

Where was the Color in Seattle?

Looking for reasons why the Great Battle was so white

by Elizabeth (Betita) Martinez

"I was at the jail where a lot of protesters were being held and a big crowd of people was chanting 'This Is What Democracy Looks Like!' At first it sounded kind of nice. But then I thought: is this really what democracy looks like? Nobody here looks like me."

Jinee Kim, Bay Area youth organizer

In the vast acreage of published analysis about the splendid victory over the World Trade Organization last Nov. 29-Dec. 3, it is almost impossible to find anyone wondering why the 40-50,000 demonstrators were overwhelmingly Anglo. How can that be, when the WTO's main victims around the world are people of color?

Understanding the reasons for the low level of color, and what can be learned from it, is crucial if we are to make Seattle's promise of a new, international movement against imperialist globalization come true.

Among those who did come for the WTO meeting were some highly informative Third World panelists who spoke Monday, Nov. 29 about the effects of WTO on health care and on the environment. They included activist-experts from Mexico, Malaysia, the Philippines, Ghana and Pakistan. On Tuesday, Nov. 30 at the huge rally before the main march, labor leaders from Mexico, the Caribbean, South Africa, Malaysia, India and China spoke along with every major U.S. union leader (all white).

Rank-and-file U.S. workers of color also attended, from certain unions and locals in certain geographic areas. There were

young African Americans in the building trades; Blacks from Local 10 of the ILWU in San Francisco and Latinos from its Los Angeles local; Asian Americans from SEIU; Teamsters of color from eastern Washington state; members of the painters' union and the union of Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (H.E.R.E.). Latino/a farmworkers from the UFW and PCUN (Pineros and Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste) of Oregon also attended. At one point a miner from the South Africa Labor Network cried, "In the words of Karl Marx, 'Workers of the world, unite!'" The crowd of some 25,000 people cheered.

Among community activists of color, the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN) delegation led by Tom Goldtooth conducted an impressive program of events with native peoples from all over the U.S. and the world. A 15-member multi-state delegation represented the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice based in Albuquerque, which embraces 84 organizations primarily of color in the U.S. and Mexico; their activities in Seattle were binational.

Many activist youth groups of color came from California, especially the Bay Area, where they have been working on such issues as Free Mumia, affirmative

action, ethnic studies, and rightwing laws like the current Prop. 21 "youth crime" initiative. Seattle-based forces of color that participated actively included the Filipino Community Center and the international People's Assembly, which led a march on Tuesday despite being the only one denied a permit. The predominantly white Direct Action Network (DAN), a huge coalition, brought thousands to the protest. But Jia Ching Chen of the Bay Area's Third Eye Movement was the only young person of color involved in DAN's central planning.

Seattle's 27-year old Centro de la Raza organized a Latino contingent in the labor march and local university groups including MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan) hooked up with visiting activists of color. Black activists who have been fighting for an African American Heritage Museum and Cultural Center in Seattle were there. Hop Hopkins, an AIDS activist in Seattle, also black, made constant personal efforts to draw in people of color.

Still, the overall turnout of color from the U.S. remained around 5% of the total. In personal interviews, activists from the Bay Area and the Southwest gave me several reasons for this. Some mentioned concern about the likelihood of brutal police repression. Other obstacles: lack of funds for the trip, inability to be absent from work during the week, and problems in finding child care.

Yet several experienced activists of color in the Bay Area who had even been offered full scholarships chose not to go. A major reason for their not participating, and the reason given by many others, was lack of knowledge about the WTO. As one Filipina said, "I didn't see the political significance of it—how the protest would be anti-imperialist. We didn't know anything about the WTO except that lots of people were going to the meeting."

One of the few groups that did feel informed, and did participate, was the hip-

hop group Company of Prophets. According to African American member Rashidi Omari of Oakland, this happened as a result of their attending teach-ins by predominantly white groups like Art and Revolution. Company of Prophets, rapping from a big white van, was in the front ranks of the 6 a.m. march that closed down the WTO on Nov. 30.

