

Arrests of protesters at WTO meeting in Seattle near 500

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As darkness fell on Seattle Wednesday, the total number of anti-World Trade Organization protesters arrested by various police agencies neared 500. On the second day of the WTO ministerial conference, 1,300 city police, joined by King County Sheriff's deputies, hundreds of state troopers and 200 national guardsmen, enforced a state of civil emergency declared Tuesday evening by carrying out mass arrests.

Some 400 protesters were arrested for attempting to enter a zone of more than 50 blocks in downtown Seattle that had been declared off-limits to all but WTO delegates and those who could prove they worked inside the restricted area. The demonstrators were loaded onto buses and taken to Sand Point, a former naval station that was converted into a booking station and jail. Police earlier reported 68 arrests on Tuesday.

The police-military blockade of the city center was in addition to a 7pm to 7:30am curfew, declared Tuesday by Mayor Paul Schell. Both the restricted zone and the curfew are to last until the end of the WTO conference on Friday.

On both days police clad in riot gear fired canisters of pepper gas at peaceful demonstrators. On Tuesday they also used concussion grenades and rubber bullets in an attempt to clear hundreds of protesters, mainly students, who had locked arms and formed human chains to block delegates' access to the Paramount Theater, where opening ceremonies were scheduled, and the state Convention and Trade Center, where the formal conference sessions are being held. Included in the police arsenal was an armored personnel carrier and an attack helicopter.

As those engaging in civil disobedience defied police orders to disperse and pepper gas spread over the downtown area, WTO organizers canceled Tuesday's opening ceremonies. A march organized by the AFL-

CIO, with some 25,000 participants, took place without incident in the early afternoon. The union-led march had the semi-official backing of city officials, and union leaders distanced themselves from the various groups seeking to block the opening of the trade conference. Some WTO meetings were held in the afternoon at the Convention Center.

The demonstrators who sought to shut down the conference ran the gamut from environmentalists and animal rights activists to those protesting child labor and the treatment of workers in the Third World. By and large, however, they shared a general, if politically unfocused, hostility to the social inequities of capitalism and the domination of society by the transnational corporations and banks.

City and state officials, pointing to incidences of window smashing and looting, claimed the state of emergency and mass arrests were made necessary by the violent actions of a section of the demonstrators. President Clinton backed these claims and gave tacit support to the actions of the police in two public appearances in Seattle on Wednesday.

Speaking in the morning at the Port of Seattle and at a luncheon address to the WTO conference, Clinton said he welcomed the peaceful protesters, but condemned those who engaged in violence and sought to block delegates from attending the conference. Thus Clinton equated those who took part in non-violent civil disobedience with the small number of people who broke windows and carried out other acts of vandalism.

As many eyewitnesses have reported, including some reporters for establishment newspapers, the police began firing tear gas and other projectiles at the demonstrators on Tuesday morning without any provocation. Prior to the police assaults, there were only a few cases of window breaking and graffiti

painting.

There are numerous press accounts of police firing rubber bullets at the backs of retreating demonstrators, officers dragging protesters behind police lines and spraying them with pepper gas, and plain clothes police attacking and beating people who were simply standing in the general area of the protests.

According to the Independent Media Center, set up by organizations involved in the protests, the police fired paint pellets to mark protesters for later arrest. In some cases people who were “tagged” but escaped immediate arrest were subsequently attacked by officers and taken into custody.

The police escalated their repressive tactics after Mayor Schell declared a state of emergency late Tuesday afternoon and announced the curfew and restricted zone in the city center. NBC Nightly News suggested a direct link between these measures and Clinton's visit to Seattle. The news program reported Wednesday that the Secret Service had warned the Seattle police to “get things under control” in advance of Clinton's appearance.

On Tuesday afternoon the National Lawyers Guild faxed a letter to Schell complaining of excessive police force. The Guild, with 150 legal observers at the demonstrations, said police fired rubber bullets, and officers beat a television cameraman and chased down a woman to dose her with pepper spray.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Washington said it would seek a temporary restraining order against the measure banning all demonstrators from the downtown area.

The AFL-CIO, for its part, has remained silent on the police crackdown. But Rod Judd, executive secretary of the King County Labor Council, solidarized himself with the politicians and newspapers seeking to discredit the victims of the police attack, saying, “I'm really bummed out that a few hundred out-of-control protesters are undermining the important, peaceful message brought downtown today by tens of thousands of demonstrators.”

Mayor Schell, interviewed Wednesday evening on the Public Broadcasting System's television news program, defended his actions and said they were backed by the AFL-CIO. He went on to characterize the events in Seattle as a “triumph of free speech” and a “sign that a civil society can work.”



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