



...WTO — 10 years later

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As night fell, the police cracked down. Some in the crowd responded by setting fire to Dumpsters. Seattle Mayor Paul Schell declared a curfew and the formation of a “no-protest” zone. Police pursued protesters out of downtown and into the nearby Capitol Hill neighborhood. Most of the day’s protesters — union members off work for the day, students who’d skipped classes — returned home.

By morning, two dozen blocks in the core of downtown Seattle had become a militarized zone where anyone who protested would be arrested on sight. Police — who’d stood by the day before while anarchists and delinquents broke windows and spray-painted corporate storefronts — now rushed in aggressively at any sign of protest.

Police arrested 630 people in all, bused them to a special FEMA detention center at the mothballed Sand Point Naval Base, and held them there and at King County Jail for up to five days. Shoppers, bystanders, reporters and local politicians were swept up in the arrests. Anyone going into the street could find themselves choking on tear gas, as did Oregon Congressman Peter DeFazio. Over the next few days, police repression of basic rights came to overshadow other issues.

On Day Four of the summit, the WTO talks

collapsed when delegates from less-developed countries walked out. For protesters, it was a victory beyond what they could have imagined. For advocates of WTO-style free trade agreements, it was a debacle. The uprising punctured the perception of inevitability or omnipotence that free-traders had enjoyed.

“It was a radicalizing experience,” said Stan Sorscher, a trade activist and union rep for the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace Local 2001 at Boeing. “People who participated in it talk about it in semi-religious terms.”

“This was taking on world powers,” recalls Jeff Johnson, legislative director for the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO. “It was unprecedented. Here you have all these world leaders and you’ve exposed what they’re doing: meeting behind closed doors. They’re not interested in having honest discussion about the repercussions of trade on people.”

Ripples from the event continued for months and years.

In Seattle, Police Chief Norm Stamper resigned. Mayor Schell lost re-election. A federal jury agreed the City of Seattle had violated protesters’ free speech rights, and the City paid \$1 million to settle the suit, filed on behalf of protesters arrested for violating the “no-protest zone.”

Attempting to recreate Seattle, protesters came together by the tens of thousands at the 2000 Republican and Democratic conventions, and at international summits in Washington, D.C.; Miami; Genoa, Italy, and Cancun, Mexico. But none had

the impact of the Seattle protests. Local police and national governments resolved never to allow a repeat of Seattle, and police surveilled and disrupted, created barriers, and used preemptive mass arrests and physical intimidation.

A year after the Seattle WTO protests, George W. Bush was declared president by the U.S. Supreme Court. Labor’s energies were absorbed in defense against a hostile White House; a mini-recession; and the economic and political fallout of the 9/11 attacks. Campus activism shifted to other causes, including opposition to the war in Iraq.

But free-traders never fully recovered from the protests, and have been on the defensive ever since. Attempting to rally, the WTO held its next meeting in 2001 in Doha, Qatar, a state ruled by a monarch, who forbade all forms of protest. At Doha, the WTO achieved what had eluded it in Seattle — a declaration of commitment to a new round of negotiations. But the negotiations never led to an agreement. A 2003 WTO summit in Cancun collapsed in similar fashion to the Seattle summit.

After Seattle, free-traders adopted the rhetoric of protesters, saying it was important that labor and environmental concerns be considered. But labor and green groups were not fooled and continued to oppose new international trade agreements.

In 2005, a Republican majority in Congress succeeded in passing CAFTA (a NAFTA-style agreement with Central America), but by then a shift had occurred among Democrats. Whereas 102 House Democrats voted for NAFTA in 1993,

just 15 voted for CAFTA. When Democrats regained the majority in 2007, they stripped the White House of the “fast track” authority needed to negotiate future trade agreements. And they signed up in droves to support a bill in Congress that calls for the renegotiation of NAFTA, the WTO, and other agreements, and sets labor and other standards for new trade agreements; the TRADE Act of 2009 has 127 co-sponsors in the House.

The next WTO summit kicks off in Geneva, Switzerland Nov. 30, exactly 10 years after protesters shut it down in Seattle. In Geneva, there will be protests; in Seattle and Portland, remembrances.

Portland, Seattle To Hold Events

In Seattle: A “week of action” will start with a weekend conference Nov. 28-29. David Korten will keynote Saturday, Nov. 28 at Seattle University, where AFL-CIO trade expert Thea Lee will present a workshop on trade policy. That will be followed by an evening event at New Hope Baptist Church. Sunday evening at Town Hall, Lee will be joined by British Columbia Labour Federation President Jim Sinclair and a video appearance by United Steelworkers President Leo Gerard. See seattleplus10.org for details.

In Portland: A march, rally and concert will take place Saturday, Dec. 5 in downtown Portland. The rally begins at noon at Tom McCall Waterfront Park under the Hawthorne Bridge; at 1 p.m. participants will march to the World Trade Center, Federal Building and Wells Fargo Building, ending up at Portland State University at 2 p.m. for an indoor rally and concert. See www.december5.org for details.

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