

Fortress Quebec: A Return to Tear Gas and Violence

Mark Engler, TomPaine.com

April 23, 2001

When political leaders from throughout the hemisphere met in Quebec City this weekend to negotiate a Free Trade of the Americas Area, they were surrounded on all sides by a towering, twelve-foot high security fence. What that fence represented—the denial of democratic participation in global economic debates—was a prime concern of the tens of thousands of protesters gathered in the streets. That, along with a pragmatic question: what is the best to bring the barrier down?

Even arriving on outside of the chain-link enclosure—making it to the sections of city that police would later fog with tear gas—was something of a privilege. In order to lessen the flow of dissenters, the border patrol denied entry to immigrants with arrest records, regardless of proven guilt or innocence. Their interrogations were administered based on one's apparent views about corporate globalization: Rest assured, the likes of George W. Bush never had to explain to the border patrol their "not perfect," drunk-driving pasts.

These affronts to civil liberties only served to heighten criticisms of the closed-off trade meetings. The People's Summit had been taking place through the week: a series of teach-ins presented arguments about why the FTAA, if passed, would solidify the power of multinational corporations at the expense of labor standards, consumer rights, and environmental protections. But protesters had scheduled Friday as the first main day of action arrived, and only then did the great fence become the target of physical resistance.

Although it composed only one moment within several days of protests, the first assault on the gate served as a key moment within the actions. This occurred as a march of three thousand young activists butted against the Summit compound. Some activists scaling the barrier leaned back their weight to pull the fence several feet closer to the crowd below. When the people released, they sent gate's huge concrete support rocking back and forth. The crowd grabbed the fence again and rocked it even more dramatically. One more swing and it toppled. While about a hundred people poured through and ran up against a police line, others dismantled additional sections.

The offensive security fence had begged a direct action response. With many Canadian dubbing the gate a "wall of shame," it was quickly becoming a national symbol of government disrespect for free speech. "I believe the provocation started with that damn wall," said prominent Canadian progressive Maude Barlow about the clashes in Quebec's streets. And (although his article went on mock the sentiment) a Toronto Globe and Mail columnist noted the poetic dismay of Brazilian Senator Telma de Souza:

"The wall, the wall/I can't believe the wall."

So when the fence, in part, came down, the domestic press recognized this as a crucial development. In contrast to the New York Times, which missed the fence's symbolic

significance and profiled the White House's trade objectives, the Toronto newspaper's banner headline cried out, "FORTRESS QUEBEC IS BREACHED."

If piecing apart the hated wall made for good-sense activism, other tactics launched protesters into a debate about how to best build a global justice movement. Having once broken the fence, the direct action's purposefulness faded into a clash with police. Some activists creatively managed the confrontation: One affinity group rolled forward a wooden catapult and launched a pink stuffed animal at their adversaries. But these playful theatrics were accompanied with the throwing of sticks, rocks, and even Molotov cocktails.

If Seattle was the "Tear Gas Round" of trade talks, as the Wall Street Journal dubbed it, this was "Tear Gas, Round 2." In many of the globalization protests of the past year, police have avoided unleashing the toxic white smoke because of its bad public-relations appearance, preferring instead mass arrests. Canadian authorities returned wholeheartedly to the chemical violence in Quebec City.

The authorities showed some restraint during the first breach of the fence, only gassing after some protesters had charged the line of riot troops. But once police launched the first canisters they shed all sense of reserve or proportion. They used the noxious bombardment to push back not only those inside the fence, but even to scatter crowds in the low-risk "green" zones of the demonstration—areas well away from the confrontation that were supposed to be safe enough to take your family. Into the night, wheezing activists stumbled down the narrow streets of old, "upper" Quebec, clutching at their eyes.

The great majority of those affected by this assault were entirely peaceful. A group from Halifax, self-identified Satyagrahis, wore gas masks and performed yoga in the dense air as a form of protest. A group of about twenty, less well-prepared, simply endured the fumes, sitting cross-legged on the clouded street with peace signs raised. Many groups, a block or two away from the central conflict, kept up singing, dancing, and chanting. But at the perimeter of the fence some groups continued to throw rocks and battle for space.

Much of the chaotic nature of the direct action was by design, a product of the organizing that led up to the event. CLAC, the Anti-Capitalist Convergence, and its allies argued for an anything-goes "diversity of tactics" and refused to join with other groups who would use non-violence guidelines as a means of facilitating more disciplined collective action. Lost was the idea—so vividly instilled when activists locked themselves peacefully around the Seattle convention center—that there could be an option other than simple marching or uncontrolled melee, and that this, indeed, might be a most potent option.

