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SHUT DOWN



ORGANIZERS' HISTORY

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25@25

25 FUN OR OTHERWISE LESSER-KNOWN FACTS TO MARK THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE WTO PROTESTS IN SEATTLE.

In 1999, more than 80,000 people took to the streets of Seattle to protest the World Trade Organization (WTO) “Millennium Round” Ministerial Conference. After months of organizing and planning, protesters engaged in creative nonviolent disobedience and shut down the first day of the conference on November 30 (N30). Thousands of people stayed in the streets throughout the week despite extreme police violence and repression. The conference, intended to cement neoliberal corporate domination forevermore, instead ended in failure that December 3rd at the hands of people’s movements worldwide and the nations of the Global South.

As the movement veteran Ruben Solis [wrote](#), Seattle marked the beginning of the “mass movement organizing” era, which globalized “the struggle against globalized capitalism and imperialism. It was the first chapter in a narrative history and political development that has been a fast-moving train” ever since. This is among the reasons that people in movements around the world reflect on Seattle every year.

For the 25th anniversary, here are 25 fun or otherwise lesser-known facts related to the protests and the organizing legacies connected to Seattle. This list isn’t intended to be comprehensive. For those interested in learning more, plenty of links follow.

gabriel sayegh
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1 THE #N30HISTORY WTO SHUTDOWN HISTORY PROJECT TELLS THE STORY. A small group of organizers who had played key leadership roles in Seattle worked together to build and launch the #N30History Shutdown WTO Organizers' History [website](#). All of them had been involved in creating and developing the Direct Action Network (DAN), which issued the call to shut down the WTO meeting through nonviolent civil disobedience and worked to achieve it. The site is an invaluable archive of materials related to the events in Seattle, an example of organizers telling our own history, and the best place to learn about what happened and *how*.

2 THE ORIGINS OF SEATTLE CAN BE TRACED TO THE MID-1980S IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH. Especially in Africa and Latin America, people mobilized, as organizer and historian Chris Dixon [wrote](#) in his excellent history of the protests, through “[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 from Bangalore to Berlin.”

3 THE ZAPATISTAS' UPRISING AGAINST NAFTA IN 1994 SET THE STAGE. On January 1, 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement went into effect. On that day, the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* – the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, or EZLN – burst onto the world stage by mounting an armed rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico, to protest NAFTA and its impact on indigenous communities. Over time, the Zapatistas became known more for their “peaceful mobilizations, dialogue with civil society, and structures of political, economic, and cultural autonomy,” as [described](#) by the North American Congress on Latin America. The Zapatistas profoundly shaped the thinking, narratives, and trajectory of the growing global justice movement.

4 ACTIVE RESISTANCE HELPED LAY THE GROUNDWORK IN 1996. Before Seattle, there was [Active Resistance](#) (AR), organized by anarchists to protest the 1996 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. [Police repression](#) was heavy. Some of the AR organizers, including Kim Feicke and James Mumm, developed programming to foster a culture of [community organizing among anarchists](#). Feicke and others at AR would go on to be deeply involved in the direct action mobilization in Seattle.

5 IN 1997, THE PROTESTS IN VANCOUVER AGAINST THE ASIA-PACIFIC ECONOMIC COOPERATION BUILT MORE MOMENTUM. Thousands of students and other activists protested vigorously against world leaders who gathered for the APEC summit at the University of British Columbia to discuss “free trade” and globalization. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police responded with [intense violence](#). The protests reverberated all the way down the Pacific Coast, in what some called a [tipping point](#) in the global justice movement.

6

RESPONDING TO THE ZAPATISTAS' CALLS, PEOPLE'S MOVEMENTS FROM ALL CONTINENTS GATHERED IN FEBRUARY 1998 TO LAUNCH A NEW ALLIANCE FOR WORLDWIDE COORDINATION OF RESISTANCE AGAINST "FREE TRADE" AND THE WTO.

