

**The December 1999 Seattle Protest Against the World Trade Organization
Talk at the University of Toulouse, sponsored by the AGET
Thursday, February 1, 2001**

A. INTRODUCTION OF DAN LEAHY (AGET or Professor Marie-Pierre Pouly).

Professor Political Economy and Labor Studies at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington since 1984.

Director of Evergreen's Labor Education Center for union members in Washington state from 1987 to 1994.

Coordinator of the Tri-national Coalition to Defend Public Education in Canada, the US and Mexico for, 1995 to present. (A coalition of teacher unions to stop privatisation of public education).

Currently, he is on leave until the Fall of 2001 when he returns to teaching at Evergreen.

B. INTRODUCTION OF DAN LEAHY IN RELATION TO SEATTLE DEMONSTRATIONS (AGET or Professor Pouly)

Organized a full time class in political economy for 70 students in the Fall of 1999 with a focus on the World Trade Organization.

Organized a three day, "preparatory" conference in October, 1999, so that activists from labor, native American, student and environmental groups could learn about the WTO and discuss their plans for the Seattle demonstrations.

Spent one week in Seattle during the WTO demonstrations participating in educational forums and street protests.

Organized a "Community De-Briefing" in Olympia, Washington immediately following the end of the Seattle demonstrations.

Organized the resources to publish Voices which was edited and produced by Stephanie Guilloud. Voices is a 100 page anthology of narratives, photos and poems by people who shut down the WTO.

TALK BY DAN LEAHY

THANK YOU

The AGET for invitation and interest
Congratulate AGET for its student sponsored conference (a first)
Professor Pouly for translation
Danielle Canabis for interest in creating a student Exchange with Evergreen.
French Students for support of Evergreen when we came under attack
as a result of inviting Mumia to be our June 1999 Graduation Speaker

OUTLINE OF MY TALK

Where did the 50,000 demonstrators come from?
What were their main positions with regard to the World Trade Organization?
What exactly happened in Seattle during the WTO protests?
How did those who wanted to “shut down the WTO” organize themselves?
What was the significance of the Seattle demonstrations?

WHERE DID THEY COME FROM

They came from a series of well organized social movements that had been protesting U. S. “free trade policies” since the early 1990s.

1. U.S. labor, environmental and community groups opposed the North American Free Trade Agreement from 1990. They learned to work with similar groups in Canada and Mexico and they almost defeated the agreement in the U.S. Congress in 1993.
2. NAFTA came into force on January 1, 1994. This was the first day of the Zapatista Rebellion in Mexico’s southern state of Chiapas.

The Zapatistas said that NAFTA was the death knell for indigenous people. They called upon civil society to organize a new social order based on cooperation and social justice, rather than on competition and economic inequality.

Many people in North America and throughout the world responded to their call.

3. With renewed energy from the Zapatista rebellion, U.S. social movements won a significant victory in 1996. They lobbied the U.S. Congress and stopped the President Clinton from receiving “Fast Track Authority” to negotiate free trade agreements.

Fast track authority is granted to the President for a specific period of time. Within this time, he can sign agreements and present them to Congress for a vote without the possibility of amendments.

The main reason the Free Trade Area of the Americas Agreement (FTAA) has been slowed down is that the US President does not have fast track authority.

4. Soon after the Fast Track Victory, these same groups began hearing about secret negotiations in Paris sponsored by the OECD to create a Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI).

This agreement, modeled on NAFTA’s Chapter 11, would eliminate the ability of any level of government to condition international corporate activity in their communities.

National and local groups began coordinating with groups throughout the world to expose and defeat the MAI. Negotiations collapsed in 1998 when France withdrew.

It is important to note, however, that local groups all along the west coast of the United States has successfully lobbied city governments to pass resolutions opposing the MAI.

After the MAI negotiations collapsed, these same local governments began to believe that the investment provisions of the MAI could be included in the WTO negotiations in Seattle:

5. The final source of people and leadership came out of the work of young people in the prison reform movement and in the radical environmental movement.

Government policies in the United States in the 1990s have promoted a massive prison construction program to jail and punish primarily young people of color. To many young organizers, Mumia is a symbol of this official oppression and they learned their first political lessons mobilizing his defense and organizing other prison reform efforts.

Governmental policies have also promoted commercial over environmental interests and many young people developed sophisticated direct action tactics to stop environmental destruction. They had also begun to work directly with the Steelworkers unions to confront the Kaiser corporation.

POINT: When all these groups heard that the WTO was coming to Seattle, it was as if this elusive enemy which met in exclusive clubs like Davos or in secret meetings in Paris was finally coming to a place the people could reach.

WHAT WERE THEIR MAIN POSITIONS?

1. U.S. Labor Unions

The national AFL-CIO's position was that labor rights should be included in any new round of negotiations. If not, there should be no new round.

By late September, 1999, the national AFL-CIO agreed to sponsor a labor rally and conduct a legal march on the first day of the WTO meeting, Tuesday November 30th. They made it clear that they would not attempt to disrupt or stop the WTO meeting and that they would not engage in acts of civil disobedience.

