

spit & polish

## DOWN WITH THE PROTESTERS

The professional demonstrators who pop up at global meetings wreaking havoc and dishing out sound bites offer no credible alternative, writes BARRY RONGE

Once again, the World Trade Organisation has met, this time in Cancun, Mexico, and, once again, the event ended in a chaos of industrial ego and national pique. But, again, its failure had nothing whatsoever to do with the protesters, those nomads of activism, who gathered but said virtually nothing.

I grasp the broad outline of their complaint about powerful industrial nations imposing conditions on the developing world that will make the poor even poorer, the rich even richer and the environment more endangered, all in the name of job creation, or some such glib catchphrase. But I don't get what the protesters offer as an alternative, except free dope, free whales, free trade, no passports and world peace. I've heard brainless beauty queens express loftier goals.

I'd like to be supportive, but I'd also like to see some organisation and a plan for what these guys will do if the international bosses should have a miraculous change of heart and say: "You are right. Come sit with us and tell us what must happen now."

The present plan of protest action at WTO gatherings neither inspires nor reassures me. They target outlets for Pizza Hut, KFC and McDonald's, and they scrawl graffiti about the abuse of child labour on advertising billboards for brand names like Nike, Fila, et al. and I'm like, "Been there, done that".

They stone and firebomb the cops, and smash cars and shop windows, largely for the benefit of the TV cameras, to which they mutter darkly about being left out of the evil cabal that is meeting behind those expensively closed doors.

Well, on the strength of such behaviour, would you let them in? Do their slogans, their well-rehearsed poses and their acts of destruction persuade you that they have any valuable insight or credible alternative to add that could revolutionise the way the world does business?

This year, a man stabbed himself to death in Cancun as part of the protest. How reassuring is that? Would you place your future in such hands? That's my problem with these people. I am in broad sympathy with what they claim to stand for, but when I look for policies, all I see are outrageous gestures and flashy sound bites prepared for impact on CNN's news headlines. It's the old 15 minutes of fame ambition.

So they raise awareness. So what? As far as I can tell, very few of these battles have been won, or even significantly contested. Is that a testament to the power of the establishment or to the weakness and



impracticality of the protesters?

I believe we have created a culture, maybe even an industry, of professional protest that is propped up by opportunistic pop and movie stars and seems to have become mainly ceremonial. I mean, what do they do once they have staged their protest? Even when these alternative groups have the unusual success of achieving real political power, they seem not to make much difference.

I find it hard to quantify what the Greens have done in Germany and Europe since they achieved a sphere of political influence. Is Germany a less industrialised nation than it used to be? Have the right-wing Neo-Nazi groups all been taken off the streets? Is Germany riding a wave of European change that effectively tackles poverty, social injustice and environmental destruction? Or are they just struggling to stay in power?

And how about Tony Blair's Labour Party? How are they doing compared to the reputedly bad old days of Maggie Thatcher and her Tories? Five minutes of scanning the headlines will provide that answer.

Even in South Africa, where the voice of the oppressed people was heard, how have we done as we head towards the celebration of the first decade of our new democracy? The government is embroiled in a scandal about an arms deal in a country that is not at war with anyone. Poverty and unemployment are not gone, and issues of healthcare and race still simmer. The only new development I see clearly is an emerging, wealthy bourgeoisie that concentrates on maintaining its wealth at all costs and cares less about social issues than it has at any time in the past 20 years.

It seems that the protesters undergo a change the minute they enter the system because it is so richly accommodating. To me, professional protest looks more and more like a smart career move and a short cut into the real corridors of power because it's all about taking control, which makes these words from John Burdett's brilliant new thriller, *Bangkok 8*, so apposite.

"The West is a culture of emergency. We worry about twisters in Texas, earthquakes in California, windchill in Chicago, drought, flood, famine, epidemics, drugs, the war on terror, crime and everything. We panic about the meteor that might hit the Earth or about how much longer the sun will last. Of course, if you didn't believe you can control everything, there wouldn't be an emergency, would there?" □