
The battle of Seattle

What happened in Seattle was historical. Regardless of whether the ministerial conference's failure to reach an agreement was the result of the action of the thousands of people in the streets or the result of the internal contradictions of governments -or a combination of both- the fact is that history was made in the streets and not in the "green rooms."

What was historical was not the fact that the police -which as everyone now knows is not that different in the US than elsewhere- used batons, tear gas, rubber bullets, helicopters and other "peace-keeping" tools. That is the usual pattern used by governments whenever they get frightened. The US government proved to be no exception. What was historical was the fact that so many people, from all over the world, got together and expressed -through different means- a common demand: no new round! Not because all those people were against trade in itself, but because they all shared the view that trade must be equitable, beneficial to people and respectful of the environment. Those people knew that the WTO negotiations were going in the opposite direction -inequitable, beneficial to transnational corporations and disrespectful to the environment- and joined forces to oppose it.

The different people present in Seattle carried out their activities in different arenas. Some organized seminars open to activists and government delegates, others lobbied the different government officials, many disseminated their viewpoints on paper and in electronic format, some organized press conferences, others implemented community radio programmes, a few carried out high profile actions inside and outside the conference room -for instance the Rainforest Action Network's huge banners hanging from a crane- and many other activities. But most importantly: all the above activities took place within the special atmosphere created by the scores of thousands of people in the streets which resisted -in spite of the cold, the wind, the rain and the police- throughout the WTO ministerial. That heroic resistance in the streets was not only the core component of the protest, but also provided additional strength to the people involved in the other activities and most participated in both street and indoor activities. Most importantly, the street got the media's attention. When, in a normal situation, journalists would have focused on interviewing government delegates, in this case they turned their attention to the protesters.

It is obvious that this was not a spontaneous struggle. Much research, awareness raising, training, information dissemination, networking and organization took place well before the meeting. But neither was it a centralized activity. Many people converged to Seattle through separate channels and only joined forces there, unaware of who the other people were, but somehow knowing that they were on the same side.

Seattle was in many aspects a huge success for WTO opponents and a catastrophic failure for the future of this institution. The protest achieved an incredible worldwide media coverage. Whenever people from around the world hear again about the WTO, they will remember the battle of Seattle and they will at least know that something smells rotten with this organization. This is a very good start indeed.

But even more importantly, Seattle showed ways forward for many of the local struggles which are

taking place throughout the world to face the same forces leading to social and environmental disaster. It showed the strength that can be developed through decentralized and coordinated action. It showed that people from all cultures can come together when there is a common and deeply felt objective. And it showed the inherent weakness of the seemingly invincible alliance of corporations, multilateral organizations and governments. Some 50,000 people -armed only with their convictions- made the whole building rock and this happened within the boundaries of the mightiest military and economic power on Earth. The apparently impossible seems to be -after this- becoming possible.