It was called People's Global Action (PGA), and at their founding in Geneva they [outlined four hallmarks guiding the network](#): "(1) A very clear rejection of capitalism, imperialism and feudalism; all trade agreements, institutions and governments that promote destructive globalization; (2) A confrontational attitude, since we do not think that lobbying can have a major impact in such biased and undemocratic organizations, in which transnational capital is the only real policy-maker; (3) A call to direct action and civil disobedience, support for social movements' struggles, advocating forms of resistance which maximize respect for life and oppressed peoples' rights, as well as the construction of local alternatives to global capitalism; (4) An organizational philosophy based on decentralization and autonomy." (The PGA added a fifth hallmark later, rejecting "all forms and systems of domination and discrimination" and embracing "the full dignity of all human beings.") PGA's member groups, holding actions around the world through 1998 and into 1999, built momentum that inspired and fed directly into Seattle and ongoing organizing for years after, as many describe in the [PGA Oral History Project](#).

7

MOST MAINSTREAM NONPROFIT AND BIG LABOR GROUPS DIDN'T INITIALLY SUPPORT THE CALL TO SHUT DOWN THE WTO CONFERENCE.

After its founding in the summer 1999, the Direct Action Network published, printed, and circulated thousands of copies of a [broadsheet](#) explaining the WTO and calling for people to come to Seattle to shut down the November meeting through nonviolent civil disobedience. Organizational endorsers of this call included People's Global Action, Rainforest Action Network, Ruckus Society, and Global Exchange. Support grew first among various activist networks, student groups, and some community and labor organizations. Most mainstream nonprofits and big labor coming to Seattle did not back the call for a shutdown – or even opposed it – focusing instead on actions of *civil obedience*. But things rapidly changed in the streets during the protests, and by the end of the week the shutdown was widely celebrated as a shared victory.

8

PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX ABOLITIONISTS PLAYED AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN ORGANIZING THE DIRECT ACTIONS.

In the spring of 1999, students at The Evergreen State College in Washington organized for renowned journalist Mumia Abu-Jamal, who was on death row in Pennsylvania – and is [still in prison](#) – to serve as graduation speaker. The college administration, governor, police unions, and members of Congress tried to block Mumia from speaking, and the [fight became national news](#). The students [out-organized](#) the opposition and [Mumia delivered the address](#) via an audio recording. Some of the students who led this effort, including Chris Dixon (who wrote a [how-to guide](#) for students to bring Mumia to their campus) and Stephanie Guilloud, cofounded the Direct Action Network.

9

DAN LEAHY TRAINED YOUNG ORGANIZERS AND FOSTERED A LOCAL CULTURE OF ORGANIZING IN THE NORTHWEST THAT WAS IMPORTANT TO THE WTO SHUTDOWN.

Leahy was an organizer, professor, and founder of the [Labor Center](#) at The Evergreen State College. He was a teacher and mentor for many young organizers (me among them), including many who played leadership roles in Seattle and have continued working in the broader movements for justice. In the summer of 1999, Leahy organized the “Trade, Labor & the Environment Conference,” convening tribal members, students, unions, and environmentalists to learn about the WTO and the upcoming summit in November. He had built connections with labor groups across North America as the coordinator of the [Trinational Coalition for Defense of Public Education](#) (from 1996 to 2009, a group founded “to counter NAFTA’s efforts to privatize and squash public education”). After Leahy’s death in 2022, friends [created a website](#) about his life and his work – including his [10 rules for organizers](#).

10

AFFINITY GROUPS DROVE THE SHUTDOWN EFFORT IN SEATTLE.

As Chris Dixon [has described](#), the Direct Action Network “asked participants to form self-reliant groups of five to fifteen people each who would determine their own creative plans for physically blockading intersections around the WTO meeting. Each affinity group designated a spokesperson who coordinated with others in ‘spokescouncil’ meetings and then reported back to their fellow members. Many affinity groups also agreed to work with each other in ‘clusters’ which took responsibility for particular intersections. Some clusters shouldered particularly ambitious projects. For instance, the cluster known as the ‘Flaming Dildos’ volunteered to shut down the area next to the interstate highway running underneath the Convention Center.” While most affinity groups in Seattle focused on the mass direct action, others concentrated on providing support and infrastructure – and sometimes fun and mischief. (One affinity group, Booty & Revolution, discreetly played the role of Cupid among activists.)

11

THE USE OF AFFINITY GROUPS, SPOKESCOUNCILS, ACTION AGREEMENTS, STRATEGIC MASS ARREST, AND JAIL SOLIDARITY IN SEATTLE DREW DIRECTLY FROM PRIOR MOVEMENTS.

