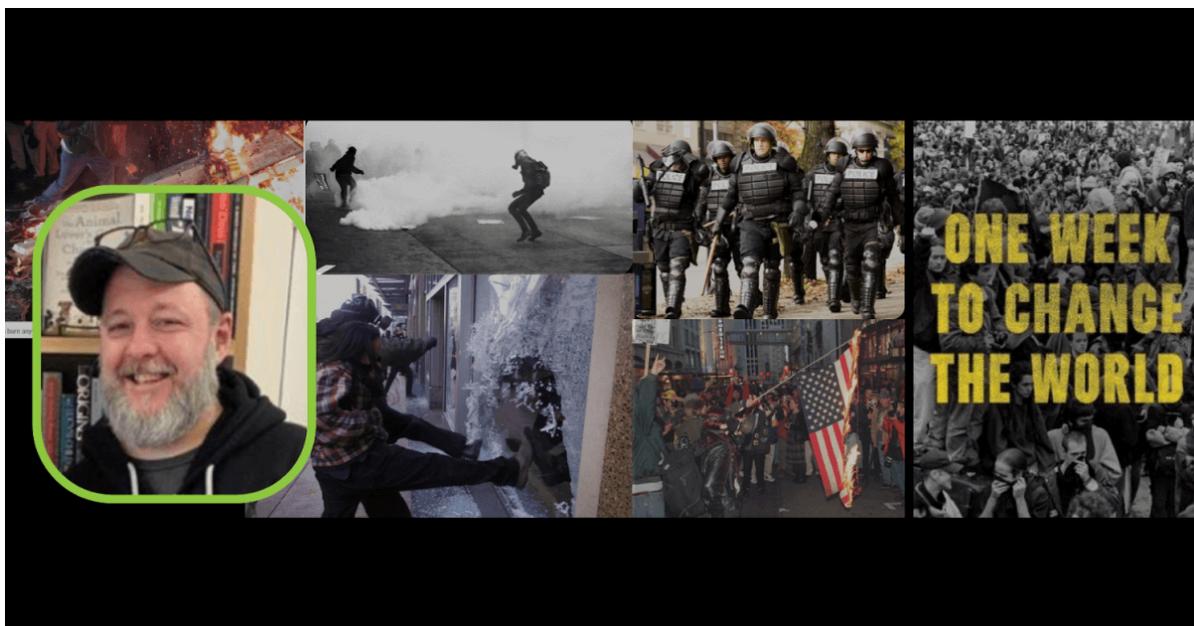


An Anti-Snitch Oral History of the Seattle WTO Protests

Agency speaks with former political prisoner Daniel McGowan about DW Gibson's book, "One Week to Change the World"

Panagioti Tsolkas & Daniel McGowan



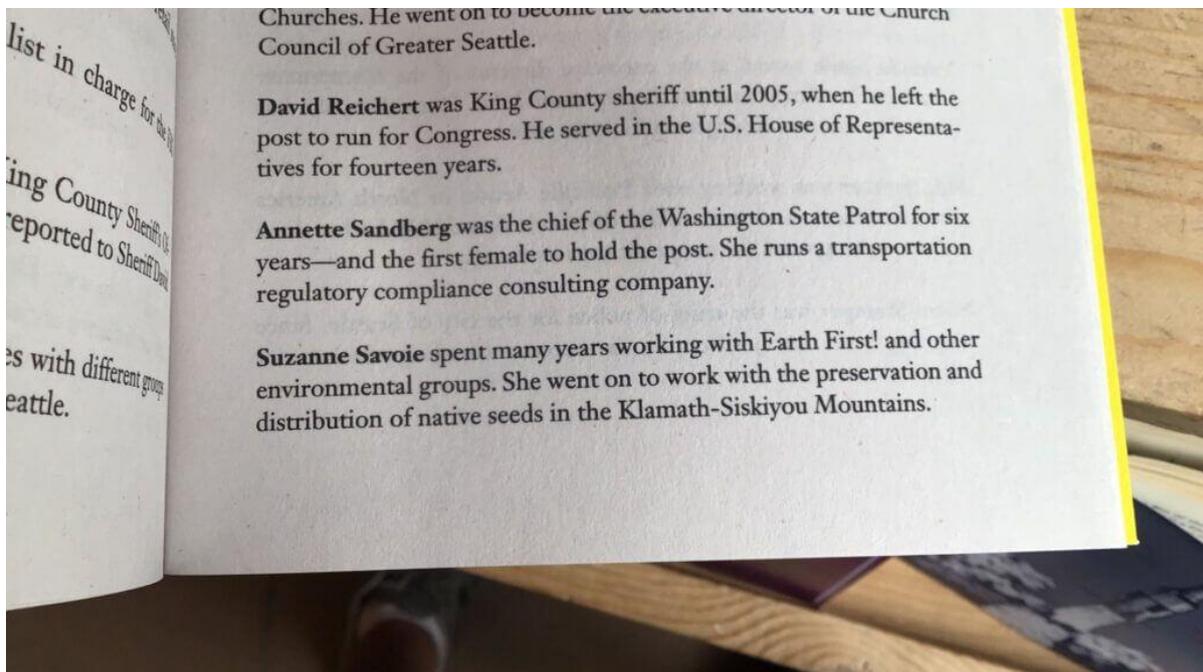
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Last month, publisher Simon & Schuster released what it called “the definitive history of Seattle’s 1999 World Trade Organization protests.” It includes 100 interviews, conducted by journalist DW Gibson, timed to hit the shelves in the lead up to the 25th anniversary of what some—mostly those of us who were out in the streets getting tear-gassed—still refer to with deep nostalgia as N30.

