many. Heroic defenses were staged, bottles thrown, but little could be done in the face of such overwhelming attack.

A couple hours later, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. march took off. Many protesters tried to join, but were stopped at first by the A.F.L.-C.I.O. marshals, who only much later let the protesters in. Even inside the march, some protesters were attacked by police, and though steelworkers — not marshals! — came to their rescue, a few were arrested. At the conclusion of the march, new conflicts began with the police, that proved to be some of the most dramatic and exciting of the day... yet even then, the overwhelming force of the police ultimately forced us to split apart and flee to safety. Protesters were attacked by police wielding batons, tear gas and pepper spray and other

chemical agents, and rubber, wooden, and plastic bullets. Over one hundred protestors were treated for injuries; quite a few were hospitalized — one with a bit of a police bullet in his head! Small groups leaving the protests were also targeted by police.

As people regrouped themselves, it was clear that the protest was neither a failure nor a success. It was far from a victory — many of us were wounded and bleeding, others in jail. The fence was not taken down and we had not had the numbers or militancy that we had hoped for. But it was a show of strength and courage that we assembled that day in the heart of the world's most well-defended police-state, and survived.

What Did Work: Building Alliances, Putting Down Roots, and Taking Aim

Outside the haze of tear gas and robo-cops wielding guns and batons, there were many successful aspects of the Miami mobilization against the F.T.A.A., and it's important that these efforts aren't obscured by all the discussion of police brutality. Here are a few:

- Free housing, free food, free legal and free medical support was provided by and for thousands of people throughout the mobilization. Talk about workable alternatives to capitalism!
- The Green and Eco-Bloc set up a community garden in Overtown, and distributed cherry trees throughout the neighborhood as well as sharing gardening skills and other resources that will be of lasting value.
- Hundreds of people participated in the Root Cause march, which crossed the thirty four miles from Fort Lauderdale to Miami, one mile for every country involved in the F.T.A.A. discussions. The march connected important struggles in South Florida to the F.T.A.A. and brought out the ways that poor communities and people of color in the region are already being affected by “free” trade. Many alliances were built and strengthened between those who took part in this march.
- Six weeks before the F.T.A.A. ministerial, the anarchists in the Lake Worth Global Justice Group organized the Free Carnival Area of the Americas (F.C.A.A.) in Lake Worth, Florida, about one hour north of Miami. The F.C.A.A. opened a warehouse to provide space for puppet and art making, planning meetings and workshops, and other preparations for protests against the F.T.A.A. They put out a call for activists to join them in this effort in the weeks before the F.T.A.A. ministerial. The art and puppets were used in the Root Cause march and the direct actions in Miami, and the activist infrastructure in Lake Worth contributed in other crucial ways to the mobilization. Many other inspiring and successful events occurred under the umbrella of the Free Carnival Area of the Americas, too.
- Both prior to the main days of action and after, anarchists in South Florida organized three press conferences and public forums. One of these events, entitled “A New World in Our Hearts,” was held in Lake Worth a week before the main days of action. It attracted large numbers of people from the Lake Worth community and helped to get many involved in

organizing and playing other supportive roles, such as providing much-needed housing for activists arriving from out of town.

- A couple affinity groups working together compiled and distributed packets including posters, wheatpaste, stickers, annotated maps, and similar redecorating tools to dozens of other groups and individuals. Several crews covered various Miami neighborhoods with messages of resistance to the F.T.A.A. in the nights before the main day of action. These groups went entirely unnoticed by the police, and put up a massive amount of posters and graffiti in neighborhoods whose only source of information on the F.T.A.A. might otherwise have been the corporate news media.
- Autonomous direct actions... One can guess that many affinity groups organized covert actions in Miami that have not been widely publicized. A communiqué on Indymedia announced that multiple military recruiting centers had suffered property destruction. Rumors have circulated about other similar actions. The powers that be have made a point of keeping silent about all such activities, of course, and from this we can deduce that they regard them as a genuine threat which must not be encouraged by any free publicity.
- “The Really Really Free Market” took place on the day after the main actions. Hundreds participated in setting up this working example of a gift economy in action. Groups set up blankets and booths providing free stuff from food, art, literature, and music to massages, new banner dropping methods, funny hats, and healing circles. This action highlighted our alternatives to “free” trade and capitalism, and showed examples of how human beings can provide for one another through mutual aid.

