

The Historic Significance of Seattle

by Vandana Shiva

The failure of the World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial meeting in Seattle was a watershed, in more ways than one. Firstly, it demonstrated that globalisation is not an inevitable phenomena that must be accepted at all costs but a political project that can be responded to politically.

Fifty thousand citizens from all walks of life and all parts of the world responded politically when they protested peacefully on the streets of Seattle for four days to ensure that there would be no new round of trade negotiations for accelerating and expanding the process of globalisation.

Trade Ministers from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean responded politically when they refused to join hands to provide support to a “contrived” consensus since they had been excluded from the negotiations undertaken in the “green room” process behind closed



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doors. As long as the conditions of transparency, openness and participation were not ensured, developing countries would not be party to a consensus. This is a new context and will make [the] bulldozing of decisions difficult in future trade negotiations.

The rebellion on the streets and the rebellion within the WTO negotiations have started a new democracy movement—with citi-

zens from across the world and the governments of the South refusing to be bullied and excluded from decisions, in which they have a rightful share.

Seattle was chosen by the U.S. to host the Third Ministerial conference because it is home to Boeing and Microsoft, and symbolises the corporate power that WTO’s rules are designed to protect and expand.

Yet these corporations were staying in the background, and proponents of free-trade and WTO were going out of their way to say that WTO is a “member-driven” institution controlled by governments who made democratic decisions. The refusal of Third World governments to rubber-stamp decisions from which they had been excluded has brought into the open and confirmed the non-transparent and anti-democratic processes by which WTO rules have been imposed on the Third World and has confirmed the claims of the critics.

WTO has earned itself names such as World Tyranny Organisation because it enforces tyrannical, anti-people, anti-nature decisions to enable corporations to steal the world’s harvests through secretive, undemocratic structures and processes. The WTO institutionalises forced trade, not free trade, and beyond a point, coercion and the rule of force cannot continue.

The WTO tyranny was apparent in Seattle, both on the streets and inside the Washington State Convention centre where the negotiations were taking place. Nonviolent protestors including young people and old women, labour and environmental activists, and even local residents were brutally beaten up, sprayed with tear gas, and arrested in hundreds. The intolerance of democratic dissent, which is a hallmark of dictatorship, was unleashed in full force in Seattle. While the trees and stores were lit up for Christmas festivity, the streets were barricaded and blocked by the police, turning the city into a war zone.

The media has referred to the protestors as “power mon-

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gers” and “special interest” groups. Globalisers, such as Scott Miller of the U.S. Alliance for Trade Expansion, said that the protestors were acting out of fear and ignorance.

The thousands of youth, farmers, workers and environmentalists who marched the streets of Seattle in peace and solidarity were not acting out of ignorance and fear; they were outraged because they know how undemocratic the WTO is, how destructive its social and ecological impact is, and how the rules of the WTO are driven by the objectives of establishing corporate control over every dimension of our lives—our food, our health, our environment, our work and our future.

When labour joins hands with environmentalists, when farmers from the North and farmers from the South make a common commitment to say “no” to genetically engineered crops, they are not acting in their special interests. They are defending the common inter-

ests and common rights of all people, everywhere. The divide and rule policy, which has attempted to put consumers against farmers, the North against the South, labour against environmentalists, failed.

In their diversity, citizens were united across sectors and regions. While the broad-based citizens’ campaigns stopped a new millennium round of WTO from being launched in Seattle, they did launch their own millennium round of democratisation of the global economy.

The real millennium round for the WTO is the beginning of a new democratic debate about the future of the earth and the future of its people. The centralised, undemocratic rules and structures of the WTO that are establishing global corporate rule based on monopolies and monocultures need to give way to an earth democracy supported by decentralisation and diversity. The rights of all species and the rights of all people must come before the rights of corporations to make limitless profits through limitless destruction.

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We want a new millennium based on economic democracy, not economic totalitarianism. The future is possible for humans and other species only if the principles of competition, organised greed, commodification of all life, monocultures, monopolies and centralised



Anti-riot police disperse rally at the WTO meeting in Seattle

global corporate control of our daily lives enshrined in the WTO are replaced by the principles of protection of people and nature, the obligation of giving and sharing diversity, and the decentralisation and self-organisation enshrined in our diverse cultures and national constitutions.

A new threshold was crossed in Seattle—a watershed toward the creation of a global citizen-based and citizen-driven democratic order. The future of the WTO will be shaped far more by what happened on the streets of Seattle and in non-governmental organisation (NGO) events than by what happened in the Washington State Convention Center.

The rules set by the secretive WTO violate principles of human rights and ecological survival. They violate rules of justice and sustainability. They are rules of warfare against the people and the planet. Changing these rules is the most important democratic and human rights struggle of our times. It is a matter of survival.

Citizens went to Seattle with the slogan “No new round,

turnaround.” They have been successful in blocking a new round. The next challenge is to turn the rules of globalisation and free trade around, and make trade subservient to higher values of the protection of the earth and peoples’ livelihood.

The citizens’ Seattle round of the democratisation of the food system synthesised common concerns of people from across the world to ensure that the way we produce, distribute, process and consume food is sustainable and equitable. In [both] the Third World and the industrialised world, common principles have started to emerge from peoples’ practices to ensure safe and healthy food supply.

1. Diversity, rather than monocultures to ensure higher output per acre.
2. Decentralisation and localisation, in place of centralisation and globalisation.
3. Ecological processes, instead of industrial processes of farming.
4. Food rights and food security, rather than free trade as the basis of distribution.
5. Democratic control, rather than corporate control of the

food system.

6. Patent-free and genetic engineering free farming to ensure the respect and protection of all species and the integrity of ecosystems and cultures. This involves excluding life forms from TRIPS [Trade-Related aspects of Intellectual Property Rights] and Biosafety from WTO rules of free trade.

7. Cultural diversity, in place of the global monoculture of fastfoods and industrial food chains.

8. Small farms and small farmers, in place of corporate farms and absentee land owners. These involve protection of existing small farms and land reform to redistribute land.

9. Fair trade, not free trade, to ensure farmers and producers get a fair return. Trade as a means rather than an end, with global trade subservient to values of ecological sustainability, health and social justice.

These principles enable us to shift to nature-centred and people-centred food systems.

Against all odds, millions of people from across the world have been putting these principles into practice. The post-Seattle challenge is to change the global trade rules and national food and agricultural policies so that these practices can be nurtured and spread, and ecological agriculture, which protects small farms and peasant livelihoods, and produces safe food, is not marginalised and criminalised. The time has come to reclaim the stolen harvest and celebrate the growing and giving of good food as the highest gift and the most revolutionary act.

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