

The Battle *After* Seattle: Framing and Prioritizing Trade Issues for the Soundbite Media

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Until now, the ravages of international trade regulation have been known primarily within labor, progressive, and environmentalist circles. The protests at the World Trade Organization's Seattle conference are a watershed, dramatically increasing public awareness of the anti-WTO movement.

Delaying, diluting, and even halting new trade initiatives that fail workers and the environment are possible if a strongly committed minority in the US continue to fight. But to achieve deep structural change and roll back existing agreements, we will need broader popular support. An important part of this challenge lies in simply but accurately defining the issues for the mainstream media from which many Americans will draw their impressions. If the protestors are remembered as a collection of special-interest "protectionists" and fringe environmentalists, then a majority in the US are likely to equate the WTO with "free trade." When the issue is framed in this way, opponents of the WTO are at an unnecessary disadvantage.

"Free trade" is, of course, a ruse employed by WTO supporters to conceal what Jerry Mander and others call *corporate protectionism* (a term that deserves wider use). One of the main objectives of trade regulation, for example, is international patent and trademark enforcement, including the ludicrous example of the Texas firm Rice Tec's patent on a broad class of basmati rice, which has been grown in India for centuries. Clearly, this is not free trade. It is "freedom" only for corporate bosses who have paid their bribes to the bureaucracy, and the *opposite* of freedom for everyone else.

Anti-WTO activists understand phrases like "free trade" and "globalization" as code words for corporate control. But this usage may not translate well into the larger culture. "Globalization" is seen by most Americans as a technological phenomenon (satellites, cheap air travel and shipping) rather than a political one, and most appear to appreciate its benefits. "Free trade" has been well sold to mean lower prices, wider export markets, and economic growth which causes only a minority of people to suffer dislocations that can be addressed through retraining.

Posing the issue as "free trade" versus "fair trade" is clever alliteration. But, in addition to the formidable ideology of "free trade" that must be overcome, this framing needlessly reinforces the belief that freedom and equality are at odds with each other and that we must choose between them. In the Land of Liberty, those who use the language of freedom usually win. Public opinion should be looked at closely in the wake of the Ministerial to see how sympathetic Americans are to the idea of "fair trade" as they understand it, and to what extent opinions about the WTO align with those on "free

trade.” We cannot continue to dismiss the idea that WTO supporters are “free traders” in one sentence, and then refer to them by that shorthand in another.

Eventually, WTO opponents can use Americans’ love of “freedom” as an advantage, because a world in which a few corporations control things makes almost everyone *less* free, not more. In the meantime, the right strategy for building adequate opposition to the WTO (and the one many are already taking) is probably to focus on the Organization’s inherent lack of legitimacy and its undermining of democratic, local control. This has been an important part of the WTO opponents’ (especially Ralph Nader’s) message since the WTO was brought into existence in December 1994, when there was little evidence that the post-election Congress even knew what it was voting for. The threat to democracy is one issue on which radical, progressive and conservative critics of the WTO can agree. Now that more Americans are paying attention to the WTO, focusing on it may be crucial.

Much of the discussion about a post-Seattle agenda for the movement has focused on promoting alternative trade policies, in response to the predicted efforts by the WTO to expand its reach. Imagining fairer trade laws is an important exercise, and debating the desirability of global trade is obviously worthwhile. But these issues should be decoupled from that of the WTO itself. There is no reason to link opposition to the WTO *process* with a particular view of what the *content* of trade policy should be. Furthermore, since just procedures must be put in place before just laws will result, objections to the process should be in the foreground in the public campaign, with much tolerance for different views on content. Everyone’s views about the content of trade policy are likely to change somewhat in a fair and open deliberation process which has real consequences, because none of us have experienced that yet.

Systemic change can be advanced by boldly promoting democratization. For example, a movement for a National Referendum Amendment to the US Constitution, especially one requiring a people’s vote on any international agreements that constrain domestic lawmaking (including agreements already reached), would draw attention to the Congress’s failure to act in the public interest when it made us subject to WTO authority. And every time the President is available to answer questions, he should be asked why the ministers of the WTO are not elected by the people and why their proceedings are so secretive! We may not agree immediately on one proposal for democratization, but if many ideas are put forward, they will at least put the WTO and its supporters on the defensive.

To the extent that WTO opponents focus on the content of world trade law without tying it to a condemnation of the process of decision making, we play into the hands of the ministers, who are trying to co-opt us in Seattle by claiming that our ideas are being listened to. Even if positive steps are taken to protect workers and the environment in the next round of trade negotiations, the WTO’s lack of accountability to these interests guarantees that they will fall far short of what is needed and be inadequately enforced. In the aftermath of Seattle, it is vital that we remain unified as much as possible in insisting that the WTO itself, as an anti-democratic body, must go.

The American left has often divided itself over how the People should use power they do not yet possess. The unprecedented coalition that has come together against the WTO gives us an historic opportunity to reverse that pattern. The real choice Americans and the world face is *not* one of freedom versus fairness, but of a highly centralized, corporate-controlled bureaucracy in Geneva versus a truly democratic process that preserves the autonomy people want their local, state, and national governments to have. Let's present it that way.