

**Interviewee: Bill Aal**

**Affiliation: People for Fair Trade/Network Opposed to WTO**

**Interviewer: Miguel Bocanegra**

**Date of interview: 11 November, 2000**

**Interview Summary:**

Bill Aal (People for Fair Trade/NO2WTO) became involved with the WTO protest organizing efforts because of his concerns about adverse global effects of biotechnology and genetic engineering. He discusses the divisions in ideology between members of People for Fair Trade before November 30. Some members, he explains, believed that targeting a broad audience would leave out many minority activists. Some wanted to reform the WTO while others wanted more revolutionary changes. The overall goal of People for Fair Trade, says Aal, was to provide a central point for the non-governmental organizations coming from out of town and to coalesce these talents to make a large impact on Seattle and the national scene with the protests. However, the group struggled to retain control over some of the events when out-of-town groups came into the picture. While Aal feels that People for Fair Trade could have better used the talents of the Seattle groups, he says protestors successfully discredited the WTO, influenced the younger generations, and exposed police brutality.



**MB**

This is Miguel Bocanegra. I'm here with Bill Aal. This is a phone interview. It is November 11, 2000, about 12:00 noon. So, Bill Aal, can you explain kind of some of your preliminary involvement and talk about your title within that, as far as being involved with the WTO protest. Give a short bio of yourself, and then also talk about some of the stuff that led up to your involvement and your group's involvement in the WTO protest.

**BA**

Okay. Well, although I eventually ended up working for People for Fair Trade in August through the end of December, I initially got involved in the WTO organizing protests as an activist in Seattle representing two groups, the Global Economy Working Group of the Church Council of Greater Seattle and the Washington Biotechnology Action Council which does citizen grassroots efforts trying to raise awareness around the issues of biotechnology but also genetic engineering of plants and animals and human genetics issues. And we saw, at the time, that globalization was directly impacting our issues around biotechnology because of the role of the World Trade Organization and the GATT and before that in intellectual property rights. So we saw that since the WTO was coming to Seattle, we should get together with people and see what they were up to, to see how we could organize both conferences and

protests against the way globalization was taking rights away from indigenous peoples on the one hand and locking up the global commons in general. So, for the first couple of months I was involved in local organizing activities with other organizations in Seattle, trying to lay the groundwork for what would eventually become the protests.

**MB**

This was in the summer?

**BA**

This was actually in February, March and April, leading up to the summer. As our conversations continued and Sally Soriano, representing the Washington Trade Campaign and the Citizens Trade Campaign, mentioned that CTC was likely to be able to provide a resource base for the IGO organizing around the WTO. We welcomed Mike Dolan into town when he came. And over that course of the next several months, we had a lot of back-and-forth between ('we' being me and Mike Dolan and the people on this organizing committee of the local folks) went back and forth about the role of CTC and the role of the local organizations. Actually I was kind of disapproving of the way CTC was coming into town. But, at the same time, they were definitely doing a lot of important work and were promising to provide resources for us to be able to do some joint things together.

**MB**

What were some of the conflicts?

**BA**

How much local control there would be over the People for Fair Trade organization as it began to evolve, whether there should be a fairly vocal and organized local group of NGOs that took positions at Seattle. That was one range of things. Another piece, which wasn't really to do directly with CTC except as their Washington, D.C. position impacts things, was the inclusion of people of color, and poor people, and the actual organizing efforts as opposed to on the streets. Things like that, and the role in terms of the actual movement, building on the ground of outside groups such as CTC and other Washington, D.C.-based organizations, in what would eventually unfold.

**MB**

Did you say what CTC was?

**BA**

Oh, sure, the Citizens Trade Campaign which is based in Washington, D.C. and loosely affiliated with the whole trade network that's around public citizens. So, at the same time they provided a real commitment of resources and possibilities for people to come together. And throughout the spring and summer, as we all began to meet together, it became pretty clear that they had the most possibilities of that, so an office started to get formed. At some point in late August the office had already been open a month. Actually, they helped open the physical space, had the keys, and so on, and helped to get some furniture for the first round of office space in that 4th Avenue space that eventually became People for Fair Trade. There was a computer person who was trying to pull together the networks and the Web stuff and

telecommunications who eventually ended up having personal and political conflicts with Mike Dolan and pretty much everybody else in that office, and eventually ended up leaving. That was in August, and at that point I was asked to come in and head up the technology efforts, which is a fit for me because I've been a computer person and a consultant for 16 or 17 years in an earlier life of mine. So, anyway, I decided to join the staff of People for Fair Trade as it was unfolding, as much to be able to try to impact some of the questions around race and class as to do the technical part.

