

Seattle (1999)

Shattering the Myth of Seattle: it's time to break more than just windows

The now infamous actions against the WTO in Seattle have taken on mythological status, with very little actual information existing on what happened, and how. Most of the published "information" about the actions has come from such "experts" as the editor for *Spa* magazine (and no, *Spa* isn't an acronym for anything...), NGO wonks, and lefty journalists. Although there are a handful of excellent stories and articles by organizers and participants in the direct actions, these have not received widespread attention or distribution, and for the most part are somewhat narrow in scope. At the same time, liberals and organized labor – who spent much of December, 1999 falling all over each other trying to disassociate themselves from the "illegal actions" (yes, the ones which succeeded in shutting down the meetings) have since decided that in fact, it was *they* who shut down the WTO meetings, presumably with their mock tribunals, letter-writing campaigns, and impassioned speeches to the masses from distant podiums....

When I travel among activist circles in other regions and countries, there are two common responses I receive when I tell people I'm from Seattle – misty-eyed nostalgia, or an intensely angry bitterness, usually expressed through phrases like "Well that won't ever happen again," or "You lot were lucky that you caught them by surprise, that's the only reason you got away with it."

Though I believe that it is clear that some of the tactics which exploded onto the US (and global) activist scene in Seattle have outlived their usefulness, I think there are still important lessons not yet learned from those actions, and I believe that the popular dismissal of Seattle-as-success solely because of the surprise element is fallacious.

I got involved in the WTO organizing in August 1999, as soon as I returned from traveling. At my first meeting, I found about 50 people discussing logistics for the week-long "convergence" which would lead up to the direct action – shutting down the WTO's opening ceremony. I believed from that moment on that we would succeed in this, never once doubted it. [I'VE HAD SEVERAL READERS WHO WERE ORGANIZING WITH ME SAY, "UM, ACTUALLY, NO, WE DIDN'T EVER BELIEVE IT WAS POSSIBLE..." SO IF YOU COULD REPLACE THE ABOVE WITH THE FOLLOWING SENTENCE, THAT WOULD BE MORE ACCURATE....] Although not many people shared my optimism, there was always a sense that we were creating something enormous, something bigger than anything we could possibly imagine. We of course had all been hugely inspired by the London J18 actions, which added to our confidence and our audacity. That confidence, I believe now, was a major factor in our success – it was contagious, inspiring countless thousands to make the journey to Seattle, or to get off work/school for the week and come downtown from their local neighborhoods.

But confidence is too elusive to replicate, so I'll try to give more tangible reasons for our success....

Building Networks, Generating Momentum

Trying to concisely describe all the networks we developed and outreach and planning we did in those frantic months leading up to N30 is an impossibility - no single one of us was involved in every aspect, and years later I'm still meeting people who were a part of a community center, student group, or senior citizens' coalition which organized against the WTO, and which I never heard of. It's very much like the parable of the blind men describing the elephant based on which part was within their grasp - the WTO organizing looks like many different, often fearsome animals, depending on who you ask.

So, with that disclaimer, my personal experience was this:

A few weeks after I got back to town, an action camp was held north of Seattle, organized by the Ruckus Society, and attended by about 150 people from across the west coast. I didn't go, but from what I've gathered, this particular camp was crucial to the confidence and the coalescing of our organizing crew. There were intensive trainings in jail solidarity, basic legal rights, urban climbing, blockades with varying degrees of technical skill, and inspiring presentations from national and international activists about other actions (including a slideshow about London RTS, which had people talking for weeks afterwards). Not only did the camp provide people with very practical and tangible skills, it built trust among the folks in attendance, which allowed us to persevere together later on.

Back in Seattle, we held weekly public meetings to plan the actions and the convergence, and in those meetings, we encouraged newcomers to get involved in the various working groups, which met separately in order to focus in depth on various details. Working groups included: housing, legal, medical, scenario (which was planning the details and logistics of involving thousands of people in a coordinated action), convergence space, fundraising, media, food, scheduling (of trainings and workshops), etc. In addition to the weekly Seattle meetings, there were regular regional meetings where people came together from across the Pacific Northwest (including Vancouver, BC). There were also telephone conference calls which included spokespeople from around the country, giving updates, offering and requesting resources, and confirming our sense that this was going to be really big.

