

Wal-Mart Conquistadors: Cut-Rate Desecration

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Cut-Rate Desecration: The Wal-Mart Conquest of Mexico

Wal-Mart has its sights set on Campbell River. Following its well-worn game plan, Wal-Mart is preying on local impoverishment to fatten their bottom line, and in the process, dividing the community, and threatening the local environment. It's nothing new to Mexicans. [-/lex/](#)

"Quezalcoatl Must be Furious"

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Wal-Mart Invades Mexico

By JOHN ROSS

St. Patrick's Day

March 17, 2005

TEOTIHUACAN, MEXICO.

Not many months ago, "polleros" (people smugglers) in Tapachula Chiapas on Mexico's southern border wheedled \$5000 USD each from six Guatemalan and two that are described as "Hindu" undocumented workers who they promised to deposit safely in the United States.

Moving through Mexico stealthily in an old bus with its curtains drawn and slipping immigration officials the obligatory "mordida" ("little bite") to ease through the checkpoints, the smugglers arrived in Chihuahua City, 100 miles south of the U.S. border, drove out to an upscale suburb, and dropped their load off in front of an enormous Wal-Mart, informing the clueless clients they had arrived on "the Other Side."

Indeed, it looked like the American Dream--the Wal-Mart shared the gleaming mall with a Wendy's, a KTC, even an Appleby's and the ten-plex "Hollywood" Cinema. "It looked just like how it looked on television" a rueful "indocumentado" told Froilan Meza of the local Chihuahua Herald.

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A full decade after that beacon of corporate globalization, the North American Free Trade Agreement, kicked in, the commercial physiognomy of Mexico is indistinguishable from that of its distant neighbor to the north. The marketplaces in these two deeply disequal trading partners are fast becoming mirror images of each other, "total convergence" as Mexican NAFTA negotiator Luis de Valle proudly boasted to the New York Times. "Mexicans and Americans now buy the same products and pay the same prices." Often they do so at the same mega-stores.

As 2005 ushers in NAFTA's second decade, 2000 plus MacDonald's now stain the Mexican landscape, and Wal-Mart, the world's most gargantuan conglomerate and the largest U.S. employer with 1.4 million "associates" (Wal-Mart has no workers) on its books, is also Mexico's biggest job generator (101,000), and far outsells its Mexican competition, with a 54% share of the market.

Having jumped the gun on NAFTA by buying into the 122 store Aurera-Bodega chain here in 1992 and taking it over five years later, Wal Mart now owns 687 super stores in 71 Mexican cities under the marquis logos of Wal-Mart, Aurera-Bodega, Superama, and Sam's Club --plus 52 Suburbias, a more upscale department store chain, and 235 VIP's restaurants. Total Wal-Mart sales of \$10.8 billion USD in 2003 dwarfed the \$8 billion taken in by the next three retailers together. But the transnational bonanza raises national hackles. "It is not good for our sovereignty that all our clothes and our food come from another country," asserts Vicente Yanez, director of the National Association of Self-Service Stores.

Just as in the U.S., Wal-Mart - which if it was a nation would be ranked the 19th economic power on earth with \$256 billion USD in income last year - has grown so big that it now dominates the retail economy, accounting for 2% of gross internal product, about the same as in the U.S. Indeed, a Wal-Mart collapse could bring down both economies with a resounding crash.

As in the U.S., the bottom line is gospel in Mexico and no unions or other troublemakers are tolerated on the premises. Non-union Mexican Wal-Mart "associates" earn an average of 13 pesos an hour (about \$1.20 USD) as compared to their non-union U.S. associates' \$9.50 (unionized supermarket workers make \$19.)

All is not copasetic in Wal-Mart land these days. 39 class actions in 30 U.S. states have been filed by disgruntled "associates", women employees, and undocumented immigrants often forced to work a 100 hours a week for below minimum pay.

