

1999

“For once we were not watching history; we were making it. In the streets of Seattle, the anti-corporate movement became a living, breathing thing.”

Naomi Klein, author and activist, 1999

Moloreria voluptat. Aceptatet aris aut esciusdan aspedip itasim saectot asperius. Les conimus, inverum quam voluptaquos min et quodis seque endae moloreria voluptat. Aceptatet aris aut esciusdanda aspedip itasimu saectot asperius molupta. SOURCE INFORMATION

Shutting Down the WTO

Seattle, WA, United States, 1999

The World Trade Organization convened in Seattle, Washington, in November 1999 for its third conference, the first in the United States. This 135-member international body, tasked with setting the rules of global trade, was meeting to set an agenda to “liberalize” global commerce in agriculture, services, and intellectual property.

Much of the world, including many smaller nations, global NGOs like Oxfam and Amnesty International, and dozens of policy and advocacy groups, were deeply opposed to this agenda, citing the threat to labor rights, local economies, and the environment by unfettered global trade.

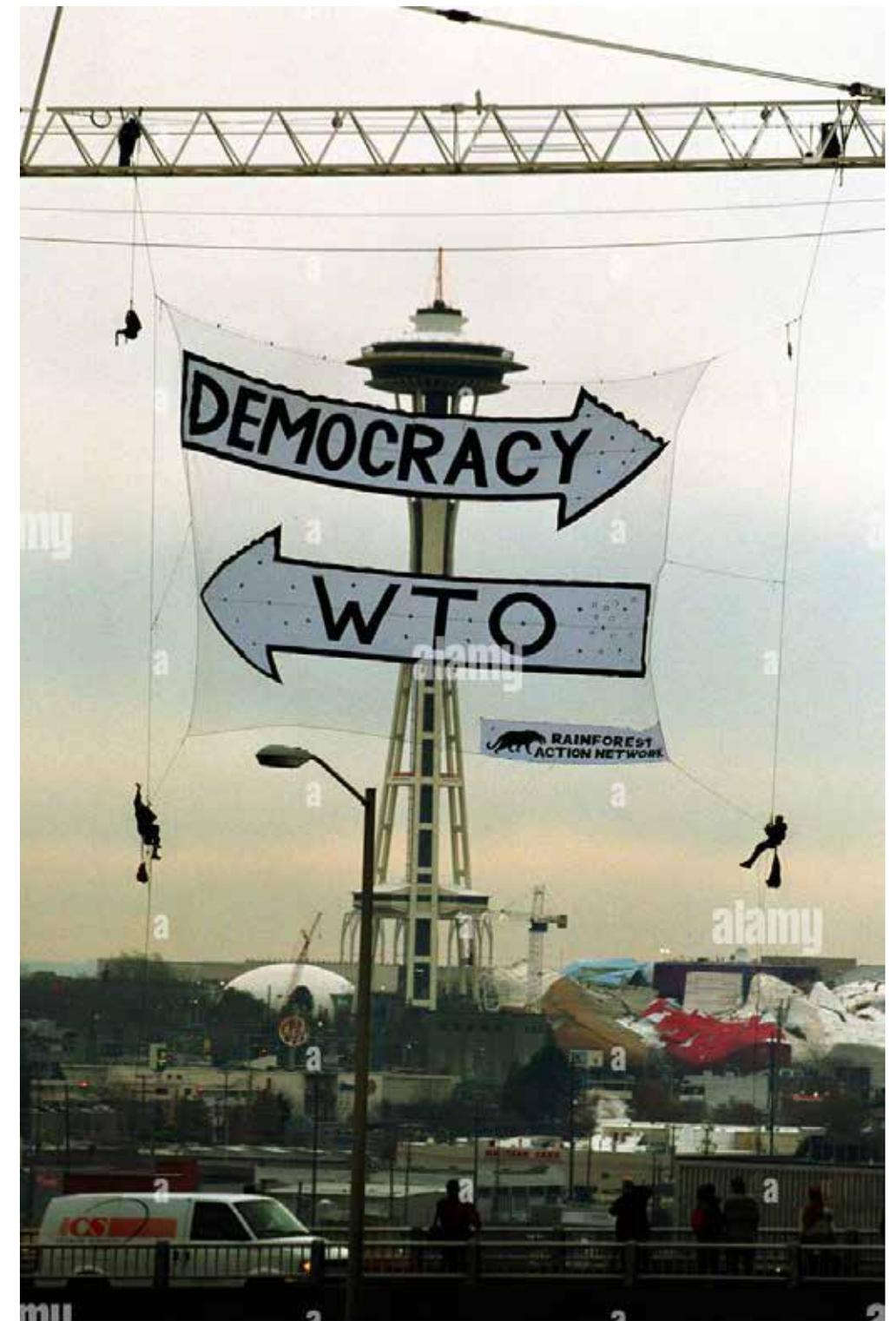
Seattle proved to be a flashpoint for this opposition. Upward of fifty thousand protesters showed up in the city, blocking roads and bridges and the entries to the various conference sites. From a sea of striking images, one photo defined the moment for the world: a banner hung by a team of activists in front of the iconic Seattle Space Needle. Organized by Rainforest Action Network and the Ruckus Society, it showed arrows pointing in opposite directions, with the words “Democracy” going one way, and “the WTO” going the other.

