

SEATTLE 1999

BY LOIS MORFORD

I participated for six days in the protest against the World Trade Organization in Seattle, and I would like to share some of my experiences with you. Please remember I was only one among many thousands and saw only a few of the events taking place. I arrived on Sunday, November 28, and connected with my friend Ruth Sheridan, age 81, who had flown down from Anchorage to meet me. We have previously done social justice work together in the refugee camps in Central America.

Our first stop was the warehouse that Direct Action Network (DAN) had rented, which I learned of from NPR while driving up. Many young people were congregated outside, some on stilts or making parade puppets and signs. The lobby walls were covered with posters and large maps of Seattle indicating march routes and times. Literature tables circled the room, with information from many labor, environmental and international groups about the WTO. We signed in, and the first question was, "Have you had non-violence training?" In a back room, draped with black plastic for darkness, several people slept. Food was available for the hungry — rice, beans, tofu, veggies, bread. Directions were posted for bus or car transport to a place for protesters to stay for \$10 a night. In another room, people were role-playing in their nonviolence and consensus decision making training. The place was buzzing with high energy and organization. My excitement began.

Our next stop was to an afternoon session at Plymouth Congregational Church, featuring prominent U.S. and Canadian disarmament groups on 'WTO & The Global War System', which explained how the WTO drives the arms race and uses military power to defend corporate interests around the world. There was standing room only — we had to squeeze in. An enthusiastic crowd gave standing ovations after almost every presentation, which became the standard for the week.

We reached our next event half an hour early, but it was already packed. It was an Ecumenical Worship & Prayer Service at St. James Cathedral focusing on *Jubilee 2000*, part of a world wide movement to cancel the crushing debt owed by the poorest countries of the world. Jim Wallis of *Sojourner's* magazine gave the sermon. The Bible verse was *Leviticus 25*. Read it.

A competing event we could have attended was at the Museum of Science & Industry, a welcoming for activists called 'Celebrate & Resist', featuring reggae, hip-hop, hardcore, and subversive theater. Activists free; all others \$10.

On Monday we attended another packed forum at the Methodist Church on Environmental & Health issues of the WTO. At noon, as part of the Seattle Tea Party, we all marched to the convention center to hear speakers on a variety of environmental and animal issues.

At dusk, we attended an Interfaith Gathering & Rally in support of *Jubilee 2000*, followed by a march to link the arms of 10,000 people around the convention center. The interfaith service was like nothing I have ever experienced. The prayers were from Native Americans with drumming and singing; a Rabbi blowing a ram's horn; a Unitarian; a Moslem reading from *The Koran* about justice; a Buddhist who had us stand, breathe, *om*, and chant; a Hindu with a prayer service of bowing with candles; and finally a Christian — a tiny, energetic Asian woman who urged us on: 'Sweet Honey In The Rock' sang for us. George Sweeney, president of the AFL/CIO introduced Maxine Waters from California who gave a rousing speech. The church was packed, hundreds more watched on video downstairs and outside, and thousands waited on the street for us to finish. Then, 10,000 strong, we marched to nonviolently link arms around the convention center. The organizers calculated it would take 10,000 to complete the circle, as the police had erected rent-a-fences several blocks away. We not only completed the circle, in some places we were two and three deep. It was raining, and we chanted, "We're cold, we're wet, cancel the debt!" and "Feed the needy not the greedy!" as well as the standard, "Hey hey, ho ho, the WTO has got to go!" On a signal we all released our arms, symbolizing breaking the chain of debt. It was a powerful experience.

What to do now? A hundred or so of us walked around to try to get a little closer to the convention center. We found a place where we could look through the rent-a-fence to see the delegates arriving in their stretch limousines and formal attire for the opening dinner about two blocks away. Seeing us arrive, the police responded. A row of fifteen or so, looking like spacemen in their new SWAT gear, came to face us across the flimsy fence. It was sort of a Keystone Kops maneuver. They planned to march out, then turn in a jump to face us with their weapons. But they had not rehearsed enough. Some jumped one way, some the other, some not at all. They looked at each other in confusion. Soon they were reinforced by contingents of police on motorcycles, on bicycles, on horses, and even in an armored vehicle which faced us off. We began chanting to them, as far-off delegates could not hear us. "Protect the needy, not the greedy!" "Turn the other way!" (They were facing us, with the WTO behind them.) "We won't pay your overtime!" Finally, "We like your boots!" That made some of them smile. The feeling was light-hearted. Both protesters and police were completely disciplined. Then we all broke off and left to find a way home. This was a completely nonviolent, prayerful march of over 10,000 people. Did you hear anything about that?

The next day, Tuesday, was the humongous Labor March for Fair Trade. Ruth and I bused to Memorial Stadium, by the Space Needle, to join 30,000 mostly unionists in a rally, then a four mile march to downtown. Other marches were forming in other areas of the city; 20,000 here, 10,000 there. In all there



must have been 80,000 of us protesting in Seattle on Tuesday, including the thousands who did not march but were forming human barricades around the convention center and the hotels where the WTO delegates were staying.

