Seattle protests illuminate implications of trade talks

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On November 30th, the world witnessed demonstrations in Seattle unlike anything that we have seen since the protests of the 1960s. The mounting concern, rising to a level that brought thousands of people into the streets around the world on the opening day of the WTO talks, is indicative of the fear that people have about increasing globalization, unfettered market practices and the implications for democracy, the environment and human rights.

Democracy is at the core of the WTO protests. While the WTO denies that it acts on behalf of corporations (it claims that the rules are the result of negotiations among governments), the fact is that the rules are written by and for corporations with inside access to the negotiations. Input from consumer, environmental, human rights and labour organizations is consistently ignored. It is the structure of the WTO (who is there) and the processes (proceedings in secret; dispute panels made up of trade bureaucrats) that is being challenged by a growing number of organizations and individuals.

Frustrated by the inability to change the structure and process through traditional channels, people have taken to public demonstrations to capture the attention of the broader public, shed light on the implications of international trade negotiations and initiate a broader and more inclusive debate about the proceedings and decisions.

The "think globally, act locally" slogan captured our imagination and gave everyday people a sense that they could belong and contribute to society at all levels. It made us feel that as individuals, we are part of a greater whole and our every day actions have significance.

Most importantly, opponents of the WTO have reminded us that the society that would result if we "act globally, without thinking locally" may help large corporations, but could have dire consequences for working people, our families and our communities.

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