

WHOSE STORY OF SEATTLE?

A PROTEST HISTORY MISSES THE POINT

A book review and response to *One Week to Change the World: An Oral History of the 1999 WTO Protests* by D.W. Gibson. Simon & Schuster, 368 pages. 2024.

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In 1999, a massive public uprising in the streets of Seattle led to the shutdown of the World Trade Organization (WTO) “Millennium Round” Ministerial Conference. That week became a historic turning point for global trade and governance, organizing and mass nonviolent protest, and police repression tactics. Seattle remains a potent example of what’s possible by combining effective organizing, mass mobilization, creative civil disobedience, and a little good luck. This is why WTO shutdown organizer Stephanie Guilloud said, in a 2019 [roundtable discussion](#)¹ about the protests, “It’s imperative to remember the particular win of Seattle . . . so we can shape the next twenty years.”

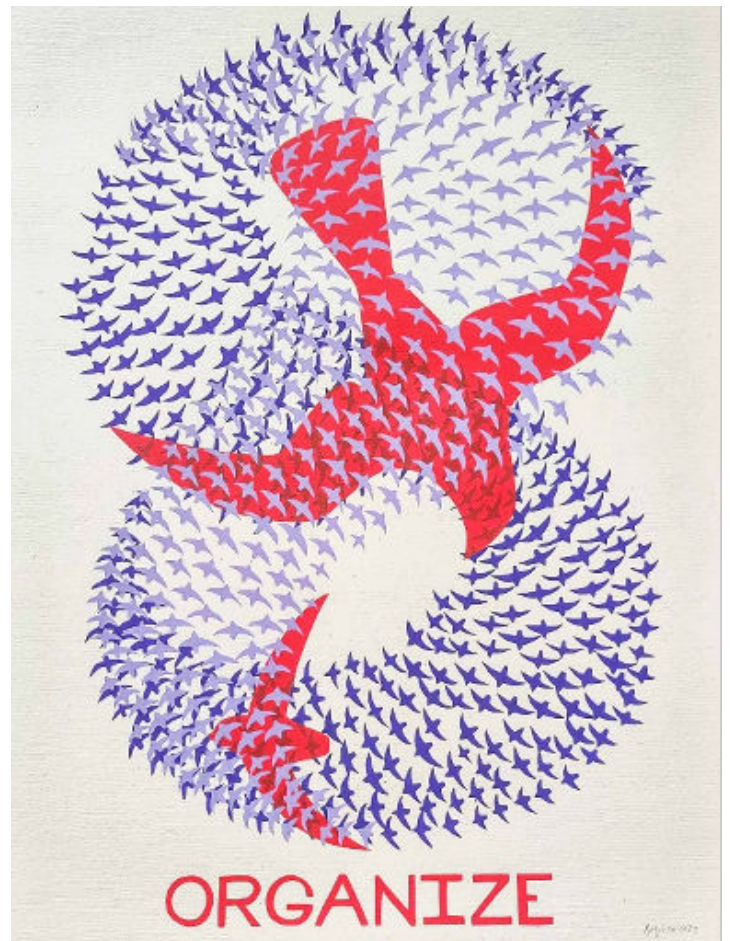


Image of poster by Roger Peet, via JustSeeds.org²

A book recently published and marketed for the 25th anniversary of the events, *One Week to Change the World: An Oral History of the 1999 WTO Protests* (Simon & Schuster), is the latest attempt to tell the story and explain the meaning of “the Battle in Seattle.” The book is composed of interviews with nearly 70 people, among them activists involved in protest organizing; nonprofit staff; union leaders; law enforcement officials; business leaders; delegates to the WTO meeting; reporters; and city, state, and federal officials. Author DW Gibson stitched together the interviews into what the book jacket calls an “essential history” of Seattle and a “practical handbook for how to make one’s voice heard.”

But the book falls far short of conveying the real story of what happened, and by no means is it a handbook. This is in no small part because of the author’s decision to center white men while giving short shrift to the politics and organizing that made such actions possible. These are problems of both representation and of analysis, and thus the book inevitably misses Seattle’s most important elements and lessons.

