



SEATTLE

The "Battle in Seattle," pitting more than 35,000 protesters of staggeringly diverse backgrounds against the World Trade Organization, ended in a striking victory for a popular movement that emerged with a stronger, more focused voice and a broad, sympathetic world audience.

The victory went beyond blocking the opening meeting of trade ministers from 135 countries and disrupting other WTO functions. The protests intensified the already deep-seated internal conflicts among different blocs of countries, leading to a dramatic failure by the WTO to launch a new round of trade talks. The protests also strengthened the bonds of many coalition partners and gave a dramatic boost to a movement that has been steadily growing and gaining clout.

After Seattle it will be difficult for any politician to talk about global economics without addressing links to labor rights, human rights, food supplies and the protection of both consumers and the environment. After Seattle it also will be critical that the protesters maintain their broad coalition, link up more with movements in developing countries, and define with greater clarity what they are for as well as what they are against.

It was easy for outsiders to be perplexed by the variety of issues raised by protesters. There were people costumed as sea turtles, dolphins and ears of genetically modified corn marching alongside Steelworkers, Teamsters and longshore workers. There were religious activists demanding cancellation of poor countries' debt and defenders of human rights in Burma and China. There were campus crusaders against sweatshops and child labor, eco-defenders of old forests and small farmers from around the world. There were calls for "vegan power" and flags invoking the American

Revolution—"Don't trade on me." While some marched or sat down in the streets with arms locked, others danced or acted out street theater dramas. At times, the streams of protest converged: A forest ranger in uniform carried a sign proclaiming, "Unfair Trade Destroys American Jobs."

It was a tribute to the WTO that it managed to bring them all together, giving them coherence and a common enemy. But the protest was not targeted simply at the WTO. With great regularity, whatever their own primary issue, protesters made it clear that their ultimate targets were corporate power and the tyranny of the market, which threaten democracy, community, nature and humanity. They were not against trade, but they wanted the global market to be governed by values beyond profit maximization. "The system turns everything into a commodity, a rain forest in Brazil, a library in Philadelphia, a hospital in Alberta," AFSCME president Gerry McEntee told the big labor rally. "We have to name that system: It is corporate capitalism."

Coming together from fights to protect forests, save jobs, block bad trade deals, defend human and worker rights, keep food safe, end sweatshops and preserve a public sphere, the new movement has become a more pointed international popular fight against corporate globalization and unregulated markets dominated solely by the needs of rootless transnational capital. At the turn of the last century, there was another movement of populists, progressives and socialists against laissez-faire capitalism and robber barons. "No one thought they had a chance," Minnesota Sen. Paul Wellstone reminded a labor audience in Seattle. "Their point was to civilize the national economy. We are here—a broad coalition—to civilize the global economy."

Discontent with the WTO and the new global economy also filled the hallways of delegates' hotels and the conference center. Many developing countries say they have gained little from the first five years of the WTO, and there were deep divisions over how far to push total commodification in agriculture, services and other areas. In the end, according to Mark Ritchie of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, the talks collapsed because of many smaller countries' frustrations with the closed, undemocratic internal

That attitude reflects the typical contempt for popular views at the WTO and among governmental trade officials. The protests drew attention to normally obscure, secretive deliberations. They were potent not only because of the size and militancy of the crowds, but because officials know that there is overwhelming public support for the protesters' fundamental positions. Just before the talks opened, the University of Maryland Program on International Policy Attitudes released a survey that showed

okay, so we're
in the streets



now what?

procedures—echoing the protests in the streets, which may have reinforced their courage to dissent. This year, many developing countries threatened to reject any proposal because of this lack of “transparency,” and both U.S. Trade Representative Charlene Barshefsky and WTO director general Michael Moore admitted that the procedures had failed and need to be reformed.