**MB**

What were some of the discussions around the race and class issues with the technology part?

**BA**

Well, from the get-go, even with organizations who were trying to come to the table in Seattle originally, they were environmental organizations, some Labor involvement but not a lot. In that formation they would show up at the table, but they were doing their own thing. And some community organizations, but from the get-go both our local organizing efforts and the way the People for Fair Trade Office was shaping up was pretty much a white and middle-class thing. There was only one staff member out of the five that was a woman of color, Lydia Cabasco. And the way the office campaign was being organized, was to try to get the word out to as many people as possible and in their mind it didn't matter what class or creed they were, but by taking that stance, at least in my opinion and some of the other people around Seattle, it ignored the particular organizing challenges that people would have organizing with communities of color and poor people in general. So, different people would raise that within the context of the office or people coming into the office, and it was like, "Oh, no, that's not the most important thing. The most important thing is to get out numbers, so you don't want to start dividing up turf, you want to just appeal to the broad masses. Well, when you do that, your message is often made bland and aimed at the middle class as opposed to poor people, and working people and people of color as a group kind of get left out of the picture. That's my opinion about that. The conversations were raised several times and again. "We run campaigns. We're not doing community organizing," was sort of the response from Mike Dolan.

**MB**

So the role of the People for Fair Trade was to organize the local community?

**BA**

Well, it was two-fold. It was to provide a focal point for the NGOs who were coming to town who were in protest and to help organize venues and speaking opportunities, and so on. The second role, not necessarily in order of importance, was to make as large an impact on the local and national scene as possible from Seattle. So it was sort of a multiple purpose. The first purpose of providing venues was pretty well served in terms of trying to find different spaces for groups to come in that were doing liaisoning with the agriculture people and helping them to identify where and how they would do their work, helping the women's organizers who came from out of town to organize a

Women's Day, and so on. And in addition, to provide a focal point for some of the alternative media, such as the Hightower Show and the Amy Goodman Show, Democracy Now, and so on. We helped to provide the infrastructure for some of the work that they were doing.

So that part went pretty well with sort of logistical assistance. The community work also went well and in certain ways there were neighborhood groups that got formed all around the city and some of those continued to meet even after the WTO events ended. Lydia Cabasco in particular, but also some of the other people in the office did a pretty amazing job of hooking up with young people and the young people often did their own organizing on their own, but it led to a pretty solid network of folks who then did a march during the WTO independently, which was great.

And then there was a lot of media work that got done to lay the groundwork for when the Washington, D.C. folks came in at the end of this period, but we pretty much - Jeremy Madsen in particular but other people in the office as well, and Sally Soriano - really did an amazing job on the local and regional media in terms of countering the official WTO press work that was going on. In a lot of ways, we won that battle - that was from my perspective.

So, the office was a really busy place. There were a lot of different things that were going on and it was pretty amazing considering there were only five paid staff and then one or two people who were incredibly dedicated volunteers, and then tens and hundreds of us volunteers who came into the process as things developed. Paul Lurch and Terry Hasselwait did amazing jobs in their different roles. Terry first is the volunteer coordinator, and then Paul, I believe, stepped in towards the very end to help split up that job, but they really helped to get out many more people than the paid staff could have gotten out.

The office served as a hub for that, and for people who wanted to get materials to speak, and there were computer resources that we assembled from basically nothing. We maybe put in a couple of thousand dollars into computer resources that we actually bought, and they got donated computers and a lot of donated services from people like Micah Anderson and Elijah Saxon and others who helped to set up the office network. I believe we actually ended up getting free DSL - high-speed Internet connection - through Speakeasy. So we were able to leverage a fairly small investment into a - I'm not going to say highly efficient office on the computer side - but definitely a functioning one that really got the job done in terms of being able to let all the staff and volunteers do the work they needed to do.