WHAT HAPPENED: THE WTO AND THE 1999 PROTESTS IN SEATTLE

Those who pick up *One Week to Change the World* aren’t going to find an overview of what transpired in Seattle. But that context matters — for what’s in the book, and what isn’t.

Born out of international governmental negotiations and launched in 1995, the WTO had the goal of promoting “global free trade,” the neoliberal mantra of the time. In practice, this meant prioritizing the “right” of corporate profits over everything else, including pesky matters like democratically elected governments, the rights of indigenous peoples, labor rights, and clean air and water. By the time the WTO had scheduled its conference for late 1999 in Seattle, a “worldwide revolt against

neoliberalism had been growing for nearly two decades,” writes WTO shutdown organizer and movement historian Chris Dixon. In his essay “Remembering for the Future,” he elaborates:³

This started in the mid-1980s in the Global South, especially Africa and Latin America, with increasingly widespread struggles against austerity measures mandated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Building on legacies of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements, these mobilizations particularly fought IMF-imposed price hikes and cuts to social spending. And by the early 1990s, meetings of neoliberal institutions such as the World Bank and the WTO faced massive protests.

“The road to Seattle,” Dixon explains, “was paved with years of organizing, confrontational struggle, and cross-border movement-building.”

This road led to Tuesday, November 30, 1999 – the first day of the WTO conference – when tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Seattle for a wide range of issues, including labor rights, environmental justice, small farms, fair trade, democratic principles, debt forgiveness, and anti-capitalism. This diverse mix of groups didn’t all organize together or coordinate all of their actions, let alone agree on solutions. In the spirit of Mexico’s Zapatistas, groups came together on the streets around one “no” – No WTO! – and many yeses.



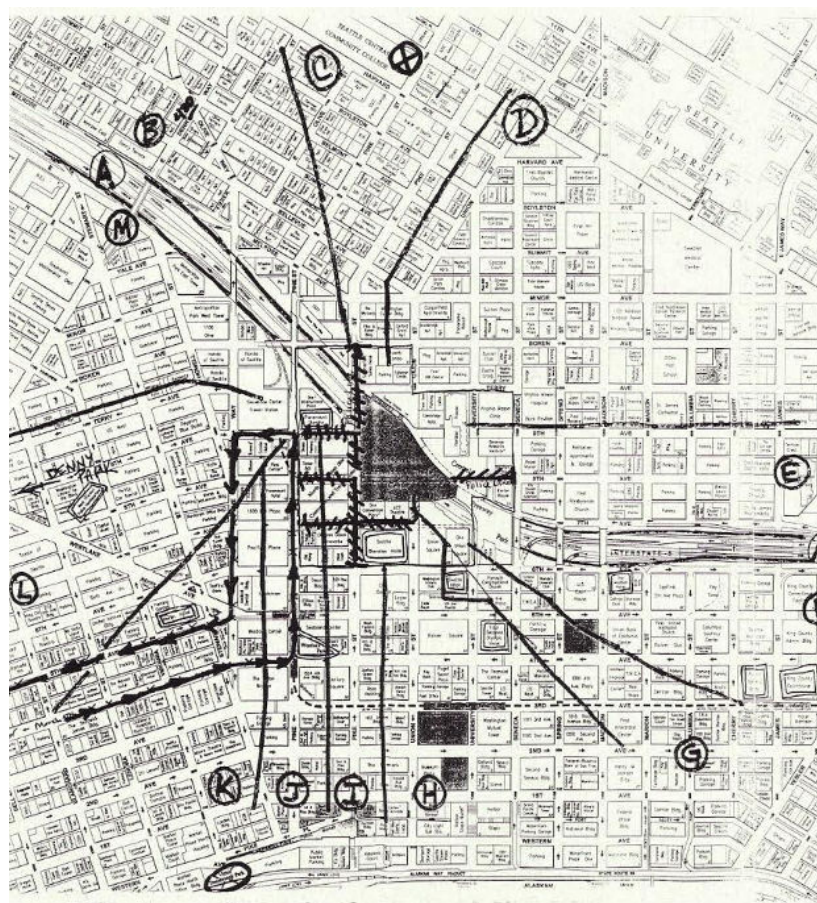
Top: WTO protesters crowd Pike Street on Nov. 30, 1999. Image: *Seattle Post Intelligencer*.⁴ **Middle:** Protesters march against the WTO on Nov. 30, 1999. Image: *Becoming a Citizen Activist*.⁵ **Bottom:** La Via Campesina contingent in Seattle to take on the WTO. Image: *Family Farm Defenders*.⁶



