

Twenty Years Later The “Spirit of Seattle” Lives On!

How the Food Sovereignty Movement Helped Bring Down The World Trade Organization

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Strike – a slogan that originated on the streets of Seattle almost two decades ago. When the images and voices of 50,000+ people shutting down a global convergence of wealthy elites rippled across media outlets in late Nov. 1999. The “Battle of Seattle” caught many by surprise. Corporate free trade apologists were quick to disparage the protesters as part of a misguided “anti-globalization” movement, apparently unaware that the forces behind the direct action had been cultivating north-south solidarity for quite awhile – a new more powerful form of globalized resistance from below.

Family farmers/fishers, migrant farm/food workers, and indigenous communities were critical to this

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grassroots victory – in particular, La Via Campesina (LVC) and its many U.S. allies such as Family Farm Defenders (FFD) and the National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC). It was in such epic struggle that the seeds of food sovereignty found fertile ground.

Many Helped Organize This Historic Encounter

I was but one of many who helped organize this historic encounter that brought together a vast array of radical environmentalists, labor unions, anarchists, global justice advocates,

and – of course, family farmers, farm/food workers, and other supporters of global food sovereignty. In fact, my very first night in Seattle – Mon. Nov. 29th – I was able to link arms with Vandana Shiva outside the corporate-sponsored WTO welcome celebration. This action was in part organized by Jubilee 2000, a largely faith-based grassroots campaign to expose and eliminate odious debts that had come onto the scene at the huge protest surrounding the G8 Summit in Birmingham, Scotland in 1998. In Seattle, the citizen blockade meant many elites were not able to get to the kick-off “cocktail party”, and all those uneaten hors d'oeuvres were later dumpster dived to feed hungry protesters at the convergence space.



Family Farm Defenders Attend the World Trade Organization Protest

John Kinsman & Francis Goodman Hold the FFD Banner

Earlier in the day I had caught up with John Kinsman and Francis Goodman of Family Farm Defenders, Medea Benjamin of Global Exchange, Ronnie Cummins of the Pure Food Campaign (later the Organic Consumers Association), Dr. Ridgely A. Mumin Muhammed of the Black Farmers and Agriculturalists Association, and other food sovereignty activists outside the downtown McDonalds for a slow food protest picnic. This was the first time I met José Bové, the iconic farmer activist with Confédération Paysanne who had recently used his tractor to “dismantle” another McDonalds in France. Bové had somehow managed to smuggle several blocks of his own Rocquefort cheese through U.S. Customs and shared it with the crowd – a wholesome alternative to the junk food or “la malbouffe” as Bové described what was being served inside. Activists with LVC and NFFC had met earlier to plant trees

in a Seattle park, and farmer delegates from over 30 countries would continue to build cross border solidarity at various teach-ins and protest actions throughout the rest of the week. At each such event the pungent smell of smuggled Rocquefort was detectable – some folks had saved their souvenir cheese! Within an hour of the protest picnic, the Black Bloc came through, and this McDonalds was also promptly “dismantled.” The Black Bloc would take out many other corporate targets – Bank of America, Starbucks, Warner Bros, Niketown, Gap, Old Navy to name but a few – over the course of the next few days.

AFL-CIO Backdoor Deals

Long before many of us arrived in Seattle, backdoor deals had already been made. Most notably, the AFL-CIO had promised government officials that their Tues. Nov. 30th post labor rally parade through Seattle’s

downtown would be used to siphon off protesters from participating in the actions to physically shutdown the WTO meeting that were already planned by the Direct Action Network (DAN). But this co-optation strategy soon unraveled as labor activists broke through the “peace police” to join their comrades that had been clogging the streets around the Convention Center since 6:00 am that morning. Among the many militant unions that defied the “labor bosses” in Seattle were the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), the Steelworkers, and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). By 10:00 am Seattle police had already launched their first unprovoked attacks against peaceful protesters occupying 6th Avenue, including myself. Word quickly spread through indymedia that the “Battle for Seattle” had begun.

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