MIAMI SCORECARD:

What we did, what we didn't do, what we learned...

Before we conclude, let's review some of the goals we have to choose from whenever we engage in mass direct action:

1. costing our enemies money and otherwise interfering with their misdeeds
2. enjoying the liberating experience of taking on the powers that be and winning
3. revealing the capitalist state for what it is by provoking police repression
4. learning how to act and apply power in anti-authoritarian masses
5. communicating with “the world” through mass media
6. communicating with locals about the issues

All these goals were achieved in Seattle, when we had the element of surprise on our side, and some of them were in Miami — though more of them could have been, had we been better prepared for the approaches we attempted, and augmented them with other tactics. Attacking the fence, in the presence of such a police mobilization, was perfect for provoking police repression,

obviously; it was also moderately good for learning how to act in anti-authoritarian masses, though the police presence discouraged many from attending and interfered with our ability to work together freely. We were able to attract some mass media coverage, for those who value that, though it was mostly along the spectrum that runs between “Murderous Anarchists Hope to Destroy City” and “Harmless Protesters Brutalized by Police,” which at best only portrays us as victims and frightens people away from future protests; the massive police presence prevented us from doing anything that could have really grabbed worldwide attention on the news, let alone invested others with a sense of their own limitless power. The goal of interacting with locals was achieved in part before and after the main demonstration by those who took the time to go around and do so — though we can always stand to do better there. Among other things, a more concerted, extensive effort to get graffiti and posters up around the area would have avoided the risks posed by police in the occupied zone, while demonstrating our power and omnipresence and thus raising morale.

As for the goal of actually striking effectively against the powers that be... considering the massive police presence around the fence, this would have been better achieved by small groups operating outside the centers of police occupation, targeting corporate property and infrastructures efficiently and stealthily. Had such plans been widely deployed and successful, they would have achieved many goals: they would have sent a stern message to both Miami and the world that hosting such contemptible events will result in great costs; they would have provided a new model for others in the anti-capitalist movement to try out themselves, as the older models become obsolete in the face of new police tactics; our enemies would have to consider widening the areas and methods of police surveillance next time, which would cost them more money, frustrate more citizens, and generally add to their already acute overextension. The drawback to such covert activity is that, unlike mass activity, it must be invitation-only, and thus doesn't lend itself to movement-building or skill-sharing; the main reason to go to a mass action rather than staying home blowing up banks is to have the opportunity to work with many others in collective projects that anyone can join in. On the other hand, many among us prefer the covert model as a matter of personal taste, plenty of us know each other well enough to arrange such activities together, and it's no secret that some of our more experienced folks didn't participate in actions in Miami because the overtly planned activities seemed suicidal and no covertly planned activities seemed to be in the works.

So what did we need in Miami that we didn't have? We should have had more clandestine planning sessions, for one thing. Direct action should not be planned like civil disobedience; in order for it to be safe, to elicit the confidence it needs to succeed, and to be unpredictable enough to stand a chance of working, it has to be arranged among friends. No organizing any massive spokescouncil can do could compensate for the lack of private initiative and planning, if affinity groups don't prepare effectively amongst themselves. More of us should have been forthcoming with our own ideas: even those of us already known for our resourcefulness often hesitate to come forward and actually organize something, feeling that someone else must already be doing it or that it must already be too late — but all too often it turns out that no one else is working on the things we'd like to see happen, and we find out after it really is too late that the ideas we'd had would have worked out perfectly if only they had been tried. Frequently we end up doing at the last minute what we should have had the confidence to do ahead of time. If we're going to have to organize groups and lay plans anyway, we might as well get over our fear of doing these wrong and just go ahead and try.

Ultimately, if an effective resistance is to be mounted, all the forces in a protest have to work together. This means everybody — from rank and file workers, puppeteers, and black-clad anarchists, to dancing Pagans and locals from Overton — everybody has to find a way to contribute to what others are doing, to complement others' projects without obstructing or endangering them. The long, steady process of building this cooperation can't be bypassed by communicating with hierarchies. A single representative from the management of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. is a poor substitute for actual communication with union workers. No amount of anti-racist workshops could possibly substitute for the experience of interacting with people of different economic and racial backgrounds. Many of the problems with the protest resulted from people's over-reliance on the spokescouncil to provide some master plan that would magically coordinate the whole movement. Of course we need to coordinate in order to work together, but that isn't going to happen if we sit around waiting for orders at a spokescouncil meeting. We can do this inside and outside the spokescouncil meeting, months before protest, in private as well as in more public meetings. Every affinity group should come to town with a hundred secret plans to stop the F.T.A.A. single handedly, as well as ideas they can share with other groups.