The propaganda that was produced by the Direct Action Network was a key element to making things happen. DAN produced 50,000 newspapers, and a comparable number of postcards, beginning at least four months before the actions. They had a slick, contemporary design, which now seems very familiar, but at the time was quite innovative. The newspapers had a brief description of direct action and affinity groups, a bit about the WTO, and the infamously controversial action guidelines. They were updated twice to include new information as we created it, and distribution (always the key conundrum) was nation-wide, although certainly more thorough on the west coast.

The notion of carnival ran deep in our plans, carnival as the irresistible blend of party and protest, of revelry and revolution, of reclaiming public space and creating something memorable. Our objective of shutting down the summit was inextricably linked to our vision of a massive street festival which would create an alternative vision of the world we wanted. Art workshops were taking place steadily throughout this crazy time, and in several public locations around town. So we were stockpiling banners, flags, and puppets, and eventually, taking them out on test runs in a series of three neighborhood parades. Designed as outreach tools and serving as morale boosters, the parades grew larger and more colorful each time.

One of these parades began on the university campus, and helped solidify many links we had with university groups. There were many student organizers in DAN, and DAN folks went to lots of university and community college meetings. Throughout this whole time, many high school and college students were organizing autonomously – planning everything from teach-ins to walkouts on November 30 to direct actions against corporate involvement in university policy and curricula.

We also were meeting with the King County Labor Council, and with the local leadership of the AFL/CIO, while developing relationships with rank-and-file Steelworkers, Longshoreworkers, and Teamsters. In addition to attending meetings, a few people from Art and Revolution went five hours east to Spokane, where the Steelworkers had been locked out of their workplace for over a year. Art & Rev did workshops with them, making signs and banners, and talking with them about what impacts the WTO was having on the steel industry and their jobs.

All of this didn't make our relationship with organized labor smooth or easy; in fact there was a crucial meeting the week before the action in which they told us that we simply couldn't do

our action before their big march (scheduled to start about 7 hours after ours) if we were to be acting in solidarity with them. However, we held our ground, and on the day of action, we had a large contingent of Steelworkers join us at 7 am to do direct action, rather than going to the labor rally which took place miles away. Later that afternoon, many Steelworkers and other radical labor folks, disobeyed their marshals, breaking through their cordon and abandoning their permitted march to join us right when we most needed to reinforce our blockades, in the height of the tear gas and repression.

Many of those relationships are still proving to be mutually beneficial; it was largely due to contacts made during Seattle organizing that union participation in Miami was as productive and as trusting as it was. Having John Sweeney, the president of the AFL/CIO, visit the convergence center and do an interview for our free radio station was unprecedented, and currently, unions are heavily involved in pressuring the city of Miami, demanding the resignation of the police chief, and that all charges be dropped, among other things.

Some people organized a West coast caravan which consisted of a member of the Steelworkers' union, some students, and some folks from Art and Revolution who did teach-ins, puppet-making workshops, singing and dance workshops, and general mobilization work.

As all of this was going on with DAN, a parallel mobilization was going on with the birth of Indymedia. The IMC was organized completely autonomously (in terms of meetings, funding, physical location, organizers) but there was some fairly close coordination with DAN. The creation of this completely radical and unprecedented network magnified and amplified our organizing efforts. Media activists around the world learned about the IMC and put the word out to all of their networks—not only was there a serious direct action being planned, but also an innovative proposal for building a radical participatory media outlet. As a result, countless more people came to Seattle.

There were also several other groups working in parallel – the People For Fair Trade, which was a coalition formed by Ralph Nader's Public Citizen, the People's Assembly, which was a radical grassroots Philipino-led organization, who held a separate march—the only march which had been refused a permit [DAN didn't try for a permit], Seattle Anarchist Response, which helped pull together a black bloc action, and several student groups. We had links to each of these organizations, and participated in each others' meetings, but for the most part, we were not closely working together.

Structures and Logistics

Many of the working groups were comprised of a core of pre-existing groups (notably, food, art and propaganda, medical, and trainings) and this was a huge asset, as we were able to benefit from years and years of experience without having to start everything from scratch. Initially the working groups reported back at each weekly meeting, but this gradually became unwieldy, as each group was making so much progress every week and had many things to report, so that half of each meeting consisted simply of reporting what had already done, leaving very little time to discuss proposals, plan new projects or make decisions.