Left: Union members march in Seattle, Nov. 30, 1999.⁷ **Right:** Some direct action blockades included protesters linked together via “lock boxes”, long tubes designed to be difficult for the police to remove.⁸ Photos by former union organizer and social justice photographer, David Bacon.

Though most people in the streets that day arrived to take part in permitted marches and rallies, a subset of activists planned, trained for, and executed coordinated acts of nonviolent civil disobedience that surrounded and shut down the first day of the WTO meeting. The lines between the permitted marches and the disruptive civil disobedience melted away, transforming the energy in downtown Seattle into what many activists dubbed a “festival of resistance.”

At the time, the direct-action blockade of a global trade conference this big and this politically significant was novel in the United States. Through careful advance organizing, dozens and dozens of affinity groups – small circles of 5 to 15 people – coordinated as a decentralized whole, using consensus to make decisions at each blockade point. This structure distributed power and made it easier for affinity groups to integrate new people who were making an on-the-spot choice to join actions of nonviolent disobedience.



Map of downtown Seattle, used by the Direct Action Network (DAN), dividing the area around the WTO conference site into “slices”, like a pie. Clusters of affinity groups took responsibility for different slices.



A Seattle police officer fires his weapon point blank into a group of demonstrators attempting to prohibit access to the WTO at the intersection of Sixth Avenue and Union Street on Nov. 30, 1999. Police first informed the demonstrators that they were in violation of an order to disperse. Photo from [Seattle Post-Intelligencer](#).⁹

In response to the protests, the police attacked people in the streets with batons, rubber bullets, and chemical weapons. The governor declared a state of emergency and deployed National Guard troops and armored vehicles. Nearly 600 people were arrested, many of whom were brutalized by police. The mayor declared downtown Seattle a “no-protest zone.” Shocking images of the police riot circulated worldwide.

Yet over the next three days, and in the face of extraordinary police violence⁹ and political repression, locals from Seattle and across the Pacific Northwest – along with folks from all over this country and many others – continued nonviolent protests in the streets. Labor unions and people’s movements around the world – in Canada, South Korea, Mexico, Kenya, Bangladesh, France, and beyond – held solidarity strikes and actions. And during the trade negotiations, many nations from the Global South, bolstered by this widespread resistance, dialed up their opposition to the WTO’s plans for corporate rule over sovereign governments.

By the end of the week, an unusual loose-knit confederation had come together in Seattle in the fight for global justice: leaders from Indigenous First Nations, antiauthoritarian activists, community- and faith-based groups, labor unions, teachers, trade representatives from the Global South, environmentalists, farmers, students, nonprofit advocacy groups, unaffiliated city residents (and more!). Together, this unique amalgamation of forces scored an unprecedented victory by exposing and undermining the WTO’s plans. The win in Seattle energized activism and organizing for years to come.

A NARROW TAKE ON HISTORY

Roughly 80,000 people participated in those protests, including me. In the summer of 1999, I moved to Seattle and joined the Direct Action Network (DAN). Co-founded by organizers from the Pacific Northwest and the San Francisco Bay Area, DAN was the all-volunteer network of activists and groups that worked together for months in the lead-up to the protests. DAN issued the call to shut down the WTO meeting, planned the direct-action blockades in Seattle, and organized and trained thousands of people to take part.