**MB**

As far as the coalition work between Labor and the direct action folks, how was that functioning?

BA

Well, that . . . Let's see how I would want to answer that . . . I think that's multiple layers of questions. At the local level there was a strong identification of Labor with what we were doing. They were weaving now two fronts. There was the Nongovernmental Organization Coalition that was loosely affiliated with People for Fair Trade and the monthly meeting. There was the Direct Action Network, which people were organizing regionally and nationally by themselves, and there was Labor -and then there were the religious groups that sort of were in that too. From my standpoint, at the local level there was a lot of moral support and interactive stuff that was going on at the grassroots level between some of the Labor organizers and the nongovernmental organizations. Ron Judd from the beginning was committed to putting a lot of people on the streets and cooperating wherever they could from their political and legal positions. That was one level.

Then there was the national level where groups like the Ruckus Society, which had a fairly high profile but actually didn't do a lot of the grassroots organizing, they provided some tools for people and some high publicity events, but they were sort of at a distance from the actual Direct Action Network organizing. But they and the D.C. crowd of Labor and environmental and whatever, they all would meet and talk about what should happen in Seattle too.

But those two efforts were really separated, and in particular Labor on the national level and at all the national levels, both the Labor Council and the Teamsters and UAW or the Steelworkers, rather, had different politics and needs than the local groups. So I think (and I wasn't in the center of this, but I sure saw the fallout) Ron Judd really projected a much higher profile for Labor, even that what it had, and lost at the national level to get that kind of support. So, it was a push-pull around Labor. I think the Labor people at the national level in the beginning were very afraid of what the Direct Action Network and other direct action groups might do that would embarrass them or go against their high visibility on the Thursday.

So, there were a lot of things that were going on there that I wasn't privy to. But when we were in the office talking about what we were going to be doing, and in my networking with organizations in Seattle we just noticed that Labor sentiments were with us, especially locally, and some of the particular locals around the country were more radical... With us, again being this NGO effort, which was separate from the Direct Action Network efforts, but parallel. But those sentiments didn't translate into a tight coalition. And at the meetings that we had when we had national representation from Labor towards the end -and the NGOs and the Direct Action Network -there was always an underlying tension about what Labor could do, what Labor wanted to do, and what kind of control they wanted to have over what Thursday would look like, so they wouldn't get overshadowed by events out of their control - in their mind out of their control.

So that was my observation, and again, that wasn't my job responsibility to work with them, but we certainly saw evidence of that as time went on.

**MB**

Yeah. One of the internal conflicts that I have heard about is the discussion between naming the organization "The People for Fair Trade" or the "NO2WTO" group. Can you talk a little bit about that discussion, and what was behind that?

**BA**

It was a very frustrating experience. I was in at most of the meetings in the coalition which was trying to figure this out. I can't remember if it was March or April, and I won't try to go into all the specific details because my memory is too vague - but when we were trying to come up with a name for this loose coalition of groups that were including people who were very radical, anti-capitalist forces like People's Assembly folks, like not necessarily people who belong to political organizations but who had the sentiments that were like, "This isn't just about reforming the WTO. No, we have to stop world corporate capitalism and the WTO is a manifestation of it."

So on the other hand there were people who represented the trade campaigns and mainstream environmentalists and others who felt like you can't be oppositional, you have to be for something, so it should be, "We're for fair trade."

Those people - and I would include myself, especially at the beginning - believed that the issue is capitalism and its manifestations through this globalization process were saying, "There is no such thing as fair trade in a world that is filled with inequalities. We need to totally revamp how we do everything." So the call for fair trade seemed to be copping out. So that were the sort of a political/ideological differences that people had at the beginning. And again I can't ... somebody else probably has a better recollection of the details of how these various meetings unfolded, but the NO2WTO contingent held the day for a meeting and then people would come from groups like the AFSC to the next general meeting and turn over the decision and a new consensus process, or pseudo-consensus process that took many, many hours away from the organizing efforts that we needed to be doing.

