

## **How We Really Shut Down the WTO**

by Starhawk -- December, 1999

It's been two weeks now since the morning when I awoke before dawn to join the blockade that shut down the opening meeting of the WTO. Since getting out of jail, I've been reading the media coverage and trying to make sense out of the divergence between what I know happened and what has been reported.

For once in a political protest, when we chanted "The whole world is watching!" we were telling the truth. I've never seen so much media attention on a political action. However, most of what has been written is so inaccurate that I can't decide if the reporters in question should be charged with conspiracy or simply incompetence. The reports have pontificated endlessly about a few broken windows, and mostly ignored the Direct Action Network, the group that successfully organized the nonviolent direct action that ultimately involved thousands of people. The true story of what made the action a success is not being told.

The police, in defending their brutal and stupid mishandling of the situation, have said they were "not prepared for the violence." In reality, they were unprepared for the nonviolence and the numbers and commitment of the nonviolent activists-- even though the blockade was organized in open, public meetings and there was nothing secret about our strategy. My suspicion is that our model of organization and decision making was so foreign to their picture of what constitutes leadership that they literally could not see what was going on in front of them. When authoritarians think about leadership, the picture in their minds is of one person, usually a guy, or a small group standing up and telling other people what to do. Power is centralized and requires obedience.

In contrast, our model of power was decentralized, and leadership was invested in the group as a whole. People were empowered to make their own decisions, and the centralized structures were for co-ordination, not control. As a result, we had great flexibility and resilience, and many people were inspired to acts of courage they could never have been ordered to do.

Here are some of the key aspects of our model of organizing:

### **Training and Preparation:**

In the weeks and days before the blockade, thousands of people were given nonviolence training-- a three hour course that combined the history and

philosophy of nonviolence with real life practice through role plays in staying calm in tense situations, using nonviolent tactics, responding to brutality, and making decisions together. Thousands also went through a second-level training in jail preparation, solidarity strategies and tactics and legal aspects. As well, there were first aid trainings, trainings in blockade tactics, street theater, meeting facilitation, and other skills. While many more thousands of people took part in the blockade who had not attended any of these trainings, a nucleus of groups existed who were prepared to face police brutality and who could provide a core of resistance and strength. And in jail, I saw many situations that played out just like the role plays. Activists were able to protect members of their group from being singled out or removed by using tactics introduced in the trainings. The solidarity tactics we had prepared became a real block to the functioning of the system.

### **Common Agreements:**

Each participant in the action was asked to agree to the nonviolence guidelines: To refrain from violence, physical or verbal; not to carry weapons, not to bring or use illegal drugs or alcohol, and not to destroy property. We were asked to agree only for the purpose of the 11/30 action-- not to sign on to any of these as a life philosophy, and the group acknowledged that there is much diversity of opinion around some of these guidelines.

### **Affinity Groups, Clusters and Spokescouncils:**

The participants in the action were organized into small groups called Affinity Groups. Each group was empowered to make its own decisions around how it would participate in the blockade. There were groups doing street theater, others preparing to lock themselves to structures, groups with banners and giant puppets, others simply prepared to link arms and nonviolently block delegates. Within each group, there were generally some people prepared to risk arrest and others who would be their support people in jail, as well as a first aid person.

Affinity groups were organized into clusters. The area around the Convention Center was broken down into thirteen sections, and affinity groups and clusters committed to hold particular sections. As well, some groups were 'flying groups'-- free to move to wherever they were most needed. All of this was co-ordinated at Spokescouncil meetings, where Affinity Groups each sent a representative who was empowered to speak for the group.

In practice, this form of organization meant that groups could move and react with great flexibility during the blockade. If a call went out for more

people at a certain location, an affinity group could assess the numbers holding the line where they were and choose whether or not to move. When faced with tear gas, pepper spray, rubber bullets and horses, groups and individuals could assess their own ability to withstand the brutality. As a result, blockade lines held in the face of incredible police violence. When one group of people was finally swept away by gas and clubs, another would move in to take their place.

Yet there was also room for those of us in the middle-aged, bad lungs/bad backs affinity group to hold lines in areas that were relatively peaceful, to interact and dialogue with the delegates we turned back, and to support the labor march that brought tens of thousands through the area at midday. No centralized leader could have co-ordinated the scene in the midst of the chaos, and none was needed-- the organic, autonomous organization we had proved far more powerful and effective. No authoritarian figure could have compelled people to hold a blockade line while being tear gassed--but empowered people free to make their own decisions did choose to do that.

### **Consensus decision making:**

The affinity groups, clusters, spokescouncils and working groups involved with DAN made decisions by consensus-- a process that allows every voice to be heard and that stresses respect for minority opinions. Consensus was part of the nonviolence and jail trainings and we made a small attempt to also offer some special training in meeting facilitation. We did not interpret consensus to mean unanimity. The only mandatory agreement was to act within the nonviolent guidelines.

Beyond that, the DAN organizers set a tone that valued autonomy and freedom over conformity, and stressed co-ordination rather than pressure to conform. So, for example, our jail solidarity strategy involved staying in jail where we could use the pressure of our numbers to protect individuals from being singled out for heavier charges or more brutal treatment. But no one was pressured to stay in jail, or made to feel guilty for bailing out before the others.

We recognized that each person has their own needs and life situation, and that what was important was to have taken action at whatever level we each could. Had we pressured people to stay in jail, many would have resisted and felt resentful and misused. Because we didn't, because people felt empowered, not manipulated, the vast majority decided for themselves to remain in, and many people pushed themselves far beyond the boundaries of what they had expected to do.

## **Vision and Spirit:**

The action included art, dance, celebration, song, ritual and magic. It was more than a protest; it was an uprising of a vision of true abundance, a celebration of life and creativity and connection, that remained joyful in the face of brutality and brought alive the creative forces that can truly counter those of injustice and control. Many people brought the strength of their personal spiritual practice to the action. I saw Buddhists turn away angry delegates with loving kindness. We Witches led rituals before the action and in jail, and called on the elements of nature to sustain us. I was given Reiki when sick and we celebrated Hanukkah with no candles, but only the blessings and the story of the struggle for religious freedom. We found the spirit to sing in our cells, to dance a spiral dance in the holding cell, to laugh at the hundred petty humiliations the jail inflicts, to comfort each other and listen to each other in tense moments, to use our time together to continue teaching and organizing and envisioning the flourishing of this movement. For me, it was one of the most profound spiritual experiences of my life.

I'm writing this for two reasons. First, I want to give credit to the DAN organizers who did a brilliant and difficult job, who learned and applied the lessons of the last twenty years of nonviolent direct action, and who created a powerful, successful and life-changing action in the face of enormous odds, an action that has changed the global political landscape and radicalized a new generation. And secondly, because the true story of how this action was organized provides a powerful model that activists can learn from. Seattle was only a beginning. We have before us the task of building a global movement to overthrow corporate control and create a new economy based on fairness and justice, on a sound ecology and a healthy environment, one that protects human rights and serves freedom. We have many campaigns ahead of us, and we deserve to learn the true lessons of our successes.

Thanks and blessings,

--*Starhawk*

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