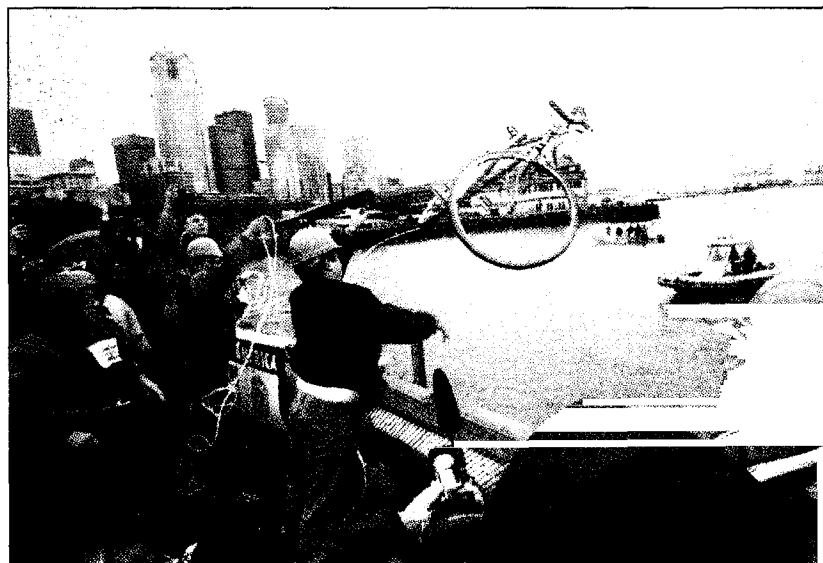
While labor leaders and rank-and-file workers from developing countries joined the big labor rights rallies, with calls for international enforcement of labor rights and even a global minimum wage, their governmental representatives at the WTO were strongly resisting even the weak American and European proposals for a discussion and research group on the relationship between labor rights and trade.

Although President Clinton's suggestion in a Seattle newspaper interview that ultimately labor rights should be enforceable with trade sanctions provided an excuse for delegates from developing countries like Egypt and Pakistan to attack any discussion of labor rights, there had been only modest progress in hastily assembled negotiations. The AFL-CIO was disappointed but would not have wanted a working party that was prohibited from talking about enforcement. The Clinton administration's rhetorical enthusiasm about labor rights is merely an attempt to preserve the legitimacy of the tarnished WTO and “free trade.” But the less progress the WTO makes on labor rights, the more doubts union leaders have about reforming the institution. If the WTO can't deliver, Steelworkers President George Becker told the big labor rally, “We should start a movement to get the hell out of the WTO.”

Victor Thorpe, the outgoing president of the International Chemical, Energy and Mine Workers was even more skeptical. “It's not enough to get a seat at the table,” he argued. “My biggest fear is that organized labor would get a seat at the table, bleating our protest and shutting these people [occupying the streets] out. It would marginalize us. It's not enough to say, ‘Let the process roll on with a codicil on labor and the environment.’ We need a WTO that actually regulates multinational corporations.”

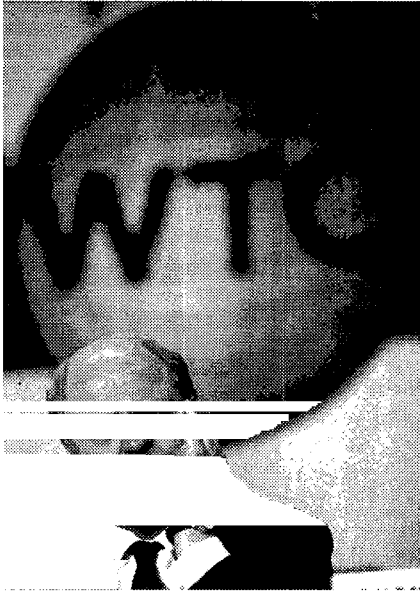
Some trade ministers blamed the meeting's failure on Clinton, who repeatedly has pushed global trade deals that offer no protection for labor rights and the environment, succumbing to popular pressure with an eye toward next fall's election.

**Steelworkers
dump a Huff
bicycle made
with Asian
steel into
Elliot Bay.**



well-dressed, middle-aged nurse, was nonplused. "I think it's great," she said. "I really support what they're striving for. I just hope they keep it peaceful."

On opening day, the action started with the groups trained in civil disobedience gathering in a park near the Pike Place Market before marching into downtown behind a banner carried



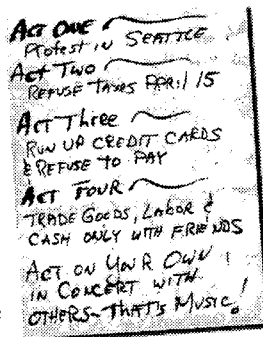
WTO director general Michael Moore

by Steelworkers attacking financier Charles Hurwitz for busting unions and destroying old growth forests. Some protesters, like forest advocate Karen Coulter, were seasoned activists. "The WTO is the latest escalation in the whole system of global corporate rule," she said as the cold morning rain fell. "We need to stop that escalation and then tackle all the other institutions of corporate rule, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank."