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Although Wal-Mart opened one store a day in 2003 (148 in the U.S., 178 in the rest of the world), resistance is growing on both sides of the border. According to gadfly Al Norman of Wal-Mart Watch, 16 mega-stores were nixed by U.S. target communities last year (220 in the past decade) and battles against the malling of Mexico have erupted all over the geography--in Cuernavaca, dozens were beaten and arrested trying to stop Costco, Wal-Mart's closest rival, from demolishing an historic green space where the British author Malcolm Lowery penned his monumental "Under the Volcano", and Wal-Marts slated for Merida Yucatan, Tecamachalco Puebla, and Amecameca in Mexico state (right under the still very active volcano of which Lowery wrote) have been stalled by activists. A threatened Wal-Mart on the shores of Michoacan's pristine Lake Patzcuaro has prompted community fury.

But the most conspicuous resistance has surged around the Arkansas-based retail empire's latest addition, an as-yet un-logoed monster store in San Juan Teotihuacan, 32 miles north of Mexico City under the soaring Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon in the sacred "City of the Gods", the first urban enclave in the New World.

Teotihuacan flourished for nearly a millennium between the 2nd Century BC and 700 AD, swelling to a half million souls by 500, and covering an expanse of eight square miles, larger even than Rome. Having harnessed underground streams, the rulers of Teotihuacan created Mexico's first corn culture, a harvest that inspired much commerce--a great marketplace shared the City with the Gods.

Quetzalcoatl, "the Plumed Serpent", a deity ubiquitous in ancient Meso-America, lorded it over Teotihuacan and his priests and devotees maintained the sun up in the sky and the agricultural seasons in balance by wholesale human sacrifice--18 upper crust sacrificial victims were uncovered in an unexplored chamber of the Pyramid of the Moon by a Japanese team this past November.

Teotihuacan is thought to have faded into history when, drained by drought, its carrying capacity collapsed, and barbarian Mexicas from the north (later designated Aztecs) repeatedly attacked the City of the Gods.

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Today, once again, the carrying capacity of Mexico state in which Teotihuacan is situated - the most densely populated in the Mexican union - is threatened by mass migration from the impoverished south. 1200 newcomers settle in the state every day according to local charitable institutions. In fact, the population boom seems to be one reason why Wal-Mart has set up shop 2000 meters from the Pyramid of the Sun in the third archeological mitigation zone ("Periferico C") of San Juan Teotihuacan.

Each winter solstice, tens of thousands of revivalist Indians, New Age acolytes, and just plain tourists don cameras, feathered head-dresses or simple white cottons and tramp to the top of the Pyramid of the Sun to soak up the rays and revitalize their bodies and souls for the coming year.

As I climbed the 247 steep stone steps divided into four narrow tiers to the pyramid's summit, many of my fellow pilgrims expressed their umbrage at the new Wal-Mart, in plain site down below. "It is like an invasion, a new conquest," opined Rafael, a young computer technician from Cordoba, Veracruz. "Falta de respeto (a lack of respect)" a middle-aged woman missing her two front teeth spat, "this is Mexico, you know."

"I come up here every year to recharge my batteries" laughed Mexico City grade school teacher Xenia Marquez, extending her arms towards the weak December sun at the very apex of the Pyramid of the Sol--in her hand she cupped three shiny metal pyramids to increase the solar jolt. Asked about the Wal-Mart down below, the maestra recoiled: "What a horror! They insult the Gods! Quezalcoatl must be furious!"--her tirade was interrupted by the tingaling of her cell phone.

Two tiers down, Miguel Angel Nieves, a young custodian whose father worked rebuilding the Pyramid of the Moon in the 1960s and who grew up under the ruins, had a distinctly different story. Proudly pointing out the Wal-Mart in the hazy distance, he exalted the prices and the products therein. "Before Wal-Mart opened, we would shop in the street or in the central market which is owned by one man. The prices were high and well, it wasn't very clean"

The saga of the resistance to the Teotihuacan Wal-Mart is a picaresque footnote in the battle against the global leviathan. Whereas in the U.S., such disputes are apt to be settled before

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permit appeals and zoning boards, the Teotihuacan Wal-Mart touched a raw national nerve and so this war was fought "a la Mexicana." "Wal-Mart has profaned the City of the Gods and there are no deities in Meso-America that can protect it now" darkly warned Miguel Limon-Portillo, the celebrated translator of Aztec poetry.

