

J.D. Charlton

# Talking Seattle!

"This is not only a great honor for our city and our state, but a testimony to our region's dependence on trade and its talented and dedicated leadership.

The inherent internationalism of the city, the cooperative spirit among the organizing groups, and the broad community-backing evidenced in Seattle were all factors in the proposal [to give Seattle the WTO conference]."

— *Patricia Davis, president of the Washington Council on International Trade, January 1999*

"Capitalism? No thanks! We will burn your fucking banks!"

— *Chant heard at assembly point*



nly a couple of months after the event, the word "Seattle" has acquired a new meaning. It's where "we" kicked the system.

The word pops up in India when power and port workers come out on mass strike against privatization. "Is it the Seattle effect?" asks a newspaper. The Internet is replete with articles analyzing its meaning. The meeting of the World Bank in Washington, D.C., in April 2000, is posted as the next "Seattle." At the time of writing, dozens of events across the world are planned for May Day 2000 inspired by the demonstrators in Seattle who stopped the conference of the World Trade Organization (WTO) at the beginning of December 1999.

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## Life's Little Ironies

That a turning point in the struggle against the excesses of world capitalism should take place in Seattle is not without its little ironies. Seattle has been lauded as a hub of the burgeoning economies of the Pacific

**"Think the WTO is Bad?  
Wait till you hear  
about Capitalism !"  
— placard**

Rim. A boomtown of the twentieth century's last quarter, "Seattle" is almost a metaphor for high-tech consumption. It is the home of Boeing, the world's biggest aircraft corporation, of Microsoft, and the symbols of galloping consumerism: Starbucks coffeeshop empire and Nike, just down the road. A place to live in grace and comfort. All this explains why the Clinton administration wanted to take the WTO to Seattle.

Yet there is a downside. In the liberalization of the global economy U.S. domination may have increased but millions of American workers have been victims of the shrinkage of basic industry, its relocation, and the intensification of exploitation in the surviving workplace. For some time the cynical and corrupt leaders of the labor unions have been under pressure from their members to organize a fight-back. They chose Seattle because their public profiles would be enhanced in the glare of the international media circus around the WTO meeting.

There is another twist that should not be lost. The new millennium was being ushered in by the system's leaders and its media on an extravagant tide of hype. Millions of new shopping opportunities were being heralded via the cyber supermarket. But their party was ruined in the virtual home of e-commerce.

A fight-back starting in Seattle has yet another lovely resonance. The city was the location of the only "general strike" (so far) in U.S. history. In 1919, in the crisis following the end of World War I with the U.S. government attempting to smash the Russian Revolution, Seattle workers struck. Jeremy Brecher writes:

Anger, hope and militance grew as in a pressure cooker. Nowhere did this radicalization go further than in Seattle. The radical I.W.W. and the A.F.L. Metal Trades Council co-operated in sponsoring a Soldiers, Sailors, and Workingmen's Council, taking the Soviets of the recent Russian Revolution as their model.<sup>1</sup>

This forms a nice backcloth to the events of December 1999.

## Action!

Seattle hit the international media on Monday 30 November 1999, but events were moving in the previous week. Mitchel C. wrote: “No matter where you turn, rallies, teach-ins, and other events are exploding out of the pavement. I went to the International Forum on Globalization that occurred Friday and Saturday. Tickets were sold by Ticketron. Around 2,500 people participated, the huge auditorium filled to capacity for two days, 9 AM to 9 PM.” On Sunday, Mitchel again: “Sunday, 1,500 people took to the streets in a wonderfully colorful, and peaceful (if raucus) procession, hundreds of giant puppets and mass performance theatre, against genetic engineering and the WTO, drummers beating on make-shift instruments, an army of genetically engineered corn, another “army of forested trees, fighting against the evil soldiers of the New World Order.”<sup>2</sup>

*I got on a Greyhound bus in Pittsburgh at 3:00 AM, the morning after Thanksgiving, and traveled two-and-a-half days to Seattle to join the protests against the World Trade Organization. I arrived to see tens of thousands of activists from the widest range of causes I've ever seen in one place, united around a common concern — their desire to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives, otherwise known as democracy.*  
(Damon, Pittsburgh)