But, to repeat this once more, with the full brunt of the forces of the terror war being brought to bear against us in Timoney's Miami it was a wonder, albeit a symbolic one, that a single grappling hook reached the fence at all. If the more confrontational among us could have wrought more havoc there, it would have done much to discredit the idea that a militarized force of any size can succeed in dominating a decentralized, flexible gathering of freedom-hungry people; all the same, what we did just by being there at all was impressive and important — and maybe enough.

The difficult time we had in Miami is going to occasion much discussion of tactics at future demonstrations, but perhaps that focus is misplaced. Shutting down such meetings was always a symbolic goal, remember, even when it was possible by such straightforward means. Now that the government has to spend eight and a half million dollars every time a ministerial takes place, and not only paralyze the city but also terrorize its inhabitants, it might be that they're doing our work for us: the once-secret meetings are impossible to keep out of the public eye, the "free" trade they concern is associated with massive police repression and suspension of human rights, and there are more opportunities than ever for us to bring up our alternative. All we have to do is show up, cause them enough consternation that they'll have to make the same preparations for the next one, and get away without unsustainable losses.

Let's be realistic, anyway: although there are improvements we could have made in our strategizing for mass activity in downtown Miami — we could have gotten more militant people to the fence at once Thursday morning, or turned the retreat from it that afternoon into a forward march that was routed to pass by corporate targets, to name two examples — there's only so much we can accomplish under such intensive surveillance and repression. But the fact that they had to spend over eight million dollars to achieve this is a sign of their weakness, not of their strength — they sure can't do that everywhere, all the time. It's taken them four years since we won in Seattle to fully develop their anti-Seattle security system, and by now we should be ready to move on to the next unexpected line of attack. We've learned so much about mass activity in the training ground these summits have provided us — now we should take those lessons back to the unguarded environments in which such tactics first thrived. Next time we succeed in coming together in great numbers without the police state getting wind of it in advance, it's going to be spectacular. Let's start focusing our energy on how to get people together for mass action outside the context of international trade meetings — let's call our own days of action proac-

tively, organize surprise group activities in our own communities, even hijack crowded events and turn them into mass actions. That's the future: more unanticipated covert activity at mass action demonstrations, more unanticipated mass actions in other settings!

So what's next? For starters, let's not forget to support all the people who were arrested in Miami, especially the ones with felony charges. They need both emotional support and assistance with legal costs, and we need to provide these in abundance so others will not be afraid to take similar risks in the future. And above all, let's not neglect the work in our own communities that generates the social foundation from which these efforts grow. Now is the time to start new infoshops, new outreach programs, even new anarcho-punk bands. Let's plan for the next massive demonstration such as the G8 in Georgia this June, or the Republican National Convention in New York City — just to be there to keep the heat on them without killing ourselves or getting all of us in jail, to keep them focused on protecting themselves from that angle so they won't see what's coming at them from the other side... and perhaps, also, to try out some new ideas, to show off how much more creative and powerful and dangerous than them we are.

As the Black Bloc sang with the Pagans:

No Army can hold back a thought
No fence can chain the sea
The Earth won't be sold or bought
All Life shall be free.

Postscript: One Activist's Perspective on Race Relations in the Heat of the Miami Protests

The neighborhood closest to the main action was an African-American ghetto, blasted and impoverished. Not everyone there was thrilled to have us around at first; walking and riding around Overtown before the demonstrations, we sometimes heard locals shout out taunts to the effect of "let's hear it for free trade!" This didn't seem to be an expression of political or economic principles, but rather of resentment against the predominantly white outsiders who were invading their space — it probably hasn't boded well in the past when a bunch of white folks showed up in Overtown.

All the same, considering what we learned later about the misinformation the police had spread there, the locals were really patient with us in the days leading up to the action. After all the chaos was all over and we had made some friends in the area, an older man wearing a black power t-shirt confided in us that the police had put the word around Overtown in advance that people there were encouraged to rob and beat up activists — not only would the police turn a blind eye, but it might even improve their relations with the community. Our friend explained that no one there trusted the police, or followed their instructions. All the same, given the bad impression of white folks in general that it's safe to suppose many in Overtown have, they were generous not to take advantage of the opportunity to try to redistribute a little wealth.

