

So who did win in Seattle?

Liberals Re-write History

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Hardly had the tear gas dispersed from the streets of downtown Seattle before an acrid struggle broke out as to who should claim the spoils. It's still raging.

On one side the lib-lab pundits, flacks for John Sweeney and James Hoffa like the Nation's Marc Cooper, Molly Ivins and Jim Hightower, middle-of-the road greens, Michael Moore, recycled policy wonks from the Economic Policy Institute and kindred DC think-tanks, Doug Tompkins (the former czar of sweatshop-made sports clothing who funds the International Forum on Globalization), Medea Benjamin (empress of Global Exchange).

On the other side: the true heroes of the Battle in Seattle—the street warriors, the Ruckus Society, the Anarchists, Earth First!ers, the Direct Action Media Network (DAMN), radical labor militants such as the folks at Jobs With Justice, hundreds of Longshoremen, Steelworkers Electrical Workers and Teamsters who disgustingly abandoned the respectable, police sanctioned official AFL-CIO parade and joined the street warriors at the barricades in downtown.

At issue here is the liberals' craving to fortify the quasi-myth of Labor Revived—a “progressive coalition” of John Sweeney's AFL-CIO, Hoffa's Teamsters, mainstream greens—poised and ready to recapture the soul of the Democratic Party. The way they're spinning it, the collapse of the WTO talks in Seattle was a glorious triumph for respectable demonstrators, achieved despite the pernicious rabble smashing window, harassing the police and bringing peaceful mainstream protest into disrepute.

Violent Protesters Interviewed

Listen to Ivins: “Of those 35,000 people, fewer than 1,000 misbehaved by trashing some local stores. How much more coverage do the 1,000 who misbehaved get than the 34,000 who didn't? A. 35 times as much? B. 34 times as much? C. Virtually all the coverage? You are correct: C is the answer. Do the other 34,000 people get any coverage? Yes—they are referred to as ‘some people concerned about the turtles...’ Meanwhile the violent protesters are interviewed on national television, identify themselves as anarchists and explain to us all that owning property is wrong and that none of the earth should be in private hands.”

Carl Pope, executive director of the Sierra Club, took a similar tack in an internal memo to his board of directors: “The Sierra Club was completely separate from the illegal protest, both violent and nonviolent...”

Pope went on to quote Kathleen Casey, one of his staffers, to the effect that “The new coalition that worked together to—thwart the WTO came out a clear winner. The Sierra Club achieved many of our goals despite the chaos and unfortunate violence that occurred in some of the actions...Some small factions engaged in vandalism and provocation, and the police sometimes overreacted in kind.”

The Nation's Marc Cooper announced tremulously that “the media focus on a few broken store windows should not distract from the profundity of what has happened here...” Cooper evoked “a phantasmagorical mix of tens of thousands of peaceful demonstrators...something not seen since the sixties, but in [its] totality unimaginable even then.” And what is this “unimaginable” thing? “The rough outlines of the much-sought-after progressive coalition—an American version of a ‘red-green’ alliance.”

To the fervid imagination of Michael Moore the union protests in Seattle had an effect on President Bill Clinton akin to that exercised by Jesus Christ on St. Paul on the Damascus road:

According to Moore: “He [Clinton] completely changed his position [he didn’t] and called on all WTO countries to enact laws prohibiting trade with nations that use children in sweatshops and do not honor the rights of all workers to organize a union.” Whoa! So, for Clinton to climb the Space Needle (or was he chased up it?) and then declare [he didn’t] that the human rights of workers were more important than making a buck, well, this was nothing short of Paul being knocked off his horse [he wasn’t] and seeing Jesus [he didn’t]! You could almost hear the collective seething of the hundreds of CEOs gathered in Seattle. Their boy Bill—the politician they had bought and paid for—had betrayed them. You could almost see them reaching for their Palm Pilots to look up the phone number of the Jackal.”

