THE DISCARDED FACTORY

Degraded Production in the Age of the Superbrand

Written by NAOMI KLEIN in her book NO LOGO

"No Union, No Strike"

A large sign is posted at a central intersection in the Cavite Export Processing Zone: "DO NOT LISTEN TO AGITATORS AND TROUBLE MAKERS." The words are in English, painted in bright red capital letters and everyone knows what they mean. Although trade unions are technically legal in the Philippines, there is a widely understood –if unwritten – "no union, no strike" policy inside the zones. As the sign suggests, workers who do attempt to organize unions in their factories are viewed as troublemakers, and often face threats and intimidation.

One of the reasons I went to Cavite is that I had heard this zone was hotbed of "troublemaking", thanks to a newly formed organization called the Worker's Assistance Center. Attached to Rosario's Catholic church only a few blocks away from the zone's entrance, the center is trying to break through the wall of fear that surrounds free-trade zones in the Philippines. Slowly they have been collecting information about working conditions inside the zone. Nida Barcenas, one of the organizers in the center, told me, "At first, I used to have to follow workers home and beg them to talk to me. They were so scared –their families said I was a troublemaker." But after the center had been up and running for a year, the zone workers flocked there after their shifts – to hang out, eat dinner and attend seminars. I had heard about their center back in Toronto, told by several international labor experts that the research and organizing on the free-trade zones coming out from this barebones operation is among the most advance being done anywhere in Asia.

The Workers' Assistance Center, known as WAC, was founded to support the factory worker's constitutional right to fight for better conditions –zone or no zone. Zernan Toledo is the center's most intense and radical organizer, and though he is only twenty-five and looks like a college student, he runs the center's affairs with all the discipline of a revolutionary cell. "Outside the zone, the workers' are free to organize a union, but inside they cannot stage pickets or have demonstrations," Toledo told me in my two-hour "orientation session" at the center. "Group discussions in the factories are prohibited and we cannot enter the zone," he said, pointing to a diagram of the zone layout hanging on the wall. [35] This catch-22 exists throughout the quasi-private zones. As the international Confederation of Free Trade Unions report puts it: "The workers are effectively living in the 'lawless' territory where to defend their rights and interests they are constantly forced to take 'illegal' action themselves." [36]

In the Philippines, the zone's culture of incentives and exceptions, which was intended to be phased out as the foreign companies joined the national economy, has had the opposite effect. Not

only have a new swallows landed, but unionized factories already in the country have shut themselves down and reopened inside the Cavite Export Processing Zone in order to take advantage of all incentives. For instance, Mark& Spencer goods used to be manufactured in a unionized factory north of manila. "It took ten trucks to bring Mark & Spencer to Cavite," a labor organizer in the area told me. "The union was eliminated."

Cavite is by no means exceptional in this regard. Union organizing is a source of great fear throughout the zones, where a successful drive can have dire consequences for both organizers and workers. That was the lesson learned in December 1998, when the American shirt maker Phillips – Van Heusen closed down the only unionized export apparel factory in all Guatemala, laying off five hundred workers. The Camisas Modernas plant was unionized in 1997, after a long and bitter organizing drive and significant pressure placed on the company by U.S. human-rights groups. With the union, wages went up from US$56 a week to $71 and the previously squalid factory was cleaned up. Jay Mazur, president of the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) – America's largest apparel union – called the contract "a beacon of hope for more than 80,000 maquiladora workers in Guatemala." [37] When the factory closed, however, the beacon of hope turned into a flashing red danger signal, reinforcing the familiar warning: no union, no strike.

Patriotism and national duty are bound up in the exploitation of the export zones, with young people – mostly women – sent off to sweatshop factories the way a previous generation of young men were sent off to war. No questioning of authority is expected or permitted. Lin some Central American and Asian EPZs, strikes are officially illegal; in Sri Lanka, it is illegal to do anything at all that might jeopardize the country's export earnings, including publishing and distributing critical material. [38] In 1993, a Sri Lankan zone worker by the name of Ranjith Mudiyanselage was killed for appearing to challenge this policy. After complaining about a faulty machine that had sliced off a co-worker's finger, Mudiyanselage was abducted on his way out of an inquiry into the incident. His body was found beaten and burning on a pile of old tires outside a local church. The man's legal adviser, who had accompanied him to the inquiry, was murdered same way. [39]

