

Understanding Seattle

By Kent Bruyneel
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Aaron Koleszar went to Seattle and left with a criminal charge and a place on the cover of Time Magazine. Leo Cheverie saw Aaron and the others who left from PEI, off to the protest. Leo could not go because in addition to being a library technician, and a Cadre contributing Editor, he is the newly elected President of the PEI Federation of Labour and with that comes even more responsibility to one who already wears several hats. Leo and Aaron are two of the most active protestors in an ongoing battle for humanitarian issues that were brought to the forefront with the media coverage in

Seattle. The three of us are sitting in Aaron's kitchen in tiny Melville, Prince Edward Island, sipping Raspberry Tea. While the snow paints a Robert Harris like picture outside I am trying to understand the reasons for activism, who is wearing the horns in this debate, and just exactly what happened in Washington State.

KB: Why did you go to Seattle?

AK: I went to Seattle to protest the World Trade Organization (WTO) and this corporate agenda, this corporate rule that is taking over our planet. Profit is being put in front of people and the environment.

KB: Barriers being knocked down, things called trade barriers, like child labor, things that are not really trade barriers, but humanitarian issues, would seem to be the best reasons to fight the WTO. Was that why most people were there, for those kinds of reasons? Were there any of the so-called 'professional protesters'?

AK: Some people were there for specific reasons but it was so much more than that because the people knew *their* issue but they also knew that what we were doing related to everyone else and all these different issues.

LC: The mainstream media seemed to portray it as some sort of group that came together for all these various reasons, and that they were not really organized in terms of reasons why people were there, but (the coverage) missed the point completely that in fact the WTO was trying to make these laws that would be binding on democratic countries. So that, for example, we could not have sanctions against places like South Africa, which we did during Apartheid. That could not be done again, because of the WTO. We couldn't have laws against importing things made with child labor, you couldn't have laws protecting dolphins from nets that are killing them, so these things were considered, not for what they were, but rather euphemistically called

"trade barriers."

KB: Aaron you must have spent much time talking, spending 75 hours in custody and being at such well-attended protests?

AK: Actually most people, like myself, were jailed alone, intentionally to break us. But we had strong solidarity, we were together on the bus and we had numbers, and they... without getting into my own... well they were systematically trying to break our wills.

KB: Did they succeed on any significant level?

AK: Not really. You know, maybe to some extent, they did succeed. They did succeed, by splitting us up to make it less comfortable, less enjoyable, you know I would have been much happier if I been able to talk to the other people because mostly I just sat by myself, or slept, or whatever. So it did have an impact in that way but we still held to our solidarity.

KB: Where will the next big battle be, is there another significant one on the horizon?

AK: There is the International Monetary Fund (IMF) meeting on the 18th of April in Washington, DC. There will be a lot of people there because the IMF is another of the pillars of the global economy interested in keeping the rich rich and the poor poor. So there will be a lot of people there, same as at the WTO conference, basi-

cally trying to prevent the conference from happening. Some people like to think that Seattle was just a test run.

KB: How do you manifest change after this? I think that being there, being arrested does very little in terms of real change and I am just wondering how you get from the concepts to real markable change?

AK: Well, I don't see it quite that way. I see us being there, and doing that as making amazing change. In Seattle we physically stopped their conference from happening the first day and that set the stage. The conference didn't accomplish what the conference was for. So we physically stopped them from their goals, which was really important. Besides that, there's the people that were at the protest who were much more radicalized and empowered. There were the people in Seattle watching, all the millions of people on the news watching this all go down that understand a little bit more about the WTO and I am sure that lots more people realize that this is an urgent issue.

LC: Even while this was happening, while it was on the news, people stopped me on the street and asked me 'what's happening with the WTO?', people who had maybe heard of it (the WTO) but had no concept of what it meant, so basically it raised the profile of this organization and the real issues that are behind it. So that whenever they



Islander Aaron Koleszar on the cover of Time Magazine being arrested/assaulted during the WTO protest