In this blinding curve of balderdash, Moore manages to conflate Christ, Clinton, Paul and JFK, truly a grand slam of liberal hagiography!

To concoct the myth of respectable triumph in Seattle, divorced from dreadlocked and locked-down Earth Firsters, turbulent Ruckusites and kindred canaille, the respectable liberals have been torturing the data and the data confessed.

Here’s how it goes: initial scouting parties of liberal policy wonks arrived in Seattle over the weekend prior to the WTO assembly and embarked on a series of sleep-inducing debates and panels, chewing over the minutiae of proposed WTO rules and regulations. As originally envisaged, these moots were scheduled to last all week, until by a process of inexorable erosion, like the Colorado river gradually cleaving its way through the Navajo sandstone to create the Grand Canyon, the WTO would be transmuted into a wholesome compact between First World and Third, between mighty corporations and African peasants, Nike and starving Indonesian workers to the betterment of all.

Then, the liberal fantasy continues. On Monday, battalions of clean-limbed environmentalists in their turtle necks and turtle costumes moved in disciplined array to a [police-approved] rallying spot where they were uplifted by the measured words of that Lenin of mainstream greenery, Carl Pope.

Faux-Populist Icon

After the speechifying, the battalions redeployed in the Methodist church on Fifth which sheltered the command and control center of the progressive Non-Governmental Organizations, aka NGOs. (In foundation-funded political wonkdom the acronym “NGO” is used constantly, often in conjunction with the phrase “civil society,” to evoke nonprofit organizations that mediate the public interest with governments. Oxfam is an NGO. The Interfaith Council is an NGO. World Wildlife Fund is an NGO. etc. etc.) Down in the basement of the church and indeed rarely emerging into the light of day was Jim Hightower, the faux-populist icon of Austin, Radio Nation’s Marc Cooper and other communicators. Upstairs were the briefing rooms and mock tribunals in more or less permanent session. It’s hard to continue relating this fantasy version of history with a straight face, because it’s so divorced from reality, but its official finale was the great labor march of Tuesday, November 30, when some 25,000 union people rallied under the indulgent eyes of the Seattle constabulary in an old football stadium, to listen to John Sweeney, James P. Hoffa of the Teamsters and such labor chieftains as Gerald McEntee of the AFSCME. The divorce of rhetoric from reality was best represented by McEntee who reiterated Carl Oglesby’s famous line from the 1960s, “We have to name the system.”*

Unlike Oglesby, who was a genuinely radical SDS leader, McEntee has been among the most fervent of all Big Labor’s supporters of Clinton-Gore.

When the rally was over, Sweeney and Hoffa led their thousands towards Downtown where at that precise moment the street warriors were desperately but successfully preventing delegates from entering the Convention Center and Paramount theater where the opening ceremony was scheduled to take place. It was touch and go as cops steadily got rougher and the tear gas got thicker. Certainly the arrival of thousands of labor marchers on the scene would have made it much more difficult for the cops to gas, beat and shoot the activists with wooden dowels and rubber bullets. It would have diminished the hundreds of serious injuries sustained by the street warriors.

The labor marchers approached and then...their own marshals turned them back. A few rebellious steelworkers, longshoremen, electrical workers and teamsters did disobey their leaders, push into downtown and join the battle. The main march withdrew in respectable good order and dispersed peacefully to their hotels, where Molly Ivins and the other scribes began composing their denunciations of the anarcho-trashers who had marred their great event.

It would no doubt be polite to treat this myth-making as contemptible but harmless self-aggrandizement. But real social movements for change shouldn't be built on illusions, and the self-aggrandizement is far from harmless. Take Medea Benjamin of Global Exchange, an NGO that has made its name on the sweatshop issue, dickering with Nike over the pay rates and factory conditions of its workers in Vietnam, Indonesia and China.