Gibson’s oral history projects have been compared to those of the late Studs Terkel, including his 2012 publication “Not Working” as a sort of unemployment-focused sequel to Terkel’s famous collection of interviews.

But there’s an aspect of Gibson’s new book, “One Week to Change the World” that might have Terkel—who was monitored by the FBI for 45 years and himself forced out of work via a McCarthy-era blacklist—rolling in his grave.

Gibson courted a known Green Scare snitch, Suzanne Savoie, as an interviewee, and then published her interview without acknowledging her role.



It’s a decision that’s ruffling the feathers of those who fought in the street battles of the late ‘90s and early 2000s anti-globalization summits, and with good reason.

During the Seattle protests, hundreds were scooped up in mass arrests, some facing serious charges. Most were released from jail, many—myself included—were never even charged.

How did we do it? By *refusing to cooperate*. Those of us caught up in the big sweeps packed the jails and courts, we refused to walk, refused to give names, and some of us refused to eat for days in confinement. Noncooperation was a fundamental principle we’d agreed upon en masse, because it resonated with our spirit of resistance, it amplified our solidarity, and because it was effective.

The state has always relied on fear, division, and despair to criminalize dissent. Solidarity has long been the best antidote. To provide a platform for an informant in a book about the November uprisings of Seattle '99—considering how much movement legal support and jail solidarity was a major part of that week—is a disservice to those seeking to understand such an important and formative event. Neglecting to mention Savoie's cooperation feels especially relevant in this moment as the U.S. and its police state are thrashing in the death throes of a falling empire: feeding far-right conspiracies and climate denial, rolling back basic rights like abortion access, condoning and funding a genocide in Gaza, etc. The hard lessons of the Green Scare are critical to remember and to pass along to the coming generation of activists and revolutionaries.

No, we should not wholly cede the story of the Seattle WTO protests to a journalist or a publisher who would overlook such a thing. So Agency is contributing another piece to the oral history, a sort of unsolicited chapter to the book, interviewing black bloc organizer, Green Scare defendant, and former political prisoner Daniel McGowan about what's up with this new book. We're hoping you'll join in the effort to raise the issue should the author or publisher come to your community promoting the book.

Though it was tempting to reminisce about experiencing N30 first hand, we didn't do much of that in the interview. So I'll offer a snip from "The Power Is Running: A memoir of N30," a favorite poetic narrative (no, not by McGowan, but perhaps someone just a stones throw from him) to set the mood a little here:

"...I cannot truly explain how it felt to taste ecstasy in every breath as the invincible forces of privilege and coercive power finally lost control, how it felt to stare down the world's most ruinous and abusive bullies and watch them blink, how it felt to fall in love with tens of thousands of people at once, to not know what would happen next, to become dangerous.

And that is a tragedy that haunts me as I write every one of these words. Because if somehow I could share with you what I felt for ten days in Seattle, you would never settle for anything less again. You would kick in your TV, run outside buck naked, tear up the freeway with your bare hands, flip tanks upside down, and dance with panda bears through the streets..."

