

The 12th Human Rights Watch Film Festival in London

Trade Off and Pester Power: Radicalism's dead end critique of globalisation

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Trade Off, by Shaya Mercer, is the latest film to focus on the protests against the World Trade Organisation meeting in Seattle in 1999. Filming on a shoestring budget, Mercer visited as many places as it was possible to get to with one camera crew as events unfurled on the streets of Seattle.

Seattle revealed the explosiveness of the social tensions building up within world capitalism, and especially within America. The significance of a demonstration of opposition to global capitalism at the heart of the system itself, after a protracted period of quiescence should not be underestimated. Nor should it be overestimated. It is important to analyse such a development critically and soberly, and make a reasoned assessment of how to develop it further. This Mercer refuses to do. Instead, the film comes across as a comedy. It is not that there is no room for such a film but, here, the jokes are a substitute for explaining events.

Mercer's chronological approach shows how the protest developed. The film is at its best showing how the early naiveté of many of the protesters was challenged as they confronted the specially trained and armed police. There is a telling sequence in which a Channel 4 reporter, after the declaration of the state of emergency, points out repeatedly to the Mayor and Police Chief that the demonstrators' violence began only *after* police attacks.

Some protestors were still shouting the slogan "No violence, the world is watching" as the police tear-gassed demonstrators and bodily picked them off the street. Han Shan of the Ruckus Society comments, "They've thrown away the constitution"—a painful echo of protestors' earlier appeals to the police to uphold the

constitution. It became quite clear (particularly through the number of cases still pending for the American Civil Liberties Union) that the question of how best to defend democratic rights was starkly posed here.

It is also possible, although this was not Mercer's intention, to see the limitations of the protest. At the beginning of the film Han Shan is seen describing Seattle as "kicking off a movement". At the end of the film he says that the linking up of groups and the demand for WTO accountability signify a victory. Mike Dolan of the New York People's Galas is seen at the end of the film saying that the strategic goal of the movement would be that the next US administration would think twice about global economic issues, after saying to itself, "Remember Seattle!"

For a relatively new film, it has rapidly been left behind by events. The recent Summit of the Americas in Quebec, with its accompanying Summit of the People, shows how far the movement has been neutered and even co-opted by the trade union bureaucracy and others.

At no point in Mercer's film do we see a thoroughgoing attempt at understanding the phenomenon of globalisation. There was some footage from an International Forum on Globalisation Teach-In held before the WTO, but it was frustratingly brief. It was also not apparent a) on what basis the lecturers opposed globalisation; b) whether they agreed with each other and c) what layers of protesters they were addressing.

Mercer glorifies the confusion under the guise of defending diversity.

At the time of the Seattle events the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote, "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.

“The historical task confronting mankind is not to reject science and technology or to resurrect a bygone era of small-scale or localised economy, but to take the enormous productive forces created by human labour 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”.

The Seattle protests were noteworthy for the relative absence of nationalism and chauvinism, but without the above perspective these sentiments have grown. Radical-sounding slogans such as “They say Free Trade, we say Fair Trade”, for example, found an echo in the banner “Unfair Trade attacks American jobs” of the AFL-CIO US trade union federation. The film also shows Jim Hoffa tub-thumping at the union bureaucracy's Labor Day rally. For Mercer the image is all-important. She makes matters worse by omitting any reference to the AFL-CIO's demands for economic protectionism such as the call to dump Chinese steel in the harbour.

Since Seattle the trade union bureaucracy has attempted to take the movement under its wing—to channel it behind the Democratic Party and promote its own reactionary agenda of America first.

At the discussion session after the screening, Mercer apologised for the number of Democratic Party senators featured in the film. Tom Hayden, leader of anti-Vietnam war protests in 1968 and long-time Democratic state legislator in California, is shown having dusted off his Black Panther turtleneck sweater. He spoke for many of those represented when he talked in the film of “trying to return democracy to local elected officials.”

Mercer presents the diversity of the demonstration as being its triumph. This is not to say that there is no merit in attempting to present as extensive a catalogue of events as possible. But an honest presentation of events would be a start. In the discussion after the screening, a member of the Socialist Equality Party in Britain raised this lack of focus as a political problem. Alternative comedian and filmmaker Mark Thomas answered by saying “looking for common causes is

important”. Yet without a clear understanding both of the problem and of how to overcome it, we are reduced to the level of patching up an impossible system. As one supporter of the US Green Party expressed it in the film: “WTO is the Wrong Trade Organisation”—as though there could be a right one without some fundamental change to the world's economic system.

Mercer has called her film “*Trade off*”, which she defines at the beginning of the film as “a balance of facts, all of which are not attainable at the same time”. It is clear, despite her apologies, that all she thinks is attainable is to put pressure on the Democratic Party and trade union bureaucracies and calls for the protection of the nation-state. The film does not provide a genuine alternative to the transnational corporations and capitalist governments.

Trade Off was shown in a double-bill with the short film *Pester Power*, made by the Mark Thomas, who visited a north London school to discuss the question of corporate advertising on school exercise books. It developed into a discussion of exploitation of Indonesian workers by Adidas. The film was at its best when tackling concrete issues such as wages and the company's defence of child labour. It is less ambitious than *Trade Off*. It is, essentially, an educational item. It emerged in the discussion that this was partly a result of Channel 4 television's legal requirement for “balance” in its programming, which meant Thomas had to afford airtime to counter-arguments from his targets. The film was again limited by the same political shortcomings as *Trade Off*.

Thomas too believes a broad opposition movement can only fight on the most elementary issues. He does not see the formation of a perspective for that movement as being essential to any step forward. When the previously mentioned SEP member rose to speak he said, “You can all leave now if you want. Here comes the politics.” Later he added, “What is important was to build a mass movement”. Thomas, like Mercer, holds the view that what is important is the number of people you get protesting, not what they are protesting about.



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