Encouraging locals to assault activists was not the only way our enemies rolled out the red carpet for us. The first time I walked through Overtown, I was approached by a small crowd of children who asked me how much I was getting paid. This was perplexing to me. I answered that as I had been unemployed since 1994, I wasn't getting paid anything. They persisted in asking the question, until I finally answered that the last time I was getting paid, I'd been getting five dollars

an hour, under the table. Satisfied, they went away; but I heard this question over and over, and I soon figured out what it meant: the rumor had been spread thoroughly that we protesters were being paid to protest. For folks who live in dire poverty and have to deal with police harassment constantly, it would make sense to conclude that white folks who presumably have an easier time getting work and wouldn't otherwise be on the receiving end of so much police attention must be doing it for some financial incentive; but the rumor was so widely disseminated that it couldn't have just been a hypothesis somebody came up with. In my opinion, it must have been spread in advance as disinformation. It certainly made us look less like crusaders for global justice and potential allies in the struggle, that at first everyone who saw us thought we were there gentrifying their neighborhood on salary.

All these strikes against us notwithstanding, the attitudes of Overtown residents towards us changed dramatically as soon as we were in open conflict with the police. As we retreated into Overtown ahead of the police onslaught Thursday afternoon, everyone we passed cheered us on — most people had come out onto the street to see what was going on, and now that they saw we shared a common enemy with them, one who was attacking us as if we were a real threat, they embraced us as friends. Several people I briefly spoke with encouraged us to step up our level of confrontation with the police — the implications were that if we could escalate the conflict, they would join in. That makes sense — though they have every reason to revolt, people who suffer poverty and constant police repression already are not going to engage in an uprising unless it looks like it is going to work. For a moment that afternoon, I could imagine what would happen if we somehow were able to hold our ground against the police and create a space for the residents of Overtown to join in. That happened in Quebec — I remember a local throwing a snowball at the riot police there a couple hours before all the locals joined in showering the cops with projectiles, just as a man in Overtown was seen throwing a football at the pigs in his neighborhood that afternoon — it can happen anywhere people are angry, if resistance can reach critical mass.

Unfortunately, we were fleeing in disarray and desperation from the most militarized police force North America has ever seen, in no condition for touching off the sequel to the L.A. riots of 1992. The most we could hope for was to get out of the situation without concussions or handcuffing scars. Before we'd arrived at the inhabited areas of Overtown, we'd been pulling dumpsters and other obstacles into the street to slow the police advance; encouraged by the support we were receiving, we decided to ask around how people on the street felt about us doing that there. Everyone said they felt fine about it; two of us began pushing another dumpster into the middle of the road.

At that point, out of nowhere, a large black man wearing a jacket with an American flag on the back came charging up at us, screaming and waving a two by four. I managed to get between him and my friends and defuse things enough for all of us to get away with only superficial injuries, but the important thing was that we had miscalculated our place in the situation. Looking around at the people who had just given us the go-ahead, I saw them shaking their heads at the guy who was attacking us, but also withdrawing some of their unconditional permission for us to be there fighting the police now that it was causing internal strife in their community.

That experience was a reminder that although folks who are really suffering under capitalism don't have reason to trust us as allies until we are actively challenging its power, we also have to be careful in the process not to make things any more difficult for them than they are. They didn't mind the police chasing us into their neighborhood, by and large — the police were going to be

there anyway, and it was a relief that they were there pursuing white folks for once, rather than locals; but when our interactions with them resulted in drama among the residents, that was a problem. It also drove home the point that you can't consider the opinions of any demographic in one bloc; everyone we'd talked to was in favor of us making barricades, but that didn't mean "the people of Overtown" were in favor of it, it just meant certain ones were. Whenever people of one background try to consider the perspectives of people from another — especially when white activists do so, I'm afraid — it is all too easy to summarize and oversimplify.

That episode passed quickly, but by then we were surrounded — police on all the streets around us. We ran down an alley, only to see with dismay that they had closed off the street ahead of us too. In a matter of seconds, a full line of police cars blocked every street around us from corner to corner, and police on foot were arresting every activist in range. We hunkered down in the alley, trying quixotically to hide between the scattered weeds at the foot of a chain-link fence, a veritable light show of blue and red reflecting off the brick wall facing us. A helicopter swooped low overhead. It seemed it was all over.