Despite the constant threat of retaliation, the Worker's Assistance Center has made some modest attempts to organize unions inside the Cavite zone factories, with varying degrees of success. For instance, when a drive was undertaken at the All Asia garment factory, the organizers came up against a very challenging obstacle: worker exhaustion. The biggest complaint among the All Asia seamstresses who stitch clothes for Ellen Tracy and Sassoon is forced overtime. Regular shifts last from 7 am to 10 pm but on a few nights a week employees must work "late" – until 2 a.m. During peak periods, it is not uncommon to work two 2 a.m. shifts in row, leaving many women only a couple of hours of sleep before they have to start their commute back to the factory. But that also means most All Asia workers spend their precious thirty-minute breaks at the factory napping, not talking about unions. "I have a hard time talking with the workers because the workers are always very sleepy," a mother of four tells me, explaining why she has been with the company for four years and still lacks basic job security and health insurance.

Work in the zone is characterized by this brutal combination of tremendous intensity and nonexistent job security. Everyone works six and seven days a week, and when a big order is due to be shipped out, employees work is done until it is done. Most workers want some overtime hours because they need the money, but the overnight shifts are widely considered a burden. Refusing to stay, however, is not an option. For instance, according to the official rule book of the Phillips

factory (a contractor that has filled orders for both Nike and Reebok), "Refusal to render overtime work when so required" is an offense "punishable with dismissal." The same is true at all the factories I encountered, and there are many reports of workers asking to leave early- before 2 a.m., for instance – and being told not to return to work the next day.

Overtime horror stories pour out the export processing zones, regardless of location: in China, there are documented cases of three-day shifts, when workers are forced to sleep under their machines. Contractors often face heavy financial penalties if they fail to deliver on time, no matter how unreasonable the deadline. In Honduras, when filling out a particularly large order on a tight deadline, factory managers have been reported injecting workers with amphetamines to keep them going on forty-eight-hour marathons. [40]

What happened to Carmelita…

In Cavite, you can't talk about overtime without the conversation turning to Carmelita Alonzo, who died, according to her co-workers, "of overwork." Alonzo, I was told again and again – by groups of workers gathered at the Worker's Assistance Center and by individual workers in one-on-one interviews – was a seamstress at the V.T. Fashion factory, stitching clothes for the Gap and Liz Claiborne, among many other labels. All of the workers I spoke with urgently wanted me to know how this tragedy happened so that I could explain it to "the people in Canada who buy these products." Carmelita Alonzo's death occurred following a long stretch of overnight shifts during a particularly heavy peak season. "There were a lot of products for ship-out and no one was allowed to go home," recalls Josie, whose denim factory is owned by the same firm as Carmelita's, and who faced large orders at that time. "In February, the line leader had overnights almost every night for one week." Not only had Alonzo been working those shifts, but she had a two-hour commute to get back to her family. Suffering from pneumonia – a common illness in factories that are suffocatingly hot during the day but fill with condensation at night – she asked her manager for time off to recover. She was denied. Alonzo was eventually admitted to the hospital, where she died March 8, 1997 – International Women's Day.

I asked a group of workers gathered late one evening around the long table at the center how they felt about what happened to Carmelita. The answers were confused at first. "Feel? But Carmelita is us." But then Salvador, a sweet-faced twenty-two-year-old from a toy factory, said something that made all of his co-workers nod in vigorous agreement. "Carmelita died because of working overtime. It is possible to happen to anyone of us," he explained, the words oddly incongruous with his pale blue Beverly Hills 90210 T-shirt.

Much of the overtime stress could be alleviated if the factories would just hire more workers and create shorter shifts. But why should they? The government official appointed to oversee the zone isn't interested I raking on the factory owners and managers about the overtime violations. Raymundo Nagrampa, the zone administrator, acknowledge that it would certainly be better if the factories hired more people for fewer hours but, he told me, "I think I will leave that. I think this is more of a management decision."

