



WTO Resistance

By Bridgette Byrd O'Connor

Thousands descended on Seattle, Washington in November 1999 to protest the pro-globalization goals of World Trade Organization. What's wrong with globalization? It depends on whom you ask.

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Background

People came from different parts of the world for the World Trade Organization (WTO)'s Ministerial¹ Conference. As conference attendees arrived in Seattle, others came to protest various aspects of the organization and its policies. Most protesters were peaceful. They took to the streets because they felt that increasing global trade would hurt labor unions, the environment, and developing nations.² Many held signs that criticized the WTO. Some even dressed as sea turtles as a way to call out the negative effects of globalization on the environment. Others used more disruptive methods, such as vandalism, to criticize multinational corporations.

Denis Cooper, a participant in these protests, described how many people felt connected by the event: "I want to say before it turned violent, it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen in my life...we all, hundreds of thousands of people, banded together for this one issue. And we all held one thing in our hearts, and that was the WTO had to go. And then the next day when all those people got arrested and they had us in the jails, I really realized how many separate issues I was dealing with here."

You may remember from earlier readings that the WTO is a primary institution of international trade. According to the WTO website, "The World Trade Organization (WTO) is the only global international organization dealing with the rules of trade between nations. At its heart are the WTO agreements, negotiated and signed by the bulk of the world's trading nations and ratified in their parliaments. The goal is to ensure that trade flows as smoothly, predictably and freely as possible." All of that sounds pretty reasonable. So why would so many groups be against it?

To fully answer this question, we have to think about the perspectives of the different people protesting the WTO. The protesters came from different groups. Many of them had competing strategies and ideals but they were united in one thing. They had reasons for protesting the WTO.

Some of the protesters came from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—non-profit, voluntary citizens' groups. The NGOs wanted the WTO to institute labor and environmental regulations and fair-trade practices. Other protesters wanted to do away with the WTO altogether. In contrast, several developing countries expressed anti-imperialist and even nationalistic feelings to criticize the WTO. On the fringes, there were anarchists with a mix of goals. Mainly, these anti-government protestors wanted to destroy what they called neo-liberal ideologies and increasing globalization. So how did all of these varied interests come together over a few days in Seattle?



Protesters with signs and a man dressed as a sea turtle at the WTO Ministerial Conference, Seattle, 29 November 1999. From the Seattle Municipal Archives, CC BY 2.0.

¹ Ministerial in this context refers to administrators from various governments.

² Developing nations are defined as those countries that are not fully industrialized. They have a lower gross domestic product (GDP) than more developed or industrialized nations.

Organizers, participants, and protesters

The WTO Ministerial Conference planned to meet in November 1999 in Seattle. The meeting was part of the WTO's goals of holding regular meetings regarding global trade negotiations. It was the third meeting of its kind since the WTO was formed in 1995. The organization's main goal was to remove obstacles that limited free trade in a capitalist world economy. Environmental regulations and workers' rights were considered obstacles. Tariffs were another obstacle to free trade. Some countries argued that tariffs were needed to protect their industries from having to compete with goods imported from other countries.

The WTO was trying to resolve many disputes that had been brewing. Member nations were called upon to submit proposals on various topics. Agriculture, labor, and environmental issues were a few examples. The organization also asked for input from developing countries. They wanted to understand the impact of global free trade practices on these nations. Over 200 proposals were submitted and then gathered into a report. However, the WTO did not effectively address many of the concerns from all of the groups. From the perspective of developing countries as well as many of the nongovernmental organizations, it looked like the WTO wanted only to limit the obstacles to free trade, despite the consequences. These groups believed that the WTO wanted to end regulations. It seemed it didn't matter if the regulations were intended to protect the environment, support workers' rights, or help developing nations. The protesters also felt that the WTO favored proposals for free trade. Such proposals were submitted by industrialized nations such as the United States, the European Union, and Japan. The WTO was criticized for dismissing the concerns of nations that were not as industrialized or wealthy.

Outside of the inner workings of the WTO, both lobbyists and protesters wanted changes. Some seeking change were NGOs such as the European American Business Council and the Fair Trade Center. There were also labor unions like the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). Environmental groups and student groups weighed in, too. Amidst these groups were some protesters on the fringe who embraced anarchist tactics. Despite differences, all groups were either opposed to certain WTO policies or believed that the organization should be outright ended.