One group advocating for such an alternative, Montreal's SalAMI, had a long track record of producing militant, non-violent, and effective demonstrations. Most recently, SalAMI held early April non-violence trainings inside the Canadian Parliament building in Ottawa. In a demonstration the next day 400 people demanded that the secret text of the FTAA agreement be made public. Police preemptively shut down the Department of

Finance and Trade—which would have been the effective goal of the group's sit-in. Subsequently, fifty-five activists were arrested when they progressed resolute over police barricades two-by-two, having clearly stated their intention to retrieve the trade agreement from the building for public review.

These efforts not only garnered huge publicity, they helped to draw broad coalition support to the anti-FTAA call to action. Canadian Members of Parliament spoke supportively at SalAMI teach-ins, and Labor unions helped fund organizing. Ultimately, however, this group held a teach-in on the Friday of the FTAA direct action, choosing not to participate in an event dominated by CLAC's individualist orientation.

One could easily imagine a different type of assault on the "wall of shame," where protesters announced a non-violent but insistent intention to dismantle the fence, and proceeded to do so in methodical fashion, forcing the police either to stand by or to move on the protesters. Once inside, protesters could have avoided being drawn into an impossible fight with police, and instead moved on toward their objective—the actual halls hosting the cloistered trade meetings—with a demand for democracy. While this may have provoked the same type of response from the authorities, it would have generated a totally different type of dynamic than the scattered skirmishes with a police force all too prepared for violent conflict.

The difference is important in determining how protests are able to reframe the debate around trade issues. A convincing argument can be made that the globalization demonstrations have succeeded by virtue of their very existence. In the case of the FTAA, few commentators could discuss the conference without noting that holding it required the largest security mobilization in Canadian history.

But this same argument also illustrates a danger: non-peaceful actions can serve to justify police repression rather than to galvanize public outrage. In the future it will be more difficult to denounce police brutality or illegal, preemptive arrests—and also more difficult to discredit those who caricature civil disobedients as violent thugs.

The long-term viability of a global justice activism depends less on the media attention afforded by a sensationalistic brawl with police than on the type of alliance exhibited by Saturday's "Peoples' March." Size estimates range from 20,000 to 50,000 participants, but the numbers hardly do justice to the array of activists present, suggesting the breadth of the movements popular base. With Canadian unions leading the way, environmental groups backing them, and myriad international organizations and political parties marching in support, an alphabet of letters stretched over several kilometers: FTQ, CTC, CLC, IUE, SEIU, CSD, CAW, USW, ALLIANCE, CSQ, ATTAC, SFPQ.

Young people, but some union members too, streamed up from the Peoples' March to see what was happening in the zone of contention. The level of solidarity remained high between the march and the confrontations. The U.S. Jobs with Justice contingent led a chant of, "Tear down the fence! Tear down the fence!" When billows of tear gas appeared on the ridge above, the crowd uniformly booed.

Regrettably, CLAC's free-for-all methodology, euphemistically dubbed the "diversity of tactics," ended up drastically limiting the real diversity of protest. It made spectators of those who might have had a supporting role in a more collective enterprise. People joining in from the march found no communications squads visible, able to give newcomers a sense of where activists needed reinforcements. Missing was the image of the archetypal millennial protester, using cell phone technology to help coordinate actions.

Besides, without a gas mask one had endure intense pain get anywhere near the security fence.

As confrontations wore on, police expanded their tactics to include rubber bullets, water cannons, and eventually mass arrests. By early Sunday, 59 police officers, 82 protesters and 35 bystanders had been injured in the demonstrations. Activist writer Judy Rebick has reported that one woman who was hit in the throat with a rubber bullet required an emergency tracheotomy.

The numbers of wounded highlighted a crucial fact of the protests. Ultimately, this is a political struggle, not a military one. Battling the police did not stop the elitist trade negotiations or make them more just. The only way to do that, in the long term, is to build strong organizations and win public support.

At their best, last weekend's large and vocal demonstrations voiced strong criticisms of the FTAA, delayed the "free trade" summit, and poked a hole in the anti-democratic "wall of shame." However, it is insistent, collective, non-violent resistance to corporate globalization, backed by the power of broad-based coalition, that will bring down that fence for good.