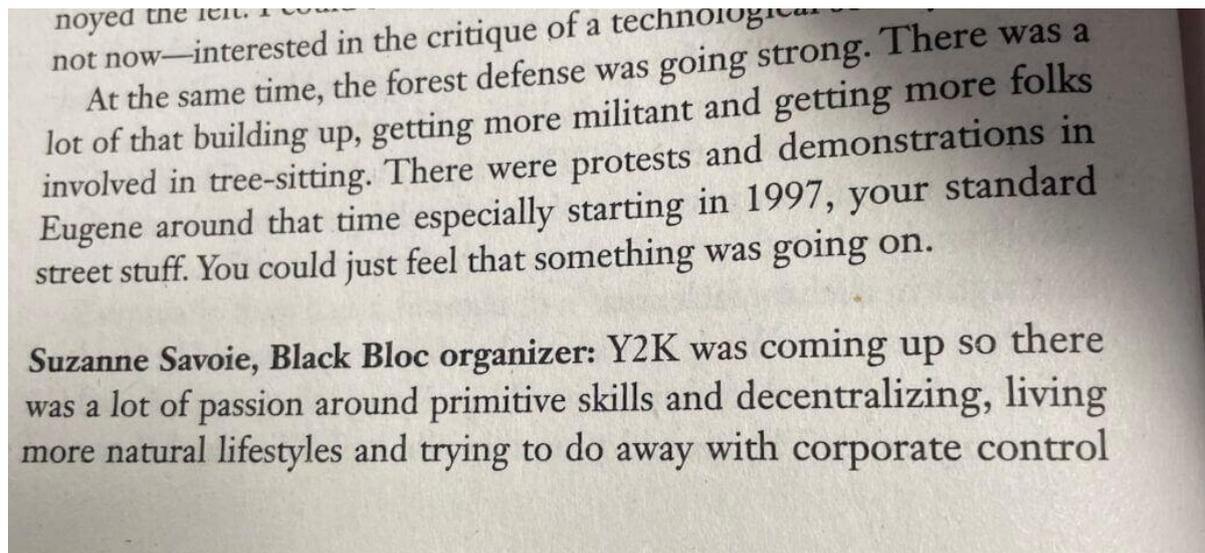
These days, McGowan isn't out at protests, but he's still in this movement. Very much so. He's particularly active in helping call attention to people facing serious charges for direct actions and supporting political prisoners from environmental and antifascist movements.

Here's what he had to say:

Panagioti Tsolkas: You have a concern with the new anthology book on the Seattle WTO protests, "One Week to Change the World". Tell me about it.

Daniel McGowan: Well, I noticed online that the book came out, and spoke with a friend who had gotten the book. I asked them if the black bloc was included. They

opened it up and immediately sent me screen shots. We were both flabbergasted by the inclusion of Suzanne Savoie.



PT: Who is Suzanne Savoie, and why do you think she shouldn't have a platform in this book?

DM: She was a codefendant of mine—someone who cooperated with the state against me and ten or so other people. Because of cooperation by her and others in the case, I was sentenced in 2007 to seven years in federal prison.

It was interesting to see the book because it's an oral history, so it weaves together a bunch of voices from the protests and gives bios for those interviews. It was really shocking to me, first that she was selected and, second, that her bio said *nothing* about the Operation Backfire case. It just mentioned her Earth First! activism and where she lives.

We were close friends. We did actions together in the Northwest and California. In order to get less time in prison, she told the government personal things about me. I was able to read her statement while preparing my defense in the case. Those details were sealed when she accepted her plea, but it was referred to in public court hearings. There's no denying it.

She has some sympathizers that've tried to help recover her reputation. There's one story that Suzanne was taken into a helicopter and threatened with being thrown out of it if she didn't cooperate. That actually happened in Chile under Pinochet, but there's no evidence of it happening here, not in this case.

I got 84 months, Suzanne got about 50 months. She spent a little less time in prison, but there's also a cost of betrayal.

I don't think that people who cooperated in this case should ever be accepted as part of the movement again because they've shown very harmful self-centered behavior. I'm not in charge of what people do with their personal lives, but these people are not

movement assets. They've shown they're not trustworthy. I don't know exactly what else she's involved with, but I know she's gotten push back from people who don't want to work with her in activist circles.

PT: Do you think this is an attempt to make in-roads towards movement credibility and activist organizing?

DM: Possibly. We saw this with snitch Chelsea Gerlach participating in the *Burn Wild* podcast, bizarrely having lunch with an FBI agent from the Backfire case.

Last year Savoie presented at an event and there was a protest against her. Where she lives, her involvement is contested. That should be the case with her getting a voice in this book as a movement representative.



She's listed as a black bloc organizer during the '99 WTO meetings. Her cooperation included snitching on people for actions that happened during those protests, but the book doesn't mention that she told the government the identity of people in the black bloc. Isn't that relevant to her credibility? I was really surprised that the journalist who compiled the book wouldn't consider that.

He said he just saw her speaking in a documentary and sought her out.

PT: So you've been in touch with the editor, DW Gibson?

DM: It took some effort, but yeah. I went to his website, he didn't have an email there, so I tweeted at him. He didn't reply. He actually blocked me.

Then I heard there was a disruption at his event in Chicago by someone angry about Savoie's voice claiming to represent anarchists in the book.

He was also participating in a virtual event in San Francisco organized by people from City Lights Publishing and a Direct Action Network (DAN) member featured in the book, David Solnit. [DAN is the group that coordinated citywide street blockades in Seattle.]

I tried to reach out again before that event, without success. Apparently the chat in the event was full of criticisms about including Savoie too.

After that he asked to be put in touch with me to discuss this. We exchanged emails and he sent me a copy of the book.