Others were relative political novices, like Wayne Flower, 33, who works for a Web site and runs his own cleaning business. "This is what America is all about," he said as he prepared to sit down in the street. "Everything we hold dear, like the eight-hour work day, child labor laws, insurance, sick pay, maternity leave—people had to stand up for that. Since the '80s, Americans have been bred to be complacent, and that's why [our leaders] get away with all this stuff. It's time to wake up and wake everyone else up."

Within an hour, the protesters managed to lock down most of the approaches to the Paramount Theater, where the opening session was scheduled. Although police began using tear gas and pepper spray, prodding people with nightsticks and drawing in armored cars and horses to disperse the crowds, the blockers remained disciplined, chanting, "no violence, peaceful protest." Later in the day, and throughout the following days, police became more abusive, even attacking Seattle residents in their own neighborhoods.

There were union members among the early morning sit-in crowd, but the labor movement had opted for a big stadium rally and march downtown. Ultimately, the labor march and assembly, with Machinists and public workers, Steelworkers and computer temps, gave the other protests credibility, just as they in turn gave the labor rally a sharper edge. The rhetoric at the big labor protest was far more anti-corporate and internationalist than it would have been a few years back. It was a rally not just for American union members whose jobs are threatened by global capital mobility, speakers insisted, but for workers everywhere and for solidarity across borders and social movements.



Yet as union strategists look to the future after Seattle, "the most urgent work is building a stronger labor-Third World progressive alliance," says Thea Lee, an AFL-CIO international economist. "We've done a lot of work making connection with labor unions in developing countries, but it's clear we need to continue that work and move beyond it and build trust with developing country governments and community leaders and environmental and religious leaders before we can make progress."

Partly that means more labor support for developing country critiques of WTO intellectual property protections, especially involving essential medicines, and more debt relief, especially when tied to core labor rights and progressive social policies. For example, Lee says, unions may support easier access to U.S. markets for developing countries that take steps, with technical and financial assistance from the United States, to improve labor rights. It would be the opposite of NAFTA, which gave Mexico—with its neoliberal economic policies and a bad labor record—increased market access.

Labor strategists are starting to recognize that they must support alternatives to the dominant development strategy: suppress labor, attract foreign capital, export heavily. "We need to put meaty political flesh on the argument that respect for core labor rights and a robust democracy are good development policies," argues AFL-CIO public policy director David Smith.

Academic studies do show that on average lower levels of income inequality are linked to faster economic growth. Harvard economist Dani Rodrik has shown that workers earn more in democratic regimes at any particular level of economic development. Also, if the United States is to be credible as an advocate for international labor rights, there's a desperate need for a massive campaign for labor rights at home, including ratification of more International Labor Organization standards.

Building on the momentum from Seattle, critics of corporate globalization are gearing up for a major fight next year on China's accession to the WTO. But it is unclear how to pressure China in any meaningful way, now that Clinton has given China the green light. Clinton's trade deal with China, the most critical of the bilateral deals paving the way for membership, does not need congressional approval. "China will be in the WTO," Lee says. "The only question is how the United States engages with China once it's in the WTO and whether it's granted a temporary or permanent normal trading relationship."

The challenge for all of the groups in Seattle, especially unions and environmentalists, is how to build on their success. "There is such a thing as more of the same," suggests Ralph Nader. "There was a real cutting edge to this demonstration." Unlike participants in many big demonstrations, the Seattle protesters—including the big labor contingent and the students—are likely to talk with people and take action back home. Nader also suggests that WTO critics push initiatives that provoke challenges under the WTO rules, heightening the sense of outrage over the limits they impose.

The Seattle demonstrations have already boosted turnout at protests around the country on related issues from sweatshops to genetically modified foods, and the ongoing campaigns on globalization issues are likely to be the major

PHOTO: ROO HICKS/LIAISON AGENCY/NEWSMAKERS.
FLYER: COURTESY OF MARC HERBST.

vehicles for this new energy. The AFL-CIO and individual unions, as well as groups like Public Citizen and Global Exchange, also plan to intensify pressure on political candidates about WTO, trade and global economic issues.