As WTO shutdown organizers Julia Steele Allen and Chris Borte [wrote](#), “There is a connective thread that [Andy Cornell skillfully traces](#) from Movement for a New Society through [ACT UP](#), Books through Bars, Infoshops, [Food Not Bombs](#) and [Art and Revolution](#) – the anarchist scene of the ’90s. In the northwest participants in the anti-nuke movement simultaneously brought the same culture and praxis into ecodefense work with Earth First!” Affinity groups have a [history](#) dating back at least to anarchists fighting fascists in the Spanish Civil War. As organizer Scot Nakagawa recently wrote, Chile’s affinity groups “[formed the backbone of nonviolent resistance](#)” to the military dictatorship from 1973 to 1990.

12

"THIS IS WHAT DEMOCRACY LOOKS LIKE!"

For more than 20 years, people have chanted this at protests across the United States. Its origin [can be traced](#) to N30 in Seattle, as Julia Steele Allen and Chris Borte have written. It’s also the name of a [powerful documentary](#) by Jill Freidberg and Rick Rowley, cut from footage by 100 media activists on the ground at the WTO shutdown protests.

13

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH NEIGHBORHOOD BUSINESS OWNERS AND RESIDENTS HELPED KEEP THE COPS FROM SHUTTING DOWN THE CONVERGENCE CENTER.

Weeks before the WTO protests in 1999, the Direct Action Network secured a former nightclub at 420 East Denny Way in Capitol Hill, Seattle's queer neighborhood. In short order, volunteers transformed the space into the [Convergence Center](#), the epicenter of operations and trainings for the protests. Before thousands of activists arrived, DAN organizers (including me) talked with local residents and met with nearby business owners, explained what was happening and why, told them to expect thousands of people to come into the neighborhood over the course of three weeks, and asked them to call DAN – instead of the cops – if there were any problems. Most business owners and managers were at least receptive. Some, like the unforgettable [Coffee Messiah](#) – a haven for queers and artists and freaks of all stripes – were truly welcoming. Even as things got chaotic and messy, many businesses and residents remained supportive, and became more so after the police [indiscriminately attacked locals](#) during the week of protests.

14

THE POLICE IN SEATTLE USED SO MUCH TEAR GAS ON PEOPLE THAT THEY RAN OUT – AND THE FBI HELPED RE-UP THEIR SUPPLY.

By the end of the first day of protests – November 30 – police had used up all of their tear gas. As described by law enforcement agents in the oral history *One Week to Change the World*, FBI flew the Seattle Police Department to the manufacturing plant in Colorado to obtain more. It appears that the police never exhausted their supply of rubber bullets.

15

YOUNG QUEER WOMEN AND TRANS FOLKS PLAYED KEY LEADERSHIP ROLES IN THE DIRECT ACTION ORGANIZING IN SEATTLE.

This included the Small Town Sleazy Cowboys (and Lady) Puppet Rodeo Association, an Olympia-based [affinity group](#). They helped found the Direct Action Network, and their cluster shut down the intersection outside the Westin hotel, where WTO dignitaries were staying. Together they organized and [led the solidarity march](#) to the King County jail on December 2nd, demanding the release of more than 600 protesters who had been arrested. And, in a sign of continued local organizing after the WTO protests, they helped coordinate a major community debriefing about the protests at the Capitol Theater in downtown Olympia, an event that drew more than 750 participants.

16

WOMEN AND TRANS ACTIVISTS ALSO LED THE MOVEMENT LEGAL TEAM IN SEATTLE.

As legal worker Rahula Janowski wrote for the [Seattle Logistics Zine](#), “the DAN legal team was assembled to coordinate and support jail and court solidarity, as well as offer trainings to familiarize people with those tactics.” This was invaluable, as more than 600 people were arrested and thousands were attacked by police. Janowski, a longtime anarchist direct-action organizer, had coordinated the legal office for the protests and went on to collaborate on developing antiracist collectives and mentor new organizers through the [Catalyst Project](#). The lead attorney for DAN's legal team was Katya Komisaruk, who had been incarcerated for an act of [antiwar property destruction](#): In 1987, she broke into Vandenberg Air Force Base in Lompoc, California, and destroyed a mainframe computer connected to the U.S. nuclear missile launch system. Later, she became a movement attorney, defending people law enforcement had targeted for protests and civil disobedience. After Seattle, Komisaruk wrote articles [about legal solidarity tactics](#) used in mass actions and [what activists should know](#) about grand juries, and wrote [Beat the Heat: How to Handle Encounters with Law Enforcement](#).