Over email, I asked him if he saw "If A Tree Falls" where there's literally a video of me smashing a window in Seattle during the WTO, and why he didn't reach out to me.

The irony of this is that the only reason I'm comfortable talking about this is because she and others told the government what had happened. There's not many people who can do it, I mean talk about being inside the black bloc, accurately and responsibly. Why choose a snitch?

PT: Did he know Suzanne had testified against other activists?

DM: Gibson's book says Suzanne was an organizer of the WTO black bloc, but she was just one member of one black bloc group among multiple.

People were confused about why we broke windows, so our group wrote a communique about it. Sure, she was part of that, but it doesn't mean it's appropriate to give her a voice in telling the story. Not after what she did.

Gibson compartmentalized it. He knew about her history but says he viewed it as irrelevant. He engaged in a theoretical exercise, defending his decision by saying the book is about the WTO, not about the ELF or Operation Backfire.

But why would she be involved in a project like this without having that crucial detail about her life disclosed, not even in her bio?

PT: It's kinda like presenting the interviews with cops in the book without saying they work for a police department.

DM: It's not that I need to agree with everything or everyone in the book. John Zerzan is in there being called a black bloc organizer—he wasn't. Medea Benjamin is in there and she called for the black bloc to be arrested. That's annoying. But to me, Suzanne's presence represents an even more serious, more inappropriate type of behavior.

She had the capacity to be a non-cooperating defendant and she chose otherwise. It's not a race to the bottom the second the hammer drops.

You know, for five years after Seattle I never talked to another soul about it. I'm one of the few people who were arrested in the Green Scare who didn't cooperate. I feel like a crazy person trying to explain it sometimes. But I feel strongly that accepting

↻ Daniel McGowan reposted



the tiny raccoon

@thetinyraccoon



DW Gibson's book event disrupted in Chicago tonight. He interviewed Suzanne Savoie- a snitch in Operation Backfire case for his book on 1999 WTO protests.



9:13 PM · Jul 23, 2024 · **2,036** Views



her as a movement voice shows other activists that there's no cost to throwing other people in your movement under the bus to lighten your sentence. If you turn state's evidence, you don't get to come back to the movement that you betrayed. It's actually a relatively small price to pay, which is even more reason we need to take it seriously, to uphold it.

I say: "Go live your life, have your farm, your family, your friends." But she should know that it's not okay to speak as a movement representative, especially not on behalf of direct actions she sent people to prison over. She's not being welcomed back into the movement. Maybe she thinks it's been long enough or that people won't remember. I don't know. But I think doing this interview shows she has some real entitlement issues.

Why would she go there? She's talking about people she ratted out! That cooperation with the state helped put others in prison, it pushed a friend and codefendant (Avalon) to commit suicide in jail.

PT: What was your experience in Seattle like? If you had been invited to contribute to the book, what would you have said?

DM: Look, I didn't need to be in the book, but that week in Seattle was a major moment in my life. It inspired the hell out of me. I could have put Gibson in touch with multiple people who would have explained the things Savoie covered, and the context surrounding it, without leaving an appearance of acceptance for her decision to testify for the state.

I spoke with an organizer from the DAN who was also frustrated with the book because it talked to so many NGOs, cops, and politicians. There were some DAN members, but mostly NGO people, like Kevin Danaher, fronting like they're militant.

Doesn't mean I don't appreciate some aspects of the book. But I want people to know about Savoie, so they can read it knowing Gibson opted to include her, and let that shape their reading experience and their confidence in what's being told of such an important moment in history.

It would be helpful if Savoie's bio was edited to reflect her role in the prosecution of environmental activists like myself and others.

I intend to keep talking about this with Gibson. He's expressed that he is considering making corrections to future editions of the book.

PT: Now that the book is out, how do you think people should engage with it?

DM: Well, I thought what happened in Chicago was hilarious and important. And it was great to see people speak up during the City Lights event too.

I know of at least three bookstores that had received copies to sell and returned them after learning about Savoie's inclusion, Burning Books in Buffalo; Firestorm in Asheville; Red Emma's in Baltimore. Five other movement bookstores have said they refused to stock it too: Left Bank Books, Lucy Parsons Center; Mayday Books, Making Worlds, and Bluestockings.

I think that's a good start for showing we're part of a movement that still takes solidarity seriously.

Editor's Note: Daniel McGowan asked that it be noted that DW Gibson has formally apologized both to him in subsequent conversations and at public events. Gibson has also stated his commitment to amend Savoie's bio in potential future editions of the book. We commend him for these efforts and want to underscore that this an example of how solidarity not only matters, it works! —Agency Editors

Authors

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Panagioti Tsolkas is a former editor of the Earth First! Journal, co-founder of Fight Toxic Prisons (fight-toxic-prisons.org) and a community organizer who has been published and cited in numerous publications and books. He lives on a small farm in Florida with his partner and two children.

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