

Police attack protesters at Seattle WTO meeting

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More than one thousand Seattle police in riot gear battled demonstrators in the streets outside the convention center where the ministerial conference of the World Trade Organization opened on Tuesday. By the day's end, Mayor Paul Schell had declared a state of emergency and imposed a dusk to dawn curfew, and Washington Governor Gary Locke had dispatched two units of National Guard troops to assist the police in suppressing further protests.

Tear gas and pepper spray saturated downtown Seattle from the time the clashes began about 9:30 a.m. local time, forming clouds so intense that office workers going home eight hours later reported being nauseated.

Black-clad, helmeted police fired bean bag bullets and paintballs at demonstrators, and there were unconfirmed reports that rubber bullets were employed as well. The pepper spray was a highly irritating form of the gas, called OC, or oleoresin capsicum, made from jalapeno peppers. It causes severe burning of the eyes, mucous membranes and breathing passages, and a number of demonstrators went to hospital emergency rooms because of its effects.

The clashes began when demonstrators, including environmentalists and student activists opposed to the exploitation of workers in the Third World by transnational corporations, chained themselves together in groups outside the convention center, seeking to block entrance to WTO delegates. This protest and the running battle with police which followed compelled WTO officials to postpone and then cancel the scheduled opening ceremonies on Tuesday morning.

At one point police moved in with an armored truck, using the vehicle, mounted units and repeated baton charges to break up groups of demonstrators. In several instances police dragged away and beat individual

demonstrators, and one eyewitness reported a group of plainclothes police attacking three demonstrators several blocks from the convention center and beating them bloody.

While one small group of demonstrators, masked and black-clad, ran through the streets smashing windows and spraying paint, virtually all the protesters were peaceful and engaged in nonviolent civil disobedience tactics, lying in the street or standing chained in groups, refusing to move to allow traffic to go through or surrounding the convention center itself and blocking the entry of delegates.

Seattle city authorities have made elaborate preparations for a police show of force outside the WTO. The entire city police force of 1,300 was mobilized, and hundreds of additional nightsticks were stockpiled. More than \$6 million was budgeted for police and other security measures, nearly as much as the \$9.5 million raised from corporate sponsors to wine and dine the 3,000 delegates.

The local media joined in an effort to witch-hunt the protesters. The editorial director of the local NBC affiliate, KOMO Channel 4, told viewers his station would refuse to cover some of the protest activities. "KOMO 4 News supports coverage of the critical issues raised by the conference, including legal protests," he announced, "but will not devote coverage to irresponsible or illegal activities of disruptive groups."

The most ominous repressive action was the decision to reopen a closed military facility at Sand Point, where the brig was used to house arrested demonstrators. In the late afternoon, Mayor Schell declared a civil emergency and imposed a 7 p.m. to 7:30 a.m. curfew on the city's downtown area. Anyone found in that area without WTO credentials would be subject to arrest he

said, essentially banishing all demonstrators until Wednesday morning.

Even tighter security is expected then, since President Clinton is scheduled to address the WTO conference as well as meet with selected representatives of those protesting the WTO's policies.

The police treatment of the anti-corporate and anti-government demonstrators was in sharp contrast to their approach to the Tuesday afternoon march sponsored by the AFL-CIO, which drew more than 30,000 people, beginning with a rally at a local stadium about the time of the confrontation downtown. The Seattle police were pulled from duty along the line of the union march, in keeping with an agreement that the union bureaucracy would itself police the demonstration.

More than 1,500 union officials served as marshals—a force greater than the 1,300 Seattle cops—including 800 shop stewards from the huge Boeing aircraft complex in suburban Everett and Renton, mobilized by the International Association of Machinists. Seattle Police Chief Norm Stamper, who directed the attacks on demonstrators in the downtown area, praised union officials for what he called "a true partnership" with the police.

As part of the labor protest actions the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union called a one-day strike along the entire Pacific Coast, involving nearly 10,000 workers and shutting down all cargo movement from San Diego to Vancouver, Canada.

Taxicab drivers in Seattle also staged a half-day strike which added to the chaos in the city's downtown, seeking to draw attention to grievances over working conditions and harassment by city regulators. The protest was organized by the unofficial Cab Drivers' Alliance of King County.



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