We were up at 5 AM on Tuesday the 30th. We had a big day planned. There were two main marches, one leaving from downtown and one from Capitol Hill. I was in the Capitol Hill march. We loaded up all the puppets into trucks and sent the larger ones up the road. On our side, we had an Earth Mother puppet whose head was eight feet in diameter. Her head and each of her hands were mounted on a wheeled cart and her fabric body stretched across the street. We also had a ten-foot-square rolling “pyramid of corporate power.” I was dressed in my full clown ensemble. I wore signs on my front and back that read “WTO — Who elected these Clowns?” I normally refrain from using “clown” as a derogatory term, but I felt justified here somehow. I carried my diabolo with me. (Bill O., Chicago)

The Progressive Librarians' Guild banner elicited quite a few comments. Most surprise — all positive. We were quite a novelty. People first looked at the banner then looked again (just to make sure) and looked us up and down as if to assess what librarians look like outside a library. Finally they

would look one of us in the eye, smile or pat us on the shoulder.... A child asked his mother who we were and she explained "These are the people who make sure Harry Potter stays inside the library." She looked at us, grinned and added, "Among other activities, I'm sure." (Shawna, Jeff, and Corey, Victoria, B.C.)

At 7:30, the march began and turned towards downtown. The rain beat down on us. As we reached key intersections, we saw human chains, lockdowns, and tripods start to emerge. The police forced us to turn several times. We wound our way around toward the Paramount Theater, which was the location of that morning's WTO opening ceremony. We found a way over the highway and there we were. The front of the Paramount Theater was walled in with metro buses. Riot Police stood on the other side. We had a tripod and a locked down human chain on

**"Keep the Sweatshop  
in the Sauna."  
— banner**

the other side of the block. There was a bus blaring music down the block. Protestors got up on top of the bus barrier and yelled at the WTO delegates who made their way around the back of the theater. For a while I thought that the protestors were going to go over the barrier and confront the relatively few police on the other side, but this did not happen. We set about making blockades so the delegates could not get through to attend the meeting. (Bill O.)

I found a great protester line to help barricade and actually exchanged with WTO delegates from South Africa (Afrikaner bastard), Egypt, Germany, and France. Some delegates discussed the issues of child labor, genetically engineered food, etc., in sympathy with our causes. Others were belligerent and got a good rash of chanting, blocking, and deriding in mass numbers. The arrogance of some of these folks was unbelievable. They were very outnumbered but still tried to push through us. It was very satisfying to say "no" to their faces and there was not one damn thing they could do. The shoe was on the other foot. How does that feel? (Jake, Louisiana)

It wasn't bricks that did it. It was massive peaceful protest after laborious turnout work. It was the most unbelievable feeling to rove the canyons of downtown corporate America completely free from state police authority. Tipped dumpsters blocked every intersection. All walks of life cruised the streets going from one line of police stand off to the next.

Before the police gassing and macing rush at nightfall, we felt completely safe in unity with the mass of humanity. If the bladder was full, pee on a Nordstrom Christmas display window next to a graffiti artist. Probably, less human-on-human violent crime was committed downtown that day than any other day of the year. (Jake)

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 their ranks 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 protestors were visibly impressed by the strength of the numbers and organization. For Annie Decker, "the power and size of it made me feel joyful. I was proud that we were together, bringing the WTO into the public eye." (David, Berkeley)

A trickle of delegates was getting through, however, and teams were dispatched to plug the holes. All around the theater were lines of riot police. At each of these lines, protestors made human chains. The police were not going to let us in, but we were not going to let any delegates in either. Some of the delegates who came up on the line I was in were understanding, a few even had conversations with us. Many were very angry and violent, however. One screamed obscenities at us for ten minutes. We would not be provoked. (Bill O.)

**"Ain't no power  
like the power  
of the people and  
the power of the  
people don't stop!  
Whose streets?  
Our streets!  
Whose streets?  
Our streets!"  
— street chant**

The vanguard of the "Big" march arrived downtown about 1:30 in the afternoon, occupying the whole street. Although it came in fits and starts, it flowed past my vantage point for fifty minutes before I found my Salem friends and joined them. We looped through a number of blocks of downtown and then began to head out of downtown, a block over from where the march came in. To my amazement, we could see a steady stream still coming in! It was 2:45. I left the march and stood on the corner to view the rest of the march. By 3 PM the march's end had passed the point at which I could see it entering downtown a block up the street. However, it was still another twenty minutes before the end passed my vantage point. This means that the march that often filled the entire

street took about an hour and a half to pass one point. Could that be less than 50,000? (Peter B.)