At this moment, just as we were trying most desperately to will ourselves invisible, a couple local kids came into the alley and walked up to us, hands in their sweatshirt pockets as if they were pretending to hold guns with which to rob us. They quickly abandoned this half-hearted charade, however, and started asking us questions about what we were doing. At first, of course, we had to explain that we weren't being paid to protest — something that I'm sure was becoming clearer by the second anyway. Then we explained — succinctly, and not without a little impatience lest our new friends' presence attract the attention of our riot-armored foes — what we were doing there, and asked their advice as to how we could extricate ourselves from the situation. There wasn't much they could tell us — being completely surrounded in foreign territory by thousands of armored police whose specific goal is to beat and incarcerate you is a toughie however you look at it. Eventually they wished us luck and moved on.

We spent a tense hour and a half in that alley, waiting for the sun to go down and the police lines to break up so we could make a dash for safety. Long after darkness had fallen, the lights were still flashing all around us, and police still marching past both mouths of the alley, and the helicopter was still overhead, now scanning the alley with its spotlight. Those were some tense minutes for all of us — except the member of our party who had spent an entire sleepless week volunteering at the convergence center, who actually took advantage of the situation to nod off for a while! The only explanation I can come up with for why they never came into the alley to arrest us is that, for the whole duration of the protests, the police never moved in groups of fewer than thirty, and in that "dangerous" neighborhood they feared to break up their numbers to pick off stragglers. I recount this story here in case it may be useful to others trying to escape under similar circumstances one day — heaven help us, such circumstances are getting more and more common.

Finally the police forces moved on, and we made our way out onto the street two at a time, without any incriminating material, in the cutest boy-girl couples we were able to throw together (these work for getting through police lines, I swear — hold hands, look deep into each other's eyes a lot, focus on seeming harmless — earlier that day a companion and I had penetrated the police defenses as far as the front door of the hotel hosting the ministerial, thanks to our lovebirds masquerade). There we found locals waiting to guide us to safety, freely telling us where the police lines were now and offering to lead us down the safest routes. Trapped inside police lines, fearing almost for our lives, nothing could have been sweeter mercy than this. Thanks in no small part

to their help; we arrived back safe at the convergence center an hour later, grateful to be free and alive.

Our guides, of course, inquired if we had any money, and we penniless anti-capitalists scrounged in our pockets to see if there was any leftover subway change to share. I emphasized to one of them that there was no price that could be placed on such assistance, and she let me know she would have done it for free, needless to say, as she wanted the same things we wanted. All the same, the situation — basically paying a native guide to lead us out of a dangerous situation, as if we were in wartime Morocco or something — was a reminder of how much economic inequality there still is even between people on the outside of the capitalist system. What I'd give to live to see a day when the means she has access to and the means I have access to are no different, to never have to wonder again to what extent I'm being regarded as a potential source of income rather than a fellow human being!

That's what we're fighting for, when we contest our enemies' free trade conventions and economic power in general. Next time we need to make it clearer to locals in advance what we're trying to do, so we won't have quite as much misinformation and misunderstandings to cut through to find common ground. If we can get a full-scale anarchist insurrection going in any city in this empire, there are millions who will join in, who need it even worse than we do — but we have to work towards this conscientiously, with an acute awareness of the challenges other communities face, and in constant dialogue as to what our role in the larger struggle should be.

I'll conclude with the letter some friends distributed in Overtown after the demonstrations were over. Good for them — let's see more of that!

An open letter to the residents of Overtown from some F.T.A.A. protestors:

Thank You Very Much!

Over the last week there were times when anti-F.T.A.A. protestors were pushed into Overtown by the police. We want people to know:

1. We had no intention to bring any heat into your neighborhood. In fact, many of us talked about the need to not do that.
2. We very much appreciate all the help and moral support we received from hundreds of residents.
3. We understand that the police brutality we experienced is just a small slice of what poor people of color deal with everyday. We recognize this system is racist. We are dedicated to smashing racism and the system behind it.
4. We oppose the F.T.A.A. because it is an attempt by the rich to exert even more control over all of our lives. It is also the continuation of the colonial relationships that have been enslaving, killing and stealing land for over 500 years.
5. We know there are a lot more problems than the F.T.A.A. We are against the entire greedy corporate-military-police-war machine that oppresses life. We are for community empowerment, self-determination, justice and total liberation. ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE!

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December 27, 2003

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