Over the past 25 years, people have produced innumerable articles, reports, oral histories, essays, books, websites, conferences, and documentaries about the WTO protests. They have explored what happened, debated its impact and meaning, mined experiences for organizing lessons, and contended with a range of political tensions.

One Week to Change the World doesn't relate with this body of work. The book has no citations, references, or bibliography, and if Gibson drew from any of these historical materials, the book's narrative doesn't reflect it. He doesn't say why, as there's no original writing in the book – no introduction, no summary, no reflection or conclusion, no ownership of his particular position and perspective.

Instead, he takes snippets of interviews and links them together to form *his* “essential history” of Seattle. And this is

the book's main problem: It's not the story of what happened in Seattle but Gibson's version of it. Tellingly, he pursues his own take on history, even when his narrative – which emerges from the sequencing of interview excerpts – contradicts what some interviewees told him. This raises a host of questions, including how some people might feel about what he's done with their stories.

The book includes some compelling reflections by those interviewed, and its most useful contribution is to be found in the insights it provides into the protest-related decision-making by government and law enforcement officials: the in-fighting between the Seattle Police Department and the King County Sheriff's Office, how decisions made by city officials and police leadership contributed to their violent response to the protests, and how local law enforcement officers later traveled the country and beyond to train other agencies on “lessons learned.”

But when it comes to the actual *organizing* behind Seattle and what activists today might draw from it, *One Week to Change the World* is marked by clichés and mischaracterization. It misses basic elements of the story, especially related to the planning and logistics for the direct-action blockades, the interplay among organizations, the modes of leadership that emerged, and the Direct Action Network itself.



Seattle Police Officer discharging pepper spray directly onto seated, nonviolent protestor. November 30, 1999. Photo by [Steve Kaiser](#), used under [Creative Commons license SA 2.0](#).¹⁰

MISPLACED SPOTLIGHT

Twice as many men as women show up in Gibson's book. Nearly 70 percent of the quotes in the book come from men. Twelve interviewees are quoted 25 times or more in the book: two government representatives, four law enforcement officials, and six activists and nonprofit staff who were involved in the protests. Of those six, all came from outside of the Pacific Northwest, and five of them are white men.

For Gibson, the important protagonists of the Seattle protests generally and the direct-action blockades in particular are white men – most of whom, in 1999, were in their 30s or 40s and held staff positions at progressive nonprofits based in D.C. or the Bay Area. This obscures – and at some points simply ignores – how leadership worked in Seattle and the diverse mix of people who served in those roles.

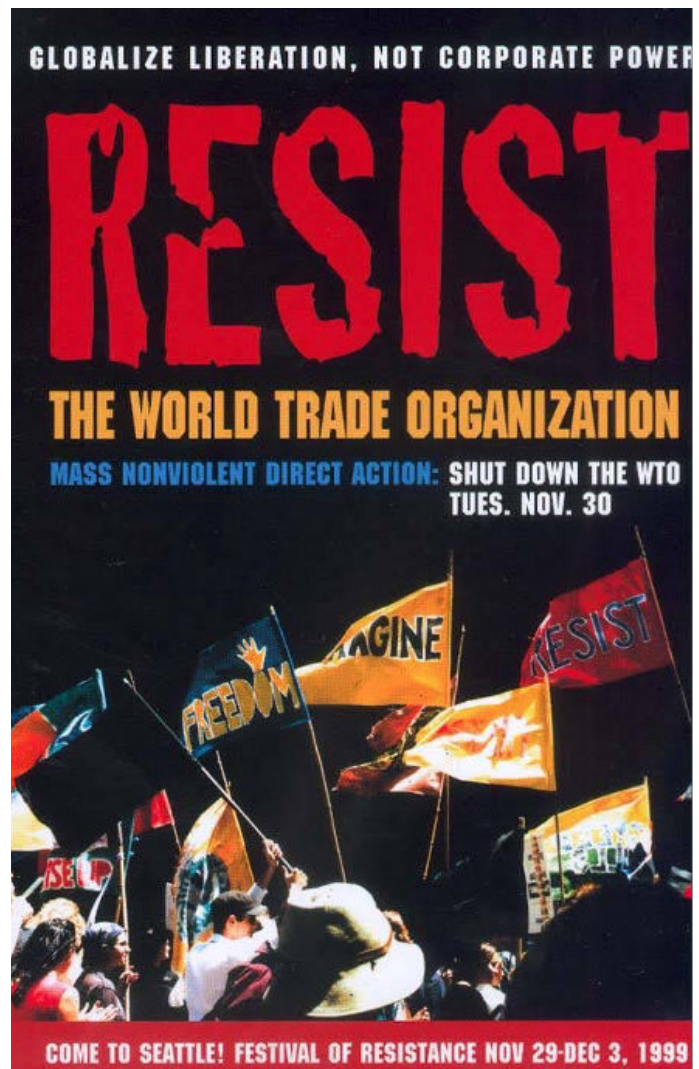
To be clear, this isn't criticism of the people Gibson interviewed or what they said. The problem is what he *does* with these interviews. Mainstream media outlets at the time did the same thing, building narratives around some of the same guys who are central to Gibson's story. This was an issue vigorously debated within the movement during and after Seattle – and is a persistent problem in how many historical accounts are told.