**“Brush with  
Direct Action.  
Helps To Prevent  
Truth Decay.”  
— placard**

At this point, the police were doing their best to be cordial and communicative. They talked to the spokespeople for the protestors. They tried to keep the tension down. This was good, but it did not last. As the afternoon wore on it became clear that we were winning. Most of the delegates were unable to make it to the opening of the meetings, and the sessions were canceled. The bus barrier around the Paramount Theater was removed. (Bill O.)

I saw signs for at least these unions: steelworkers, electrical workers, teachers, bricklayers, ILWU [longshoremen], painters, Stanford [University] workers, service employees, teamsters, sheetmetal workers, marine engineers, transit workers, boilermakers, plumbers, steamfitters and refrigeration workers, public service workers of Canada, cement masons, pulp paper and woodworkers, nurses, Canadian airways workers, and carpenters. (Peter B.)

Steve saw “United Steelworkers from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Chicago, Illinois, and Gary, Indiana, United Autoworkers from the Midwest, International Longshore and Warehouse Union [workers] from right down the West coast, Service Employees International Union members from all over, Teamsters from all over, International Association of Machinists, mainly from the Northwest, and many craft unions—carpenters, boilermakers, and sheetmetal workers mainly from the Northwest.”

Togetherness was the theme of the labor rally, not only solidarity among workers of the world, but of organized labor with everyone else. There were incredible sights of Teamster president James Hoffa sharing a stage with student anti-sweat shop activists, of Earth Firsters marching with Sierra Clubbers, and a chain of bare-breasted BGH-free Lesbian Avengers weaving through a crowd of machinists. (Doug Henwood)

**“Capitalism Destroys All Life.” — placard**

**“Police Riot! Mass Arrests!”**

There were around 1,000 Seattle police, with many coming in from outlying areas — King County sheriffs, and cops from other cities, perhaps as many as another 1,000. There were also 200 National Guard who were mostly held in reserve. All the cops were in riot gear — padding, shields, with gas masks at the ready or on. The suppression of free speech and assembly was a conscious policy by the city, state, and federal governments. The pressure was intense from the Feds — Secret Service (since Clinton came to town on Wednesday, December 1) and specifically from Secretary of State Madeline Albright and Attorney General Janet Reno. Reno demanded that the National Guard be called out. Mayor Schell imposed a “no protest zone” around the Convention Center and hotels where the delegates were staying. There was a 7 PM to 7 AM curfew through wide areas of downtown. The “state of emergency” declared by Mayor Schell was endorsed by the city council with no effective opposition and even with support from the so-called “progressives” on the council. The police chief and others tried to claim that “excesses” by the cops were few and understandable considering the strain they were under. In fact, “excesses” were the rule. The government decided to clear out the protestors and punish them for their success on November 30. In doing so, tear gas, pepper spray, rubber and wooden bullets, percussion grenades, clubs, and arrests were all allowed and encouraged. More than 600 were arrested. The police chased protestors into a residential/business neighborhood a mile out of downtown with no pretext of defending the Convention Center area. This was not an “excess.” It could have been stopped at anytime by city officials, but it wasn’t. It was clear policy. (Steve, Seattle)

**“We don’t need  
no corporations.  
We don’t need  
no thought control.  
Lock the delegates  
in the bathroom.  
WTO has got to go.  
Hey, coppers!  
Leave those kids  
alone!” — Pink Floyd,  
street chant**

The mood was jubilant, but our work was not finished. I hooked back up with the giant puppets. The organizers with radios were sending us to “trouble spots” where there was tension brewing or small groups in need of support. We brought the puppets to each of the barriers and I entertained the locked-down human chains. Our Earth Mother Puppet was so large that its very presence changed the energy of every intersection we came to. (Bill O.)