So we formed a new group, which we called the "organizing collective." These meetings also took place once a week, and were open to anyone, although decision making was limited to one representative from each working group, who would report on what their group was doing, and then report back to their group what others were doing. These representatives could rotate as long as any new attendees were somewhat briefed beforehand to maintain some continuity. In reality, most representatives did not rotate, and there was little attendance by anyone outside of the working groups. It's unclear to me now if people were just not interested in going to yet another meeting each week, or if the word did not get sufficiently spread that the meetings were open and public – in any case, the organizing collective faced strong critique of being a hierarchical and unaccountable inner circle, and in the urgency of the moment, I don't think we ever addressed that critique sufficiently.

Another working group was known as the "scenario" group, (what I think in the UK might have been called "logistics"). This group was convened to work out a framework for the action: we pored over maps, divided the city into 13 sections, tried to assess which would be the most risky so we could communicate that to affinity groups from out of town, decided on gathering sites and march routes, and coordinated with other working groups to provide support to the actions (such as food, water, first aid). Participation in the group was open to anyone, though in the final week of planning, it became invite-only, primarily to avoid having to spend an hour at the beginning of each meeting summarizing the previous three months' work for newcomers.

Converging and Coordinating

In addition to the mass action, what most of these groups were gearing up towards was a ten day convergence, with trainings, workshops, performances, art-making, and endless meetings to hone and refine the actions themselves. The convergence center was the hub of this ambitious project, and contained sufficient space for multiple simultaneous trainings, a large kitchen where two free meals a day were cranked out for up to 3,000 people, a free comprehensive health clinic and dispensary which saw up to 500 people per day, a tea house and reading room (if anyone could concentrate amidst the surrounding ruckus), and a bicycle lending library.

One of the most important components of the convergence was the trainings. All day every day were trainings in legal rights, jail solidarity, first aid, direct action techniques and tactics (ranging from the technical – how to build lock-boxes or tripods, to the philosophical – why to do it, when to do it, what range of options exist, to the synthesis – how to escalate tactics to match needs or desires or situations, to the pragmatic – what to do when you're locked to 8 other people and the cops try to remove your goggles or arrest your support crew...).

The importance of the trainings cannot be emphasized enough. Dozens of affinity groups formed spontaneously during trainings; people planned actions with folks they'd known only a few hours or days. Thousands of people went into the actions on November 30 having already practiced how they would set up their blockade, what they would do when the police came, how they would respond to tear gas or pepper spray, how they would behave during arrest, transport, booking, etc. It really demystified the process for people who had never been arrested before; for them, it was a revelation not only to have the entire scenario spelled out step-by-step, but actually to be "arrested" by activists in cop costumes, and to act out the entire process, including interrogation scenes where the "cops" used different lies and manipulations to try and extract information.

Trainings built confidence as well, not only in ourselves but in our community. The knowledge that hundreds of people would be on the street to give you first aid if you were hurt, and to observe and document any police action against you, and to track you through the jail and court system inspired people to push their limits, to test their endurance, to imagine what was possible and then to go one step further. Perhaps most importantly, the trainings helped dispel fear. By creating open space in which people could share their experiences of arrests, of locking their necks to bulldozers, of the intense but temporary pain of pepper spray, the fear of the unknown was banished – certainly there were still many unknowns, but shining light onto them diminished their power.

Each night we held large public meetings, called "spokescouncils." The spokescouncil was the coordinating and decision-making body of the actions, and is a rather unwieldy and ambitious attempt at direct democracy. The meetings began eight days before the action, and then continued throughout the week of action, organizing jail solidarity actions and legal support. We made decisions through a formal consensus process, with a few provisions built-in to prevent total collapse if the meeting were infiltrated with cops or otherwise authoritarian trouble-makers, but we rarely (if ever) operated under anything other than consensus.