The dominant argument is that "there is no alternative" to the American model of cowboy capitalism and wide-open markets. But if that's true, key questions need to be asked: What is it about the way the world works that restricts the ability of communities or nations to create alternatives? What needs to be changed to give people more choices? Obviously, changing the WTO is only one part of that solu-

tion, and among critics there is an often fruitless debate about whether it can be reformed or whether new institutions must start from scratch. What's needed instead is a debate about how to push simultaneously for what is achievable in the near term and what is needed in the long run, taking victories where they can be won without abandoning the more ambitious goals. The clearer the movement that coalesced in Seattle can become about those common, long-range goals, the better chance it will have to go beyond stopping the WTO and providing the much needed alternative to corporate globalization. ■

MAKING HISTORY

BY DAVID BACON
SEATTLE

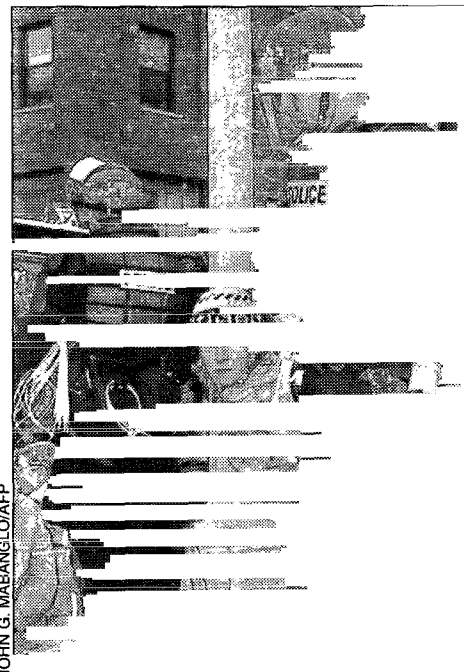
Those who marched or stood or sat in the streets of Seattle made history, and they knew it. And like the great marches against the Vietnam War, or the first sit-ins in the South in the late '50s, it wasn't always easy to see just what history was being made, especially for those closest to the events of the time. Tear gas, rubber bullets and police sweeps, the object of incessant media coverage, are the outward signs of impending change—that the guardians of the social order have grown afraid. And there's always a little history in that.

Poeina, a young woman sitting in the intersection at the corner of Seventh and Stewart, waiting nervously for the cops to cuff her and take her away in her first arrest, knew the basic achievement she and her friends had already won: "I know we got people to listen, and that we changed their minds." It was a statement of hope, like the chant that rose Nov. 30 from streets filled with thousands of demonstrators as the police moved in: "The whole world is watching!"

The Seattle protests put trade on the public agenda, making WTO a universally recognized set of initials in a matter of hours. But the greatest impact of Seattle will be on the people who were there. A certain understanding of the world was forged in the streets here—a realization based, to begin with, on who was there. Environmentalists came protesting the impending destruction of laws protecting clean air and water. Animal rights activists came to protect sea turtles. Trade unionists came fighting for jobs and protesting child labor. Fair trade campaigners arrived ready to debate corporate domination of the process by which trade rules are decided.

Environmental activists in their twenties came with the tactics from the battles in the forests of Northern California and the Pacific Northwest. They carried giant puppets, dressed themselves in costumes rather than carrying signs, and laid

down in busy intersections at the height of morning rush hour. In groups of 20 and 30, they chained their arms together, slipping metal sleeves over hands and chains to make it hard for the police to cut them apart. Two years ago, this tactic was answered by Humboldt County sheriffs, who



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swabbed pepper spray directly into the eyes of protesters at Pacific Lumber Company. Even for veterans of civil disobedience, the chains are a tactic that demands determination and commitment to face down the fear of violent response.

Later the same day, tens of thousands of

union members marched into downtown to join the protest. Having shut down all the ports along the Pacific Coast from Alaska to San Diego, union members chanted and waved picket signs as they filled the streets as far as the eye could see. Each union's members marched together, each with its own color jacket or T-shirt, each carrying banners and hundreds of signs printed for the occasion. Many of the morning's young protesters were visibly impressed by the strength of their numbers and organization.