

The World Trade Organization is a corporate coup d'état in disguise. Through the WTO, the national laws of any country can be challenged if three bureaucrats in a secret dispute settlements committee deem them to be "barriers to trade". Full-time corporate lobbyists are at work to get inconvenient laws challenged at the WTO. Time and time again, laws to protect the environment and workers – from minimum wages, to eco-labelling, from food-safety, to the ban on asbestos – have been construed as barriers to trade, and many overturned. In this way, the WTO promotes the consolidation of power and wealth in the hands of large corporations and financial institutions.

The WTO is not only about trade – it is about paving the way towards a new form of capitalism, one where the role of government is limited to assuring a stable currency, providing a justice system to arbitrate disputes, enforcing property rights, and maintaining a strong military and police force. Under WTO rules, governments are not allowed to favour local firms and 'discriminate' against foreign-owned corporations; nor subsidize domestic industries. WTO rulings take place in secret, and allow for no appeals. It seemed like an unstoppable force, until 30 November 1999.

N30. The overwhelming unforgettable rejection of the World Trade Organization. 75,000 people on the streets of Seattle, 10,000 taking direct action and preventing the opening ceremonies from taking place. Simultaneous demonstrations in over a hundred other cities around the world. Three days later, headlines screamed from the papers, "Summit Ends In Failure," after delegates from the global South, encouraged by the mass rejection on the outside, withdraw their consent, and prevent a new round of trade deals.

To contrast with well-known events involving tear gas, brutal police, broken corporate windows, and the infamous 'no protest zone', in which all dissent was banned, here are three of the literally thousands of untold stories of individuals taking action in Seattle, all of which, when combined, add up to much more than we can possibly imagine.

The Anticipated First

by Rowena Kennedy Epstein

I met you somewhere between revolution and my heart. You walked in cold and smooth on the eve of history. Stories whispered by my ear and maps lay on my lap, actions were planned and I signed up to lock down around a cow. You slid in next to me and shook my hand. I said, "Nice to meet you, are you getting arrested?"

You said, "No, not this time." Then you turned on your heels and walked toward the ruckus of the week to come.

I desperately want to say that I thought about you every day, that the revolts on the street were nothing next to the revolts of my heart. But I had been training in a boot camp for combatants against capitalism for the last 19 years, and all I could think of was glory and stories of the movement to come. I hadn't slept in weeks; I couldn't dream of you. I hadn't eaten in days; I was planning our attack. I hadn't loved in months; I was organizing the stories of Salvadoran struggles.

I woke up at 4.00 am on 30 November 1999 from the pre-battle lump in my throat and the 10,000 monarch butterfly skeletons rattling in my belly. I had two hours to get to the park, two hours to meet my affinity group; two hours till I would introduce myself to a hormone injected cow. A cow that would make its way through wet streets and riot police, a cow that moo-ed: "We're cold, we're wet, and we hate Monsanto." I arrived armed with hot tea and a mistrust of the already swarming police. I watched cops confiscate

puppets and shopping carts, smirking as they walked away with a 40-foot papier maché carrot that read “UPROOT OPPRESSION”.

Bold – that’s what we were, all of us, bold and cold. Some with wings and a smile, some with lock-boxes tucked under our Gore-Tex jackets and Bolivian wool sweaters. The ground vibrated beneath our collective fear and anticipation. We sang songs in rhythm with memory, and moved in beat to the stories of those who had fought before. We functioned in narratives. We saw microscopic forms of the present. We longed in future syllables of what may come. We aged.

The smell of wet hair and history sailed into my nostrils as we stepped into those streets. There was a collective sigh of relief as the morning light pierced through the clouds onto the streets that would become our home for the next week. We had fun, the Monsanto hormone-injected cow and I. We ate words of struggle, spitting them out with venom and power, and as day broke night we broke oppression. Empowerment swelled over us; a generation began to understand. Our work was legitimized, our back-alley

meetings made sense. And our fates had been sealed by sticky, permanent, revolutionary glue.