For their part, the factory owners are in no rush to expand their size of their workforce, because after the big order is filled there could be a dry spell and they don't want to be stuck with more employees than work. Since following the Philippines labor law is "management decision,

“most decide that it is more convenient for management to have one pool of workers who are simply forced to work more hours when there is more work and fewer when there is less of it. And it is the flip side of the overtime equation: when a factory is experiencing a lull in orders or a shipment of supplies has been delayed, workers were sent home without pay, sometime for a week at a time. The burst out laughing when I asked them about job security or a guaranteed number of hours. “No work, no pay!” the young men and women exclaimed in unison.

The “No work, no pay” rule applies to all workers, contract or regular.” Contracts, when they exist, last only five months or less month , after which time the workers “re-contract.“ Many of the factory workers in Cavite are actually hired through an employment agency, inside the zone walls, that collects their checks and takes a cut – temp agency for factory workers, in other words, and one more level in the multiple-level system that lives off their labor. Management uses a variety of tricks in the different zones to keep employees from achieving permanent status and collecting the accompanying rights and benefits. In the Central American Masquiladoras, it is a common practice for factories to fire workers at the end of the year and rehire them a few weeks later so that they don’t have to grant them permanent status; in the Thai zones, the same practice is known as “hire and fire”. [41] In China, many workers in the zones have no contracts at all, which leaves them without any rights or recourse whatsoever. [42]

It is in the casual new relationship to factory employment that the EPZ system breaks down completely. In principle, the zones are an ingenious mechanism for global wealth redistribution. Yes they lure jobs from the North, nut few fair-minded observes would deny the proposition that as industrialized nations shift to higher-tech economies, it is only a matter of global justice that the jobs upon which our middle classes were built should be shared with countries still enslaved by poverty. The problem is that the workers in Cavite, and in zones throughout Asia and Latin America, are not inheriting “our” jobs at all. Gerard Greenfield, former research director of the Asian Monitoring and Resources Centre in Hong Kong, says, “One of the myth of Relocation is that those jobs that seemed transferred from the so-called North to South are perceived as similar jobs to what was already being done before.” They are not. Just as company-owned manufacturing turned – somewhere over the Pacific Ocean – into “orders” to be placed with third-party contractors, so did full -time employment undergo a mid-flight transformation into “contracts.” The biggest challenge to those in Asia,” says Greenfield, “is the new employment created by Western and Asian multinationals investing in Asia, is temporary and short term employment.” [43]

In fact, zone workers in many parts of Asia, the Caribbean and Central America have more in common with office-temp workers in North America and Europe than they do with factory workers in those Northern countries. What is happening to EPZs is radical alteration in the very nature of factory work. That was the conclusion of a 1996 study conducted by the International Labor Organization, which stated the dramatic relocation of production in the garment and shoe industries “has been accompanied by a parallel shift of production from the formal to informal sector in many countries, with generally negative consequences on wage levels and conditions of work.” Employment in these sectors, the study went on, has shifted from “full-time in-plant jobs to part-time and temporary jobs and, especially in clothing and footwear, increasing resort to homework and small shops.”[44]

Indeed, this is not simply a job-flight story

A Floating Workforce

On my last night in Cavite, I met a group of six teenage girls in the workers' dormitories who shared a six-by-eight-foot concrete room: four slept on the makeshift bunk bed (two to a bed), the other two on mats spread on the floor. The girl who make Aztek, Apple and IBM CD-ROM drives shared the top bunk; the ones who sewed Gap clothing, the bottom. All were children of farmers, away from their families for the first time.

Their jam-packed shoebox of a home had the air of an apocalyptic slumber party – part prison cell, part Sixteen Candles. It may have been a converted pigsty, but these were sixteen years old girls, and like teenage girls the world over they have covered the gray, stained walls with pictures: of fluffy animals, Filipino action-movie stars, and glossy magazine ads of women modeling lacy bras and underwear. After a little while, serious talk of working conditions erupted into fits of giggles and hiding under bedcovers. It seems that my questions reminded two of the girls of a crush they had on a labor organizer who had recently given a seminar at the Worker's Assistance Center on the risks of infertility from working with hazardous chemicals.

Were they worried about infertility?

"Oh, yes. Very worried now."

All through the Asian zones, the roads are lines with teenage girls in blue shirts, holding hands with their friends and carrying umbrellas to shield them from the sun. They look like students coming home from school. In Cavite, as elsewhere, the vast majority of workers are unmarried women between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five. Like the girls in the dorms, roughly 80 percent of the workers have migrated from other provinces of the Philippines to work in the factories – mere 5 percent are native to the town of Rosario. Like the swallow factories, they too are only tenuously connected to this place.