The spokescouncil was comprised of affinity groups, groups of 5-15 people who plan actions together. Affinity groups were the fundamental unit of our actions; by organizing this way, power remained decentralized, no single person knew the entire plan (or even half of it). Many affinity groups linked up and formed a larger network, or "cluster," in order to take on a more ambitious project, or to take over an entire section of town themselves. During the spokescouncil meetings, affinity group spokespeople committed to occupy and hold particular intersections, or to provide support to others. In this way, thousands of people in hundreds of affinity groups filled in our giant map on the wall, until we had commitments from everyone to completely blockade the site of the opening ceremonies. We heavily encouraged each affinity group to be autonomous – to provide basic legal, medical, communications, and any other support for themselves, not to mention to plan their own action.

Being organized in this way left things pretty spontaneous and organic, and completely autonomous. No centralized leadership could have compelled people to hold their blockades while they were being tear-gassed and beaten, but because each group had made its own plan, there was a sense of ownership of the action, which deepened everyone's commitment and endurance. As one woman said a few weeks after the action, "Everyone left Seattle feeling they did it," that each one of us was responsible for the success of the action. And it was that sense of personal responsibility and shared ownership that changed the lives of so many of us who participated.

Organized Endurance

In the years since those now historic and often mythologized actions in Seattle, I've heard incredible rewritings of history, ranging from various groups or individuals who at the time did their best to distance themselves from the direct action now claiming to have been responsible for its success, to the strange idea that Seattle somehow just spontaneously occurred, that it was some sort of miracle that came out of the blue, and accidentally succeeded due to the element of surprise, which can never be replicated.

Yet, nothing came from out of the blue – we *organized*, and it paid off. We weren't just freaks and artists and full-time activists on the streets; we went into high schools and churches, labor councils and neighborhood associations, workplaces and universities. Those people were on the streets with us; those people flooded the city council meetings afterwards, damning the police and the city, not only for their illustrious abuses and constitutional violations, but also for having invited the WTO to meet in our city in the first place. The teach-ins, workshops, and presentations, which took place across town for months in advance, ignited the population's anger and propelled them into the streets, more than a single flyer or workshop ever could have. Once they were in the streets – tasting the freedom of reclaiming their city (even for only a day), experiencing the joy of the streets filled with music and festivity rather than traffic, and feeling the pride at the end of the week of *having won*, they were not ready to give it up, nor would they ever forget it.

On the day of the action, the blending of art and action, carnival and revolution manifested in breathtaking ways. A stage was built across an entire intersection, and people locked themselves to it, creating an interactive blockade, on which innumerable performances took place throughout the day. Other intersections were blocked with things ranging from a four-lane-wide puppet, to a giant inflatable whale, to a huge mural stretching between the sidewalks with paint available to anyone who wished to add to it.

Additionally, people were prepared to be out all day. There were groups roaming the streets distributing food and water, bringing first aid materials and medical skills where needed, and providing entertainment to folks locked-down and unable to see the breadth of the take-over of the city. There was a butoh dance troupe, a marching band, and independent media makers spreading news from one part of town to the next, and all over the world; there were innumerable performers – puppeteers and hip-hop rhymers, unicyclists and acrobats, fire-breathers and choral groups. Because of this preparation, this attention to detail – not only

providing for our physical needs, but our need for joy and laughter – the blockades were maintained long after the opening ceremonies were cancelled. The capacity for endurance was phenomenal. As Rowena Kennedy Epstein wrote later, “I remember thinking I would never stop. My body was caving in on me, my eyes were swollen, my feet were bleeding, and I never anticipated stopping. I would like to think that a generation never anticipated stopping.”

There was a level of ingenuity, autonomy, and creativity that I haven’t seen at US (or any other) actions since. These various blockades were organized entirely by affinity groups, and no one knew in advance the sum total of what was being planned. This is something that is often forgotten, in the myth-making during the years since Seattle – sure, it’s true that we succeeded in part because we caught them by surprise. But the element of surprise was nothing compared to the innovation and creativity that thousands of people demonstrated. I have been to numerous actions since, in many parts of the world, and I have not yet seen the level of autonomous participation by affinity groups that we had in Seattle, nor have I seen such a solid structure and framework for an action, backed by solid organizing for months in advance.