Whatever cachet Benjamin might have won by sneaking into a WTO session and being arrested and briefly addressing the delegates, was swiftly squandered by her subsequent deeds, defending Niketown. Benjamin and her Global Exchange cohorts stood on the steps of Niketown and sweatshop outlets in downtown Seattle to defend the premises against demonstrators.

As Benjamin herself proudly described her shameful conduct to the New York Times: "Here we are protecting Nike, McDonald's, the GAP and all the while I'm thinking, 'Where are the police? These anarchists should have been arrested.'" On the Nation website one can find an equally disgusting sample of this ass-kissing of corporate slave drivers.

Asked To Arrest Them

Stephanie Greenwood excitedly quotes the slogan of a person she describes as "her *Nation* boss", said slogan being "Capitalism, no thanks! We'll burn your fucking banks." But woe betide any demonstrator who took this slogan seriously, as encouragement to inflict direct injury on capitalist property. Greenwood goes on to report admiringly a scene outside Levi Strauss where the respectable protesters "brought kids who had kicked windows in over to the cops and asked them to arrest them."

Fortunately for the kids, the cops didn't heed the invitation. Had they done so, these kids could now be facing up to ten years for "malicious mischief", which is the charge prosecutors in the North West are bringing against street activists. And those people turned in by Benjamin and the others did endure awful treatment in jail.

An early report by Amnesty International describes "systematic cruel treatment was used to coerce or punish violent protesters for acts of noncompliance such as refusing to give their names in King county jail... one person was slammed against a wall, beaten while lying on the floor and his fingers forced back with a pencil. In another case guards squeezed a man's nose, almost suffocating him, when he refused to give out his name. Also at King county jail, people were allegedly strapped into four-point restraint chairs as punishment for nonviolent resistance or asking for their lawyers. In one case a man was stripped naked before being strapped into the chair. One woman was stripped naked by four women guards, while a male guard outside watched. She further had her arms and legs folded behind her and was held down on the floor with the full weight of two guards on top of her."

Aside from the baneful consequences of this on-ground-collusion with the cops, the larger political agenda of the liberals with their myth-making is far from benign either. By falsely proclaiming a victory for peaceful pro-cop protesters, they now can move on under a largely factitious banner of "unity," and hunker down with the government policy makers to rewrite the WTO treaty to their satisfaction. This is the core meaning of co-option, and certainly the writers at the London Economist understand it well enough.

In the wake of Seattle the Economist ran a long article discussing the rising power of NGOs, which successfully challenged the World Bank, sank the Multilateral Agreement on Investment and engineered the brilliant anti-land

mine campaign. But, the Economist continued, there's hope. "Take the case of the World Bank. The 'Fifty Years is Enough' campaign of 1994 was a prototype of Seattle (complete with activists invading the meeting halls). Now the NGOs are surprisingly quiet about the World Bank. The reason is that the Bank has made a huge effort to co-opt them."

A Seat at the Table

The Economist went on to describe how World Bank president James Wolfensohn had given the NGOs a seat at the table, and more than 70 NGO policy wonks now work in the Bank's offices worldwide, and half of the bank's projects have some NGO involvement. No one should look at the NGOs without first reading Michel Foucault on co-optation and internalization of the disciplinary function.

Finally, the myth-making actively demobilizes radical struggles against the two party status quo, since it pretends that one of the two parties—naturally, the Democrats—can actually be redeemed. Just listen to Michael Moore proclaiming the redemption and possible martyrdom of Bill Clinton. These are people who will be rallying next year outside the Republican Convention in Philadelphia but not outside the Democratic convention in Los Angeles, notwithstanding the fact that there is at least some disagreement between the Republican presidential aspirants on the WTO, whereas Gore and Bradley are in harmonious concord on this issue.

But of course it's all a myth, which can be easily popped with a simple question: if labor's legions had not shown up in Seattle the direct action protesters would have at least succeeded in shutting down the opening session on Tuesday, November 30, and they conceivably could have dominated the agenda of the entire week, as in fact they did.