The “legal” AFL-CIO march, in which we were participating, had originally planned to merge with the direct action people on Fifth Avenue before turning round and heading back to Seattle Center. However, in a decision that we considered a betrayal of our frontline comrades, the AFL-CIO organizers detoured the march route.... A group of marshals stood in front of a street to block our path towards the direct action protesters. We decided to join the direct action group and continued straight through the line of marshals.... We found ourselves in a war zone....” (Shawna, Jeff, and Corey)

**“Teamsters and Turtles  
Together at Last!”  
— placard carried  
by a Teamster**

In the late afternoon we arrived at a major downtown intersection. The human chain here had already been gassed, but they were holding strong. We rolled up with the puppets and it was clear that there was an attack brewing. Behind the protestors was a police line. Behind them were two more lines in formation, gas masks on and ready. Behind them was a line of mounted police. They were in formation as well. It was clear that this mass of protestors was about to be gassed and sprayed. We brought the puppets in close. My companions started the crowd singing.

Step by step, the longest march, can be won, can be won.  
Many stones may form an arch, singly none, singly none.  
And with union what we will, can be accomplished still.  
Drops of water turn a mill, singly none, singly none.

Drummers and a trumpet player played along. I moved up to the police line and started to do my clown routine, making a spectacle out of myself. The human chain, whose faces had been set in grimaces of fear and apprehension became relaxed and joyful. A carnival atmosphere quickly developed, attracting TV cameras. It was a surreal sight, the joy of the protestors and the grim, storm-trooper visages of the police, tensing for attack. (Bill O.)

As it happened, however, no attack came. The police in the front started to relax their bodies. I heard one laugh at a bit of my slapstick. A

**“WTO = Global Injustice!” — placard**



whiff of tear gas from another confrontation floated past, making our eyes water. I waved my hand in front of my face. “Whoa, was that one of you guys?” I asked the cops. Two broke out laughing. Behind the lines, the ranking police officers were having a conference. They pointed in our direction and at the cameras. They ordered the horses and the reinforcements to stand down. They were willing to order their men to attack totally peaceful people, but the clown and the puppets were too much for them.

By about five o’clock, the protests were winding down. Groups were unlocking and dispersing on their own. People were making plans for the next day. It was dark, meetings were over, and we had succeeded. We were moving the puppets around downtown to bring them back for storage for the night. It was in this context that the “violence” started. Be clear, the only violence that happened up until this point was from the police, directed at peaceful, nonviolent protesters engaged in civil disobedience. (Bill O.)

The police backlash that Tuesday and Wednesday night was atrocious. I witnessed it personally in the residential neighborhood of Capital Hill. Cops (with encouragement from Clinton’s Secret Service, as reported in the *Seattle P-I*, our own corporate media) aggressively chased and maced and gassed and clubbed and tackled innocent bystanders as well as protesters outside of the curfew police-state zone. I was gassed but too quick to be maced or clubbed. A moderate Republican county councilperson, a local CBS reporter, and a young woman, an innocent bystander, were shoved and gassed, clubbed and arrested. [The woman was] thrown face down on the concrete and [her] head [was] stepped on while her arms were pulled back — in this residential neighborhood. And yet, the police could not maintain control. (Jon)

**“The Senators who  
Ratified the WTO  
Treaty Should Be  
Tried for Treason.”  
— placard**

Onlookers began yelling, “Get ready! They’re going to do it! Get ready!” I heard the spray and people began screaming in pain. I was just expecting spray, so I was pretty surprised when I felt one of those big clubs land on the top of my head. The guy behind me took most of the force from the blow, so I wasn’t hurt badly. I covered my head with my arm and covered my eyes with my hand, as the screams continued and it became obvious — even though I couldn’t see anything from

underneath my bandana — that the cops were not only spraying but beating the people as well. A police officer then grabbed my hand and pulled it away from my face and sprayed me in the eyes with a canister of pepper spray. (Damon)

The police were using concussion grenades. They were shooting teargas canisters straight at protesters' faces. They were using so-called rubber bullets. These are actually hard plastic. Some of the damage I saw: these plastic bullets took off part of one person's jaw, smashed teeth in other peoples' mouths. I saw police arrest people who had their hands up in the air screaming "we are peacefully protesting!" (Dr. Richard Andrea, NYC)

We were peacefully marching into downtown from the waterfront. The march was led by Bob Hasagawa, president of the 14,000-strong Teamsters Local 174. He attempted to make a speech at the steelworkers rally — but they cut him off. So he made a speech from a soapbox where he vowed that if anyone was going to be arrested he would be the first (although he wasn't arrested). The march grew to nearly 1,000 people,

**"Monsanto:  
Don't Eat It —  
Bite Back —  
Defeat It!"  
— placard**

and it felt like we owned the streets of Seattle — that feeling lasted about 10 seconds. From out of nowhere, and from two different directions, the cops came in hard with tear gas and percussion grenades. They split the march into several pieces — one group of 300 and another group of 200.