This went on for 2 or 3 months, until finally the resolution was to call the organization or really loose coalition that wasn't an organization, both things, "People for Fair Trade/NO2WTO," so it was an attempt to compromise which in the long term basically ended up becoming People for Fair Trade because it's too long a name.

People for Fair Trade was in the beginning, and the people who were more centrist in their approach were the ones who had access to the phones and the resources for putting together flyers and all that stuff. So while they

attempted occasionally to throw out the “NO2WTO” as a secondary name, the People for Fair Trade name stuck, at least that’s my view of it. And what that ... that was really a false issue and it divided the community up for, in my opinion, for two or three months, critical months, in which we could have actually created a Seattle force that didn’t have to be unified on all its politics but actually would be an expression of what was going on in Seattle, which would have made a counterbalance to the outside groups coming in. It made it really impossible since there was no political unity to provide a counterbalance to the tendency of, say, the Citizens Trade Campaign and the labor unions from outside and the environmental groups from outside coming in and sort of claiming control over the events, which may be as it should be, but that two- or three-month period where the name was the main topic of discussion at these general meetings really screwed up political unity in Seattle around what should happen, and what kind of messages should go out, and so on.

And as a result there was no unified voice in Seattle from the Seattle groups that could have built towards longer efforts of organizing. So that’s, I think, it was a lesson I learned that sometimes battling over a name is a red herring, if you will, and there were more substantial things that we could have done with that time. But that’s a lesson learned. And it was exploited, and I think that disunity was exploited by the outsiders.

**MB**

In what way?

**BA**

Because it was, when people said, “Well, we can’t have this. We have to go and form an office and do all this stuff and you guys are spending time in a political discussion that isn’t going to go anywhere. We’re not going to have a coordinating council that is made up of groups, where there’s going to be People for Fair Trade and it’s going to be run by CTC staffers or people who are hired by CTC. We’ll have this loose coordinating council that eventually fizzled away, as it had no political power or power to impact what was going on in the office. So there wasn’t any real use for it.

So, the actual ability to make decisions as a coalition of local groups and national groups faded, and the national groups which are used to meeting in D.C. and have got their shit together, in their mind, would come up with what the national messages were and what the marches were going to be about, and it led to confusion after the WTO ended as to how people were going to work together. To this day there have been at least two, if not three, efforts to try and bring different groups or organization to get around the WTO together locally in Seattle that have fallen apart. I think part of it is sort of the legacy of our not having come into serious political discussions before the WTO, and that’s happened, so it was really hard for us to pull back together, even though there are various people who have tried. So that is a particular manifestation in the Seattle area. Nationally, what it meant was the messages that were to

the media and to the world outside of Seattle and into the country were coming from the D.C. groups and the direct action group, which didn't leave a Northwest voice.

So, anyway, I'll stop being rhetorical about it, but that was definitely an impact. And I think it weakened our ability to do outreaching, although we did some incredible outreach since we did end up having a lot of fragmentation of effort. That sort of - now, we're talking April, May, maybe June timeframe which was critical in getting people outside of the converted group, you know, people who were already down on the WTO struggle. We lost some precious time. So, anyway, that's enough about that.

**MB**

Yes. So what were the successes of the coalition, because I know it wasn't all conflict or fighting. I think it's important to pull out those elements. I want to also, if you could touch on some of the ways that these groups came together and did kind of provide in some ways a unified voice or organized successfully.

**BA**

Okay. Well, there were a lot of successes. Some of the successes we couldn't take credit for because they were happenstances, but some that we could. The first one is that we did win the media battle, at least in Seattle, around what the issues were and we established that the official WTO group didn't have a lot of credibility. A lot of that work was done by Sally Soriano and Jeremy Madsen and other people in the various groups that were part of this People for Fair Trade coalition: Carleen O'Dell and her group and so on. So, that was the first and very major success. The second was the work that Lydia Cabasco and other people did around the community colleges and high schools, in particular, with the Seattle Young People's Project and some other groups. I really feel like there was an amazing response on the part of the young people and a lot of that was coming from the support that Lydia got from other people to do in her crew -I'm sure you've talked to her, so I don't need to detail who that is- in getting the word out and developing popular education exercises. So, from Vancouver all the way down to Olympia and to San Francisco people know Lydia's name and remember People for Fair Trade and they all came up to Seattle to kick some butt and it was great. I think that all sort of led to a lot of youth development and leadership in the city and around the region. So, that was one thing.

