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LAST TUESDAY IN SEATTLE

I want to send my friends in the Marxist Literary Group and beyond some of my observations and reflections on Tuesday, November 30's stirring anti-World Trade Organization (anti-neoliberal) rally and march in Seattle-some of what I saw, heard, felt, and thought. What follows is pretty fresh and not much revised, so please be forgiving of stylistic or critical lapses, and my excitement, which persists.

Tuesday's union-sponsored rally and march along with most of the other protests of that day in Seattle and the actions of the whole two weeks, mark a historic turning point, the beginning of a new era in which the broad left can once more play a defining role in human affairs locally, nationally, and internationally. I don't think I'm overstating the case, but I want to be clear about the Seattle experience and about what I mean. My concern is not an academic one. Obviously, the events and participants of the anti-WTO protest had been organized far in advance of that day (by the Ruckus Society, the Direct Action Network, the unions, the International Forum on Globalization, and other groups) and so it represents the coming together of movements, persons, and ideas, their planned and hoped for confluence, and not some kind of spontaneous origination. Still, something new and important did come into being. An MLG friend referred to that Tuesday in Seattle, and the whole week of protest, as a world-historical moment, and I think he's right.

Like many of you, I've joined picket lines and participated in rallies and protests over the years-free speech, anti-war, civil rights, pro-choice, pro-union, workers' rights, pro-environment, anti-nuke, gay rights, Central America--in several cities, even helped organize and spoken at a few; but I have never seen all the various groups and tendencies that make up the fractured (and fractious) left joined together in a common cause focused on the structure of the internationalizing economy and class issues and the ill effects of these on all groups, people, and concerns. It is the new sense of collective will and the anti-corporate focus of these disparate, too often cripplingly contentious groups that impresses me and makes me optimistic about the future.

At Memorial Stadium in Seattle, for the labor rally, there were, at the height, about 15,000 people gathered inside (many more outside). A majority of these no doubt were union members, but there were also lots of environmentalists, NGOs, students, community and religious activists, farmers, Zapatistas, Cuba supporters, gays, and lesbians. I'd say a good 40%, maybe more, of the whole crowd were women. Another MLG friend told me (if I remember correctly; we ran into each other at the start of the march) that he had marched into downtown Seattle that morning from the UW area with a band of 4,000 or so students from various schools. The unions were there in force. They have money and resources and can turn out numbers of people. They have international organization and connections, and a long history of struggle despite periods of economist and nationalist-protectionist tendency and compromise. The people, including us, need the unions, and the unions need the people. I'm convinced of this. Basically, the words of the speakers-mostly top union officials and organizers-one after the other were excellent left, trade

union messages, but with a difference. There was almost no drawing back (although there was a little from a couple of speakers) from the international pro-worker, pro-environment, pro-people, pro-woman, anti-corporate emphasis.

The president of the ILWU announced to huge cheers that the longshoremen had shut down for the day every port on the west coast, from San Diego to Vancouver BC and including Seattle to emphasize the seriousness of the rally and march and the solidarity of the various unions, groups, and causes represented. He also reminded the cheering crowd of his union's long history of international, radical action.

There were a lot of speakers-I don't have a schedule of them-including several women and people of color, and speakers from other countries-India, Malaysia, the Caribbean, Latin America, Canada. The whole rally had a definite, genuine international emphasis. To my mind, the best single speaker was a black labor leader from Barbados who in a forceful talk of five minutes had the crowd on their feet cheering and stamping for the rights of working people, and the environment, throughout the world. I'd listen to him any time. But all of the speakers were good-from Vandana Shiva to Jimmy Hoffa-and they were the national and international leaders of their organizations-electricians, pipefitters, steelworkers, carpenters, the Sierra Club, Malaysian unions, etc. The last speaker was James Hoffa, Jr., who gave a rousing speech vowing to transform the WTO or shut it down for good. Sweet Honey in the Rock ended the rally.

