

WTO: News from HONG KONG (1)

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On the Hong Kong island, Wanchai is the name of the district where the Convention Centre is, an immense building with futuristic forms which was built on the sea, like the prow of a ship which advances in the bay. Since Sunday, Wanchai has been practically in a state of siege, with an extraordinary deployment of means of security going as far as naval patrols in the bay. Today, in this district, the 6th ministerial conference of the WTO has begun.

The governments of 150 countries (Saudi Arabia and Tonga has just been admitted) will discuss for approximately 100 hours, between now and Sunday, the text of the ministerial draft declaration which was communicated to them by the leading authorities of the WTO.

In addition to the official delegations of 150 countries, journalists and 3,200 persons from civil society, which includes representatives of the employers' organisations (two thirds) and associations and NGO, are also present.

I recall two salient facts from the opening ceremony.

The first, it is the intense pressure practised by the various speakers (the head of the Administration of Hong Kong, the Minister for trade of Hong Kong, Mr Tsang, who chairs the conference, PASCAL Lamy, Director General for the WTO, Mrs Amina Mohamed, ambassador of Kenya and president in exercise of the general Council of the WTO) that the ministers present make concessions and reach an agreement. Such strong insistence which made those who allowed themselves to refuse the advanced proposals to feel guilty.

Neither Mrs Mohamed, nor Mr Lamy, nor M.Tsang, who could and should have done so, pointed out that the document presented to the negotiations included annexes (they account for 31 of the 41 pages of the version in English) include only one, which was the subject of an agreement in Geneva between the representatives of the various Member States of the WTO. One knows that an introductory note in the ministerial draft declaration indicated that in the version presented to the ambassadors in Geneva, but disappeared from the document submitted to the ministers in Hong Kong. It is only referred to in a letter sent by Mrs Mohamed and Mr Lamy to Mr Tsang. A letter which does not have the legal effect of the draft declaration and which, at least, would have had to be read to the opening of the conference. The more so as Mr Lamy, addressing the day before the members of Parliament of all the countries present here, stressed that its ministerial draft declaration was supported by all the Member States, omitting to state that it is precisely because he contained this introductory note specifying the disagreements that the consensus had been able to be reached in Geneva. Beautiful example of the twist of which Mr Lamy is capable.

The second fact marking the opening ceremony is the protest expressed by a delegation of the network which coordinates all the otherworld networks "Our world is not to be sold". Whereas Mr Lamy stressed that its organisation is not liked, about twenty militants including the American Lori Walach and the Philippine Walden Bello tried to shout the criminal injustices that the WTO agreements caused. Echoing what a few hours earlier the delegations of countries of the South declared at the press conferences, Walden Bello, director of Focus one the Global South (Bangkok), said: "We are protesting because we cannot continue to watch the WTO take away the lives and

livelihoods of farmers, peasants and workers across the world” And he added: "There is nothing on the table at WTO that is going to benefit developing countries. Developing countries must reject what is on offer. It is a case of ' no deal is better than a bad deal ' .

At the same moment, in the street, the second of the three major demonstrations envisaged proceeded and, as with the first, passed in the most peaceful manner. As on Sunday, there were several thousand to express their revolt by word, by songs, dancing and of the mimes. At the end of the event, a boat covered with slogans crossed the Hong Kong bay and faced the high-speed motorboats of the maritime police force. Korean farmers threw themselves in the water and joined colleagues who had been plunging into the quays. Their way of expressing that the WTO runs the small farming community, but that it can run too.

In my hotel, I have several television networks (the transmissions in English of the Chinese (Beijing) and the German TVs, the BBC, CNN, TV5 which gives the Belgian, Canadian, French, and Swiss television news). I am frightened by the way this conference of the WTO is treated, in particular in the French-speaking channels relayed by TV5 in which I discern without difficulty the first world prize for caricature and disinformation: the only subjects broached are the agricultural file and the feared violence of protesters' and nothing is said, or hardly, on the reasons for their protest. To explain the various agreements, the issues of society that they represent and the discussions that they cause, there is quality information only to the BBC. Not a word until now on the French-speaking channels in connection with the capital services file although it concerns the people of the North as well as those of the South. One could hope that the method 4 of the AGCS is first of all applied to the journalists. They would be interested with perhaps... . On the other hand, dealing with agriculture makes it possible to make believe that all is blocked owing to a minority of peasants (which is only a minority of television viewers). On our side, we would say that this minority nourishes 100% of the population and that peasants constitute 62% of world population. And especially that liberalisation in the WTO way destroys farms and lives. Regarding the demonstrators, as they were not violent in Hong Kong and since (in particular on the French-speaking channels) those who do not accept the logic of profit must absolutely be demonised, two channels found the means: they repeated images of the violent moments in Seattle!

Tomorrow, one enters the live negotiation.

P.S.

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