Global Yodel

May 1, 2002 By Esther Kaplan

When the World Economic Forum (WEF) chose post-9/11 New York City for its annual January gathering of top corporate execs, the police prepared for mass arrests of anti-corporate globalization shock troops. But the first to get cuffed were eight members of ACT UP/New York, as they attempted to drop banners near major intersections that read “Bush and Big Business Agree: People With AIDS, Drop Dead!”

AIDS activists shuffled their way through the weekend’s largest march as masked “corporate bureaucrats” with signs such as “I’ll take 50 cents off that AIDS drug if you give me a 30-year patent.” And they brought their three-pronged message to church and campus teach-ins: “Donate the dollars” (to the UN’s Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria), “drop the debt” (to free up the budgets of developing nations for health care spending), “treat the people” (by legalizing production of cheap generic meds).

Meanwhile, inside the Waldorf Astoria, several of the WEF’s elite invitees -- like Harvard economist Jeffrey Sachs and AIDS vaccine champ Bill Gates -- used their platform to call for more government and corporate aid to epidemic-stricken nations. Cause-friendly U2 rocker Bono even declared AIDS in Africa “an everyday holocaust.”

Indeed, in a corporate kind of way, AIDS has been on the WEF agenda for at least three years, according to Kate Taylor, head of the WEF’s Global Health Initiative, launched in 2000 to coordinate a private-sector response. AIDS presents a threat to both security and profits, Taylor said, “creating generations of orphans in gun-rich environments vulnerable to dangerous elements.” Between the need to constantly train new workers to replace those who fall ill and the shrinking market for consumer goods, “AIDS is very clear on a balance sheet,” she said.

But according to Alan Berkman, MD, founder of the AIDS advocacy group Health GAP, “It is obvious that private industry is trying to respond to AIDS on the cheap, minimizing any opportunity to treat people with antiretrovirals.”

The chairman-designate of Anglo-American, a large South African mining company, was selected by the WEF as private-sector rep to the Global Fund. Yet, as Berkman points out, Anglo-American covers HIV meds for only senior staff -- not their tens of thousands of mine workers, whose HIV rates run at 20 percent or more.

The AIDS agenda wasn’t fully embraced by protest planners, either. Sharonann Lynch, a Health GAP member and ACT UP arrestee, failed -- despite weeks of lobbying and backroom arm-twisting

-- to get AIDS treatment on the demands list for the weekend’s biggest march. Said Lynch, “Our enemies and our allies are both on a steep learning curve as far as the danger that AIDS poses.”

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