Neither group had broken any laws or even entered into the no-protest zone (although we were trying to take it there). Both were pinned down by the cops and people were arrested. The cops put us on city buses to be processed. After they filled the fourth bus — they ran out of room and let the rest go. It seems that everyone in the city knew who we were. People lined the streets to cheer us as our bus passed. (Kent, Seattle)

In custody, most of the people I met had never been arrested before but were no less militant for it. I was stunned by the level of militancy. There was no question on most people's minds that they were fiercely devoted

**"Stop Exploiting Workers!" — steelworkers' placard**

to solidarity and that they would do whatever it would take to remain in jail till all our demands were met. (Jon, Seattle)

The following were fellow detainees of Kent's:

- **Teamster organizer:** young guy early thirties. Progressive wing of the Teamsters and member of Teamsters for a Democratic Union (reform movement in the Teamsters).
- **Postal worker:** Early thirties, active when he was in college, but had not been active for years. Got fed up with world and protested the WTO. His arrest was an education for him. He now wants to tear the head off the city, state, and country that had him beaten, teargassed, and arrested. Has become more active in his union as a result of being disciplined at work for being jailed.
- **Graduate student** (University of Indiana): late thirties. Studying agricultural engineering.
- **Citizen of India:** faces possible deportation six months before he earns his doctoral degree.
- **Sheetmetal worker:** late twenties. Helped organize her entire workplace into the sheetmetal workers union.
- **Environmental activist:** early twenties. From Arcadia, California (a city heavy into green politics). I talked to him a lot. He asked about the history of the Teamsters and where he could find out more about the labor movement. Wants to hold a meeting in Arcadia about the battle in Seattle.
- **Direct Action Network leading activist:** early thirties. Helped lead the jail solidarity action.
- **Amanda/student activist:** early twenties. Was arrested with me and on my bus. She was active against the U.S. in Kosovo and against the bombing of Iraq.
- **Mike/graduate student** (University of Washington, genetics): mid-twenties. His first demonstration ever.

## **Mobilization and Motives**

It seems that between 60,000<sup>3</sup> and 80,000 people participated in the events over the five days.<sup>4</sup> This raises two interesting points. First, a total of some 30,000 to 40,000 people from one region is impressive enough though not unprecedented. From the Seattle region it is remarkable when we realize its geographical location. The urban area is small and

distant from other conurbations. By road Vancouver is two hours to the north. Portland is three hours and the San Francisco Bay Area sixteen hours to the south. Minneapolis to the east is thirty hours. Organizers cannot rely on a vast influx from adjoining urban centers. Only very well prepared and financed contingents, plus highly motivated individuals, could drop in by air. All this makes a national demonstration in Seattle logistically difficult and its success all the more startling.<sup>5</sup>

It is remarkable just how many came from far and wide. On a conservative estimate of numbers, 20,000 people traveled a very long way. Over 3,000 came from Canada; the bulk from Vancouver, but there were even busloads from Ontario, 2,000 miles away. Probably more than 10,000 traveled up the coast from Oregon and California. One respondent mentions a "caravan" from California and another from eastern Canada. There were certainly contingents from, at least, Chicago, New York, Boston, Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, Fort Collins and Denver (Colo.), Hartford (Conn.), Kent (Ohio), Bloomington (Ind.), Knoxville (Tenn.), Nevada, Georgia, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Iowa. It speaks of considerable organization and there is already plenty of evidence of that.

