

Reflections on Copenhagen and the Cycle of Movements

Ten Years After Seattle WTO

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On November 30, 2009, the World Trade Organization (WTO) met in Geneva, ten years to the day of the shut-down of the WTO in the streets of Seattle, still reeling from a decade of global organizing and mobilizations against it. On that same day, November 30, 2009, President Obama announced orders to send 30,000 additional US troops to Afghanistan. Two weeks later, from December 7 to 18, the United Nations Copenhagen climate summit took place, paralleled by street mobilizations, mass direct actions, and counter-summits of global social movements.

These are the three interlocking major crises of our time: climate change, war, and economic crisis. Climate change is the most dramatic and global of the wide range of ecological crises. Copenhagen was a defining moment in what is becoming the central fight between global social movements and corporate capitalism: climate. By war, I mean especially the US-led military empire with bases across the planet and wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The real economic crisis is the human and ecological suffering caused by the corporations, banks, and finance racket that are hardwired to make us poorer, and themselves richer and be unaccountable and anti-democratic. As the banner over the London climate camp last year during the G20 meeting read, "CAPITALISM IS CRISIS."

I'm writing this in early 2010, in what feels like an unusual opening to re-think what is happening in the world and in our communities, and what we can do to bring about positive changes.

A longtime European anti-capitalist organizer friend wrote to me of the Copenhagen mobilizations, "The delegitimization of the UN process and class war within the UN Bella Centre was clear for all to see. It felt like the end of a certain cycle of movements and the beginning of another—a bit like 1998 felt!"

An emerging global and North American climate justice movement, rejecting market solutions and calling for nonviolent direct action, is emerging. The parallels between the global justice/anti-capitalist movement emerging from Seattle and the climate justice movement emerging from Copenhagen are striking. Many of the people with whom I organize local climate justice actions in the San Francisco Bay area are folks I was with in the streets of Seattle during the WTO and in the streets resisting the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and are a new wave of young radicals. The value of looking back to Seattle WTO resistance is to think about what worked, why, what can be done better, and then to innovate and not fall into the trap of repeating.

The 1999 Seattle WTO shutdown and resistance action has become an icon—a story that gives other things meaning. What people think happened in Seattle shapes what they believe about protest, direct action, social change movements; about corporate globalization and capitalism; and about police, the state, and repression. Stories shape consciousness. Consciousness shapes the future. That's why I have spent some time over the last few years to try to salvage the real story of the Seattle WTO resistance—a story dangerous to corporations and governments, and powerful for people, communities, and movements.



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ACTIVIST MYTHS AND CHALLENGES

After Seattle, Copenhagen or other successful mobilizations there is a tendency to look toward the next big summit or mass action. Mass mobilizations and direct action are a key part of any successful movement, but strong mobilizations come out of ongoing campaigns and are the culmination of movement building in our communities. They are not a substitute for them.

There is an activist and radical myth that Seattle WTO resistance was largely a semi-spontaneous rebellion or that it depended mostly on an element of surprise, or even luck. This myth overlooks the facts of massive grassroots organizing, mobilizing, networking, education, alliance-building, media work, and creation of a unifying strategic framework. This is not to negate the less explainable elements, like emergent intelligence—people thinking along the same lines at the same time, nationally and globally—that took place in conjunction with the strong foundation of organizing and strategy. In some cases people have tried to repeat a Seattle WTO-type mobilization without the lead-time, capacity, or support. The result has been a series of less planned, narrowly framed, mass actions that have left participants vulnerable to getting beaten up politically, physically, and legally.

After mass action efforts in St. Paul during the 2008 Republican National Convention, veteran direct action organizer and strategist George Lakey wrote in a discussion letter titled “Let’s Support Winning Instead of Witness”:

My experience is that most of the militant young anarchists that go from place to place to hold their ritual bashes (and not all militant young anarchists do so) are as non-strategic and unconcerned with social change as are most pacifists who hold signs at the county courthouse every Wednesday at noon.