The march was amazing. Many thousands marched with their unions, such as Steelworkers, Electricians, Public Employees, the ILWU (which shut down all West Coast ports for the day), and many many more. Many passed out literature about their causes to other marchers. Many single-interest groups were there: an animal rights activist with a beautiful 3-D butterfly on a pole stating "The WTO Kills Butterflies" (genetically engineered corn kills monarch butterflies), a woman with a sign adorned with kale, cabbage and broccoli "Support Small Farmers — Buy from Farmers' Markets", a woman with a sign taped on her back "End the Daily U.S. Bombing of Iraq". During the march, everyone was talking together, exchanging information, forming alliances. Ruth and I, after a mile or so, would sit out for awhile and watch 3 or 4 blocks of protesters march by, then join in with a new interesting group. For several blocks we marched with French Unionists, chanting (in French) "All together all together — hey hey!" The march seemed endless. I have never participated in such a large protest, and neither had Ruth, in all her 81 years. It was thrilling for us both.

We heard a rumor that after the march there was to be a spontaneous protest at the downtown McDonald's. I would have much preferred to protest at their corporate headquarters, but we went to see what was happening. There was a large crowd of noisy, peaceful protesters. McDonald's had 2 plastic banners strung up. One said "Sundays & Wednesdays — 2 Burgers, 2 Fries, \$2!" The protesters pulled that banner down, to many cheers. The other said "Now Hiring". I watched a young man climb on the shoulders of another, expecting him to tear it down also. Instead, he pulled out a pen and wrote "SLAVES", so the sign now said "Now Hiring SLAVES". The crowd cheered. The French Roquefort Cheese Farmers were there. When the European Union refused to accept hormone-raised beef from the U.S., the WTO fined them and applied sanctions, specifically against Roquefort cheese by name. The farmers were irate, and were taking the WTO head-on. One had driven his tractor through a McDonald's in France. They set up a table outside the McDonald's, and were passing out Roquefort cheese and crackers to all the protesters. "The Cows Say No!" we chanted. The cheese was delicious. Then several hoodlums arrived, dressed all in black with black masks and sticks, and started beating the window. No one knew who they were. We were all

shocked. People shouted "No violence" and "Hey, cool it," but they trashed the window and ran away. I got a good close-up picture of them and was surprised they didn't harm my camera. This was the only incident of violence or vandalism I personally witnessed during my six days in Seattle.

We next encountered a barricade of protesters at the Roosevelt Hotel, barring the entrance to WTO delegates. They had been there all day, while the march had passed around them, and were deciding whether to stay all night or re-group in the morning. They also discussed whether to let two reporters from France through their barricade. I was very impressed with the democratic process — the bullhorn was passed around, and everyone had a chance to speak until consensus was achieved. I heard later that the police were instructed to arrest leaders, but with this kind of decision making there were no leaders. When we finally made it home Tuesday evening, we were invigorated, feeling the protest had been phenomenally successful.

But Wednesday was a shocker. We awoke to the TV news that the mayor had declared a no-protest zone over downtown Seattle. At that moment protesters outside the zone were being arrested and tear-gassed, and the zone had just been extended to include their area. The violence and vandalism and confrontations between protesters and police the night before were shown over and over on television. The buses weren't running. People were asked to stay home. We managed to make it to the Methodist Church forum, which was on how the WTO impacts democracy, development and the lives of women. We heard powerful, angry, articulate women from all over the world — Tanzania, Mexico, Philippines, St. Lucia, Malaysia, Africa, El Salvador, Canada. A women's African drumming group energized us, and the 'Raging Grannies' & Street Theater entertained us. Ralph Nader addressed us. We had permits for a legal, nonviolent march at noon, and the consensus was we should go, even if we faced tear-gas and arrest. It was a touchy situation. The church people negotiated with the city, and we got permission to go if we absolutely went single-file on the sidewalk, with no signs and no chants, and were not threatening. So about 1,000 of us taped our mouths, held hands and walked in silence to face the line of SWAT team-dressed police, with helmets, pads and weapons. It felt very powerful. After awhile we hummed 'We Shall Overcome', then returned to the church.

Seattle on Wednesday reminded me of Central America during the violence of the 1980s. Police lines were everywhere, and many intersections were blocked by police or protesters, sometimes both. A month before Christmas, there were few others and no shoppers. Many stores were boarded up. Tear-gassed protesters sought shelter in the church, and one man from Global Exchange was hit in the face by a rubber bullet, which penetrated his lower lip and knocked out some teeth. During the afternoon session we were asked to remain in the church because of tear-gas outside and an impending curfew. The basement of the church had one room with literature tables, and just about every peace, justice, environmental and faith-based group I've ever heard of, plus many unions, were distributing literature and networking. Jim Hightower, in his cowboy

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