

The battle of Seattle

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Seattle, 30 November 1999, was a defining moment for the global anticapitalist movement. This was day the movement, which had been growing over the previous five years, finally became conscious of its power.

Years of grassroots action in the USA culminated in the siege of the WTO ministerial meeting in Seattle. Young people had been at the heart of numerous campaigns against corporate America in the Clinton years.

A new generation of activists on campuses across the USA and Canada became politicised by the invasion of the mind-snatchers as the big corporations moved into the classrooms.

Faced with the sheer hubris of money, student politics moved on from the politics of identity and introspection to a strong anti-corporatism ? aiming to turn back the agents of Nike, Coca-Cola and McDonalds with their ?free education packs?.

University authorities resorted to censorship and blackmail against their students anticorporate branding campaigns ? terrified of offending big name sponsors. Such heavy-handed attempts only radicalised the campuses even more. Student groups investigated the operations of the big corporations away from their campuses and found that the money used to bribe their administrators was sucked out of sweatshop labour in the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam and China ? the one-dollar-a-day impoverished billions of the Third World.

Seattle put it all together. As Manning Marable said later:

?The demonstrations in Seattle showed that growing numbers of Americans are recognising that all of these issues ? Third World sweatshops, the destruction of unions, deteriorating living standards, the dismantling of social programs inside the US ? are actually interconnected.?

On 30 November 1999, the World Trade Organisation convened in Seattle, for what was to be the launch of a new millennial round of trade negotiations. The negotiations were quickly overshadowed by massive street protests outside the hotels and the convention center. The sheer scale of the demonstrations ? estimates vary between 40,000-60,000 ? shocked the media. More than 700 organisations took part.

More shockingly, TV showed the determination of the demonstrators to actually close down the WTO meeting. They also showed the brutality of the police, determined it must go ahead. The era of summit sieges had begun.

The conference?s inaugural session was cancelled. Delegates ? including the head of the WTO, the UN Secretary-General, the US Secretary of State, and the US Trade Representative ? were imprisoned in their hotels on the first day. On the following days, as demonstrators fought cat-and-mouse battles with the police on the streets, the trade talks inside the convention centre broke down. Divisions between the Europeans and the Americans were exposed which in turn emboldened the countries of the global south to

resist the free trade demands of the USA.

It was the first real setback the architects of capitalist globalisation had suffered and the whole world was watching.

Planning for the Seattle demonstrations had begun months earlier and included local, national, and international organisations. In the forefront was the Ruckus Society, Rainforest Action Network, and Global Exchange. Among the most notable participants were national and international NGOs (especially those concerned with development issues, labor rights, the environment, and consumer protection. Trade unions including the hitherto reactionary AFL-CIO student groups, religiously-based groups and a wide spectrum of environmentalists and anarchists planned separately and together.

The coalition was loose and broad. It was based on opposition to corporate-dominated free trade policies and their effects on the various single issues that motivated the various groups. They shared no one political goal or solution. There was a developing consensus among the protestors that the WTO favored multinational corporations over the interests of most of the world's population and that its policies were destroying the lives of people in the global south and well as bringing enormous job insecurity to the north.

Many NGOs were armed with credentials to participate in the official meetings. The AFL-CIO, and its member unions, planned a large official rally. United Farmworkers, Communication Workers of America, Steelworkers, UA Plumbers and Steamfitters, Carpenters, Teachers, Airline pilots, Longshoremen, Electricians, Boilermakers, and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) all sent large contingents.

The Sierra Club the oldest and most staid of the US environmental movements famously held a march with 300 dressed as turtles, the day before the WTO conference opened. Their comic costumes symbolised a serious complaint against the WTO.

When the US Congress tried to block shrimp imports caught in nets that trap and drown 150,000 sea turtles each year, the WTO called the block arbitrary and unjustified. In fact in every environmental dispute brought before it the WTO's secret three-judge panels had ruled for big business and against environmentalists.

These turtles participated in other marches with members of the truck-drivers union, giving rise to the famous placard Teamsters and Turtles United at last!, which came to symbolise the linkages being made between organised workers and the new social movements. Steelworkers and Longshoremen later got heavily involved in the militant actions around the convention centre.

Other groups were much more radical and were bent on disrupting the meeting. These latter groups were loosely organised in the Direct Action Network (DAN). They planned to disrupt the meetings by blocking streets and intersections in the city centre to prevent delegates from going from their hotels to the Washington State Convention and Trade Center.

