

Back Story

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If there's one point on which everyone in the movement seems to agree, it's that action-hopping is getting old. The big mobilizations, like the April World Bank/IMF protests and this summer's actions at the Republican and Democratic conventions, are wearing people down. Hardball police tactics have made them cost more, while the sneering corporate media has made them matter less. These days, many of the people who worked on the big actions of the past year are reassessing, looking toward more community-based organizing and moving away from big blockade events.

The magic of this moment in time, though, is that the urge to get in power's way has become irrepressible. New people and new groups are clearly feeling inspired to make things happen, often in places that haven't yet seen much action. Check out Protest.Net, and you'll find a formidable – yet only partial – list of major upcoming demonstrations and direct actions, denoted by the abbreviated dates that have become standard movement syntax: S26, O3, O15, O17, N10, N17, A15.

But while the now-seasoned veterans of Seattle, D.C., Windsor, Philly, and L.A. are sorting out their next steps, and newly active organizers are stepping forward, it's worth looking back at the untold history of this movement. For while many people have been giving serious thought to the future of big actions, few know about their past.

The initial spark of the anti-globalization movement came on January 1, 1994, when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect. On that day, a hitherto unknown group of revolutionaries, the Zapatista National Liberation Army, rose up in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. The armed skirmishes lasted less than two weeks; unlike other Latin American guerrilla movements of the past, the Zapatistas did not seek a military victory. Instead, they hoped to inspire the downtrodden – both in Chiapas and the world at large – to organize and empower themselves, creating "an intercontinental network of resistance against neoliberalism."

By "neoliberalism" the Zapatistas meant the current global capitalist order, with its agenda of trade liberalization and privatization of public goods. Economic neoliberals (not to be confused with political liberals in the American definition) seek to maximize profit by removing all barriers to global business: pesky impediments like labor and environmental laws, for instance. Neoliberalism is the philosophical underpinning of corporate globalization, the foundation for trade agreements like NAFTA and for the World Trade Organization.

In 1996 and 1997, the Zapatistas convened two massive encuentros, or gatherings, "For Humanity and Against Neoliberalism." These brought together thousands of people from popular movements around the world, particularly from the Global South: labor unions, indigenous and community groups, peasants' and farmers' associations, human rights and environmental organizations, and more. The gatherings were intended not to create a global organization or produce a unified strategy, but to discuss how different groups were affected by neoliberalism and how movements might coordinate their resistance.

After the second encuentro, in August 1997, some 50 representatives of these varied movements – including indigenous groups from Nigeria and Mexico, and farmers' organizations from India, Brazil, Bolivia, and Indonesia – sat down to plan worldwide protests against the World Trade Organization, the prime symbol and instrument of corporate globalization. To facilitate organizing, they created an ongoing network, which they called Peoples' Global Action Against "Free" Trade and the WTO, or PGA for short.

The first Global Days of Action took place in late May 1998, coinciding with the WTO's Second Ministerial Conference, held in Geneva. There was barely a blip of participation from the United States: The only coordinated events were a radical street party in Berkeley and a small forest-preservation action in Arcata, the heart of California's Redwood region.

But in 28 other countries, it was a different story entirely. Five hundred thousand people took to the streets of Hyderabad in India, with the rallying cry, "We, the people of India, hereby declare that we consider the WTO our brutal enemy." In Brazil, an anti-WTO march drew some 50,000 people, including members of the country's Movement of Landless People, who were simultaneously looting supermarkets and government food stores as a protest against hunger. Some 20 cities held Global Street Parties, raucous and celebratory takeovers of public space, inspired by Reclaim the Streets (RTS), a movement that began in England during the early 1990s from a convergence of Earth First! campaigners against road construction and ravers fighting criminalization of their underground party scene.

Meanwhile, in Geneva, on the first day of the WTO meeting, 10,000 protested vigorously outside, while some of the more militant youth vandalized some banks and a McDonald's; the police attacked demonstrators with clubs and tear gas, but actions continued for three more days, including traffic blockades and a march by 1000 bound and gagged people, symbolizing the silencing of civil society by corporate rule.

Just over a year later, on June 18, 1999, PGA coordinated a "Global Day of Action Against Financial Centers," also called a "Carnival Against Capital," to coincide with the G8 Summit meeting of the major industrial powers. If the 1998 actions were impressively large and widespread, J18 (when this sort of abbreviation was first used) was staggering. There were events in well over 100 cities and more than 40 countries: from Australia to Zimbabwe, Sweden to South Korea, Chile to the Czech Republic. Famously, J18 in London escalated into anti-capitalist mayhem, with millions of dollars of property damage to corporate and financial institutions, in a protest that partly inspired the Black Bloc in Seattle.

In the U.S., activists in eight cities – including Los Angeles, San Francisco, Eugene, Boston, New York, and D.C. – organized actions for J18, mainly under the auspices of Reclaim the Streets, which had crossed the Atlantic over the previous year; the largest of them had several hundred participants. The American movement was still flying below radar, reaching a fairly small number of people in the know, but that was changing quickly.

Peoples' Global Action gathered again in August 1999 in the Indian city of Bangalore, hosted by a local radical farmers association known for torching genetically modified crops and burning down a KFC fast-food outlet. The agenda? To coordinate N30, the next global day of action, which was to coincide with the meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle.

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