WTO riots in Seattle: 15 years ago

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After landing in the national consciousness with grunge and brief flashes of success with the Mariners and Sonics, Seattle closed out the '90s with the infamous World Trade Organization (WTO) riots, which plunged the city into chaos for a few days during its stint on the world stage.

Nov. 30 marks the 15th anniversary of the conference's first day, but peaceful protests began even before then.

The intent of the conference was to set a global agenda for trade negotiations into the new millennium. Tens of thousands of people representing different but broadly anti-globalization intersts converged on downtown Seattle, leading to several now-iconic standoffs with a militant-looking police force.

The protests led to 157 arrests of people who were later released and the resignation of Seattle Police Chief Norm Stamper.

A series of subsequent court decisions about the police response to the protests cost the city big.

A movie depicting the events, "Battle in Seattle," was released in 2008 and was filmed in Vancouver, British Columbia and Seattle. It starred Andre Benjamin (also known as Andre 3000), Ray Liotta, Charlize Theron, Woody Harrelson, Joshua Jackson, Channing Tatum and Michelle Rodriguez.

A basic timeline of events, according to [HistoryLink.org](http://www.historylink.org/):

* Oct. 29, 1999: Mayor Paul Schell writes a letter to Seattle business owners explaining the coming WTO meeting, its connected events, a description of a planned AFL-CIO march and an invitation to protesters to join the city in planning for permits and designated protest areas.  
  "We expect everything to flow peacefully during the event, but we are fully prepared to respond to emerging situations if need be," the letter read.
* Nov. 26, 1999: Gov. Gary Locke offers to send National Guard troops to Seattle to assist with crowd control. U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno also offers the help of federal officers. Newspaper reports indicate Schell declines both offers, but Schell later disputed that.
* Nov. 28, 1999: Trade officials from 125 member countries begin to land in Seattle. Two anti-WTO protests consisting of several hundred people occur downtown.
* Nov. 29, 1999: Three large demonstrations decry WTO policies. Thousands of protesters march through downtown Seattle, with several hundred dressed in bright green sea turtle costumes, deriding WTO "free trade" rules as harmful to the environment and animal welfare.  
  Several brief standoffs occur between police in riot gear and protester groups, but they end without incident.
* Nov. 30, 1999: Schell declares a state of emergency on the first official day of the WTO conference. Protesters clog city streets and shut down the opening WTO session, triggering police use of tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse the crowds.  
  More than 35,000 people march from an AFL-CIO labor rally at the Seattle Center to the downtown area.  
  Meanwhile, masked "anarchists" smash windows, spray graffiti and damage patrol cars.  
  Though activities remain mostly civil through the afternoon, WTO delegates are unable to move freely and Schell declares a state of emergency, which initiates the police response with tear gas, pepper spray and rubber bullets. Police ultimately push a great number of protesters into Capitol Hill, where confrontations continue through the night.
* Dec. 1, 1999: Seattle officials establish a "no-protest zone" in which 25 square blocks are guarded by police and National Guard and cordoned from anyone other than WTO participants, area residents, business owners, local employees and public safety personnel. The order is later revised to allow city officials and journalists.  
  Even people who live or work in the area are barred by police if they hold or wear anti-WTO signs.  
  A federal judge rejects a request from the ACLU to prohibit the city from enforcing such a zone.  
  Authorities arrest demonstrators who manage to reach Westlake Center (prohibited in the zone), some bystanders and at least one WTO delegate. President Bill Clinton arrives and meets with union and environmental leaders responsible for some of the peaceful protests.  
  As dusk falls, police again employ tear gas, rubber bullets and concussion bombs to scatter protesters from downtown streets.
* Dec. 2, 1999: Police abandon use of rubber bullets and tear gas as anti-WTO protests grow to include demonstrations against forceful police conduct and the "no-protest zone." Only two are arrested that day.  
    
  Clinton signs a treaty aimed at eliminating egregious forms of child labor and leaves Seattle.
* Dec. 3, 1999: Trade negotiations break down and delegates fail to reach an agreement on an agenda for the next round of negotiations. Disagreements between the richest countries regarding agricultural subsidies are a primary impetus for the failure.  
  Several thousand demonstrators march in a closing anti-WTO protest headed by the Teamsters union. Hundreds of people gather outside the Westin Hotel and King County Jail demanding the release of arrested protesters.  
  Demonstrators dance upon hearing the news of the negotiation breakdown.
* Dec. 6, 1999: Seattle Police Chief Norm Stamper announces his resignation, taking full responsibility for the WTO unrest. He serves his last day Feb. 18, 2000.

The events during the days of protests led to several court cases, among them:

* A Colville postal worker blinded during the protests received $105,000 from the city in 2002.
* The city settled with the 157 people arrested in 2004, paying out a total of $250,000.
* The Ninth Circut Court of Appeals upheld the city's "no-protest zone" in 2005, but also said the police went too far in their crackdown.
* A U.S. District Court jury ruled in 2007 that the city did not violate speech rights during the protests and crackdown, but violated due process rights. The city settled with a $1 million payout to protesters.