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Marie Mason

Review: Battle of Seattle

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The Battle of the Story of the Battle of Seattle,
David Solnit and Rebecca Solnit,
AK Press, 2009, \$12,
www.akpress.org

Having been in Seattle for the “insurrection” against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1999, I looked forward to reading David Solnit’s account of the days leading up to November 26 and his interpretation of the aftermath of those events. I took part enthusiastically in many of the demonstrations and blockades of which he writes, and ran in the Black Bloc.

I remember feeling personally wounded by how not only the mainstream press summarized our efforts, but also by the unexpected sting of sharply divided alternative press attacks that smacked so many radicals square across the jaw.

The second “Battle” in the title refers to Solnit’s attempts to intervene in the filming of director Stuart Townsend’s 2007 film, *Battle in Seattle*, to make it conform more closely to his version of events. I was curious to read Solnit’s account of his meetings with the director where he describes his negotiations with Townsend over content and dialogue.

I appreciated the film and wrote a mostly positive review in these pages (see FE Fall 2008). It features actors Charlize Theron and Woody Harrelson portraying the anti-WTO demonstrations through a mostly sympathetic fictionalized account of events and what was at stake. This is done through the eyes of characters portraying some of the types of people present during the tumultuous demonstrations and blockades.

Although Solnit is a skilled organizer and a person of integrity and vision, I disagree with what amounts to an attempt to disenfranchise many who were there, but whose views and purpose differed from his own. Many individuals, unions, international and U.S. based non-profits, and grass-roots groups came to participate with varying visions of what they wanted and the tactics they hoped would achieve the change they desired.

Many groups were never in contact with one another, and certainly not with the Direct Action Network (DAN), the coalition Solnit worked with, so they never signed onto their action agreement. While DAN did do a great deal of work to create the framework of a plan to blockade the streets which ultimately led to the shut down of Seattle's crosstown traffic, it was, in fact, a glorious and unpredictable mess which ultimately won the day and forced the collapse of the ministerial talks.

Solnit makes the same critical mistake he accuses Townsend of in making his film. Like the director, he didn't reach outside of his own experiences to interview anyone who participated in events beyond his paradigm/approval.

It is a fatal flaw in the book as a definitive historical document, but does not damage its ability to enlighten a whole new generation of radicals who want to know how some segment of the movement perceived their role in the first major successful opposition to the juggernaut of global capital.

Its detailing of organizing tactics make it a fascinating book that serves as an insight into the perspective of someone so highly committed and engaged. It helps to keep the historic memory alive and expands the foundation for dialogue that should continue about the changing face of capitalism and how it is best confronted.