The problem of unfamiliarity with the WTO was aggravated by the fact that Black and Latino communities across the U.S. lack Internet access compared to many white communities. A July 1999 federal survey showed that among Americans earning \$15,000-\$35,000 a year, more than 32% of white families owned computers but only 19% of black and Latino families. In that same income range, only 9% of African American and Latino homes had Internet access compared to 27% of white families. So information about WTO and all the plans for Seattle did not reach many people of color.

Limited knowledge meant a failure to see how the WTO affects the daily lives of U.S. communities of color. "Activists of color felt they had more immediate issues," said Rashidi. "Also, when we returned people told me of being worried that family and peers would say they were neglecting their own communities, if they went to Seattle. 'They would be asked, 'Why are you going? You should stay here and help your people.'"

Along with such concerns about linkage came the assumption that the protest would be overwhelmingly white—as it was. Coumba Toure, a Bay Area activist originally from Mali, West Africa, said she had first thought, "the whites will take care of the WTO, I don't need to go." Others were more openly apprehensive. For example, Carlos ("Los" for short) Windham of Company of Prophets told me, "I think even Bay Area activists of color who understood the linkage didn't want to go to a protest dominated by 50,000 white hippies."

People of color had reason to expect the protest to be white-dominated. Roberto Maestas, director of Seattle's Centro de la Raza, told me that in the massive local press coverage before the WTO meeting, not a single person of color appeared as a spokesperson for the opposition. "Day after day, you saw only white faces in the news. The publicity was a real deterrent to people of color. I think some of the unions or church groups should have had representatives of color to encourage others to come."

Four protesters of color from different Bay Area organizations talked about the "culture shock" they experienced when they first visited the "Convergence," the protest center set up by the Direct Action Network. Said one, "When we walked in, the room was filled with young whites calling themselves anarchists. There was a pungent smell, many had not showered. We just couldn't relate to the scene so our whole group left right away." "Another told me, 'They sounded dogmatic and paranoid.'" "I just freaked and left," said another. "It wasn't just race, it was also culture, although race was key."

In retrospect, observed Van Jones of STORM (Standing Together to Organize a Revolutionary Movement) in the Bay Area, "We should have stayed. We didn't see that we had a lot to learn from them. And they had a lot of materials for making banners, signs, puppets." Rashidi recalled, "Later I went back and talked to people, and they were discussing tactics, very smart. Those folks were really ready for action. It was limiting for people of color to let that one experience affect their whole picture of white activists." Jinee Kim, a Korean-American with Third Eye Movement in the Bay Area, also thought it was a mistake. "We realized we didn't know how to do a blockade. We had no gas masks. They made sure everybody had food and water, they took care of people. We could have learned from them."

Reflecting the more positive evaluation of white protesters in general, Richard Moore, coordinator of the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, told me "the white activists were very disciplined." "We sat down with whites, we didn't take the attitude that 'we can't work with white folks,'" concluded Rashidi. "It was a liberating experience."

Few predominantly white groups in the Bay Area made a serious effort to get people of color to Seattle. Juliette Beck of Global Exchange worked hard with others to help people from developing (Third World) countries to come. But for U.S. people of color, the main organizations that made a serious effort to do so were Just Act (Youth ACTION for Global JUSTice), formerly the Overseas Development Network, and Art and Revolution, which mostly helped artists. Many activists of color have mentioned Alli Chaggi-Starr of Art and Revolution, who not only helped people come but for the big march in Seattle she obtained a van with a sound system that was used by musicians and rappers.

In Just Act, Coumba Toure and two other members of color--Raj Javadev and Malachi Larabee--pushed hard for support from the group. As a result, about 40 people of color were enabled to go thanks to special fundraising and whites staying at people's homes in Seattle so their hotel money could be used instead on plane tickets for people of color. Reflecting on the whole issue of working with whites, Coumba talked not only about pushing Just Act but also pushing people of color to apply for the help that became available.

One of the problems Coumba said she encountered in doing this was "a legacy of distrust of middle-class white activists that has emerged from experiences of 'being used.' Or not having our issues taken seriously. Involving people of color must be done in a way that gives them real space. Whites must understand a whole new approach is needed that includes respect (if

you go to people of color thinking you know more, it creates a barrier). Also, you cannot approach people simply in terms of numbers, like 'let's give 2 scholarships.' People of color must be central to the project."

