



SEATTLE & BEYOND

ALLIANCE

for Sustainable Jobs and the Environment



Beyond Seattle

by Mark Ritchie

The recent World Trade Organization Ministerial talks in Seattle failed largely because the negotiation process was undemocratic. Negotiators from nearly all of Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and parts of Asia bitterly condemned the talks as coercive and exclusionary.

These complaints were not new; in fact, the WTO process has been described as undemocratic for years, both from the inside by delegates and from the outside by non-governmental groups, including trade unions, farmers, environmental and consumer organizations, and human rights advocates. In the past, however, protesting delegations had always been forced by superpower pressures to go along with the prescribed agreement.

But this time it was different. There was near unanimity between and among the key forces: leading Southern country delegates to the Ministerial and non-governmental representatives inside and outside the meetings. Several Third World delegates confirmed that they found the strength to hold to their positions in part from the powerful, ever-present voice of public protest outside the meeting halls.

The Broader Implications

"WTO Seattle" was, as the papers called it, the first post-modern global gathering. Freed from Cold War-era alliances and constraints, and taking lessons from past trade agreement failures, the nations of the South combined with representatives of civil society to write a new chapter in global governance. Civil society has moved to the center stage in these affairs.

Inside the WTO, the old process, whereby the United States and European Union cut a deal and then imposed it on everyone else is now, I believe, a thing of the past. At the same time, major changes are needed to include civil society in a formal way in both future ministerial meetings and in the on-going WTO process.

With respect to global governance, I believe that something profound happened in Seattle. The process of re-examining the framework and rationale behind the entire system of global governance has taken a giant leap forward.

First, the need for global cooperation

has never been more apparent. Protestors and delegates alike raised an impressive range of issues, nearly all of which will require coordinated action over long distances and democratic global rules and procedures to address. Those raising concerns about the loss of species and biosafety wanted to reinforce the global Convention on Biodiversity. Those concerned with protecting children from employer exploitation or slavery demanded globally effective sanctions.

Second, we have transformed global governance. Civil society has taken a place at the table with national governments and multilateral institutions for a full-scale debate on the shape of global decision-making and governance in the future.

A half-century ago, delegates from many nations came to San Francisco to create the United Nations. They engaged in a great debate over the opening language of the founding charter for the UN. Many governments wanted the Charter to declare that "We the governments" of the world were creating the UN. The representatives of civil society present in San Francisco fought for language that declared that "We the people" were creating, legitimizing, and empowering this new global institution.

The same debate over control of global affairs continues today. In Seattle civil society said to itself and to the world that global affairs are simply too important to be left up to national governments or global bureaucracies. Global governance has been and will be transformed forever. We find this historic breakthrough deeply gratifying and inspiring.

The Road from Seattle: Getting Beyond "No"

Before Seattle, we had very little hope of making any changes. Since Seattle, the situation has changed completely. If the WTO continues to refuse to take our views and concerns into consideration, the outcome will most likely be unsuccessful and threaten the very survival of the WTO.

To test this opportunity we need to move quickly. We need an efficient and inclusive global process over the next months that can hammer out our ideas in three areas.

We need to determine areas in which we do not desire any WTO involvement whatsoever. Then, we need to highlight some of the areas of current WTO rules, such as prohibitions against the dumping of agricultural exports, where we want the

WTO to start enforcing its own rules. Third, we need to identify key issues on which we want the WTO to take affirmative action. For example, we want the WTO to prohibit the patenting of life and essential drugs.

The victory in Seattle joins the denial of fast track negotiating authority to President Clinton and the suspension of talks on the Multilateral Agreement on Investments as proof of civil society's ability to block ill-considered initiatives in the global arena. But Seattle also demonstrated that we are prepared to express our ideas on what is needed in terms of global governance and to engage in constructive dialogue on these ideas with all concerned actors, including governments, religions, cultures, businesses, and other global institutions.

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Many of the groups from around the world that came together in Seattle will continue to work together at an even higher degree of cooperation on both WTO issues and on other global concerns, like the campaign for Third World debt forgiveness called Jubilee 2000. Successful cooperation between unions, environmental groups, and farm organizations is being converted into specific agreements on follow-up activities such as the creation of a globally coordinated WTO lobbying operation and plans for regional and global meetings.

Seattle will be remembered for a lot of things, including the courage of the mostly young people who stood solidly and steadfastly in the face of a furious assault. My hope is that it will also be remembered as a watershed event—a time and place where we the people confronted dysfunctional and oppressive global institutions with new ideas and new energy. I hope I will be able to look back someday soon and be able to say that this Battle in Seattle helped jolt the world onto a new path, one leading towards a just and truly sustainable system of global governance and world peace.

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