It was especially good to hear so many union leaders, one after the other, all of them, include environmental concerns among their demands and recognize environmental activists as their partners in struggle, although clearly their emphasis was on the welfare of working people, women, and the poor internationally. The environmental speakers emphasized these concerns as well. There was much cheering from the union crowd, the thousands of workers, for environmentalists, students, women-as well as for union issues. There was much awareness of common ground among all of the groups in attendance, internationally, and it is this awareness, this conscious, purposeful finding of common cause and the focus on the structure of the internationalizing economy and the struggle to transform it to serve working people that makes me feel optimistic for the future, that makes me feel that the day was and is historically important; and I'm quite convinced from all I've read since that the WTO and government officials know that too. The message of the rally and march and all sympathizers got through in a very big way, despite the corporate/editorial mis-uses of the works of press photographers and reporters to focus mass attention solely on images of violence. Still, when I read the articles from start to finish, I found that the print media often did a pretty good job of covering the events of that day. And the Indies, of course, were great; it was a major web event. The WTO trade representative from the European Union was quoted in one paper as saying that (and I think he envies them) the thousands of working people demonstrating in the streets of Seattle simply "do not share the values" of the WTO. He got that exactly right. Even Clinton has desperately tried to ride the movement's coattails (thinking no doubt of Gore's chances in the fall election and his own "legacy.")

The Tuesday march itself consisted of tens of thousands of people. I can't say exactly how many because none of us could see the beginning or end of the march. But the marchers filled a major Seattle street for three and a half miles, pretty solid, which sounds like at least 50,000 people, my guess at a number. There was tremendous good spirit and much of the carnival atmosphere and moments of revolutionary levity that blossom when people assert their power and take the streets as their own, which is what I quickly realized they (and I and my companions) were consciously doing. There was lots of music, dance, and laughter. Lots of people wore varying degrees of quite imaginative and colorful costumes. There were many chants and songs, fading in and out. Several groups, including a band of twenty painted students from Pacific Lutheran University, had choreographed and practiced anti-corporate cheers. Such energy! It was really encouraging to see so many students and young people involved, marching side by side with Teamsters, Pipefitters, and Lesbian Avengers. I was especially moved by a large group of middle-aged SEIU women who sang union songs-a strong, sweet rendition of Union Maid ("I'm Sticking to the Union"). I was just

delighted by the Anti-Fascist Marching Band, a disheveled, piratical-looking group of twenty-five middle-aged musicians led by two women dressed in dusky deep red majorette costumes from the '50s and twirling batons. They played union and protest songs, dixieland, a sweet and raucous version of America the Beautiful as they marched along. There were a few moments when I felt like I might have died and gone to heaven! It was like being part of a living poem being shaped-that we were shaping-as we moved along. A radical mime/drum corps stationed on a sidewalk, playing several different kinds of drums loudly, had lots of kids dancing in the street, whirling, laughing, having a ball. One float was a huge, bright green condom-maybe 25 feet long and 12 feet high-a helium-filled balloon, advising the WTO to "Practice Safe Trade." There were the now-famous sea-turtle costumes (and the famous signs, "Teamsters and Turtles Together at Last"), a blighted Uncle Sam on stilts, a smirking Mr. Moneybags, and many others. My personal favorite chant among the many that punctuated the cool Northwest sunbreaks was "Corporate Scum, Here We Come!" But the one I should have liked best was the often heard "Whose World? Our World! Whose Streets? Our Streets!" That was truly the spirit and the reality of the day. At one point we marched along with a group of a dozen bare-breasted and painted vegan dykes, naked from the waist up-some of the same ones we'd seen joyously tearing off their shirts at the march's start-who were marching and chanting with a big group of steelworkers-burly union men-who seemed not the least bit abashed or perturbed by the look of their fellow marchers of the moment. They all seemed incredibly accepting of each other.

As we neared the Convention Center, we saw much graffiti spray-painted on buildings, many smashed plate glass windows, one Starbucks completely trashed. We (our little Mid-Willamette Valley Jobs with Justice group with our blue banner and Trabajos Con Justicia signs) decided not to go to the Convention Center or downtown where the tear-gassing, etc., was occurring because the union people, the marshalls, didn't want their folks to go there officially-a reasonable request, given all the people involved-and we had come as union supporters, which we are, on a union bus. So we marched on back to the area of the Space Needle, where the march disbanded. (Had I been alone, I would have wandered off to the other scene with the one-third of the union marchers who did that; I like to be where the action is and contribute to it. But I feel right about the choice my companions and I made.)

