

Not in Service: the tale of insurgent taxis

by Grey Filastine

One of the lesser known acts of civil disobedience during the days of the Seattle WTO meetings was a strike by the local taxi drivers; a small but effective component in making the city inhospitable to our unwelcome guests. The call was made for all taxi drivers to suspend service within Seattle city limits from 6.00 am to 6.00 pm on Tuesday 30 November 1999.

In some parts of the world, taxi driving is a respectable profession which earns a decent income, by local standards, and which has no negative stigma. The cab drivers I've talked to in Europe, Asia, and North Africa claim to do pretty well and identify with the middle class. This is not the case in the United States, where taxi driving is one of the lowest rungs on the social hierarchy. Taxi drivers in urban areas are overwhelmingly poor immigrants, rural taxi drivers are frequently among the poorest and most marginalized of whites. Seattle's two biggest taxi fleets are primarily owned

and operated by East African men from Ethiopia, Somalia, and Eritrea. Another large company is almost entirely Punjabi Sikhs and other North Indians, and another is the last holdout of the working-class Anglo drivers. Drivers lease cars for 12-hour shifts from taxi owners. Most lease the car on a weekly basis, working seven 12-hour shifts per week. We are therefore self-employed, and lacking unions, unemployment insurance, workers' compensation, medical insurance, and any official channel for dealing with exploitation by the companies, which deal with the allocation of cars, collection of lease money, dispatch, and general administration. Cab owners pay dues to the company to support this infrastructure; since there is no oversight, the companies are dens of nepotism and incompetence.

Additional troubles began in the industry when the city government decided to apply a 'zero tolerance' model to the local taxi industry with an ordinance passed in 1997. In one of the many spurious attempts to make Seattle a 'world class' city, perhaps in anticipation of the already scheduled WTO meetings, the taxi industry was targeted for reform. Laws were enacted regulating everything imaginable,

corporate universe, the pie's the limit!"

>> **October 18** >> Activists in the Earth Liberation Front Network reduce North America's largest ski operation in Vail, Colorado, US to ashes, causing \$26 million in damages, in order to halt expansion of the resort. The 12 miles of planned roads and 885 acres of clearcut would decimate the last and best remaining lynx habitat in the state.

>> **October 30** >> World Trade Organization Director-General Renato 'Rocky' Ruggiero gets lemon pried at a London, UK, conference on trade, investment and the environment. Three members of the People Insurgent Everywhere, or PIE division of the Biotic Baking Brigade catch Rocky by surprise, calling out references to landmark WTO rulings: "That's a present from the dispossessed!" Sploosh! "And that's from the turtles!"

Splоosh again. "Are you bananas Mr. Ruggiero?" Splat! The adrenalized trio disappear into the West End crowds, shouting, "We are everywhere!" while Rocky sulks back indoors.

>> **November** >> A massive internet campaign against the MAI convinces the French government to withdraw, leading to the total collapse of the negotiations and sending a wake-up call to business elites. Lasting results

beginning an era of English language tests, uniforms, enforced cleanliness, consolidation of cab companies, illegalization of independent owner-operators, inspections, and a punitive system for offenders. Curiously absent from these laws was assurance of quality of life, job security, safety, or reliability of income for the taxi drivers – indicating the local government’s dominant concern for the superficial experience of tourists and conventioners over the working conditions of its constituents.

Drivers reacted by forming an organization called the Cab Drivers’ Alliance of King County. This organization has had limited success in challenging the power structure, mostly stymied by the individualist nature of taxi drivers and the implacable nature of politicians. At the very least we have made a career of harassing City Hall, once encircling the building with honking cabs in a four hour wildcat strike, then cruising through downtown as a rolling roadblock.

If this doesn’t sound familiar, it should. People from the global South working too hard for too little. Working-class whites pitted against immigrants. Sweatshop hours. A system which caters to the comforts of the wealthy. A popular resistance that gains little ground against a ‘business-friendly’ government. It is like a script in miniature of capitalism’s latest fad, neoliberalism.

For obvious reasons, it wasn’t difficult to call for a strike. The difficulty was largely one of information dispersal. Flyers posted at the cab lot were torn down immediately, flyers posted 50 yards from the lot were removed within 24 hours. Management did its best to discredit the strike,

“The WTO is the place where governments collude in private against their domestic pressure groups.” – *Financial Times*, 30 April 1998

claiming it to be a fiction to the media. Other management declined comment or made ambiguous statements. At the Anglo company, the management made it clear to me that I was not physically safe to organize or post flyers at their lot. I spent a few nights creeping around all the lots at 3.00 am, posting flyers under windshield wipers. It is strange that so little has changed in the US – that labour organizing can still get you shot or blacklisted.

Perhaps the most difficult task was to convince the drivers that N30 was the right time for a strike. Most were counting on making heaps of money from the delegates, and were hesitant to give up one of the most lucrative days of the year. A large article was published in our newsletter, detailing the reasons we should act on this day for our own individual interests and for global reasons. Many of the African and Indian drivers were familiar with the WTO, World Bank, and IMF because of the activities of those institutions in their home countries. Eventually most drivers warmed to the idea because of the rare chance to get even with the city government – by denying taxi service when it would hurt the most.

Just four days in advance, the strike was announced to

the media. It was kept secret until the last minute to prevent the companies from coming up with counter-propaganda, or the municipality to avoid the crisis by arranging other transportation. Response from the media was immediate and somewhat overwhelming for our small strike committee. News outlets were desperate for more WTO stories, and I suspect they were also interested because of the dynamic and unpredictable nature of our 'union', lacking careerists and the usual crusty old order of lefties to water down our anger.

The events on N30 are now pretty historic, and there were certainly a lot more exciting things happening than a dearth of cabs. Busy with other actions that day, I felt happy to know that the delegates couldn't use cabs to get through crowds, and were more easy to spot and harass in their limousines, and that no taxis were being shaken or blocked, which could have shifted some taxi drivers' sympathies.

Our strike significantly aided in shutting down the city since the bus service was also suspended, and people definitely wouldn't drive into the city after it became clear that the demonstrations had claimed the streets. There was

simply no way for people to get to their jobs in the city centre. This, combined with the masses of people who voluntarily chose not to work on N30, suspended any atmosphere of normalcy. The transportation shutdown enabled a situation of de facto general strike.

Grey Filastine drives a taxi as infrequently as possible, but if you are in Seattle try hailing Yellow 509. The rest of his time is spent in various hustles, producing music, or making political trouble.

Resources:

» **Information about Grey's other musical and direct action projects:**
www.postworldindustries.org

of the campaign include a global network of connected activists primed for the next battle: that against the launching of a new round of 'free' trade negotiations at the upcoming WTO ministerial in Seattle.

>> November >> In an impressive nationally coordinated action, crops in over thirty UK GMO test sites are destroyed in over a dozen cities on the same night.

>> November 23 >> Following the October pieing of Monsanto's CEO, Robert Shapiro, Operation Privatize This! is launched in Berkeley, US in the form of a vegan pumpkin pie to the face of Douglas G. Watson, president and CEO of biotech giant Novartis. According to BBB Special Agent Tarte Classique, the pumpkin pie symbolizes the estimated 60 per cent of food on American tables for Thanksgiving which will contain

genetically-engineered products. At the same time, UC-Davis Chancellor Larry Vanderhoof receives a banana cream pie to the face, for the "strategic alliance" he has contracted with the other biotech giant, Monsanto. Agent Cow Pie remarks, "We speak pie to power, and send this epicurean treat to His Honor the Chancellor with love from the BBB."

>> November 28 >> Operation Cremate Monsanto