From January 1999 messages were appearing on the Net. Many, like Sam from the Bay Area first saw it there. "Six months prior to the WTO meeting I became aware from the Internet that a massive protest was in preparation. The Direct Action Network and the Anarchist Information Service were very active on the Internet but also on the ground, informing and co-ordinating and training. Many people say they heard about Seattle in the summer and from local sources. Geoff said, "I heard about it from anarchist circles in the Bay Area." "I got an anonymous flyer from some anarchists in Olympia, a small city near Washington," records Steven; "postering and media reports," says Chris from Vancouver. Akio reports: "On the West coast, activist communities had been abreast of the plans for six months prior to the event. It was widely circulated knowledge that big plans were being drafted." Ann from Victoria, B.C., says: "I first heard about it in May when a Philippines Solidarity activist in Victoria went to a preparatory meeting in Seattle." Tresa, a 30-year-old Seattle teacher: "I was in charge of the Religious School... We ended up having some great classes for the seventh, eighth, and ninth graders. The eighth grade teacher, in particular, had been planning a Holocaust lesson and was wondering how to tie it in with Chanukah. We talked about the Maccabees, then I got her to the

WTO. The students come in early to class and we ate pizza together so we had a good chance to start conversations then (a number of them had been to demos before school).

In the summer the Ruckus Society and the Rain Forest Action Network sponsored a training camp in northern Washington. According to *Z Magazine* 150 activists held workshops that “ranged from urban climbing and banner-making to nonviolence training and peacekeeping, scouting, technical lockdowns and blockades, media, website design, street theatre, legal tactics, even drumming.” Throughout the autumn, the report explained, “warehouses [were] being scouted as potential squats. Seattle Food Not Bombs [was] making preparations to feed the troops. A sophisticated media collective [was] formed to ensure that the good work of protesters [was] neither ignored nor marginalized. Low-power ‘pirate’ radio activists [were set up as] communications for the masses, and a network of inconspicuous bike messengers [was to] feed information from the streets to the clandestine transmitters.”<sup>6</sup>

Direct Action activists brought an enormous amount to the success in Seattle but the biggest story was the engagement of labor unions after decades of relative passivity and defeat. The leadership of the AFL-CIO was there in force. Against a background of a long-term employer offensive, and falling revenues, the WTO was a great stage to make its presence felt. With a vulnerable Democratic president in a presidential election year, pressure on the wanna-bes Gore and Bradley would not be out of place. So they brought their mobilizing facilities to bear in a fashion not experienced in recent memory. The AFL-CIO website records that “union activists, many arriving in more than 200 buses hired for the occasion, began gathering at Memorial Stadium two hours before a 10:30 rally. An estimated 30,000 to 50,000 participants overflowed the stadium and spilled into the adjoining park...more than 50 unions, 25 states, and 144 countries were among the activists.” Many respondents to the questionnaire record that union funds were behind the mobilization of their cohorts.

Of course the success of the operation depended on grassroots rank and file organization. Ron Judd, executive secretary of the King County Labor Council (Seattle) said, “We went into churches, community groups, neighborhood organizations, environmental meetings, schools, high schools, colleges, universities, and labor halls, even in people’s homes, to talk to them about the WTO and how it affects their lives.”<sup>7</sup>



Labor on the march, Seattle, December 1999

Tina from Chicago said, “The first I heard was about the labor mobilization, at a labor organizers meeting in April.” Kent from Seattle records, “In Seattle anti-WTO groups organized at colleges — and most unions had members organizing their co-workers around the WTO. People started talking about the WTO nearly a year ago. The sting of NAFTA is still fresh in the minds of many — so the bitterness was already there.” Jeff, an aerospace worker from Wilmington, Mass., went with fifteen members of North Shore Boston Labor Council. His factory is being re-located to Mexico. “We were pissed. After seven or eight years working on trade issues in our local union, it was not hard to sign up eleven people for the trip. Some great trade unionists in the council came along as well. All of us paid our own way and looked to have some fun as well as do some serious protesting.”

