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DOUG HENWOOD

## **SEATTLE AND BEYOND:**

### *World Troublemaking, Organized*

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Since LBO is weighing in late on the World Trade Organization (WTO) extravaganza, a bit less celebration and a bit more analysis are in order. And to that serious business in a moment. But a little celebration is irresistible. It was an extraordinary event and it's hard to think of any match for it in the U.S. in the last 30 years. And it's deeply shaken the ruling class. The annual World Economic Forum in Davos, usually a time when the global elite retreats to stroke itself, was reportedly troubled by "Seattle," a word that's become shorthand for the challenge to their previously unchallenged rule.

Perhaps the only virtue of the WTO is that it puts a face on a set of issues that used to be abstract and arcane. As recently as five years ago it would have been unimaginable that thousands of people would fill the streets and hundreds of people would get arrested over trade and capital flows. Sometimes it seems that its critics blame it for too much, as if it were the embodiment of capitalism itself. But it's very difficult to organize around an issue as intangible as capitalism itself. This is certainly the next best thing.

It wasn't only a new set of issues that exploded into prominence in Seattle; it was also a milestone in a new kind of politics that feels world-historical. Splits between "real" and "cultural" politics, between labor and environmentalists, between young and old, were forgotten. Demonstrators were well-trained and prepared, but plans were remade on the fly (thanks to ubiquitous cell phones); the direct action youth displayed an admirable mix of spontaneity and discipline, seriousness and wit. Aging boomers stopped looking back to the 1960's and marveled at a younger generation previously written off as apolitical slackers. As one aging boomer said to another: "They're smarter than we were."

**Fashions.** It's become fashionable among some "radicals" to denounce the AFL-CIO's stance towards the WTO. Certainly there's plenty to be critical of. The labor leadership, not always obeyed by the rank and file, tried to distance itself from the mostly youthful crowd blocking the streets. But the fact that the unions were there at all is amazing. And amazing too is the change in labor's rhetoric over the last few years: nationalism has been largely replaced by internationalism. At the main labor rally during WTO week, a series of unionists from around the world spoke, including a South African mineworker who quoted Marx by name, urging the workers of the world to unite to a great cheer from the crowd. (AFL-CIO spinmeisters reportedly told him to drop that line, but he delivered it anyway.) Steelworkers boss George Becker complained that "imports were inundating our borders," and Teamsters unfurled a banner urging the border be closed to the threat of Mexican trucks. But such offenses to solidarity refreshingly minimal. And though U.S. labor has never been known for making common cause with outside groups,

the stage was filled with environmentalists and student anti-sweatshop activists; much tribute was paid to unity among all enlightened forces. We'll see if word is parent to the deed.

It's become fashionable among some "moderates" to distance themselves from an irresponsible fringe. "Anarchists" was deployed as a cuss word even though anarchism is an honorable political tradition. It was sad to see Medea Benjamin of Global Exchange defending Niketown's windows against breakage by the demonized "anarchists." Sober reformists are incapable of understanding that they need immoderates to help them make their case; without crazies to which they can appear like moderate alternatives, no one would ever listen to them.

**Main events.** The street carnival almost turned the failed summit into a footnote. But its collapse was major news indeed though not without precedent. The point of the talks was to agree on an agenda for detailed trade negotiations over the next several years. But the summit itself should have been mostly a formal endorsement of an agenda that should have been quietly worked out in Geneva in the weeks before the conference. That never happened.

A combination of substantive and procedural issues spoiled the proceedings. Clinton's call to include labor rights in the WTO alienated many Third World delegates, who, as the BBC put it, thought it "was intended to undermined the competitive edge they derived from lower wages." Clinton probably made the suggestion to mollify domestic critics, knowing it would go nowhere; his negotiators quickly explained that he'd "misspoken." But progressives tempted to view the "South" as the good guys in the Manichean battle of North vs. South should keep this in mind: Southern elites are happy to exploit their workers and ravage their environments.

Labor rights alone were hardly enough to kill the talks. The U.S., EU and the so-called Cairns Group of 15 food exporters led by Australia couldn't agree on an agriculture agenda. Another point of contention was Japanese resentment of U.S. anti-dumping policies the right Washington reserve for itself to retaliate against countries it deems to pricing their exports unfairly low. Despite lip service paid to a rules-based multilateral system, the U.S. typically feels free to do whatever its wants in practice.

**Futures.** Back to the more exciting terrain of popular revolt. The WTO eruption is part of a worldwide mobilization that is increasingly positioning itself as anti-capitalist. The proposed Multilateral Agreement on Investment, a bill of rights for capital which was being negotiated in near-secrecy, fell apart in late 1998 thanks in large part to worldwide popular opposition mobilized through the Internet. Last June's G-7 summit was anti-celebrated around the world with street demonstrations, and a full-fledged riot in the City of London festivities also partly organized through the Internet. This is not what the Boys of Davos have in mind when they talk about technologically driven globalization. There's also a growing worldwide anti-World Bank/IMF movement. These issues of political economy were the province of specialists less than a decade ago; now they're at the center of a great deal of political mobilization. Can it consolidate and expand from here? Will the Seattle coalition stick together, or fly apart?

Arguing against impermanence are the facts that the Seattle coalition was no spontaneous eruption, but was, as Mark Ritchie of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy points out, 12 years in the making. Also arguing against impermanence are the intention of most participants to keep up the pressure at other ruling class events at the World Bank/IMF meeting in DC in April, the Republican convention in July and the organization of Seattle-style direct action cells across the U.S. It's all evidence of an inspiring energy looking for targets. Maybe the hypercapitalist ascendancy of the last 20 years is over. Maybe there's something to this millennial stuff after all.

Doug Henwood, *Left Business Observer*