

From Seattle to St. Paul

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There's a specter haunting the northern Midwest. It is the specter of Seattle.

These days, no gathering of radicals in these parts can happen without some talk about our plans for the Republican National Convention in St. Paul in late summer. And no talk about anti-RNC action can happen without someone mentioning N30, the November 1999 protests against the WTO in Seattle.

Again and again, in the consulta planning meetings and among the folks that you meet, you can hear the phrase the lessons of Seattle, but everyone seems reluctant to be explicit about what exactly those lessons are or should be. What's been interesting for us has been to press people in the anti-convention action groups to tell us what it was that they think they learned from Seattle. Interestingly, everyone we have talked with has a different answer. But everyone keeps talking about Seattle as if we all know and all agree with what the lessons were.

So what does Seattle mean for those of us plotting large-scale direct action against the Republican Party machine in the Twin Cities?

We don't want to present our opinion as the only correct one. We just want to provide our perspective in the hope that it will get others to say more and publish more before September. For background, let's explain that, of the three of us writing this article, two were in Seattle in 1999 (independent of one another) and one of us was in Boston in 2004. All of us were involved in anarchist actions that got us roughed up by cops and arrested. And all of us were disappointed by how little was ultimately accomplished and we hope that something different will come from shutting down the RNC this summer.

We three regard N30 as a lesson in the failures that we can expect when there's poor pre-planning. The Battle of Seattle was a missed opportunity for meaningful, lasting action; better preparation would have turned it into something more than protest-porn pictures of tear gas clouds, scrawled graffiti, and burning dumpsters shown on TV.

We see the hysterical anti-terrorist posturing of militarized police after N30 and 9-11 as one of the most meaningful lessons to have come out of the anti-WTO protests. In the years after Seattle, WTO, IMF, G8, and NAFTA conferences took place in increasingly remote and/or more heavily policed areas. For them, the lessons of Seattle were lessons learned by the cops by the time of the anti-FTAA protests in Miami and the RNC-DNC crackdowns in NYC and Boston in 2004. When cops and politicians talk about Seattle, it sounds almost as if they learned more from Seattle than we did. The lessons for the rest of us should involve appreciating the importance of creating new types of strategic thinking, of honing a hyper-awareness about police spies and infiltrators, and for teaching one another a new jiu-jitsu of how to avoid tasers, tear gas, zip-tie wrist restraints, and the general rising level of paramilitary violence by the forces of law-'n'-order.

We've been encouraged that many of our comrades have thought about some of the things, too. We're glad that so many are committed to more organization but not at the expense of small-scale autonomy. There's no end to

the if this, then that contingency plans which have been developed by forward-thinking organizing coordinating groups, all of which have built-in self-destruct switches that will dissolve any leadership roles as the date of the RNC gets closer. Carefully and self-conscious media relations have already begun in earnest, and fund-raisers in anticipation of the bail and legal fees needed to help jailed friends has already begun.

Let's all talk more about what Seattle means and what it means to what we plan for the RNC.

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