

Alternatives urgently needed! The Peoples' Summit parallel to the 11th WTO Ministerial Conference

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The 11th WTO Ministerial Conference held in Buenos Aires left a sour taste in the mouth of trade multilateralism. The Argentinian hosts referred to it as a successful meeting, but actually, the only thing they could celebrate was the accession of South Sudan as a new member. In the context of a deep WTO crisis, the Argentinian government was determined to say "there is life beyond Buenos Aires", delaying the resolution of this crisis that will have to be dealt with in the road to the next 2019 Ministerial. In short, this meeting ended unceremoniously, or as they say in Argentina, without grief nor glory.

Impacts in the region

Even though inside the Ministerial there was no progress or resolutions, the fact that it took place in Buenos Aires did have significant impact on the South American political order.

First of all, this was the first time the WTO landed in South America, in a regional context that is nowadays highly favorable to free trade. The visibly difficult practical implementation of alternative integration proposals such as ALBA, compounded by the economic and political crisis experienced by governments such as in Venezuela, prepared the ground for the return of free trade, touted as the only choice to secure increased foreign investment. The promised "flurry of new investments" would be guaranteed as the countries "return" to the orbit of legal certainty, a seal that is obtained by signing Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and Investment Treaties that provide protections and assurances to investors. The attempts by Mercosur countries to adhere to the Pacific Alliance are headed in that direction, while different intra-regional FTAs are being negotiated.

Secondly, the arrival of the WTO provided an alibi to increase militarization in the region. The Argentinian government made strides in massive purchases of military and police equipment to ensure the safety of the meeting. In addition, Argentina will host the G20 Summit in 2018, for which an estimated \$150 million dollars will be spent in security and organizational expenses. Reportedly, the shopping list includes tear gas, helmets, vests, ammunition, shells, fences, rounds, helicopters, airplanes, radar systems, warships, missile frigates, among others. The net balance for the host organizers of these meetings is materialized as updated policing technology and military equipment that will be available for the local armed forces once the meetings and summits are over by the end of the year, for internal use in the context of increasing criminalization of the social protest.

Third, this meeting took place in a context of government mistrust of the civil society organizations that usually cover WTO Ministerial Conferences. An unbelievable situation that unfolded as an international embarrassment for the government, was the

development of a list with over 60 names of activists who not only had their WTO credentials taken away, but also had problems to enter the country. The most renowned cases were those of Petter Titland from ATTAC Norway and Sally Burch from ALAI Ecuador, who were denied entrance to Argentina and were returned to their countries of origin without further explanation. This policy to prevent any civil participation in the Ministerial showed, on one hand, the Argentinian government's deep ignorance of how this kind of international bodies have historically operated, and on the other, it crystallized the tense relationship between the government and social organizations at local level. It should not come as a surprise that for the G20 meeting they use the same strategy, aimed at showing they have "everything under control".

So, beyond what is happening inside these meetings, the local and regional impacts are clear, not only in terms of the host country, but in the way regional politics is devised in the coming years.

The Peoples' Summit – national to global scale

Despite the poor outcomes of this Ministerial, it became evident that the WTO continues generating resistance. Wherever the WTO goes, just like the G20, the G7, the Organization of American States (OAS), the IMF or any other international forum that only cares about corporate interests and the interests of the largest countries, social organizations speak out against them and organize themselves to make their positions against this deceiving multilateralism visible.

In response to the arrival of the WTO in Buenos Aires, the "WTO Out Convergence" was established in Argentina. This Convergence came together in mid-2017 with over 100 national organizations, joined by other 100 regional and global organizations. The "WTO out" space was promoted by the "Argentina better off without FTAs" assembly¹, created in 2016 after the revival of the free trade agenda that was brought back by Macri's administration. This Assembly works in coordination with regional allies against free trade, especially the platforms created in the past years against the Trans-Pacific Partnership in Chile, Mexico and Peru, in addition to historical allies in the struggle against the FTAA, such as the Brazilian network against Free Trade (REBRIP). The "WTO Out" convergence was joined also by organizations with a long history of global and continental resistance, such as ATTAC Network, Friends of the Earth, Vía Campesina and CLOC, Latindadd, Global Forest Coalition, Transnational Institute, Global Justice Now, the Committee for the Abolition of Third World Debt (CADTM), DAWN, Jubilee South, among others, as well as more recent campaigns such as the *Global Campaign to Dismantle Corporate Power*.

The "WTO Out" convergence decided to confront the arrival of the Ministerial with street demonstrations, but also with a discussion about alternatives, taking it from where it was left at in the process of the Peoples' Summit held in Bali in 2013. This did not mean

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leaving aside what was happening inside the Ministerial; however, the focus was on the alternatives work and the criticism against the trade system as a whole, targeting the WTO as a creation of neoliberalism and corporate privilege. With this in mind, the organizations built the Peoples Summit "WTO Out, Building Sovereignty", with thematic fora focused on alternatives to capitalism, sustainable ways to relate with nature and the commons, the production and consumption model, popular economies and feminist economics. During 3 days, over 2500 people discussed about intellectual property and the social use of medicines, the role of youth, resistance of women against free trade, the impacts of free trade agreements, transnational corporations and foreign debt, among others, that were captured in the Peoples' Assembly Final Statement².

A positive balance

The final balance of the Peoples' Summit is very positive. The organization, articulation and discussion process represented a net political growth for the organizations committed at national and regional level. However, its preparation was not easy, since Argentinian movements were not following the WTO negotiations or the global discussions.

Indeed, the Ministerial was for many organizations their first contact with the global resistance process. A similar moment might have been experienced when the Peoples' Summit was convened in Mar del Plata in 2005 at the peak of the campaign against the FTAA, but this process was exclusively hemispheric American. In contrast, the WTO Ministerial brought the global resistance movement to Buenos Aires, influencing the issues under discussion and bringing the views of activists from other continents to bear, who contributed with a wealth of analyses and many points of view that enriched the consciousness and action of local organizations. This contact and mutual exchanges undoubtedly represent a positive balance for the Argentinian popular movement, as well as a leap forward for the participants in the Summit in terms of their political and human capacity building.

But of course, not all has been a bed of roses and there are many challenges ahead, especially in the road to the G20 in Buenos Aires in 2018. Significant progress was successfully achieved, but there is still a lot of political work to do, especially in terms of coordination between movements, given the strong disarticulation among the large continental organizations in recent years. This situation is not exclusive to the Americas: our global articulation spaces have mutated, including the World Social Forum, and campaigns in North America, Europe and Asia gather steam and then unravel.

We are living times where the urge for change has been replaced with the colored beads and mirrors brought to us by capitalism, with false discussions and highly technical debates, filled with data, in other incomprehensible languages, where less and less people are able to comment and participate, and where it would seem that without a college degree people will not be able to understand the paths of liberalization, debt, the WTO or

the G20. It is thus crucial to avoid getting lost in details and footnotes. We need to see and focus on the big picture, on how capitalism works and reshapes itself on a daily basis.

Whether with free trade or protectionism, the essence is always the same: exploiting labor and plundering the planet. Therefore, the path of the Peoples' Summits, focused on discussing alternatives, what we want, what we build today and is urgent, becomes increasingly necessary.

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Article first published in Spanish in ALAI's magazine *América Latina en Movimiento*, No. 532, April 2018: [Tensiones e impases en la OMC](#) (Tensions and stalemates in the WTO).