Direct action organizer Matthew Smucker gives some insight in his brilliant self-critical essay, “What Prevents Radicals from Acting Strategically?” He writes:

“We need to examine how our groups’ collective rituals and alternative narratives, if unchecked by an imperative to strategically engage society, will tend toward self-isolation. We need to see how profoundly this limits the potential power of our movements. When protest tactics become primarily collective ritual without regard to a strategy for broader engagement, then much of the non-participating public is likely to associate the given issues with the particular ritual, or the “type” of people who perform the ritual. People who sympathize with the issue or goal may not become active in the cause because they are not interested in assimilating into—or being identified with—a fringe subculture, or because they see a lack of strategy.”

Smucker expands on these ideas further:

“One of the largest barriers to strategic thought and action in many U.S. social movements today is that, in the story of the righteous few, success itself is suspect. If a group or individual is embraced by a significant enough portion of society, it must be because they are not truly revolutionary or because their message has been ‘watered down,’ rather than because they’ve organized or communicated their message effectively.”

Too many US anti-authoritarians and anti-capitalists, often courageous and smart activists, seem stuck with organizing practices that lead to self-marginalization, while millions of people in the US are hungry for change and would step up to common-sense, well-organized, strategic mass direct action-based campaigns around housing, work, healthcare, and climate, and against war.

AFTER-ACTION ANALYSIS

After the Seattle WTO protests many of us went full steam into the next round of organizing. We did not take the time out to analyze what had worked, what had not, and why. And now, a long and ongoing series of mass actions in the US is missing the lessons that hundreds of organizers could have provided. As radical researcher

Paul de Armond writes in “Black Flag Over Seattle,” his excellent outsider analysis of the 1999 week-long battle originally published in the *Albion Monitor*,

“Law enforcement, government authorities, and even the American Civil Liberties Union have conducted in-structive after-action analyses of the Battle of Seattle. By way of contrast, none of the protest organizations has rendered an after-action analysis of the strategies and tactics used in Seattle, even though the Internet teems with eyewitness accounts. In all forms of protracted conflict, early confrontations are seedbeds of doctrinal innovation—on all sides.”

In a 2009 interview I asked him what lessons activists should have learned. He responded:

“At the time, the obvious one was, “How did this happen and where does it take us?” At the time I wrote this, one obvious lesson to me seemed the unexpected political power of ad-hoc, even accidental, coalitions. Movements grow by expansion and recruitment. Instead, the movement [after Seattle] seemed to turn inwards to the point that some protests were an in-joke known only to the participants.”

SEATTLE WTO SHUTDOWN: STRATEGIC PRINCIPLES

Several years after the Seattle actions, a group of us reflected on the key elements or principles that made the one-day mass urban action in Seattle a success. These principles also apply to similar actions: the 2003 shutdown of San Francisco’s financial district the day after the US invasion of Iraq and, to some degree, the recent Reclaim Power mass action in Copenhagen. We came up with the following principles in an effort to develop a people-power strategy within the US anti-war movement. I have added a few more for the book, *The Battle of the Story of the Battle of Seattle*.

1. Clear What-and-Why Logic: A simple rationale for the mass action that makes sense to people. Direct Action Network wrote, “We are planning a large-scale, well-organized, high-visibility action to SHUT DOWN the World Trade Organization on Tuesday, November 30. The World Trade Organization has no right to make undemocratic, unaccountable, destructive decisions about our lives, our communities, and the earth. We will nonviolently and creatively block them from meeting.”

2. Broadly Publicized: Lead-up actions, press conferences, a widely-distributed broadsheet newspaper, nearly 100,000 color postcards, a massively visited Web site, widespread emailing of our call to action and action info, a West Coast performance/ education/training road show and broad regional and North American mobilizing made sure many people knew what was planned, why, and how to prepare and plug-in.

3. Mass Training and Mass Organization: Perhaps two thousand people received nonviolent direct-action and related trainings in the days and weeks leading up to the action, and in communities up and down the Western U.S. one thousand people were directly involved in the organizing through affinity groups and clusters, working groups, and public meetings. This training and organization was the foundation on which thousands more joined spontaneously. As Stephanie Guilloud writes in her amazing reflective essay, “10 Lessons for Movement Building on the 10th Anniversary of the WTO Shutdown,” “They came out of the bars: infrastructure and preparation allows for spontaneous action.”

