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Mobilizing Miami

by Manuel Pastor & Tony LoPresti

The 1999 "Battle in Seattle" was heralded as one of the first significant challenges to the top-down, "Washington Consensus" model of globalization. But in the celebratory assessment that followed, Bay Area organizer Elizabeth "Betita" Martinez asked a simple and provocative question: "Where was the color in Seattle?"

Her critique has reverberated ever since. African-Americans and Latinos are often those most adversely affected by the local effects of globalization, partly because of their concentration in the low-wage job sectors vulnerable to imports and capital flight. Yet these communities have not been at the center of the US global justice movement.

The November 20-21 ministerial meeting around the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) in Miami--one of the poorest and most unequal cities in the United States--holds the promise of something different. National organizations including the AFL-CIO and the Sierra Club have waded through the conservative swampland of South Florida to stir resistance. But the region has also witnessed the emergence of "Root Cause," a convergence of local grassroots groups that includes the Miami Workers Center, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and Power U.

For each of these groups, the allegiance of low-income constituencies is based on the organization's capacity to deal with day-to-day survival issues such as housing, education, environmental justice and worker and immigrant rights. Yet in spite of the laser-sharp focus on community needs,

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anti-FTAA work has become a prominent campaign.

What's going on? With Miami's usual internationalist fame confined to Cuban exiles vainly plotting Castro's downfall, the city certainly seems an unlikely venue for helping a populace understand the darker side of corporate globalization. Moreover, Miami's media have been feeding the public a steady diet of hype about the FTAA, centering on the idea that luring the regional trade secretariat to Miami, along with the general impacts of trade liberalization, could create close to 100,000 new positions in Florida. The groups that make up Root Cause have responded by charting a patient path toward building a local anti-FTAA constituency in Miami's communities of color--a stark contrast to the usual script, in which activists swoop into town for large protests, then depart. The Miami Workers Center, for example, has built its effort into a unique weekly training and discussion program for community leaders dubbed the "Circle of Consciousness." One of several popular education tools the center uses, the circle had already tackled globalization through an eleven-week session for community residents, and the syllabus for the run-up to the ministerial itself has featured a six-part series on racism, a six-part series on patriarchy and a six-part series on the FTAA itself. Center executive director and former labor organizer Gihan Perera argues that the circle "has become the most important work we do.... We know that we can move local-global work from here. It is where we identify what is strategically important to do."

As part of their FTAA education, members of Low Income Families Fighting Together (LIFFT), a group of poor people of color operating under the umbrella of the center, have met with members of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, an organization that has launched a fast-growing boycott of Taco Bell for sourcing its tomatoes from unsavory employers. As Haitian-American organizer Max Rameau tells it, "Most of the members of LIFFT...have never been on a farm, and are meeting tomato pickers who are being exploited by Taco Bell.... even though they can't understand them, and they have to speak through a translator, they are shocked at the conditions that these workers are facing. By the same token, the Immokalee Workers now have a better understanding of what's going on in Liberty City with the struggle to hold on to the land that the blacks have occupied for so long and now is being threatened."

Indeed, some local leaders have seen the anti-FTAA work as one way to

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overcome Miami's deep racial divisions. The keynote event for Root Cause is a three-day march from Fort Lauderdale to Miami, culminating in a Unity Ceremony that will bring Haitians, Latinos, African-Americans, whites and Native Americans together to pledge support for each other's struggles. It's a far cry from one of Miami's most infamous interracial marches, an April 2000 event that featured frustrated blacks walking with whites, some of whom were waving the Confederate flag, to protest the inordinate attention given by local politicians to Cuban shipwreck survivor Elián González.

While efforts like those in Miami have local roots, they have been nurtured by some key national organizations: Jobs With Justice has organized annual delegations of grassroots leaders, including some from South Florida, to the annual World Social Forum of global activists, and Boston's United for a Fair Economy and Atlanta's Project South have teamed up to train activists throughout the country on the intersection of community concerns with international dynamics.

But the streets of Miami will provide a real testing ground for this new community-based approach to making the global-local link. In Seattle, protesters chanted, "This is what democracy looks like." If the preparations in Miami bear fruit, activists may soon be able to add, "This is what a grassroots globalization movement should look like."

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