Jia Ching Chen recalled that once during the week of protest, in a jail holding-cell, he was one of only two people of color among many Anglos. He tried to discuss with some of them the need to involve more activists of color and the importance of white support in this. "Some would say, 'We want to diversify,' but didn't understand the dynamics of this." In other words, they didn't understand the kinds of problems described by Coumba Toure. "Other personal conversations were more productive," he said, "and some white people started to recognize why people of color could view the process of developing working relations with whites as oppressive."

Unfortunately the heritage of distrust was intensified by some of the AFL-CIO leadership of labor on the Nov. 30 march. They chose to take a different route through downtown rather than marching with others to the Convention Center and helping to block the WTO. Also, on the march to downtown they reportedly had a conflict with the Third World People's Assembly contingent when they rudely told the people of color to move aside so they could be in the lead.

Yet if only a small number of people of color went to Seattle, all those with whom I spoke found the experience extraordinary. They spoke of being changed forever. "I saw the future." "I saw the possibility of people working together." They called the giant mobilization "a shot in the arm," if you had been feeling stagnant. "Being there was an incredible awakening." Naomi, a Filipina dancer and musician, recalled how "at first a lot of my group were tired, grumpy, wanting to go home. That really changed. One of the artists with us, who never considered herself

a political activist, now wants to get involved back in Oakland. Seattle created a lot of strong bonds in my small community of co-workers and friends."

They seem to feel they had seen why, as the chant popularized the Chicano/a students of MEChA goes, "*Ain't no power like the power of the people (Say wha?), 'Cause the power of the people don't stop!*"

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There must be effective follow-up and increased communication between people of color across the nation: grassroots organizers, activists, cultural workers, and educators. We need to build on the contacts made (or that need to be made) from Seattle. Even within the Bay Area, activists who could form working alliances still do not know of each other's existence.

With mass protests planned for April 16-17 in Washington, D.C. at the meeting of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the opportunity to build on the WTO victory shines brightly. More than ever, we need to work on our ignorance about global issues with study groups, youth workshops, conferences. We need to draw specific links between WTO and our close-to-home struggles in communities of color, as has been emphasized by Raj Jayadev and Lisa Juachon in the *The Silicon Valley Reader: Localizing the Effects of the Global Economy*, 1999, which they edited.

Many examples of how WTO has hurt poor people in Third World countries were given during the protest. For example, a Pakistani told one panel how, for years, South Africans grew medicinal herbs to treat AIDS at very little cost. The WTO ruled that this was "unfair" competition with pharmaceutical companies seeking to sell their expensive AIDS medications. "People are dying because they cannot afford those products," he said. A Filipino reported on indigenous farmers being compelled to use fertilizers containing poisonous chemicals in

order to compete with cheap, imported potatoes. Ruined, they often left the land seeking survival elsewhere.

But there are many powerful examples right here in the U.S. For starters, consider these:

* WTO policies encourage sub-livable wages for youth of color everywhere including right here.

* WTO policies encourage privatization of health care, education, welfare and other crucial public services, as well as cutbacks in those services, so private industry can take them over and run them at a profit. This, along with sub-livable wages, leads to jeopardizing the lives of working-class people and criminalizing youth in particular.

* Workers in Silicon Valley are being chemically poisoned by the chips they work on that make such wealth for others. WTO doesn't want to limit those profits with protection for workers.

* WTO has said it is "unfair trade" to ban the import of gasoline in which certain cancer-causing chemicals have been used. This could have a devastating effect on people in the U.S., including those of color, who buy that gas.

* Overall, WTO is controlled by U.S. corporations. It is secretly run by a few advanced industrialized countries for the benefit of the rich and aspiring rich. WTO serves to further impoverish the poor and enrich the wealthy of all countries.

Armed with such knowledge, we can educate and organize people of color. As Jinee Kim said at a San Francisco report-back by youth of color,

"We have to work with people who may not know the word 'globalization'—but they LIVE globalization."

A shorter version of this article will be found in the February 2000 issue of the magazine COLORLINES.

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