17

THE DAN STREET MEDIC TEAM PROVIDED LIFESAVING CARE TO PEOPLE DURING THE WTO PROTESTS.

As its members wrote in the [Seattle Logistics Zine](#), they provided “a free health clinic during the convergence, trained activists in ‘guerilla first aid,’ and coordinated field medics to work with affinity groups and autonomously on the streets. . . . Our goals included empowering people to care for themselves so they could remain in the streets despite the cops’ dispersal attempts, and minimizing the need for hospital visits which are prohibitively expensive, often disempowering, and not safe for those doing arrestable actions.” The health clinic operated out of the Convergence Center and was open to neighborhood residents. “The [Black Cross Health Collective](#) in Portland was formed as a result of us collaborating in the clinic and on the streets in Seattle,” wrote collective cofounder Jennifer Whitney in an email exchange with me. “We provided medic trainings and . . . first aid on streets locally and at mass actions around the country and world. And we conducted community-based clinical trials to find remedies for pepper spray exposure. Our eye treatment (explained in Black Cross’s [first aid zine](#)) has been [used around the world](#) ever since.”

18

JUST MONTHS AFTER THE PROTESTS, A SMALL GROUP OF QUEER ORGANIZERS FROM OLYMPIA DESIGNED, EDITED, AND PUBLISHED A VITAL COLLECTION OF FIRST-PERSON ACCOUNTS.

Dozens of people contributed firsthand narratives, poetry, and analysis for [Voices from the WTO: An Anthology of Writing from People Who Shut Down the World Trade Organization in Seattle 1999](#). The book includes a glossary and timeline of events for the week of protests and was fully funded by labor unions, community organizations, and individual donors. “It is imperative to offer our history to the present and future generations of social justice workers,” wrote organizer and project editor Stephanie Guilloud. “The most amazing part of this project is that these different voices – steelworkers, postal workers, students, farmers, mothers, teachers, and activists – are all speaking about the same day.”

19

ORGANIZERS PUBLISHED A ZINE REFLECTING ON THE LOGISTICS IN SEATTLE AND SHARING LESSONS LEARNED FOR ACTIONS AND MASS MOBILIZATIONS.

The DAN logistics team provided the movement infrastructure for the mass convergence and direct action protests in Seattle: food, security, meeting space, childcare, legal, medical, tactical, communications, volunteer coordination, etc. Longtime anarchist organizers Mike E. and Kim Feicke facilitated the logistics team in Seattle and also trained a number of younger organizers in the why and how of movement logistics. In May 2000, they edited and published the [Seattle Logistics Zine](#), a collection of writings by people who worked on various support functions. (I worked as their assistant on the project.) As Mike E. wrote in the introduction, the zine’s purpose was “to stress the importance of those functions to any large-scale gathering, and to make this information available to anyone that wants to put an event like this together in the future. Even though every organized event is unique, there are certain basic needs that are always present.” Mike E. had been running logistics for mass actions since the antinuke movement in the 1980s. Logistics are, he wrote, “often overlooked by the movement, in favor of the actions and marches.”

20 THE NATIONAL ORGANIZERS ALLIANCE BROUGHT TOGETHER BASE-BUILDING ORGANIZERS WITH GLOBAL JUSTICE ACTIVISTS TO EXPLORE HOW TO BUILD AND STRENGTHEN MOVEMENTS. In July 2001, organizers from around the country convened in Northern California at NOA's fifth [Gathering](#) for a wide range of how-to [workshops](#), shared learning, and fellowship. NOA's members were organizers of all stripes – community, labor, faith-based, and more – with a mission to “advance progressive organizing for social, economic and environmental justice and to sustain, support and nurture the people of all ages who do it.” The Gathering's focus on strengthening organizing as a methodology (rather than on a particular issue, politic, or campaign) allowed for constructive [exploration](#) of the opportunities and challenges found at the intersection of local base-building and global mass direct-action mobilizations. The extraordinary range of speakers, facilitators, and trainers included younger global justice organizers like Nancy Haque (a DAN cofounder) as well as [veteran organizers and movement elders](#) like Mandy Carter, Anne Braden, Gary Delgado, and Jose Matus.