When we consider who the activists were and what took them to Seattle we uncover an immense variety of background and personal history. Like Annie from Santa Cruz, Calif., several talk of “a radical family background in terms of fighting capitalism and racism through labor movement organizing and civil rights, both communist and anarchist.” Several others record radical/socialist/union family histories while others have activist histories themselves. Sam, from the Bay Area, says he is “70+, a WWII veteran with many years of participation in union and political activities.” Michelle, a socialist from Toronto, is 37. She has been a political and trade union activist for twenty years, “from protesting Anita Bryant in the late 70s, to the Gulf War, the national student strike in 1995, the mass strikes in Ontario in 1995-97, etc.” Kent is a 29-year-old socialist metal worker from Seattle and six years a political and union activist. Annie is a 21-year-old student. She has done an AFL-CIO internship, done civil disobedience for unions, started a student labor club on campus, and done police brutality protests. Bill O. is 24. He writes, “I have been in Art and Revolution for about a year and a half (in Chicago). I am a clown and an actor by trade.” Anon, 47, is an “unemployed paralegal, left, anarchist, Jewish atheist.” Tina from Chicago is 46. She writes, “[I have been]...an activist for thirty years, woman’s movement, anti-war, various (non-electoral) political movements, union for twenty years.” Elizabeth, a student in her early twenties: “Helped organize as a national leader in the North American Ad Hoc Student Coalition for Fair Trade.” Akio is a 24-year-old college graduate from Eugene who says, “Seattle was my introduction to the culture of activism.”

Respondents indicated where they believed the pull to Seattle came from. “Among the rads and youth,” wrote Akio, “the environment seemed to be the primary concern, followed pretty closely by human rights, especially sweatshop labor...The AFL’s constituency was primarily concerned with labor rights and erecting international child labor laws, and also voiced a significant amount of concern for the environment. In my opinion, though, more significant than the variety of issues comprising the protest was the general sentiment that democracy is being replaced by corporate oligarchy.”

Elizabeth from Vancouver put it down to the “threat to public services, including education, threat to democracy and ability of governments to regulate and create standards, protect labor rights and safety

and environmental standards. More pressure to privatize and on the global south to give up completely on labor, health, and environmental standards.” Tina saw “the extraordinary development of the organized labor movement calling for action in the streets on economic/political issues — first time I remember it happening EVER.” An anonymous guy from Vancouver simply wrote, “I hate capitalism.”

Steven wrote:

I want to tear down borders and democratize corporations. Looked like a good place to do it! Many people wanted to save trees. But most of all I think people are just sick as hell of corporate control. Here [in the States] elections are all bought and paid for by corporate money. Corporations are considered people, with freedom of speech, but are never given the death penalty for dumping millions of gallons of oil into the ocean or for killing Indians at Bhopal, or whatever.

Tom’s view was that “I think some people just want to fuck with the power structures because they resent their parents.”

Bill O. said he was “interested in fighting the enormous and growing influence of unaccountable transnational corporations and the human rights and environmental havoc that these monsters promulgate. The WTO is one part of a vast complicated system to re-colonize the third world. Almost any issue can be traced back to the systematized power of capital.

## **Thinking Seattle**

Surely, the very first thing to register about the events in Seattle is its anarchic excitement; the sense, in the often almost breathless accounts, of people experiencing a kind of birth of the new. Amber from Denver said, “I came here to protest the killing of turtles. I’m going home determined to turn the world upside down.” “Best thing since... whole wheat bread!” says Tina. For Dean, “It changed the world and the movement.” Jon says, “I am still trying to understand it all. I am proud to have been there and feel like we accomplished far more than we could have predicted.” “I think it made me believe we can actually change things,” writes Albert. And Steve just writes, “Yeah! Fuck shit up!” “When can we have another one?” asks Michelle. A locked-out Kaiser aluminum worker said, “A year ago I thought a redwood deck was the most





Street Battles, Seattle, December 1999

beautiful thing in the world. Now I understand the importance of sustainability. I guess I'm an environmentalist now."<sup>8</sup>

From the union bureaucrats paraphrasing Marx, to the Lesbian Avenger proclaiming that "my nipples stand in solidarity with the Steelworkers and Teamsters and all the laboring people," there is a sense of possibility<sup>9</sup> of moving into a new politics with agendas not yet written.

Many demonstrations would throw up an activist profile similar to Seattle in its variety: especially among its organizers and certainly around the environmental issues that have characterized much radical action in the recent past. Yet, the best lieutenants cannot build a mass demonstration by themselves. There must be an "army" ready to respond. That there was, speaks of an enormous depth of feeling; a raised consciousness across a significant swath of society.