As many of the people interviewed point out, the WTO shutdown wouldn't have happened without the Direct Action Network. DAN was an all-volunteer formation, with a collaborative leadership structure made up predominantly of women and young people, including young queer folks and people of color, most of whom were organizers living in the Northwest. Without them, DAN likely wouldn't have come together as it did, let alone succeeded in organizing such a huge number of people. Yet Gibson renders these young people, especially women, practically invisible.

Gibson's myopia leads to more problems. He ignores much of the vibrant anarchist organizing happening in North America then, and instead presents the wing of the radical environmental movement based in Eugene, Oregon, as the principal precursor to the Seattle direct actions. But this is misleading. As Dixon deftly

summarizes in his excellent [essay](#), the political trends and dynamics that fed into Seattle, particularly the broader anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian organizing in the U.S. at that time, were decidedly more influential.

The book includes multiple anecdotes that illustrate the unique experiences of Gibson's protagonists but excludes details that might help the reader understand not just what happened that week, but *how*. For instance, he includes a scene in which his main character – a white guy who was staff at a D.C.-based nonprofit – ducks out of the tear gas-filled street into the safety of a fancy hotel room and has a beer with a friend and a famous actress before returning to the chaos outside. It's a colorful little story with details like the type of beer they drank and what was on TV about the protests.



As part of DAN's outreach, thousands of these [palm card flyers](#) were printed and distributed across the West Coast and beyond.¹¹

Contrast this with more relevant details left out of the book. There's shockingly little about the complex logistical functions that allowed activists to execute decentralized, highly coordinated nonviolent direct actions and marches throughout the week. Affinity groups are only briefly described and there's little about how they joined into clusters or worked together in the spokescouncil – the consensus-based decision-making body for many people involved in the direct-action protests.

There's nothing about the remarkable activist-run medical teams that saved lives on the streets and without which the sustained week of protests might have been impossible.

There's little about the activist legal team, and when its lead attorney is mentioned, we don't learn Katya Komisaruk's last name or anything about her. (She's a former political prisoner and a storied movement lawyer.)

There's next to nothing about activist security trainings and open organizing practices, which effectively prevented provocateurs and police infiltrators – discussed by cops interviewed in the book – from disrupting the protest plans.

The Convergence Center – DAN's hub of operations and where decisions were made in spokescouncil meetings

every night before and throughout the protests – isn't meaningfully explored. And so on.

