

The social meaning of the anti-WTO protests in Seattle

The Editorial Board
6 December 1999

The protests and clashes between demonstrators and police outside the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle are a harbinger of things to come. These events reveal the explosiveness of the social tensions building up within world capitalism, and especially within America.

The Seattle protests were the biggest American civil disturbances sparked by political issues since the Vietnam War era. Except for disturbances where race was a major factor, as in the 1992 Los Angeles rioting sparked by the police acquittal in the Rodney King beating, it has been nearly 30 years since the National Guard was called out in a major American city.

The scale of the protests and police mobilization in Seattle did not, of course, approach those of the 1960s antiwar demonstrations or ghetto rebellions. But they are nonetheless symptomatic of new interest in political and social issues among American working people and youth.

Those who came to Seattle in the tens of thousands raised a myriad of issues related to the environment and the exploitation of child labor and workers in the Third World. But what united the overwhelming majority of them was concern over growing social inequality and hostility to the domination of the transnational corporate giants over working people, not just in America but all over the world.

As the *Washington Post* commented, describing the protesters: "They are folks who don't check each day to see how their 401(k) is doing or hang out with people who have become millionaires when their companies went public.... What they all seem to agree on is that giant corporations have gone too far in gaining control over their lives and defining the values of their culture and that the WTO has become a handmaiden to those corporate interests."

According to one public opinion poll released during the Seattle conference, American attitudes toward the agenda of the WTO and the transnationals are sharply divided along economic and class lines. Among families making less than \$20,000 a year, there was a three-to-one majority believing that free trade agreements were harmful. Only among those with incomes over \$50,000 a year was there a narrow margin in favor of such agreements, with broad support only among those in the highest income brackets.

It is clear that such sentiments reflect, not hostility to foreign trade in the abstract, but deep suspicion of the globalization of the world economy under the control of a few hundred giant transnational corporations, and fear of its impact on jobs, living standards, working conditions and democratic rights.

The protests in Seattle were noteworthy for the relative absence of crude nationalism or American chauvinism, which was limited to the AFL-CIO bureaucrats and the handful of Buchanan supporters. Many

of the demonstrators were either espousing the interests of the peoples of the less developed countries, or directly representing them, in delegations which brought to Seattle groups of peasants and exploited workers from many countries.

The emergence of such anticorporate, anticapitalist sentiments among broad layers of the population is a political fact of the greatest importance. It is a product of the extraordinary polarization of American society over the past two decades, in which the privileged layer at the top, perhaps 5 or 10 percent of the population, has grown wealthy beyond their wildest dreams, while the vast majority of middle class and working people face an increasingly difficult struggle to maintain a decent life for their families.

This socioeconomic polarization—documented in countless studies in recent years—has been accompanied by a parallel political process. The American two-party system, always a tool in the hands of the monied elite, has become more and more removed from the interests of the bulk of the people. The result is that when serious social issues are raised in America the authorities have no answer but police truncheons, tear gas and rubber bullets, turning the downtown of a major city into a war zone.

The events in Seattle demonstrate the increasing distance between the representatives of big business and ordinary people. The public reaction to the protests, especially in Seattle itself, has been generally one of sympathy toward the protesters and revulsion toward the police tactics. But corporate Seattle fumed at the failure of the police to act more forcefully against the demonstrators who were disrupting the conference.

The shocked reaction to the anti-WTO protests on the part of the ruling elite and the mass media which it controls shows their own disorientation. What else did they expect when they summoned a conference to discuss the fate of the world economy, in which only big business and its political stooges were represented?

It is not merely a matter of the undemocratic and secretive operation of the WTO itself, as Clinton and the American media sought to suggest. The US government is just as much the instrument of the corporate elite as the WTO. In no other industrialized country are the interests of the non-wealthy so completely excluded from the political system and the official media as in the United States. The ruling circles, believing in their own propaganda that the stock market boom of the 1990s has benefited every American, are as oblivious to the real conditions facing working people in America as they are to the suffering of child laborers in Bangladesh.

Among the most rabid exponents of free market ideology, the reaction to Seattle was a mixture of incomprehension and contempt. The British business journal the *Economist* editorialized against any

concession to anti-WTO protests, declaring, "It is hard to say which was worse—watching the militant dunces parade their ignorance through the streets of Seattle, or listening to their lame-brained governments respond to the 'arguments.'" The *Wall Street Journal* denounced those concerned by sweatshop exploitation in the Third World, saying: "if you are a Salvadoran mother desperate to feed your family or a Chinese teenager with no local job prospects, that 'sweatshop' and 'exploitation' might look more and more like opportunity."