15-Second Image

If the direct action protesters had not put their bodies on the line throughout that entire week, if the only protest had been that under official AFL-CIO banners, then there would have been a 15-second image of a parade on the national news headlines that Tuesday evening and that would have been it. The WTO would have gone forward with barely a ripple of discord except for what the African and Caribbean nations had managed to foment from the inside.

Remember, after Tuesday most of the labor people had gone back to work, and the street warriors were on their own, prompting the Seattle police finally to overreach and go berserk to such a degree that the people of Seattle and the press turned against them. People like Moore and Ivins should be taking up the cause of those protesters still facing charges.

They should also be pinning the blame on those who told the cops to take the gloves off. By Tuesday night both the White House and the US Justice Department were telling the mayor of Seattle that Clinton would not come if the streets weren't cleared. Reno wanted the feds to take over the policing actions, which almost certainly would have led to a massacre.

Contrast the outlook of Benjamin and the other protectors of corporate property with the attitude of a 34-year old Oregon farmer who found himself in the midst of the downtown protest, was arrested and harshly treated in jail: "To break a window in a retail facility in downtown Seattle is nothing compared to what some of these CEOs are doing daily."

Leave the last words to Jeff Crosby, the president of a union local of International Union of Electrical Workers who flew to Seattle with 15 of his fellow union members from New England. Crosby works at a GE plant, who is about to relocate in Mexico. After he went home, Crosby put up on the web this open letter:

"The decision by the AFL-CIO not to plan direct action was a mistake. The literature and petition the AFL-CIO used for Seattle was mostly unreadable and unusable, with no edge. Despite some heroic efforts by union folks in Seattle and other places, the AFL-CIO campaign was reminiscent of the 'old' AFL-CIO's campaign against NAFTA—remember 'Not This NAFTA?' If we had run a campaign against the congressional 'Fast Track' vote with 'Not this

fast-track', we would have lost that one too. Did anyone really try to bring people to Seattle under the slogan, 'We demand a working group'?

"This is a period when on certain issues, massive, nonviolent direct action is in order, as the demonstration in Seattle shows. Every member who went on our trip reports that support for the demonstrations, even with the disruptions, is overwhelming. And not just from other workers in the shop, but family and other friends, regardless of what they do for a living. 'Since we came home, we're being treated like conquering heroes,' marveled one of our group.

"Perhaps the AFL-CIO was driven by policy advisers in Washington who didn't understand how angry people are about this issue...Perhaps they did not want to embarrass Gore. Perhaps Sweeney had an agreement with Clinton to ask for enforceable labor standards. Perhaps they thought that most people would be turned off by civil disobedience, or something else, I don't know. There were plenty of people in the labor movement pushing for the labor movement to join in the Direct Action—we lost."

Fortunately, the street warriors won.

* *Note by Peter Werbe:* Cockburn's history (probably his memory) is bad here. It was SDS president, Paul Potter, at the first national march on Washington DC against the Vietnam war in 1965 who uttered those words. In *Democracy is in the Streets*, James Miller's history of SDS, his account of the incident states, "We must name that system,' said Potter, pausing for effect. Someone in the crowd yelled, 'Capitalism.' Others shouted him down."

The last sentence refers to the "heckler." Actually, myself and numerous others who were present yelled out the name of the system Potter was too timid to label. No one shouted us down.

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Ah, What to wear to the demo...

The following was received by the New York Free Media Alliance:

Hello:

I'm a reporter for *Glamour* magazine, and at the request of my editor I am trying to find a female anarchist between the ages of 18 and 35 who participated in the WTO protests to be featured in a possible *Glamour* article.

Glamour reaches about 12 million readers a month, so it will be a great platform to talk about trade issues which were protested.

I am hoping you can put me in touch with a woman that fits this description. If you do, please call me collect at 212-286-7283.

Maura Kelly

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