I didn’t think about you that day. I thought about El Salvador and Chiapas. I thought about Emma Goldman and the Chicago anarchists of 1887. I thought about the fact that I paid for my own tear gas, and wondered if I had got my money’s worth. I wondered if my parents were proud, hearing my father say, “They think they can hide, but not this time; people are organizing.” I saw them standing in shattered glass; they watched my face and for a moment our lives had reversed – a recognition of their past.

I remember the collective. I remember standing in the intersection of Stewart and Olive and hearing my life change. I remember thinking that I would talk with you about all of this. I remember thinking I would never stop. My body was caving in on me, my eyes were swollen, my feet were bleeding, and I never anticipated stopping. I would like to think a generation never anticipated stopping. I lay down that night and heard drums in my ears, and watched helicopters fly past my high school. I watched riot police stand on the same corners where I used to smoke a

services in 1994, and community groups threaten to seize the water and power companies if prices don’t drop.

>> **October 1** >> In Ecuador cities grind to a halt and schools shut down in a general strike against the IMF austerity package that has triggered currency devaluation, and 400 per cent increases in energy prices. 12,000 police and military troops are deployed in Quito alone, and a bomb explodes outside the US

embassy. During clashes, four people are killed and over 90 arrested.

>> **October 1** >> In Peru, following demonstrations against president Fujimori’s pro-IMF policies, hundreds storm the presidential palace, looting the storage room of the presidential guard and painting the walls with graffiti. Thirty people are arrested and marches the following day demand their release.

>> **October 7** >> “Mr. Friedman, it’s a good day to pie!” says Special Agent Apple of the Biotic Baking Brigade, as he flops a coconut cream pie in the face of Milton Friedman, neoliberal economist extraordinaire. Friedman is in San Francisco, US, at a conference he organized on privatization of public education. As the agent is dragged away, he is heard shouting, “When it comes to defending the Earth from the scum of the

joint between fourth and fifth periods on Friday afternoons. I watched the beginning and the end of my career as a forgiving activist. I knew that I would soon be a casualty of everyday meetings and the jailhouses of Seattle, Philadelphia, and DC. I don't think I thought much more that week. I had occupied a different mind, trying to organize the events, trying to organize my thoughts, trying to organize the order of the streets I would be running in.

We won that night. A phone call from the jailhouse yielded me my breath. I heard the drums and the chanting and then the words, "We won this battle, there was no new round, we shut down the WTO!" I fell to the floor and cried; I cried an hour before I met you and I cried an hour after I left you. I cried from the acid left in my mouth and numb limbs; I cried for all our defeats. I cried because I never imagined experiencing a victory in my lifetime. And then I ran to my car and came to you, bearing my body and the news of the first victory of this war. I remember you sat down and stopped moving, and looked at me as though the world had just fallen from my tongue. We smiled. We would have kissed if we had known each other; we would have hugged if it hadn't been our first date. And I said, "Should we go downtown?" and you said, "I really want to hang out with you."

That night we sat across from each other sipping tea and singing stories, weaving the past into our present; speaking of yesterday as if it had already been entered and meticulously recorded into the history books. I felt the philosophical knife of my life before and my life after N30 slide deep into my skin. I had broken open; I was seeing

new land with views of rebellion and courage, a glimpse that will be with me through the stories of repression and time and survival. That will outlive me. I knew then that I might never have the words to tell this story, our story, a story of re-birth.

I can never forget the history of that week, so I can never forget the history of us. I met you in simple language, at the beginning of a complex battle, somewhere between revolution and my heart.

Rowena Kennedy-Epstein is a poet and activist. She lives in New York City

Resources:

» *Whose Trade Organization? Corporate Globalization and the Erosion of Democracy*, Lori Wallach & Michelle Sforza, Public Citizen Foundation, 1999.

» *Voices From the WTO: an anthology of writings from the people who shut down the World Trade Organization*, edited by Stephanie Guillaud and Julia Allen, self-published, available from the Evergreen State College bookstore, by emailing payner@evergreen.edu