Raymundo Nagrampa, the zone administrator, says migrants are recruited for the zone to compensate for something innate in "the Cavite character," something makes local people unfit to work in factories situated near their house. "I don't mean any offense to Cavite personality," he explained, in his spacious air-conditioned office. "But from what I gather, this particular character is not suited for the factory life – they'd rather go into something quickly, They do not have the patience to be right there in the factory line." Nagrampa attributes this to the fact that Rosario is so close to Manila "and so we can say that Cavitenians are not running scared with regard to getting some income for their daily substinence….

"But in case of those from the provinces, from the lower areas, they are not exposed to the big-city lifestyle. They feel more comfortable just working in the factory line, for, after all, this is a marked improvement from the farm work accustomed to, where they were exposed to the sun. To them, for the lowly province rural worker, working inside an enclosed factory is better off than being outside."

I asked dozens of zone workers- all of them migrants from rural areas – about what Raymundo Nagrampa had said. Every one of them responded with an outrage.

"It's not human!" exclaimed Rosalie, a teenager whose job is installing the "backlights" in IBM computer screens. "Our rights are being trampled and Mr. Nagrampa says that because he has not experienced working in a factory and the condition inside."

Salvador, in his 90210 T-shirt, was beside himself: "Mr. Nagrampa earns a lot of money and he has an air-conditioned room and his own car, so of course he would say that we prefer this work – it is beneficial to him, but not to us…. Working on the farm is difficult, yes, but there we have our family and friends and instead of always eating dried fish, we have fresh food to eat."

His words clearly struck a chord with a homesick Rosalie: "I want to be together with my family in the province," she said quietly, looking even younger than her nineteen years. "It's better there because when I get sick, my parents are there, but here there is no one to take care of me."

Many other rural workers told me that they would have stayed home if they could, but the choice was made for them: most of their families had lost their farms, displaced by golf courses, botched land- reform laws and more export processing zones. Others said that the only reason they came to Cavite was that when the zone recruiters came to their village, they promised that workers would earn enough in the factories to send money home to their impoverished families. The same inducement had been offered to other girls their age, they told me, to go to Manila to work in the sex trade.

Several more young women wanted to tell me about those promises, too. The problem, they said, is that no matter how long they work in the zone, there is never more than a few pesos left over to send home. "If we had land, we would just stay there and cultivate it for our needs," Raquel, a teenage girl from one of the garments factories, told me. "But we are landless, so we have no choice but to work in economic zone even though it is very hard and the situation is very unfair. The recruiters said we would get a high income, but in my experience, instead of sending my parents money, I cannot maintain even my own expenses."

So the workers of Cavite have lost on all counts: they are penniless and homeless. It's a potent combination. In the dormitories, sleep deprivation, malnutrition and homesickness mingle to create an atmosphere of deep disorientation. "We are alien in the factories. We are also alien in the boarding house because we all come from faraway provinces, " Liza, an electronics worker told me. "We are strangers here."

Cecille Tuico, one of the organizers at the Workers' Assistance Center, was listening in on the conversation. After the workers left to make their way through Rosario's dark streets and back to the dormitories, she pointed out that the alienation the workers so poignantly describe was exactly the employers look for when they seek out migrants instead of locals to work in the zone. With the same muted, matter-of-fact anger I have come to recognize in so many Filipino human-rights activists, Tuico said that the factory managers prefer young women who are far from home and have not finished high school, because "they are scared and uneducated about their rights."

CONCLUSION

CONSUMERISM VERSUS CITIZENSHIP

The Fight for the Global Commons

The beers at my hotel bar in Rosario were blissfully cold, and the gang from the Workers' Assistance Center were all getting a little drunk. We were arguing, once again, about whether codes of conduct have any merit whatsoever. Zernan Toledo (who personally favors armed revolution – it's just a question of when) pounded the table. "These documents are written by transnational corporations, so they will only serve the transnational corporations –haven't you read Marx?"

"It's different now," I countered. "With globalization, there need to be some common standards – and the governments certainly aren't setting them."