4. Decentralization: A wide range of participating groups and individuals helped to shape, understood, and supported the basic strategy and agreements. At the core of the action were many self-reliant affinity groups who organized into clusters, thus the core action participants were well-organized, able to be flexible and make quick decisions, and respond easily to changes. This meant that the action was less vulnerable to repression or disruption, and that when some organizers were arrested, others stepped up.

5. Action Agreements: The groups and activists of the Direct Action Network made some basic agreements early on about what types of mass action would best shut down the WTO and would create a space that could involve a wide diversity of participants, because we would need hundreds or even thousands to shut down the WTO. We agreed that we would organize ourselves in affinity groups who would coordinate in a spokescouncil and that we would support and prepare for jail solidarity. We agreed that the direct action blockades would be nonviolent, and

would not include property destruction (except for moving objects as blockades). Voluntary agreements are the foundation of any collective project and are the basis of trust for alliances of different people and organizations.

In the wake of Seattle, parts of the anarchist and anti-capitalist scene adopted and strongly promoted a “diversity of tactics” framework which in practice means refusing to discuss which tactics are or are not strategic and refusing to make agreements about which tactics would or would not be used at an action. It was seen as a pushback against the rigidity of “nonviolence” with all its baggage, allowing more space for property destruction and street fighting with—or fighting as self-defense against—cops. In recent years diversity of tactics advocates have initiated mutual respect agreements (the St Paul Principles and the Pittsburgh Principles) between’ different organizing groups around time and location of demonstrations and not publicly criticizing each other.

Most movements around the world, nonviolent or not, discuss strategy, make agreements about which tactics are strategic, and organize to follow those agreements. Where diversity of tactics has replaced action agreements in the US, the effect has been that mass direct actions are less massive, less strategic, less frequent, with less public support, and more vulnerable to infiltration, police provocateurs, repression, corporate media marginalization, and the constituencies participating have become narrower.

6. Open Organizing: We made the decision early on to organize openly and publicly. This was a learned response to government efforts to infiltrate or disrupt past mass actions and movements, such as the FBI’s COINTELPRO efforts to destroy the New Left, civil rights, and anti-Vietnam war movements. If a group’s plans for mass actions or demonstrations are public and open, it is less vulnerable to government infiltrators or informants and its plans are not ruined if they are found out. It also makes group members less susceptible to the goal of government disruption, which is, in the words of one FBI Agent quoted by Brian Glick in his book *War at Home* (1989, South End Press): “to make activists think there is a cop behind every telephone pole.”

Our basic plan, to march on and blockade the WTO on the opening morning of their Ministerial, was very public, printed on tens of thousands of outreach postcards and broadsheets, and even on the front page of the *Seattle Times*.

Keeping planning secret, or adopting a “security culture” that can make a group more insecure and unwelcoming, works against the need to involve large numbers of empowered people and to have open democratic decision-making. Small self-reliant affinity groups of five to twenty-five people as the basic planning and decision-making bodies of the action can create an element of surprise or spontaneity.

In Seattle affinity groups formed into clusters to take on blockading the thirteen “pie slices” that downtown Seattle around the WTO had been divided into; and some remained mobile. How, where and when each affinity group or cluster would blockade was an element of surprise.

7. Media and Framing: Direct Action Network aggressively communicated in plain language to participants; to movements; and to the public through our own printed materials, website, emails, road shows; and to both independent and corporate media what we were planning and why and what was wrong with the WTO. Because of this major effort to tell our story, and despite corporate media efforts to weaken public support for our direct actions, a month later, a January 2000 opinion poll by Business Week found that 52 percent of US people sympathized with the protesters at the WTO in Seattle. Too often, a healthy, radical critique of the corporate media leads to groups deciding to not even try to engage with them, standing by while they get beaten up in the mainstream press and in public opinion, and sometimes barely making the effort to communicate through independent media or directly through their own media and outreach. Yes, the corporate media, like the police, are instruments of control, but would you stand by and not protect yourself against a cop’s club because their authority is illegitimate?

These principles worked for a strong well-organized mass action mobilization, with public support, to shut down one city for a day. What would it take to do this in more than one city, for more than one day, and with increasing public participation and support?

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