There have been numerous courageous actions by environmental activists and a rising level of interest in the issues they constantly raise. A whole generation of high school and college students has been touched, so to speak, by dolphins, giant redwoods, the rain forests, the green house effect, and urban pollution. And, there aren't any face masks strong enough to block the stench of corruption at the top.

For workers across the western world the past quarter of a century has been an experience of retreat and retrenchment faced with declining wages, rising prices, and severe discipline in the workplace. Joe B., from Portland expresses it well: “You go out to work — if you’re lucky. Some trumped up bastard tells you the time of day. Your wages go up — but not at the rate of cabbages at Wal-Mart. Then the plant shuts down.” It is this cry that is being heard more and more but it still is largely hesitant — if angry. The mobilization for Seattle is the great example, so far, of a shift from awareness and attitude to action.

In one important respect this movement’s composition is different from the movement of the sixties when, by and large, the working class and its labor unions were not involved. In Seattle it is quite clear that the largest contingents were from that constituency. By the end of the event sections of it were in a close and apparently harmonious relationship with the “natural” constituency of demonstrators: “students,” environmentalists of several stripes, sixty-eight veterans and their children.

Much of the media evinced surprise as if a sort of Berlin Wall existed between the constituencies. This ignores important changes that have taken place over thirty years. The working class has not disappeared; its composition has altered. There are new occupations and old ones have changed. The skilled have been de-skilled and whole areas of formerly “middle-class” labor has been subordinated to “factory-style” routine, discipline, and insecurity. At the same time the expansion of education has tipped masses of college graduates, often overqualified, into such jobs. The steadily falling vote in U.S. presidential elections has been one register of the growth of an enormous chunk of the population with a properly cynical attitude to the regular political process. This does not make them conscious revolutionaries over night. Nevertheless, there are fresh tensions and anxieties to add to permanent ones. Seattle is an example of a popular upsurge, a reaction to such tensions. They are quite thrilling in their capacity to break molds.

Most folks, from all campaigns and groups, went to Seattle with only the vague goal of demonstrating effectively against the disparate excesses of the WTO. The scale of the mobilization surprised many of them. The crude violence of the law and order machine shocked everyone. Enormous warmth was expressed for the birth of new alliances. Ideas were in the crucible. Labor bureaucrats, arriving with a nationalist/protectionist agenda felt the pressure from their audience to mute

such positions in favor of an internationalist stance. Jeff, the aerospace worker from Massachusetts, wrote, "There could be no mistake that this was not a Pat Buchanan crew. This makes building alliances easier, both within the United States and across the borders. We've come along way from thinking that the answer is just to 'Buy American'."

David, from Berkeley, California, has the last word:

Those who marched or stood or sat in the streets of Seattle this week 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 was not 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. But perhaps the greatest impact of Seattle will be on the people who were there. Just as anti-war demonstrations and civil rights sit-ins of decades ago were focal points, from which people fanned out across the country, spreading the gospel of their movement, Seattle is also a beginning of something greater yet to come. What will the people who filled its downtown streets take with them back into this city's rainy neighborhoods, or to similar communities in towns and cities across the country?

## Notes

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1. Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* Rev. ed. (Boston: South End Press, 1997), 104.
2. Doug Henwood, *Left Business Observer* (LBO) website, 30 November, 1999.
3. No respondent came in at under the estimated 40,000. The highest suggestion was "over 100,000." The best guess is somewhere in the region of 60,000 to 80,000.

4. Estimates of where people came from varied wildly from 15 percent to 80 percent from the Seattle locality but the majority suggest 50 percent to 70 percent local, so we could settle for around 60 percent or 40,000 people!
5. A WTO conference might easily have been scheduled for, say Washington, D.C. Given that city's relationship to contingent conurbations down the east coast we might now have been reviewing and assessing a quite enormous demonstration. The level of local participation in Seattle is therefore very remarkable and must surely reflect a new engagement. (*Added note* [May 2000]: The very success of Seattle no doubt made the labor leaders nervous, making their support for April 16th lukewarm. Their endorsement came late and certainly limited the size of labor contingents in D.C., and thus the overall size.)
6. Denis Moynihan, *Z Magazine*, December 1999.
7. Report by Kim Murphy and Nancy Cleeland, *Los Angeles Times*, 4 December 1999.
8. Henwood, *Left Business Observer*.