"Globalization is nothing new. We have always had globalization," said Arnel Salvador, another of the WAC organizers. His eyes were fixed not on me, but on something across the bar. Since the hotel where I stayed is the only one near the Cavite Export Processing Zone, it was, as usual, packed with visiting factory owners, contractors and buyers who were here to stay up all night singing karaoke and cutting deals for cheap clothes and electronics. I followed Arnel's eyes to a young man slouched in his chair, his feet up on the table across from him, his knees splayed apart as if he owned the world. Trendy and modern, he looked like a character from one of the many cell-phone commercials on Asian TV. "You can always tell the foreigners," Arnel said slowly, his usually warm voice icy. "No Filipino would sit like that."

The foreign investors who sing karaoke at the Mountain and Sea Hotel in Rosario are part of a long and bitter history of colonialists in the Philippines: first the Spaniards came and conquered, then the Americans arrived, setting up army bases and turning teenage prostitution into one of the country's largest industries. Now colonialism is dead, the U.S. military has receded and the new imperialists are the Taiwanese and Korean contractors in the export processing zones, sexually harassing the eighteen-year-old Filipinas on the assembly lines. Several of the free-trade zones in the Philippines (though not Cavite) are actually built on land that only a few years back housed U.S. military bases, and all over the country workers are shuttled to and from the zones in U.S. army jeeps converted to mini-buses. To Arnel Salvador and Zernan Toledo, the much-vaunted joys of economic globalization amount to pretty much of the same: the boss has just traded in his military uniform to Italian suit and Ericsson cell phone.

The day after the night of our drinking, I sat with Nida Barcenas in the backyard of the Worker's Assistance Center, and asked her what motivates her, night after night, to trudge out to the dorms at 11 p.m. to meet with the garments workers when they finally get off work. My question took Nida by surprise. "Because I want to help the workers, I really want to help them," she said. Then the though composure that helps her stand up to the zone bosses and petty local bureaucrats disappeared and fat tears rolled down to her smooth cheeks. All she managed to say was "It's like what Arnel said – it's just been so long is the fight between the feudal landlords, against the military dictators and now against the foreign factory owners. I turned the tape recorder off and we sat in silence until her colleague, Cecille Tuico, quietly brought us mugs of syrupy-sweet vanilla ice cream that turned to soup in the hot sun.

Because the Workers' Assistance Center's chief mission is to empower workers to stand up for their rights, WAC organizers don't much like the idea of Westerners swooping into the zone brandishing codes of conduct, with teams of well meaning monitors trailing behind. "The more significant way to resolve those problems," says Nida Barcenas, "lies with the workers themselves, inside the factory." And codes of conduct, she says, have little hope of helping because the workers have no hand in drafting them. As for third-party independent monitoring, Zernan Toledo believes

that no matter who performs it, it's just that: third party. All it will do is reinforce the idea that somebody else is looking after the workers' destiny, not the workers themselves. To some this flat-out rejection sounds stubborn and ungrateful, an unfair dismissal of all the well-meaning work being conducted in boardrooms in Washington, London and Toronto. But the right to sit down and bargain – even when you don't get the perfect deal – is the fundamental right for which the international trade union movement has struggled from its inception; it has always been about self-determination. Zernan Toledo invokes an old and familiar aphorism to explain the distinction: "If you give a man a fish, he will eat for one day. But if you teach him how to fish he will eat forever." And so, every evening at the Worker's Assistance Center, Zernan, Arnel, Cecille and Nida give the workers their fishing lesson. A little blackboard stands in the backyard with the chickens, and the organizers take turns leading seminars. Sometimes fifty workers show up, other times just one. Through this route will no doubt take longer than the ready-made codes and monitoring, the WAC organizers say they are willing to wait. As Nida says, it has already "been so long," they may as well get it right.

It's a message that applies not just in Cavite, but to all those concerned about corporate abuses around the world. When we start looking to corporations to draft our collective labor and human rights codes for us, we have already lost the basic principle of citizenship: that people should govern themselves. As we have seen, Nike, Shell, Walmart, Microsoft and McDonald's have become metaphors for a global economic system gone awry, largely because, unlike the back-door wheeling and dealing at NAFTA, GATT, APEC, WTO, MAI, the EU, the IMF, the G-8 and the OECD, the methods and objectives of these companies are plain to see: workers and foreign observers alike understand very well what they are up to. They have become the planet's best and biggest popular education tools, providing some much-needed clarity inside the global market's maze of acronyms and centralized, secretive dealings.