However, there were some unions who wanted to take a stronger position. The King County Labor Council, the local affiliate of the AFL-CIO, had been very active in promoting a large demonstration against the WTO. Also, unions like the Longshore (ILWU), the Steelworkers (USWA) and the Teamsters (IBT) had led the fight against NAFTA and Fast Track. These unions had very active locals in Washington State.

It is also important to remember that Seattle and Washington State have a very radical labor tradition and is one of the strongest union states in the U.S.

2. U.S. Environmental Organizations

Environmental organizations in the U.S. took the general position that there should be No New Round of Negotiations agreed to by the WTO in Seattle.

They wanted an evaluation of the WTO itself.

When the WTO was established in 1995, they believed GATT Article XX would protect national environmental policies. They were wrong. WTO Dispute Panels said Article XX protections only applied when they were “least trade restrictive.” In other words, commercial interests were superior to environmental interests.

Environmental groups agreed to put money and resources into week long educational conferences and legally sanctioned protest marches.

3. Internationally Oriented Community and Church Organizations

These groups had a long history of linking social struggles in Third World countries to community work in the United States. Many of these groups saw the WTO as a new expression of Western colonialism and considered it an illegitimate institution.

They demanded a cancellation of the Third World debt and committed to mobilize educational forums, as well as a major protest march on Monday evening.

4. Direct Action Network

This was a new coalition formed seven months before Seattle with the explicit purpose of stopping the WTO meeting through creating a festival of resistance, engaging in non-violent acts of mass civil disobedience and practicing jail solidarity.

The Direct Action Network conducted civil disobedience workshops and training camps all along the west coast of the United States and distributed literature and recruitment cards to “Shut Down the WTO.”

Strategically they divided Seattle into a “pie” with the World Trade Center in the middle of the pie. Each slice of the pie was the responsibility of a “cluster” of affinity groups. Each affinity group was made up of 10-15 people who had planned a particular action for Tuesday morning, the opening day.

A week before the opening of the WTO and during the week of the WTO Ministerial, these cluster and affinity groups participated in a Spokes-Council meeting during which general strategy was discussed and decided upon. These meetings and other preparations were held in the “Convergence” space, an abandoned night club close to downtown Seattle.

Throughout the summer and fall of 1999, many of the young people from the Mumia movement and from the radical direct action environmental movement joined this network, formed affinity groups, received training and made plans to "shut down the WTO."

WHAT EXACTLY HAPPENED IN SEATTLE?

FOUR STAGES

The Third Ministerial was scheduled to open Tuesday morning, November 30th, at the Paramount Theater in downtown Seattle. Six thousand delegates were expected and twenty-four heads of state. The Ministerial was scheduled to last until Friday and most formal meetings were to be held in Seattle's World Trade Center.

The events of the week can be broken down into Four Stages:

1. Educational Forums on the Weekend Prior to the Opening

For several days before the opening of the WTO Ministerial practically all protest groups held educational conferences and forums on practically all aspects of the WTO organization and its free trade policies. These events were attended by thousands of people.

2. Massive Protest Marches: Sunday, Monday and Tuesday Morning (N30).

A series of marches began building momentum for Tuesday. The Direct Action Network mobilized several thousand for a neighborhood march on Sunday.

Church, international and some parts of labor mobilized five thousand on Monday evening to encircle the formal reception party for WTO delegates.

At 7:00 am on Tuesday, the Direct Action Network led two simultaneous marches of direct action protestors who took up positions in front of the Paramount theatre, the Sheraton Hotel and the World Trade Center and blocked intersections in the immediate area.

They were soon joined by protest marchers from Seattle's International community and by student marchers from the University of Washington.

The Labor Rally was scheduled for ten o'clock and the 30,000 strong labor march reached downtown in the early afternoon.

By early afternoon, there was an estimated 50,000 people in downtown Seattle. The Opening Ceremonies at the Paramount Theater had been cancelled. Many of the delegates were trapped in their Hotels. The WTO sessions were not taking place. The protestors had control of downtown Seattle.

3. Government Attacks the Protestors: Tuesday Afternoon and Wednesday

The 30,000 person labor march came close to where the Direct Action Network protestors were blocking downtown Seattle, but it kept moving past them and returned to the site of their rally which was at least 20 blocks from downtown Seattle.

Almost simultaneous with labor's departure from downtown Seattle, the Mayor of Seattle declared an emergency, declared a "no protest zone" in the city center, ordered a curfew from 5:00 pm to 7:00 am and asked for help from other police agencies. (Many believe the City's strategy was to push the downtown protestors out as the labor march returned to their rally site).

At the same time, the Governor signed a proclamation of emergency and ordered national guard and state police to Seattle.

Beginning Tuesday afternoon and continuing through Wednesday night, multiple police agencies, utilizing roving groups of "robo cops" and "peace keeper" armored cars, terrorized protestors and citizens in the no protest zone, in sanctioned marches, in areas outside the no protest zone and in nearby neighborhoods. They used pepper spray, CS Gas, rubber bullets, concussion grenades and mass arrests. 578 people had been arrested by Wednesday night.