21 BOOKS ABOUT THE SHUTDOWN HAVE KEPT THE DISCOURSE GOING. Many [books](#) have examined the origin, impact, lessons, and legacy of the protests in Seattle and the global justice movement, including those by progressive author [Naomi Klein](#), activist academics [Lesley J. Wood](#) and [Eddie Yuen](#), and ecofeminist [Starhawk](#). L.A. Kaufmann's excellent [Direct Action: Protest and the Reinvention of American Radicalism](#) takes up Seattle in the context of direct action organizing in the U.S. across many movements over decades. More recently, DW Gibson's *One Week to Change the World*, published and marketed to the 25th anniversary of the WTO shutdown, offers an oral history of the protests. As I wrote in [this review](#), Gibson's book falls short of conveying the real story of Seattle, centering white men in the narrative while giving short shrift to the politics and organizing that made the actions possible.

22 THE EVENTS OF 1999 GOT THE HOLLYWOOD TREATMENT. In 2006, WTO shutdown organizer David Solnit found out about the production of a new film about the Seattle protests. He reached out to the director, Stuart Townsend, to learn more and discovered that while Townsend seemed well-intentioned, the script was a familiar mainstream distortion of movement history. In [The Battle of the Story of the “Battle of Seattle.”](#) a short and illuminating anthology Solnit edited with his sister, Rebecca Solnit, he recounts how he and other activists intervened, creating a “kind of pressure campaign over the retelling of the uprising we had helped organize.” The movie [Battle in Seattle](#) was released in 2007, featuring stars like Charlize Theron, Woody Harrelson, Ray Liotta, Michelle Rodriguez, and André 3000 from OutKast. While the activists succeeded in winning some constructive changes, as Solnit wrote, overall the movie “repeats some myths and stereotypes about activism that are used by elites to damage or marginalize our movements.”

23

MANY DIRECT LINKS CONNECT SEATTLE TO OCCUPY WALL STREET – INCLUDING THE PEOPLE'S MIC.

The “people’s mic” allows a large group to hold an assembly in the middle of a noisy city without a loudspeaker. In a crowd, one person talks and everyone else repeats what they said. It’s associated with Occupy and gained wider usage in a range of movements afterward. But as described in the book *One Week to Change the World*, its advent can be traced to the Seattle WTO protests, specifically at the solidarity actions held at the King County jail to demand the release of the more than 600 people who had been arrested.

24

SEATTLE FED INTO THE SOCIAL FORUM PROCESS AND THE PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT ASSEMBLY.

Emerging from the global movement to resist neoliberalism, and boosted by the energy unleashed in Seattle, the [World Social Forum](#) (WSF) was developed for groups, movements, and networks to formulate and propose concrete alternatives. First held in Brazil in 2001, the WSF brought together social movement forces in an open and collaborative process, intentionally contrasting with the closed meeting of elites at the World Economic Forum in Davos. Grassroots organizations led by people of color in the United States [started the U.S. Social Forum](#) process in 2004, and the first U.S. Social Forum (USSF), with 15,000 people, [convened in Atlanta in 2007](#). The 2nd USSF, with more than 20,000 participants, took place [in Detroit in 2010](#). The program books from the [2007 USSF](#) and [2010 USSF](#) convey the breadth and scope of the movement-focused process. A third national forum [convened in 2015](#) in Philadelphia and San José, and a number of regional social forums have been staged over the years. Building on the Social Movement Assemblies held at the WSF, organizers of the USSF developed the [Peoples Movement Assembly \(PMA\)](#) process. Today, with support from organizations like Project South, many groups continue to have PMAs, especially across the [U.S. South](#).

25

ONE UNIVERSALLY APPLICABLE LESSON COMING OUT OF SEATTLE: MAKE SURE TO HAVE ENOUGH BATHROOMS.

Over three weeks from November to early December 1999, many thousands of people came through the Convergence Center, and a few porta potties supplemented the on-site bathrooms. That wasn’t enough. After the protests, when the logistics team was breaking down the space, the porta potties were indescribably gross. The worker who came to pick them up was named Dude. A big, hulking man with tattoos on his forearms and smiling eyes, Dude looked as if he’d seen many things in his day – and even he was taken aback. For reasons unknown to me, the service company didn’t empty the porta potties before their removal. So I helped Dude move the putrid, overflowing toilets out of the Convergence Center and load them onto his truck. We talked as we worked: He and his wife, having seen the WTO protests on TV news, had gone to their local library to access the internet to learn more. “You kids did a good job,” Dude told me. “But you should have gotten more johns.”

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