The DAN deployed some 10,000 activists in affinity groups in the streets around the Convention Center. Affinity groups were non-hierarchical, each one usually made up of between five to 10 politically like-minded people who know and trust one another, thus serving to keep information about its actions within the group (and out of the hands of the police).

Affinity groups in the DAN system co-ordinated their actions in a large undercover space a Convergence Centre. Any tactical decisions were taken strictly by consensus (i.e. without a vote, at spokespersons)

councils). They thereby hoped to avoid the creation of a centralised ? and in the eyes of its anarchist originators ? hierarchical/authoritarian organisation.

This system is only fully adoptable by a movement dominated by aggregated individual activists, in which large, already ?hierarchical? organisations, play a minor role. That is why this system played such an important role in the United States, with its relative weakness of working class parties, and such a marginal role in Europe in later mobilisations.

American ?missionaries?, from Ruckus and DAN tried hard to spread this system to Europe after Seattle (notably in Prague) with the associated commitment to strictly non-violent direct action but neither the system nor this commitment in principle proved exportable, even to the European anarchists. However in Seattle this system scored a signal success because it caught the forces of law and order by surprise and because it drew in support from ?hierarchical? organisations like branches of trade unions and socialist groups.

In Seattle affinity groups were responsible for locking down one of 13 sections of the city centre. There were also ?flying groups? that could move around to back up groups under attack. The groups were further divided into those willing to be arrested and those who were not. All decisions prior to the demonstrations were reached by consensus.

DAN agreed a basic code of nonviolence which including the statement: ?We will not destroy property?. However a group of mostly-young anarchists from Eugene, Oregon (where anarchists had ?rioted? on J18), intended to use confrontational tactics, and had no objection to ?trashing? corporate property: banks, Macdonalds, Starbucks etc.

At 05:00 on 30 November, the Direct Action Network?s plan went into action. Several hundred activists took control of key intersections. Over the next few hours, a number of marches began to converge on the area from different directions. These included a student march from the north and a march of small farmers from South Korea, together with human rights advocates from Burma and Colombia who marched in from the south. Meanwhile, a number of activists controlled the intersections using lockdown formations ? chaining themselves to concrete blocks etc.

At 10:30 the Seattle police began firing tear gas canisters. By noon, they were also shooting demonstrators with rubber bullets and using pepper spray in order to get as many WTO delegates as possible through the blockade. Police began beating demonstrators and even bystanders who were not participating in the demonstrations.

Demonstrators chanted: ?Whose Streets? Our Streets! Whose World? Our World!?! and when the police battered and pepper-sprayed unresisting demonstrators, the cry went up: ?The whole world is watching! ?The whole world is watching! And indeed it was.

Around mid-day a few dozen black-clad and masked anarchists from Eugene, in a tactic known as the black block, began smashing windows and vandalising corporate storefronts. This produced some of the most famous images of the protests. Reaction from other protestors was mixed (some attempted to physically prevent their activities, others prevented the police from making arrests).

Late in the morning the AFL-CIO-organised march, tens of thousands strong, turned back before it reached its intended target ? the convention center. However thousands of unionists ignored the AFL-CIO marshals and joined the huge blockade downtown.

More than 600 people were arrested over the next few days, although virtually all of them were later

acquitted due to faulty arrest police procedures and lack of evidence. One particularly violent confrontation occurred the evening of 1 December, when police pursued protestors fleeing from downtown into the neighborhood of Capitol Hill, indiscriminately using tear gas, pepper spray, and batons. Neighborhood residents were also injured in the brutal police revenge attack.

The success of the Seattle siege in stopping a major international gathering of the corporate globalisers had an electric effect right around the world. It signaled that a new movement had been born ? a movement of individuals, of pre-existing movements, of the more radical wing of the trade unions, especially rank and file unionists at the level of locals (branches), all committed to various forms of direct action.

Seattle set the pattern for ensuing globalisers? summits (WTO, IMF, World Bank, G7, EU heads of state). Anticapitalists would converge, usually a day or two before the summit, for direct action training, banner making, etc. Usually, counter-conferences were also held to educate and politicise the large numbers of young people attracted to these events.

The era of summit sieges and counter-conferences had begun.

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