Free Trade, Hidden Costs

The World Trade Organization, born out of the forty-year-old postwar agreement called the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, emerged in 1995 as an ambitious attempt to create a system of binding rules addressing services, intellectual property, and commerce in a globalizing world. It quickly became apparent to many that in the name of “free trade,” the WTO’s proposed rules protected corporate interests and limited governments’ ability to regulate. Environmentalists feared that laws and policies they fought for at the national level would be undercut by WTO rulings calling them trade barriers. Human rights activists foresaw the same for the vulnerable and disenfranchised, and labor unions predicted a global race to the bottom in wages and working conditions. And all agreed that democracy was at stake. “WTO negotiations were not in the open,” wrote Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz in *Globalization and Its Discontents*. “The agenda was set behind closed doors, and many of those who were most affected by the decisions—workers, the poor, the environment—were not at the table.”

While the WTO and its rules were evolving rapidly, the public was in the dark. “We believe the shortage of information and reporting to

Protest!



“What’s so powerful about Seattle is that labor, environmental, and human-rights groups have fused into a single, unstoppable demand for accountability and democracy in trade.”

Ralph Nader, consumer advocate and founder of Public Citizen, 1999

Members regarding these meetings, both before and after their occurrence, leads to unnecessary divisiveness and rancour,” wrote eleven developing-country delegations in the month before the meeting. The pace of the negotiations, held largely in the dark, made many feel the talks were unstoppable. As Lori Wallach, author of *Whose Trade Organization? A Comprehensive Guide to the WTO*, put it at the time, “We were told it’s happening, there is no alternative, get the fuck out of the way.”

The organizers of the Seattle protests saw the meeting as a unique opportunity to bring global attention to the WTO. For months before the meeting, civil society leaders and representatives from unions and environmental and human rights groups—people not always aligned on the issues—met, discussed, and strategized how to organize.

Activists debated how to distill the complex negotiations into a simple, accessible message.

“With fifty thousand people converging on the city, we knew that the message could easily get lost,” said John Sellers, then-director of the Ruckus Society. “We needed to fix that.” At one of the many planning meetings, activist Jeremy Paster offered the winning suggestion. “It was one of those moments when the second it came out of his mouth, everyone agreed that that was it,” said Sellers. “That was the one.” At four o’clock in the morning on November 29, the day the conference started, five protesters scaled a 170-foot construction crane and unfurled the banner. The image, and the message, went around the world, appearing on front pages of newspapers everywhere.

The Protesters Mobilize

The next three days were dramatic and inspiring. On day one of the conference, more than three thousand protesters, including children and parents dressed in turtle suits, marched down Fifth Avenue to the convention center, six hundred steelworkers walked from the Seattle Art

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Museum to the WTO cocktail party at the exhibition center, and peaceful protesters formed human chains to protect storefronts as black-clad rioters smashed windows. On day two, while the International Longshore and Warehouse Union organized work stoppages at all their deep-sea ports on the West Coast, twenty-five thousand union members, activists, and citizens marched to Seattle’s Memorial Stadium. Others immobilized the bus service, blocking travel through the city. US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright could not get from her hotel to the convention center just a few blocks away. By Wednesday, with two hundred National Guard troops patrolling streets lined with plywood-covered windows, Mayor Paul Schell declared a state of emergency and banned protests in the business district. On Friday, with nearly six hundred arrests tallied and the city effectively shut down, the WTO talks were suspended in what US Trade Representative Charlene Barshefsky diplomatically called a “time out.”

That same week, local protesters around the world echoed the demands of those in Seattle. In London, activists gathered outside the London Stock Exchange. Farmers’ unions and social-justice organizations held rallies in New Delhi and Bangalore. In Paris, five thousand farmers staged a “peasant’s picnic” under the Eiffel Tower to underscore the threat to small farmers and food safety posed by the negotiations. Protesters blocked streets in Lisbon, occupied the departure halls of Amsterdam’s international airport, and rallied by the thousands in Ankara, Turkey.

The iconic Democracy banner and countless images and footage from the protests dominated the news internationally for days. “I was supposed to leave to go back to Washington, DC, that Saturday,” said Helene Cooper, the *Wall Street Journal* reporter covering the conference. “But I stayed all weekend because I needed to write a huge story for the Monday paper: Protesters: 1, WTO: Nothing.”

The “Battle of Seattle” ignited a global wave of citizen engagement that has shadowed every WTO Ministerial Conference since. Thanks to the work of this coalition of scholars, researchers, unions, environmentalists, citizens, and protesters, the World Trade Organization and its negotiations went from a concern held by a loose coalition of activists, unions, and smaller nations to a threat familiar to hundreds of millions of people worldwide. “Seattle was the beginning of saying there is something wrong with this globalization, this idea of free trade,” said author and activist Vandana Shiva, “and that’s why people are out in the streets.” Despite securing piecemeal accords such as the Trade Facilitation Agreement, no comprehensive trade round has successfully concluded since then.