Failure to Learn, Failure to Innovate

What I see these days is that affinity groups turn up with no particular plan, and then spend a week complaining that there is nothing to do, as if local organizers are supposed to brainstorm hundreds of ideas from which people can choose. Somehow, many activists have gone from being creative and active participants to being in a more passive, spectator role, waiting for someone else to come up with the ideas, and then – more often than not – shooting down each idea as being impractical, oppressive, reformist, etc. This passivity and enthusiasm for criticizing from one’s comfort zone (in which one does nothing at all, so as not to be criticized...) is but one element in the fizzling and current failures of this particular movement in the US.

Another factor in our weakened position is that frequently, actions are planned with no clear goal. Advancing on a fence is not a useful goal around which people can organize creative actions. Even if you reach the fence, and even if you tear it down, then what, apart from getting beaten, gassed, arrested, or dispersed? In Seattle, our goals were explicit, and well publicized months in advance. We were going to shut down the meeting, prevent it from even starting, and our tactics were to use various blockade techniques while having a street festival which occupied the entire city center. Within those goals are endless possibilities for creative participation that go well beyond making a clever banner or chanting a new slogan. Another example of an action with a clear goal was in Prague, where organizers decided to blockade the IMF/WB delegates inside their conference center. Unfortunately, many people who came from other countries (especially the UK) at the last minute never knew about this goal, and assumed that the intent was the same as in Seattle, to prevent them from entering. So this is another problem – the Prague organizers could have had better links and better information dispersal to internationals arriving in the final days, and traveling activists would do well to make a greater effort to learn what is actually being planned and find a way to contribute to the existing action, rather than assuming that they know better than those working locally for months.

Ultimately, it is the process which is key, not the triumph of ideology, but the constant reinvention of what “revolution” looks like, the refusal to accept a static definition, the commitment to evolving the idea of revolution, to innovating our tactics, and to looking beyond the next action, the next summit, the next fence against which we will throw our bodies....

Audacity Gets the Goods

There are many ideas floating around of where to go from here. Many people are saying that we need to stop always defining ourselves by what we are against and start showing what we are for. Obviously, this is a good idea, but makes for a difficult action plan. Setting up

autonomous zones outside summit meetings without posing any particular threat to the power structure seems like a retreat to me, a retreat into a temporary commune, a comfort zone, into which few people outside our limited and subculture-based circles will enter.

Retreating from direct action at this point in time, when there is so much at stake, and when we have them on the run more than ever before, I believe, is a mistake. But it is also a mistake to continue moving forward with vague notions of "direct action" which are ill-prepared and have little "action" involved. It is useful to take a look at the old IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) slogan – "Direct action gets the goods" because it begs the immediate question – what constitutes "the goods" these days? What is it, exactly, that we are after?

If we don't have clearly identifiable goals, how can people commit to put their bodies on the line to meet them? How can we know if we have succeeded if we don't know what we set out to achieve? The goals don't have to be obviously attainable (i.e.: shutting down the City of London, or the WTO meeting), but they must be audacious, ambitious, and challenging enough to inspire folks to work towards them, to dare to dream beyond the probable, to expand the definition of the possible. [I WOULD ADD THE FOLLOWING PARAGRAPH TO THE END OF THIS ONE, IT SEEMS TO BE A CULMINATION OF THE PRECEDING IDEA...] Revolutionary social change has never been won by people who thought "Well, we should be really careful because they'll just fuck us over if we are too successful," or "They've got us totally outnumbered, we better just apply for a permit and stop pretending like we'll ever really make a difference."

Our actions have become almost exclusively symbolic and spectacular, and although symbolism can be useful in triggering imaginations and challenging institutions, we need to have some concrete and tangible successes to balance out the symbolic ones; otherwise we end up alienating ourselves from our own actions, our numbers dwindle, we come away from each action less inspired and more damaged, injured, and burned out. Meanwhile, that which we call "action" grows less and less active, less and less direct.

But, as Mike Prokosch and Tony LoPresti wrote in their recent (January 2004) article, *Next Steps in the US Global Justice Movement*:

"Direct action doesn't have to be this way. When it has clear goals, it can organize focused, disciplined, extremely effective actions. Seattle is the example. Before it came a quarter-century of actions, learning, and refinement starting in the anti-nuclear movement. In preparation for it, Northwest activists built affinity groups and did community education for a year. The myth that Seattle was a spontaneous coming-together is one of the most destructive myths among many in direct action circles."

It's time to shatter the myth.