I thought the rally and speakers at Memorial Stadium were just terrific, ditto the big march. And even though I did not join it this time, I am exceedingly glad, as were my fellow marchers, that the political action around the Convention Center and in the streets of downtown Seattle on that Tuesday occurred. (As I wrote those lines, the Teamsters were still supplying the hundreds of protestors outside the jail with coffee, milk, and cookies.) The political actions and the labor rally and march complemented each other and contributed each to the other. We need each other, the people, the activists, and the unions, if we are to contest the depredations of multi-national corporations and globalization-of capital-effectively and build instead a human world.

Everyone was tremendously impressed with the discipline and purpose of the thousands of nonviolent protestors, and because of their example and success at closing down the WTO I plan to get training in nonviolence as soon as possible. They were organized and very political and their strategy worked. (As for the roughly 100 black-garbed and masked anarchists who did the actual violent damage, they did nothing until the police started teargassing nonviolent protestors at about 10 a.m., and then they attacked only the stores of major multinational corporations. They effectively increased the operating space for everyone else.) At any rate, 99% of the protestors and marchers were disciplined, purposeful, informed, and nonviolent. And as of now no union officials (although some are disappointed by the media emphasis on violent images) have backed away from the same pro-labor, pro-environment, pro-people, anti-WTO, i.e., anti-neoliberal, anti-corporate positions that the vast majority of the active protestors proclaim. There is common ground and cause and real solidarity across the board.

Near the end of the march, we passed a bar and there were some young and middle-aged union men

standing outside, mostly but by no means all white guys, drinking beers and some with small American flags stuck in their baseball caps and hard hats, and seeing that they didn't smile or wave as we passed (unusual, this) reminded me that there are still the kinds of class, economic, and cultural problems and differences under the surface that fractured and broke apart the movement from the mid '60s through the mid '70s and on-the same distrust, at least on the margins. As events proceed, it will no doubt be harder to maintain unity than it was that Tuesday. And there will be the problem of the kind of economic vision that the protestors share (mostly, sustainable economics-this is a fascinating problem; Mander, Shiva, Korten, and the IFG have done a great job of organizing among unions and protest groups in the past several years). Nonetheless, what happened that Tuesday in Seattle was a historical turning point I believe that opens up much new space for action for those on the left to work for transformative change and a better world. It was a truly splendid day, an unexpectedly fine beginning, and now it's up to those of us who care to do so to take advantage of this new opening. A new left has formed, a new movement is crystallizing in the world. And it's worth remembering that the corporate class no longer have the knee-jerk weapon of cold-war anti-communism with which to taint, fragment, and stymie the left. This was clear in Seattle, and a relief. We have room; the time to join and help shape this concerted, informed radical movement has come. I for one have joined in.

That Tuesday it was clear that the students, environmentalists, feminists, left religious and secular activists, and the apparently very few left academics like me and one of my companions (and, I assume, all of you) have come a long way over towards understanding and sharing the problems and needs of union people and of working people everywhere. Common ground and common cause have been and are being mapped out; everyone is focused right now on the structure of the internationalizing economy and thinking about how to shape alternatives that work for working people and the environment everywhere. This is a tremendous achievement, a moment all of us should seize. The millenium has not come, but after that Tuesday in Seattle there is new reason to hope and act, remembering that there are lots of different groups and tendencies actively seeking and finding common ground on the left now and trying to work together to build a better world.

What role will socialists, including Marxists, choose to play in this developing and changing scene? It's a complex question; the answer is not preordained. Some, I think, are so rigid and wedded to the past that they will be left behind; but as left intellectuals and activists we have much to contribute if we choose to do so. Is the new movement's dominant theoretical perspective, called "sustainable economics," for example, fully capable of guiding it in the long run? What strategic challenges do the regressive elements of that perspective present? There's important work to be done, needed work, perhaps especially in helping the new movement shape its consciousness and direction in truly transformative ways so as to avoid the processes of cooptation and keep the focus on creating a better, more fully human world. And while we do this, if we so choose, while we respond in action and thought to the continuing challenge of that Tuesday in Seattle, we will of course be reshaping and transforming our very selves, as well.

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