In many ways, the book presents Seattle and as if it happened in a bubble, absent its social movement context. For instance, the book includes two people who were part of the black bloc in Seattle. (The black bloc is a tactic used principally by some autonomous and/or anarchist activists and may involve property destruction as a political act.) Several years later, one of them cooperated with state authorities in testifying against her former friends and comrades, which contributed to the incarceration of a number of activists. This relevant background is also omitted from the book, generating controversy since its publication. Another participant in the Seattle black bloc, Daniel McGowan – one of the activists imprisoned in the years of state repression afterward – vividly describes the details behind this controversy (and Gibson's response) in a recent, powerful [interview](#).¹²

Because the author fails to meaningfully account for the politics and organizing in Seattle, his takeaways are two-dimensional. In a recent [interview](#)¹³ about the book, Gibson argues that a key lesson from the WTO protests is the importance of collaboration among direct action activists and insider policy advocates – the old “inside outside” strategy.



Spokescouncil meeting. Graphic by Josh MacPhee.



Seattle police use gas to push back World Trade Organization protesters in downtown Seattle on November 30, 1999. Photo from AP/Eric Draper.¹⁴

Sure, but this glosses over the dynamics on the ground in 1999. Mainstream labor and nonprofit organizations didn't support the call to shut down the WTO conference through nonviolent direct action. Before and even on November 30, those groups focused on "reasonable" protest tactics – mostly civil *obedience* – and some of them outright opposed the call for a shutdown. Others stayed at arm's length from DAN's planning: If the direct-action blockade failed, they were poised to say "That wasn't us." But when it *succeeded*, some of the groups claimed they'd supported it all along or even helped to organize it.

And in some ways, that's a good thing (frustrating as it was at the time for many of us in DAN). It shows that through deep, effective, and relational organizing *over time*, what is deemed radical and marginal at one moment can become the center of gravity in the next, a new benchmark for what is possible. In Seattle, this meant many months of work that built on years of organizing in the region, across the country, and around the world. But Gibson misses this point too. And the book largely ignores the decades of robust discussions and debates among organizers and activists that flowed out of Seattle and into the movements that followed.



Seattle police arresting WTO protestors. 1999. Photo by former union organizer and social justice photographer, David Bacon.¹⁵

THE ORGANIZERS' HISTORY OF WHAT REALLY HAPPENED IN SEATTLE

People who participated in Seattle have long appreciated the significance of recording, remembering, and grappling with the events and their lessons. In 2019, a small group of DAN cofounders and core organizers compiled an indispensable collection materials developed over the years into the Shutdown WTO Organizers' History Project [website](#)¹⁶ to mark the 20th anniversary.

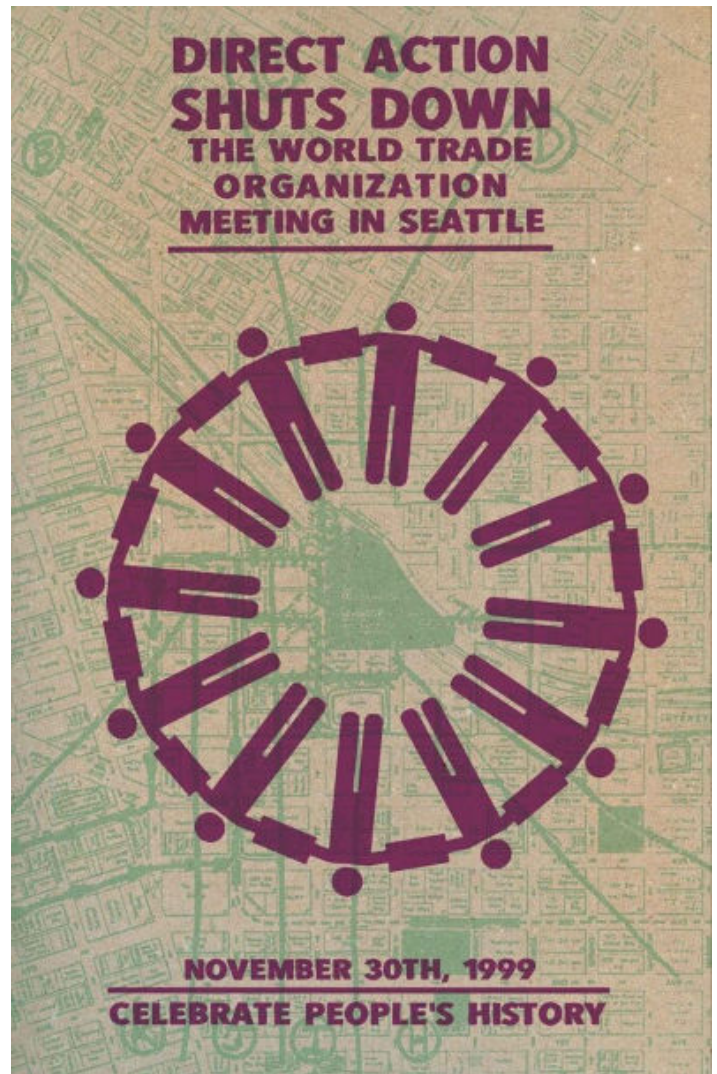
In 1999, most of these organizers were in their early 20s and lived in the Northwest: Ingrid Chapman was a student in Seattle who formed an on-campus No WTO group and dropped out of college to organize full time with DAN. Hop Hopkins organized in Seattle with the People of Color Against AIDS Network and was a co-founder of the Brown Collective. Organizers Nancy Haque and Chris Borte cofounded Portlanders Against the WTO. Stephanie Guilloud and Chris Dixon were anti-authoritarian organizers in Olympia. David Solnit, from the Bay Area, was cofounder of the direct-action protest group Art & Revolution. (Solnit, the oldest of this group, was the only one included in *One Week to Change the World*.)