It is also important to remember that President Clinton had arrived in Seattle Tuesday night and was moving around the city during the day on Wednesday.

4. Protest Forces Re-mobilized for Final Victory: Thursday and Friday.

On Thursday afternoon, the Direct Action Network led protest marches to the King County Jail in downtown Seattle. There were 600 protestors inside the jail. The protestors blocked the front doors and surround the jail with several thousand protestors. They remained there through early Friday morning.

These protestors were now directly joined by Steelworkers and Teamsters. The Longshore union also threatened to close the Port of Seattle if negotiations failed to release the jailed protestors. Many protestors were released from jail Thursday evening and early Friday.

On Friday, The King County Labor Council called for a noon march into the "no protest" zone. Several thousand labor union members marched from the Seattle Labor Temple into downtown Seattle. This march was led by union members who were also Native Americans.

After this march was completed, Direct Action Network organizers led several thousand more demonstrators back to the jail and to the Westin Hotel where WTO delegates were staying. The protestors did not want to let the WTO delegates go home until all the protestors were out of jail.

On Friday, the WTO announced that their talks had collapsed due to the refusal of the developing countries to sign the draft declaration for a new round of negotiations.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SEATTLE

I would like to discuss the significance of Seattle in two areas: For the WTO itself and for social movements.

For the World Trade Organization:

1. The major goal of the Seattle Ministerial meeting was to initiate a new round of negotiations (The Millennium Round) and to expand the areas under discussion in these negotiations.

The WTO Ministerial failed to reach agreement on this goal. It was a major defeat for the expansion of neo-liberal policies in the global economy.

2. The Seattle Ministerial was also significant because of the refusal by Developing Countries to agree to proposals drafted by the rich countries in closed door meetings called “green room” sessions.

It was this refusal of Developing Countries which led to the final collapse of the Seattle Ministerial.

3. Seattle was also significant because it showed continued tensions between the two major funders and users of the WTO the United States and the European Commission. These tensions revolve around the U.S.’s unilateral demand for service expansion (the General Agreement on Trade in Services, GATS) without regard for the concerns or negotiating position of developing countries.

Pascal Lamy, head of the EU delegation, also called the WTO procedures “medieval,” an implicit criticism of the US Trade Representative who chaired the Seattle Ministerial.

4. WTO rules call another Ministerial meeting this year – 2001.

However, as of this date, they have not resolved any of the developing countries’ concerns that were raised in Seattle nor have they reformed their “green room” procedures.

5. The failure of the Seattle Ministerial might also mean a shift of U.S. policy away from multilateral mechanisms like the WTO and toward regional agreements like the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA).

This should become clearer in mid-April when President Bush makes his first foreign policy appearance at the FTAA summit in Quebec City, Canada.

For Social Movements:

1. This was a great victory for social movements because it challenged the notion of the “inevitability” of neo-liberal policies and the lack of an alternative.

2. The Seattle victory also inspired and strengthened other mobilizations like those in Prague, Marseille and Nice. – “Building on Seattle” was mentioned in all their calls for more protests. Social movements are built on recognized victories.

3. Seattle demonstrated the success of Parallel Organizing.

All parts of the social movement reflected in the Seattle protests do not share the exact same goals and do not utilize the same tactics. Nevertheless, their ability to share the same space or act in parallel was critical to the success in Seattle.

4. Seattle also demonstrated the importance of developing long term educational and strategic alliances with local organizations.

These local organizations played a critical role in hosting, guiding and incorporating the large influxes of global supporters. It was also these relationships that kept the movement going after the police assault on Tuesday afternoon and Wednesday.

5. Seattle also demonstrated the critical importance of a media arm for the social movement itself.

An Independent Media Center (Indymedia.org) was organized during the Seattle Ministerial. Without this Center, the only media reporting during the demonstrations would have been the hostile and inaccurate commercial media.

It is also this Center which produced the video you are about to see, This is What Democracy Looks Like.

6. Finally, Seattle demonstrated that social movements can strategically and tactically out organize police agencies, as the Seattle Police Department admitted.

However, as is obvious by now, police agencies have changed their tactics according to the recommendations in the Seattle Police Department’s After Action Report.

Social movements will need to respond with new strategies and tactics if their voice is to be heard.

The FTAA Quebec City meeting in April, 2001, will be a good test. The old walled fortress of Quebec city will be sealed off by the largest mobilization of police in Canadian history to hide the FTAA delegates from a locally based social movement that has had nine months to prepare and over a year of lessons since Seattle 1999.

CONCLUSION

Seattle demonstrated that a well coordinated global social movement can successfully disrupt and stop the plans of institutions, like the WTO, who promote the single policy of neo-liberalism.

Seattle also demonstrated that there is an opening for citizens to act and change the direction of the current global economy which gives more wealth to 200 persons than to 2 billion.

And, since I plan to visit Jean Jaures' home town after tonight's Zebda concert, I'll end with a quote from Jaures:

“The most important thing is that we should continue to act and to keep our minds perpetually fresh and alive That is the real safeguard, the guarantee of our future.”