The Civic Front to Defend the Teotihuacan Valley ("Frente Civica") first got wind of Wal-Mart's plans very late in the game after concrete trucks started pouring a foundation in the third archeological zone less than two kilometers from the pyramids. Activists immediately suspected a deal had been cut between the conglomerate, the municipal government, and the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) without whose permission the project could not go forward.

On October 1st, Lorenzo Trujillo, a middle-aged teacher, the self-styled "spiritual guide" Emma Ortega, and Emmanuel D'Herrera, a poet and professor, set up camp at the Wal Mart site, rolled out their "petates" (straw mats), lit copal incense to the guardian figure of Coatlicue, a sort of Aztec Shiva, and, in classic lost-cause Mexican struggle posture, declared themselves on hunger strike. Not unsurprisingly, their sacrifice had deep scratch in a nation that bridles at dubious NAFTA encroachments and has been galvanized by the plight of its Indian cultures after ten years of Zapatista rebellion.

Mexico state governor Arturo Montiel, a dark horse presidential hopeful of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, which ran Mexico for seven decades and would like nothing better than to take back power in 2006, was a big booster of the new Wal-Mart store, boasting that it would bring 3000 new jobs to this run-down region. But local street sellers and market venders, who have created their own open air Wal-Mart in and around the ruins, figured that their livelihoods were jeopardized by super-store competition and joined the fray. Street fights between those who opposed the project and those who did not want to bus 20 miles away to other towns to do their shopping ensued. When the Frente Civica camp was attacked by angry construction workers, the three hunger strikers moved to the ruins. A second strike began on the sidewalk outside the INAH's Mexico City offices.

By now, lots of fingers were being pointed at the INAH for having declared the Wal-Mart site of "no archeological value." One fired construction worker, Martin Hernandez, told the national left daily La Jornada that he had seen broken pieces of pottery and other items being hauled from the construction site and was ordered to keep quiet about the destruction.

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Soon Rigoberta Menchu and Subcomandante Marcos were commenting on the desecration. The Teotihuacan Wal-Mart was a ready-made flashpoint for indigenous organizations such as the National Association for Indigenous Autonomy (ANIPA), which pointedly asked if the Catholic Church would allow a mega-store to be thrown up at the door to the Vatican? Aztec concheros dancers arrived from Mexico City to excite energies.

Francisco Toledo, Mexico's most luminescent painter, who had single-handedly kept a MacDonal'd's out of Oaxaca city's colonial plaza, like Teotihuacan a UNESCO World Heritage Site, drew pictures of monkeys pushing shopping carts beneath the pyramids of "Teotihualmart" as social critic Carlos Monsivais tagged it. Union leaders came to express their support of the hungry strikers and to remind the press of Wal-Mart's anti-union bias. Anarcho-punks, anthropologists, and comedians expressed their outrage--cabaret star Jesusa Rodriguez told of the "Hualmartas, a tribe from the north", the discovery of whose "Hualmart Codex" revealed that "they worshipped the Yanqui dollar." The Teotihuacan Wal-Mart even made U.S. late night TV when Comedy Central's Jon Stewart included it in his nightly fake news broadcast.

As the international uproar mounted, Wal-Mart worked around the clock to get the new store up and running before matters got completely out of hand. And as the deadline approached, tempers flared. In late October, militant farmers from nearby San Salvador Atenco who had fought off a proposed international airport with their machetes three years previous, clashed with police just outside the ruins--a police car and three motorcycles were torched.

When on Wal-Mart was finally ready to throw open its doors a week later, there were 70 customers on line before nine, many drummed out by a sound truck that had been circulating through the small city for days advertising free gifts and big bargains. But just before opening time, a team of INAH workers appeared on the scene and demanded entrance in order to drill for last-minute samples. A pair of two meter-deep holes were perforated between cash registers six and seven as store stockers stopped to gawk. The samples yielded only sand and fragments of 20th century brick and Wal-Mart received the INAH's blessings to open for business.