By attempting to enclose our shared culture in sanitized and controlled brand cocoons, these corporations have themselves created the surge of opposition described in this book. By thirstily absorbing social critiques and political movements as sources of brand "meaning," they have radicalized that opposition still further. By abandoning their traditional role as direct, secure employers to pursue their branding dreams, they have lost the loyalty that once protected them from citizen rage. And by pounding the message of self-sufficiency into a generation of workers, they have advertently empowered their critics to express that rage without fear.

But the fact that the brands nave led us into this maze does not mean we should look to them to lead us out. Nike and Shell are shiny new doorways opening onto the much complicated and less glamorous world of international law. And though it won't be easy and it won't come quickly, we will find our way out as citizens, on our own. We may feel a little like Theseus, clutching his thread as he entered the Minotaur's labyrinth, but nothing else will do. Political solutions – accountable to people and enforceable by their elected representatives – deserve another shot before we throw in the towel and settle for corporate codes, independent monitors and the privatization of our collective rights as citizens.

It is a daunting task but it does have an upside. The claustrophobic sense of despair that is so often accompanied the colonization of public space and the loss of secure work begins and the loss of secure work begins to lift when one starts to think about possibilities for a truly globally mind society, one that would include not just economics and capital, but global citizens, global rights and global responsibilities as well. It has taken many of us a while to find our footing in this new

international arena, but thanks to the large part to the crash course provided by brands, we are closer than ever before.

The first step has been an astonishingly successful network of popular-education projects. In 1995, the International Forum on Globalization held its first Global Teach-In in New York, which brought together leading scientists, activists and researchers to examine the impacts of a single, unfettered world market on democracy, human rights, labor and the natural environment. There were seminars on NAFTA, APEC, the IMF, the World Bank, Structural Adjustment of the North and every other global body or trade agreement you never understood but were afraid to ask. The New York Conference attracted several hundred people, but at the second conference in Berkeley, California, two thousand people showed up (with zero pre-publicity and no media coverage – just some posters and E-mail lists). A conference a few months later in Toronto attracted even more people and there have been similar gatherings on university campuses around the world.

And world leaders can't have lunch together these days without somebody organizing a counter-summit – gathering that bring together everyone from sweatshop workers trying to unionize the zones to teachers fighting the corporate takeover of education. At these events – in Geneva, Cologne and Birmingham – alternative models of globalization spill onto the streets during the day, and the reclaim the Streets parties go on all night.

It is sometimes difficult to tell whether these trends are the start of something genuinely new or the last gasps of something very old. Are they as the engineering professor and peace activist Ursula Franklin asked me, simply "wind blocks," creating temporary shelter from the corporate storm, or are they the foundation stones of some as yet unimagined, free-standing edifice? When I started this book, I honestly didn't know whether I was covering marginal atomized scenes of resistance or the birth of a potentially broad-based, movement. But as time went on, what I clearly saw was a movement forming before my eyes.

Three years ago, when I attended the Berkeley teach-in on globalization, I was frustrated that the speakers were all over fifty and that the links with college-age culture jammers and anticorporate and campaigners had yet to be made. A year later, these generations of activists and theorists were already enmeshed on several fronts, lending urgency and depth of analysis to each other's actions. During this same time, campaigns focusing on a single corporation in a single place – Shell in Nigeria, say, or Nike in Indonesia – had also found each other and were starting a process of intellectual cross-pollination, often at the click of a hotlink, thanks to the Net.

This emerging movement even has a major victory under its belt: getting the Multilateral Agreement on Investment taken off the agenda of the Organization for Economics Co-operation and Development in April 1998. As the Financial times noted with some bewilderment at the time, "The opponents' decisive weapon is the Internet. Operating from the around the world via web sites, they have condemned the proposed agreement as a secret conspiracy to ensure global domination by multinational companies, and mobilized and international movement of grassroots resistance." The article went on to quote a World Trade Organization official who said, "The NGO s have tasted blood. They'll be back for more." [1] Indeed they will."

