

...WTO-10 Years Later

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that went further. A treaty signed in Marrakesh, Morocco in 1994 committed to reducing all "non-tariff" barriers to trade; expanded the scope to agriculture, services, capital investment, and so-called "intellectual property;" and created the WTO as an enforcement and dispute resolution mechanism. Signatory nations are supposed to treat all other WTO members the same; that means, for one thing, that a country can't restrict trade with countries that abuse workers rights or the environment.

But not all interests are equal at the WTO, said AFL-CIO trade policy expert Thea Lee: The bias is toward the interests of multinational corporations.

"The labor movement's view," Lee said, "is that to the extent that we will continue to be in a global economy, we need to make sure the rules of that global economy are taking care of working people and the environment, not just corporate profits."

In 1999, labor leaders and environmental and community activists learned the WTO would hold a summit at the Washington State Convention Center in downtown Seattle. They began putting resources into a response.

For months leading up to the meeting, they made extraordinary efforts to educate people about the WTO, and reached out to other groups to coordinate a week of protests.

Organized labor focused on a rally and march on Tuesday, Nov. 30, 1999 — Day One of the meeting. Seven staff organizers assigned by the national AFL-CIO worked for two months to prepare. The International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) resolved to shut down Washington ports for the day so members could take part.

Other unions paid lost wages so members could get off work to attend. The Machinists Union committed to turn out 900 members to serve as parade marshals. United Steelworkers scheduled an annual conference to take place in Seattle just prior to the WTO meeting, reserving 500 hotel rooms. The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions scheduled its annual meeting in Seattle as well, drawing unionists from more than 100 coun-

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tries. Each local labor council in Washington organized three to 10 busloads, and labor councils in Colorado, Montana, and British Columbia organized bus and car caravans. The Oregon AFL-CIO chartered and filled a 350-seat Amtrak train, while other Oregon labor organizations accounted for 15 more buses.

Meanwhile, environmental activists and anti-sweatshop groups in the Seattle area and on college campuses throughout the Pacific Northwest prepared for early-morning street blockades intended to prevent delegates from getting to the meeting.

On Nov. 30, all that preparation bore fruit. In the early morning, 15,000 mostly-student demonstrators achieved

what few had thought possible: halting the WTO meeting by preventing delegates from getting to the convention center. Using physical barriers and "lock-down" tactics borrowed from anti-logging protests, they held intersections even when police used pepper spray and physical force. Meanwhile, 20,000 people, mostly labor unionists, attended a union rally in Memorial Stadium, and then were joined by another 15,000 in "feeder marches" in a permitted march to downtown. But as marchers neared the convention center, they found the streets full of people. The procession ground to a crawl, and split into at least three streams, some mingling with the protesters blocking intersections.

Steve Hughes, today a union rep at Oregon AFSCME Council 75, was then part of a group of The Evergreen State College students occupying an intersection near the convention center. Police had been menacing the group all morning. Fatigue was setting in and spirits were sagging, when all of a sudden, a group of guys in hard hats behind an Iron Workers banner showed up and stayed to reinforce the intersection.

"The WTO was one of those moments where there was a crack in the facade and we got a taste of our power," Hughes says. "It was a vision of how different groups could work together and how our causes are interrelated."

The presence of tens of thousands of unionists and their families now meant it would be politically disastrous for police to keep trying to clear intersections with force and chemical agents. By mid-afternoon, with delegates still unable to get in, WTO leaders cancelled the day's session.

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Terminated without a Prior Warning

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