But the perforations had left a gaping chasm in the mega-store's floor and Wal-Mart public relations officer Claudia Algorri decided the inauguration would be postponed until after the long "Dia de los Muertos" (November 1st-2nd) weekend, Mexico's intensely traditional celebration of its dead.

Over the weekend, the Frente Civica built altars to their ancestors and prayed that the Gods of

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Teotihuacan were tuned in.

When customers once again flocked to the mega-store on Tuesday morning, 250 riot cops were on hand to greet them. The first scuffling occurred after the mob tried to take the doors and Wal-Mart officials had to calm the public with free Cokes, French fries, and "little cakes" (La Jornada.) Then the link to the satellite, which would connect up the Teotihuacan cash registers with Wal-Mart headquarters in Bentonville Arkansas, went kaplooy--the Gods must have been listening. For six hours, the crowd hung around the parking lot under the blazing sun. A family quarrel broke out and noses were bloodied. Finally, near 3:30. customers were allowed to grab a shopping cart and the consumer frenzy was consummated. But sales were not brisk--most had come just to gander at the marvels of modern merchandising contained within this temple of plastic.

And that night, a band of toughs thought to have been recruited by the INAH dismantled the Frente Civica encampment by the ruins. D'Herrera, then in the fourth week of his hunger strike, was roused from his petate and three students slashed by a razor-toting thug. The Teotihuacan Wal-Mart was officially in business.

Christmas is a season of cultural confrontation in Mexico where gift-giving, as in much of the Hispanic Catholic world, is symbolic and confined to Epiphany on January 6th, the day the Three Kings visit the Christ child. But Santa Claus is the superhero of the global marketers and so like the Days of the Dead vs. Halloween and the Crucifixion vs. the Easter Bunny, Xmas breeds culture shock.

By December, the Teotihuacan Wal-Mart was doing boom time business. Although "Nueva Wal-Mart" (the corporation's Mexican handle) has posted no outside store sign to avoid controversy, the interior is unmistakably a prototypical Sam Walton-style emporium stocked to the roof beams with mostly Chinese-made items (Wal-Mart imports 10% of all goods China exports to the U.S.)

Given the season, the toy aisles were particularly packed with parents shopping for either Christmas or The Kings--of six customers questioned, opinions were split down the middle as to which day they would celebrate.

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Nonetheless, all six fervently concurred that Wal-Mart prices were the lowest (and only ones) in town. Princess Barbi was on sale for 288 pesos (about \$20), He-Man action figures for 162. But a giant yellow Hummer weighed in close to 4000 pesos. A miniature Wal-Mart mega-store marked down to 988 pesos was drawing oos and ahhs. Elsewhere in the aisles, Black & Decker irons were going like hot cakes at 97 pesos and U.S. grown tomatoes and apples were holding their own against local produce.

Out in the parking lot, Victor Acevedo, a local anthropologist who affects hand-made Indian accessories, was sheepishly ladling merchandise into his battered Volkswagen bug. "I don't like the idea of Wal-Mart being so close to the pyramids--but where else am I going to shop?" he told a U.S. reporter.

Sincreticism unlocks the door to much of the Mexican mystery. When the Europeans came, they pulled down the Aztec temples--Teotihuacan is a fortuitous exception--and built their cathedrals from the rubble. The Teotihuacan Wal-Mart, albeit transiently imposed, sits atop land once occupied by an Aztec "tianguis" or bazaar. In Mexico, you always need to look underneath.

Mexico is a four millennium-old civilization with a culture as obdurate as granite and obsidian. In contrast, the United States is a make-believe country with a bubble-wrapped culture and a minimal national history. The smart money says that when all the Wal-Marts crumble into dust, the majestic Pyramids of Teotihuacan will still be standing.

John Ross has just been awarded the 2005 Upton Sinclair Award (an "Uppie") by the San Pedro California chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union for his latest cult classic "Murdered By Capitalism--A Memoir of 150 Years of Life & Death on the U.S. Left". "The Wal-Martization of Mexico" appeared in a truncated form in the March issue of The Progressive.