

Thousands protest at World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle

Political first principles for a movement against global capitalism

The Editorial Board
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Thousands of people are gathering in Seattle, Washington this week to protest the proceedings at the ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO). The prospect of mass protests provoked Britain's *Financial Times* on Saturday to publish an editorial defense of international capitalism.

Entitled "The Critics of Capitalism," the editorial notes that the "backlash against global capitalism is gaining force and power" and that "the protests have real importance as a warning signal that public unease with capitalism and the forces of globalization is reaching a worrying level."

The *Financial Times* observes that during the Asian economic crisis, "People were outraged at how the whims of secretive hedge funds could apparently cause mass poverty on the other side of the world." It continues, "It would be foolish to deny that free trade can cause enormous and painful upheavals," but concludes with the bland assertion that for "all the pain a more open and integrated global economy can cause, it is still of overwhelming benefit to the world economy."

The *Financial Times* editorial is noteworthy for its markedly defensive tone. It suggests that the mood within leading economic and political circles, notwithstanding the record-breaking rise in share values on Wall Street, is a far cry from the heady triumphalism that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union less than a decade ago.

The *FT* response to critics of global capitalism is unlikely to convince anyone not already enthralled by the supposed wonders of the market. When, for example, the editorial speaks of "overwhelming benefit to the world economy," it begs the question: who precisely falls within its conception of "world economy?"

Is the *FT* referring to the vast majority of the world's people? If so, its editors would be hard pressed to demonstrate that the expansion of transnational capital and finance into Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, for example, has produced anything other than a disaster for broad masses of the working population. The same can be said for the masses of Africa, Asia and Latin America, whose living standards have fallen, in some cases catastrophically, during the past two decades of economic restructuring programs dictated by the International Monetary Fund and Western governments.

Nor have working people in the centers of capitalist industry and finance—the US, Western Europe, Japan—benefited from the growth of transnational capital. Living standards have stagnated or declined, economic insecurity has become pervasive, leisure time has given way to longer working hours and government-financed programs that formerly offered some protection against the vagaries of the market

have been slashed to the bone.

If, on the other hand, by "world economy" the *Financial Times* really means those at the upper-most rungs of the economic ladder, then the newspaper has an excellent case. A flood of statistical information has appeared in recent years documenting a staggering growth of social polarization on a world scale. One fact is indicative: the wealth of the world's billionaires, *475 individuals*, now equals the combined yearly incomes of more than fifty percent of the world's population, i.e., *three billion people*.

Such are the fruits of global capitalism. What makes the editorial writers of the *Financial Times* nervous is that more and more people are recognizing this and beginning to consider its implications.

A heterogeneous variety of organizations have mobilized for the protest in Seattle. Among them are non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from around the world lobbying for labor and human rights standards to be incorporated into trade deals; environmental groups like the Rainforest Action Network and Greenpeace; ostensibly "left" groups oriented to the AFL-CIO bureaucracy; the trade unions themselves; and right-wing nationalist tendencies of the Pat Buchanan ilk.

It is expected that thousands of young people, including many students not affiliated with any of the groups organizing the protests, will participate. They are coming to Seattle because they are repulsed by the direction of American society: the dominance of large corporations over every aspect of life; the growth of social inequality; the official obsession with wealth; the "law-and-order" hysteria and worship of the military; the increase in racist and anti-Semitic attacks; the indifference at every level of government to the needs of the population.

The building of a viable movement against world capitalism, however, raises vast historical and political questions. The century now drawing to a close has been full of complex and often bitter experiences. It is enough to refer to the great Russian Revolution of 1917 and the tragic fate of the Soviet Union under the bureaucracy that usurped power in the late 1920s and proceeded, under Stalin and his successors, to carry out monstrous crimes against the working class and the cause of international socialism, all in the name of Marxism and communism. It will prove impossible to wage a successful struggle without assimilating the lessons of those experiences.

The record of previous protest movements, including the struggle against the Vietnam War, proves that activism and even the willingness to make great sacrifices are not sufficient. The most

complicated task facing human beings is the organization of a movement against the existing system.

What is the social and political basis for such a movement? In our view, the essential foundation must be the international unity of the working class.

The mass of working people form the essential backbone and leading social force of any movement against global capital. Far from shrinking in size or significance, the working class has grown on a world scale, both in absolute terms and in social weight.