These organizers and many others played vital roles in making Seattle happen. For months they engaged in the slow, methodical work of building and strengthening the local relationships, cross-movement solidarity, and collective trust necessary for a successful mass action – at a time when email and cell phones were relatively new, social media and smart phones didn't exist, and the internet was still called the World Wide Web. And they all kept organizing in the decades after Seattle. In a [roundtable discussion](#) in 2019, they discussed how they got involved in the WTO protests and what they learned – identifying clear, concrete insights and lessons.¹⁷

The website includes history, analyses, tools, and references that are essential to understanding Seattle but are lacking in *One Week to Change the World*. Among them are a terrific [summary](#)¹⁸ about that week and its ramifications; [resources](#)¹⁹ about Seattle and organizing, including books, documentaries, and an [anthology of writing](#) by people who shut down the WTO published just months after the protests²⁰; materials about the [role of art and music](#)²¹ in the organizing and protests, including a

[summary](#) of the Infernal Noise Brigade²²; [articles](#) about how and why the WTO has failed since 1999²³; and movement [reflections](#)²⁴ on Seattle by activists and organizers.

These materials connect to the decades of organizing and movement-building that fed into Seattle and help us understand the linkages to much of what followed – from protests against the Iraq war, to Occupy, and beyond.



*Poster by Nicolas Lampert. This is #98 in the Celebrate People's History Poster Series.*²⁵

LOOKING BACK TO LOOK FORWARD

All told, *One Week to Change the World* does a disservice to the organizing history of Seattle, to some of the people interviewed in the book, and to readers. These stories deserve better, and not just for their own sake: when building power to take on the real and dangerous challenges the world faces, social justice movements often draw from the past to understand and shape the fights unfolding in the present.

As we approach the 25th anniversary of that momentous week, we're lucky to have resources like the *WTO Shutdown Organizers History*. Even better are today's organizing campaigns and growing movements around the world fighting for labor, civil, and human rights; climate justice; reproductive freedom; democracy; an end to mass criminalization and incarceration; a free Palestine; and so much more. Such movements, often led by young people, represent our best hope to stave off catastrophe and build a better world for us all. They are making history that all people of conscience should join; theirs are stories that will be worth telling well.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Organizers Roundtable: We did good organizing--Redefining the Win for Movements Today." Conversation with Direct Action Network (DAN) organizers 20 years after the Shutdown of the WTO in Seattle, with Chris Borte, Ingrid Chapman, Stephanie Guilloud, Nancy Haque, Hop Hopkins, and David Solnit. Transcription by Cita Cook. <https://www.shutdownwto20.org/what-next/organizers-roundtable-discussion>
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