On June 18, 1999, these virtual connections were made real when a coalition of groups including Reclaim the Streets and People's Global Action held the second Global Street Party, this time to coincide with the G-8 meeting in Cologne, Germany. The event, billed as a global carnival

against capital," took aim squarely at corporate power. All around the world, parties and protests were held in financial districts, outside the stock exchanges, superstores, banks, and multinational headquarters. With the simultaneous action in seventy different cities, the day was the coming-out party for this new global political player: it displayed all of the movement's promise and creativity – and showed more forcefully than ever before just how much anticorporate rage is brewing.

Though they were organized locally, a common theme ran through all the events. In Bangladesh, women garment workers held a protest against the sweatshop conditions; in San Francisco, they protested those same conditions outside Gap stores. In Montevideo, Uruguay, activists turned the main square of the City's financial district into a "fare-trade" show, with exhibits on every corporate abuse from the child labor to the arms trade; in Madrid, the entrance to the stock exchange was blocked. And in Cologne, site of the G-8 summit, European activists held a counter-summit and demanded debt forgiveness for Third world countries. The event was joined by five hundred Indian farmers who were traveling across Western Europe in an "intercontinental caravan." Along the way, they stopped off at the corporate headquarters of agri-business such as Cargill and Monsanto whose seed patents and genetic engineering of crops have burdened many Indian farmers with massive debts.

On the same day that the Indian farmers were peacefully protesting in Cologne, London's financial district turned into a war zone – the city hasn't seen anything like it since the 1990 poll-tax riots. The 10,000-strong gathering started as a classic RTS surreal political party. The streets were cleared by a Critical Mass bike ride and were flooded by activists dressed in second hand suits with slogans painted on the backs. They danced in the doorsteps of office towers, formed a human chain around the Treasury and held peaceful sit-ins at several banks. The bankers and investment brokers, meanwhile, acme to work disguised in casual sports clothes, having been advised by police to "blend in" with the activists so as not to catch a flying pie. But as the day wore on, the crowd splintered in smaller groups and became gradually more violent. One group stormed the Future Exchange, breaking all the glass in the lobby, disrupting automated stock trading and forging an evacuation of the building. In other parts of London, a McDonald's outlet, a bank and a Mercedez Benz dealership were trashed, a protestor was run over by a police van and several police were injured. There was also mob violence in Eugene, Oregon: windows were broken at banks and fast-food restaurants, cars were stormed, protestor attacked cops with rocks and cops attacked protestors with pepper spray. In both cities, the political messages about widening economic disparities and the brutalities of a free-market globalization were drowned out by the sound of shattering glass.

In Geneva, the message is clear as day: rather throwing rocks through windows, activist arrived with sponges, soap and squeegees to wash the facades of the big downtown banks. The organizers explained to the press that they only wanted to help these fine institution clean up the stains left behind by crippling Third World debt and Nazi gold. In Port Harcourt, Nigeria, the mood at the "Carnival of the Oppressed" was militant but celebratory. A crowd of 10,000 welcomed Ken Saro-Wiwa's brother back to his homeland after years of exile. After listening to the speech by Owens Wiwa, the crowd proceeded to the gates of the city's Shell oil headquarters and blocked entry for several hours. The next stop was a street named after the late Nigerian dictator, General Sani Abacha, where members of the crowd lowered the street sign and temporarily renamed the road after one of the men whose lives he stole: Ken Saro-Wiwa. According to the organizers, "There were dancing and singing in the street, bringing Port Harcourt, Nigeria's petroleum capital, to a stand-still."

And all of this happened on a single day.

When this resistance began taking shape in the mid-nineties, it seemed to be a collection of protectionists getting together out of necessity to fight everything and anything global. But as connections have formed across national lines, a different agenda has taken hold, one that embraces globalization but seeks to wrest it from the grasp of the multinationals. Ethical shareholders, culture jammers, street reclaimers, McUnion organizers, human rights hacktivists, school-logo fighters and internet corporate watchdogs are at the early stages of demanding a citizen-centered alternative to international rule of the brands. That demand, still sometimes in some areas of the world whispered for fear of a jinx, is to build a resistance – both high-tech and grassroots, both focused and fragmented – that is as global, and is as capable of coordinated action, as the multinational corporations it seeks to subvert.

excerpt from Naomi Klein's authored book, NO LOGO
printed in Picador, USA,
Copyright 2000, 2002
reprinted Chapter 9, pages 212-221