Global economic integration has meant the expansion of industry into areas in economically backward countries where none previously existed and the growth of the working class by the hundreds of millions. In the advanced countries, changes in economic life (computerization, the elimination of middle layers of management, the pressure of downsizing and budget cuts) have resulted in the proletarianization of wide layers of the population previously defined as middle class.

Globalization has created an unprecedented degree of international social polarization between the wealthy elite and broad layers of the population. The struggle between the working class and capital has not disappeared, it has expanded in scope and grown in intensity.

Nor is there a lack of combativity on the part of workers in defense of their jobs and living standards. The explosiveness of social contradictions has been demonstrated in every region, most recently, albeit in a politically confused form, in Indonesia.

Working people have made their greatest gains historically when their most advanced elements have been guided by the ideals of internationalism. The notion that workers everywhere had the same interests inspired the Russian socialists who led the revolution of October 1917. The chief difficulty today is that workers in every part of the globe have been abandoned and betrayed by their old organizations—so-called Communist and Socialist parties, Labour parties and trade unions. The political consciousness of masses of people has suffered as the result of decades of domination by pro-capitalist and nationalist labor bureaucracies.

In today's restricted and largely uninformed political debate, "global capitalism" and "globalization" are essentially synonymous. It is, however, necessary to distinguish between the increasingly global character of the production and exchange of goods—in and of itself a progressive development fueled by revolutionary advances in computer science, telecommunications and transport—and the socially destructive consequences that flow not from globalization as such, but from the continued subordination of economic life to a system which is driven by the anarchic pursuit of private profit, and wedded to an outmoded national form of political organization.

The great question today is not how to roll back development to some largely mythical age of isolated national economic life—it is this: who is going to control the global economy, whose interests are going to determine how its immense technical and cultural capacities are utilized? The only social force capable of organizing the global economy in a progressive fashion is the international working class.

The AFL-CIO bureaucracy, which has come en masse to Seattle, epitomizes the reactionary essence of nationalism. It doesn't articulate the interests of the working class, but of various sections of business threatened by the trajectory of the world economy and, of course, its own selfish interests.

In a particularly grotesque demonstration of the bureaucracy's nationalism, United Steelworkers union officials are staging a "Stop Steel Dumping at the Docks Rally" on Wednesday, during which they

intend to dump Chinese steel into Seattle harbor.

In the AFL-CIO, nationalism is combined with pathological anticommunism. Why pick Chinese, and not Korean or Brazilian steel? Because to the American trade union bureaucracy, the Beijing Stalinist regime is "communist." They would love to instigate a new Cold War, with China as the designated enemy state. This outlook brings them closely into line with ultra-rightist Pat Buchanan.

The AFL-CIO leadership incarnates everything backward in the history of the US labor movement. It forges its de facto ideological alliance with Buchanan even as it continues to surrender every gain made by past generations of workers.

Bound up with the perspective of internationalism is a no less fundamental question: the independent political organization of the working class. The issues raised this week in Seattle cannot be solved by protest. No application of pressure on the WTO or any other capitalist institution will in any serious way change the situation facing the world's working and oppressed masses.

Those opposed to the existing state of things are obliged to go to the root of the problem, the system of production for profit. This means a struggle for fundamental change, to reorganize society on a new social principle. This is a political struggle for which the working class needs its own instrument, its own political party.

In the US, this means a definitive break from the straitjacket of the two-party system. Clinton, Bush and Buchanan, despite tactical differences, all speak in defense of the profit system. Any talk of leading a struggle against global capitalism while maintaining the two-party system is a sham or an illusion.

Whatever the misunderstandings or confusion surrounding the notion of socialism—largely bound up with a mistaken identification of Marxism with its opposite, Stalinism—the egalitarian, democratic and internationalist principles of socialism represent the only alternative to the irrationality and injustice of capitalism. Those who are serious about resisting the domination of the transnational companies and their political representatives will find themselves compelled to study, assimilate and fight for the perspective of international socialism.

The coming months and years will provide no lack of social and political upheavals and struggles on the part of working people all over the world. The international editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site* is confident that our publication, providing a continuous source of Marxist commentary and analysis of political, social and cultural developments, will become a focal point for serious discussion and debate, attracting the most principled and self-sacrificing students and intellectuals, and laying the political foundations for the emergence of a new, genuinely international and socialist movement of the working class.

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