



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Activists prevent World Trade Organization conference in Seattle, 1999

26 November

1999

to: 6 December

1999

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: *Seattle, WA*

Goals:

To prevent the World Trade Organization (WTO) from being able to come to any agreements at their ministerial conference scheduled for late November/early December 1999.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 050. Teach-ins

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 050. Teach-ins

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 038. Marches
- 039. Parades
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 4th segment:

- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 5th segment:

- 034. Vigils

- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 6th segment:

- 034. Vigils

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 019. Wearing of symbols › People dressed as turtles
- 138. Sitdown

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Environment

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Environmentalists
- farmers
- feminists
- human rights activists
- students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Ben White, Mike Dolan, Sally Soriano, Earth First!, the Humane Society, Lisa Wathne, Nancy Pennington, International Forum on Globalization, United Steelworkers of America, Public Citizen

Partners:

Not known

External allies:

Not known

Involvement of social elites:

U.S. Senator Paul Wellstone (Minnesota)

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- International Forum on Globalization
- United Steelworkers of America

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 2 days*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

The World Trade Organization

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

None known.

Repressive Violence:

Police tear-gassed, pepper-sprayed, and arrested protesters and hit them with rubber bullets and truncheons.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Formed in 1995, the WTO serves as an organization that facilitates trade amongst 123 nations. The first major protest against the WTO occurred in 1999 in Seattle, Washington. United States citizens were protesting the WTO's ministerial conference because they claimed that the WTO was breaking down nation states' sovereignty. Specifically they were concerned with workers' rights and the concept of the "race to the bottom", in which countries companies compete to pay their employees the lowest wages, resulting in massive employee exploitation. Additionally, the protesters were concerned about the environmental policies of the WTO and the fact that many of the nations within the WTO were allowed to treat animals horribly in the interest of making money. The protesters' goal was to disrupt the conference so much that no agreements could be met.

The WTO protest campaign consisted of many different forms of nonviolent struggle. As the protesters were opposing many different issues with the WTO, the organizers came from many different backgrounds as well. Animal rights activist Ben White, one of the first organizers, described the group of approximately 40 leaders as "grizzled old activists". The first organizing meeting was held in February of 1999, as leaders knew that the conference would be happening in November of that year and wanted adequate time to prepare for it. One group that played a major role in the organization of the campaign was Ralph Nader's group Public Citizen. Nader was a long-time environmentalist and politician from the United States. Public Citizen's local organizer, Sally Soriano, was instrumental in rallying local support for the initial organizing meetings of the anti-WTO groups.

The organizers began creating a committee to counter each committee that the WTO meeting organizers were forming. The first of these sorts was the anti-WTO “host” committee, People for Fair Trade (The WTO organizers also had a host committee).

These organizational meetings and formation of committees continued throughout the spring, summer, and fall of 1999. There was little else the organizers could do, as they intended to focus their efforts on the week of the WTO conference, or “WTO week” as it came to be known.

One of the most public and now famous actions of WTO week was organized by White. Five years prior, the United States had instituted regulations against buying shrimp from countries who did not utilize proper sea turtle protection in their shrimping practices; these regulations were later overruled by the WTO, thus requiring the United States to trade with countries who did not regulate their shrimping industries to protect the turtles. In Seattle, White had a group of supporters dress as sea turtles for the entire week, drawing much attention to the issue.

Various groups led teach-ins the weekend before the WTO meetings were to be held. The last of these teach-ins took place on Monday, November 29. White arranged for 240 “turtles” to be at the event to show support. On this day, the “turtles”, along with the Sierra Club, the Humane Society, and Friends of the Earth, led a march of 10,000 people to the convention center where the WTO meetings were to be held the next day.

The actions were continued on the evening of the 29th, with the People’s Gala at which documentarian Michael Moore provided the entertainment. The focus of the People’s Assembly was international solidarity. A service at a church and another march and human chain surrounding the building where the opening reception for the WTO was taking place rounded out the night.

November 30 was the official start of the WTO meetings. Three massive marches were held on this day. The first march consisted of students from the University of Washington and Seattle Central Community College as well as other schools. The students marched downtown and sat down in the streets. The second march, which included the “turtles” as well as environmentalists, feminists, farmers, and human rights activists, also headed downtown. Police tear-gassed both of these marches. The third march was a huge international Labor Rally, which took place at Memorial Stadium followed by 30,000 people marching through downtown. The situation had turned very chaotic, with police tear-gassing and pepper-spraying protesters as well as hitting them with rubber bullets and truncheons. Many protesters are arrested. The chaos prevented the WTO meetings from occurring.

More marches, more violence against the protesters, and more arrests took place on December 1. Additionally, steelworkers organized a parade. The campaigners continued to march and demonstrate on the next day, with police still repressing the protests violently. During this time it was still difficult for the WTO to conduct its meetings.

By December 3 the people of Washington were outraged and came out in masses for the marches. A vigil took place at the jail where all of the arrested protesters had been taken. On this day it was announced that the arrested protesters would be released. On December 4, The Seattle Times headline announced “Talks Collapse; Meeting Ends” and those attending the WTO ministerial conference left Seattle. The vigil continued at the jail until the last person was released on December 6, 1999.

The campaign was ultimately extremely successful. They were able to prevent the WTO from reaching any agreements. The campaign grew exponentially, yet the leaders were able to keep most protesters nonviolent. It was successful despite the violence against the campaigners and the fact that Seattle mayor Paul Schell declared the city a “no protest zone” and called for a “state of civil emergency”.

Research Notes

Sources:

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