The protests

A combination of disorganization and competing interests within the WTO as well as protests from outside the WTO took over. It led to two days of peaceful protests and violent clashes from November 30 to December 1, 1999. Hundreds were arrested in Seattle. The people trying to organize these varied protest groups found it near impossible to address everyone's goals. Some groups didn't want to march with others because their goals were too different. Other groups wanted to cause unrest in the area through violent anti-globalization and anti-corporate protests. Most wanted to band together to form a collective voice. Perhaps they could express, non-violently, what they wanted from the WTO.



WTO protesters on 7th Avenue, Seattle, 1999. From the Seattle Municipal Archives, CC BY 2.0.

Organized protests have occurred throughout history. The Women's October March stood up against the king during the French Revolution. Gandhi organized protests against imperial governments in India. Many protested the Vietnam and Iraq wars. We often see marches and protests to support the rights of women, LGBTQ+ people, and people of color. This event in Seattle was certainly not the first organized protest against a global organization. In the late 1980s there were organized protests in Berlin against two other global economic organizations: International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Another happened in Paris in 1989 during the G7 Summit.³ Protesters once again took to the street in Madrid in 1994 to demonstrate against the IMF and World Bank. Anti-globalization protests were organized on an international scale in June 1999. Known as the J8, protesters met in an array of cities to rally against the policies that were being discussed at the G8 Summit.

The Seattle protests were also known as N30, referring to the date of November 30. They were as diverse and complicated as other anti-globalization efforts, if not more so. Here is a summary of the protesters' goals. Keep in mind these were prioritized differently by different groups:

- Get multinational corporations and the WTO to help reform labor practices in developing nations.
- Protect the environment from the negative effects caused by global trade.
- Stop ignoring developing nations. Stop favoring policies put forth by the U.S., the European Union, and Japan.

In many ways, the concerns of the protesters outside mirrored the discussions that were supposed to be happening inside at the WTO Ministerial Conference. The goals were not universally agreed upon. Still, they could be summarized like this:

- Give developing nations a say in new trade regulations being proposed.
- Hear the concerns some nations have regarding environmental and labor issues.
- Reduce trade regulations and restrictions. This could increase the profits of international corporations.

The protesters are referred to as anti-globalists. However, it is not because they want to entirely shut down global trade. Rather, they were typically concerned with corporate greed, fair labor practices, and environmental protection. Those who promoted violence were often on the fringes of the protest groups. However, the actions of these few, more extreme protesters gained the most media attention. Many broke windows and vandalized property at businesses. Generally, they attacked global chain companies such as Starbucks and Nike.

In general, most protests seek to call attention to a problem by causing disruption, but not violence. Despite the violent acts at the N30 protest, things began peacefully. Thousands of people took to the streets to block entry to the Washington State Convention Center; the WTO Ministerial Conference was held there. The idea was to prevent enough conference attendees from getting to the meetings so the meetings might be canceled. They achieved this goal. However, their goal of a non-violent protest became harder to manage. The anarchists encouraged confrontational tactics and vandalism. Police responded by launching tear gas and firing rubber bullets at all protesters, not just the violent ones. The Seattle Police seemed unprepared for the scale and size of the event. In the end the Seattle mayor had to call in National Guard soldiers. Hundreds of protesters, both violent and peaceful, were arrested. Numerous people would later sue the city of Seattle for wrongful arrest. City officials were forced to pay over \$200,000 to those who won their cases.

³ The G-7 refers to the Group of 7 nations. It consists of the largest and wealthiest industrialized democratic nations. Currently, these countries are Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States.



Seattle police pepper spray WTO protesters, 30 November 1999. By Steve Kaiser, CC BY-SA 2.0.

Results?

The story of the Seattle protests was not exactly new. Still, it did seem to mark a new era in mass organization against economic globalization. The protesters also brought the issue to the attention of the media. They generated publicity for their causes. New international networks were forged between protest groups. They began to work together to achieve their goals of free and fair-trade practices. There are continued organized protests at many of the meetings of the WTO, IMF, World Bank, and at government summits such as the G-7.

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Bridgette Byrd O'Connor

Bridgette Byrd O'Connor holds a DPhil in history from the University of Oxford and has taught Big History, World History, and AP U.S. Government and Politics for the past ten years at the high school level. In addition, she has been a freelance writer and editor for the Big History Project and the Crash Course World History and U.S. History curriculums.

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