The response of the Clinton administration combined rhetorical posturing and cynicism. The White House had initially hoped to exploit the protests to further its trade agenda against opposition from Europe and the Third World countries. It closely coordinated its position in the WTO talks with the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, hiring a former top aide to AFL-CIO President John Sweeney as counsel to White House chief of staff John Podesta, with the responsibility of managing the Seattle conference.

But the events in Seattle went far beyond what the trade union bureaucrats and establishment environmental lobbyists had intended. And when the protests began to overshadow the WTO meeting itself, instead of serving as useful backdrop, the administration responded ruthlessly. Both the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* reported that it was direct pressure from the White House which induced the Seattle authorities to intensify police violence against the protests, impose a curfew and call out the National Guard.

This did not stop Clinton from posing as the friend of peaceful protest, in his speeches at the Port of Seattle and to the WTO conference itself, even while his aides were spearheading the assault on democratic rights in the streets of Seattle.

The demonstrations in Seattle raised issues of critical importance. But neither the organizers nor the participants possessed a program which could provide a genuine alternative to the agenda of the transnational corporations and capitalist governments. Worse yet, the trade union bureaucrats, bourgeois environmentalists and Democratic Party politicians seek to turn the growing opposition to capitalist globalization in the direction of nationalist chauvinism and the defense of the capitalist nation-state.

Typical among these is Tom Hayden, leader of antiwar protests at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968, and a longtime Democratic state legislator in California. In a column Sunday in the *Washington Post* he wrote approvingly that the anti-WTO protesters could attack the policies of Clinton from the standpoint of American nationalism.

"For the first time in memory, the patriotism of the corporate globalizers is in question, not that of their opponents," he wrote. "Do the Clinton administration's investor-based trade priorities benefit America's interest in high-wage jobs, environmental protection and human rights? Are American democratic values and middle-class interests secondary to those of transnational corporations? As a grass-roots movement seeking the overthrow of what it sees as an oppressive system, Seattle '99 was more like the Boston Tea Party than the days of rage we knew in the late '60s."

In a similar fashion, Ralph Nader and other environmental and consumer activists focus their critique of the WTO on the claim that trade pacts constitute a violation of US national sovereignty—a position which is nearly identical to that of extreme-right-wing chauvinists like Patrick Buchanan, now seeking the Reform Party presidential nomination, who participated in some of the Seattle protest activities.

The development of a political movement against global capitalism requires above all a conscious recognition that it is capitalism, not the increasingly global character of modern society, which is the real enemy. Capitalist globalization—i.e., the subordination of humanity to the profit interests of a few hundred giant transnational corporations—cannot be fought by seeking to return to a historically outmoded system of relatively isolated and unintegrated national economies.

The revolutionary developments of modern technology, from computers and lasers to biotechnology and genetic engineering, would, under democratic and popular control, have an enormously positive potential. As they are now, however, in the grip of capitalist corporations and the national state, these new technologies serve mainly to swell the profits of the super-rich and provide ever more destructive weapons for the military.

The historical task confronting mankind is not to reject science and technology or to resurrect a bygone era of small-scale or localized economy, but to take the enormous productive forces created by human labor out of the hands of the transnational corporations and national states, and make them the common possession of all humanity, with their development subordinated, in a rational and planned way, to human needs.

This socialist perspective can only be realized on an international basis. Oppression and exploitation cannot be abolished within the existing framework of rival nation-states, whose economic and political competition at a certain stage inexorably develops into military conflict. Both capitalist private ownership and the nation-state system are relics of the past. They have been superseded by the development of world economy, which requires the establishment of a system of worldwide economic planning, controlled democratically by the people, and taking into account both the need for economic development and the rational utilization and conservation of natural resources.

The decade of the 1990s began with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the state established by the world's first socialist revolution in 1917. While the spokesmen for world capitalism hailed the collapse of the USSR as the failure of socialism, it represented in reality the bankruptcy of Stalinism, the reactionary and anti-Marxist perspective of the bureaucracy which usurped power in the Soviet Union and suppressed the working class. The essence of Stalinism was its rejection of socialist internationalism in favor of a nationalist perspective—the building of "socialism in a single country."

For all the triumphalism of Wall Street, it is therefore significant that the 1990s end with the first signs of the emergence of an international movement against the capitalist system. This movement can only go forward by assimilating the lessons of the twentieth century, above all the struggle for socialist internationalism against Stalinism, social democracy and bourgeois nationalism.

See Also:

Thousands protest at World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle: Political first principles for a movement against global capitalism
[30 November 1999]



To contact the WWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wws.org/contact