The second thing was that environmentalist, Labor, direct action people actually saw that we could work together, and to some extent community folks. So, globalization isn't an abstraction any more to anybody who is doing political work in Seattle. I would say that a major accomplishment was realizing that we may have different decisions about what it means, but there is a major global impact on our work. And we saw that how if we worked in the environmental movement we can't leave the Labor and community components out. If we worked in the community, it isn't just about



community control, it's about trying to maintain control in a global context. So, that was happening, but I think that the work that we did together and the conversations that we had while doing the work really led to a higher awareness on all of our parts of our interconnected struggle.

Thirdly, there was a lot of initiatives that have led to further organizing in Seattle. One of them is around technology stuff and the nexus of the Independent Media Center and some of the people who do computer-related work in Seattle, and I'm including myself in that, we're beginning to network together and try to put together tool kits for organizing efforts, both here in Seattle and around the country. So, that's a major plus that those kinds of relationships were forged in the heat of the WTO. So, we know how each other works under stress, we can see where we fall out when the chips come down and it makes for better relations. So, that's another major positive impact.

Fourthly, around the issues of police brutality that happened- a lot of folks who were young activists and environmentalists and Labor people who for the most part were white and educated (not exclusively) who ended up in jail, and those who were beaten up on the streets, began to realize what the extent of police brutality was in this city and what privilege we thought we had rapidly evaporates. I think that makes it more easy to make coalitions around police violence for communities of color and homeless people. And you can see the impact of some of that organizing in some coalitions like People's Coalition for Justice and other groups that started before and had independent origins but certainly I think have been fueled by the energy that came out of the WTO protesters having gotten their heads beat up. So, I think people learned a few lessons there and that they're not immune to this police state that folks of color often experience in the United States.

**MB** Can you hold on one second? (changes tape)

**BA** So, I just want to say -we may be wrapping up on your end anyway- but, I need to get off about in five or ten minutes

**MB** Sure, sure. Can you talk a little bit about some of the stuff that happened around the internet? I know that you're working on that end of the People for Fair Trade

**BA** Well, we worked on developing a website -I won't go into all the ins and outs of the struggle to get it under the People for Fair Trade's control, there's all sorts of attempts to be a coalition with various groups. We had a lot of support from One Northwest which supports environmental computer networking and also from folks as far away as Vancouver, British Columbia and internationally to set up a website that maintained a lot of the core information for where things were going to happen, maintaining a schedule of

events. So, there was a lot of awareness that got generated not just from our website but from several other websites that were oriented towards direct action or towards specific environmental issues. The net result, if you'll excuse the pun, was that there was a lot of different information and communication that was available through the internet that wasn't available and wouldn't have been available even three years before. So, a lot of people were able to get both general information about the World Trade Organization and the problems that it has created for the planet and for our people as well as specific organizing opportunities. "Hey, I'm going to do such and such on such and such a date. Who else is interested?" So, those kinds of things were able to happen.

Flyers were passed around the internet left and right so that people in Ohio and Vancouver and Florida were able to use the same flyers to let people know what was going on in Seattle and why the WTO was a target. So, it became a mode of not just communication but of passing finished work around so that people didn't have to recreate the same material over and over again. That was a plus.

I think another aspect of this was, because there was a lot of open communication about what was going on, the intelligence authorities and the police authorities were also able to monitor some of our activities that were open. I'm not talking about deep surveillance, but we know that our website and other websites were watched by the various police forces around. It makes it really mystifying to me why they could say "we didn't know what was going to happen" because much of what we were talking about was broadcast. I think, without going into a lot of detail, those kinds of police surveillance and intelligence surveillance continued and deepened for the A16 events for work that we did with the steel workers around the Kaiser Aluminum strike in later months. So that the police and other intelligence units learned that we were using it as an organizing tool and both tried to disrupt our activities sometimes with misinformation but also just tried to find out what we were doing. So, we need to think about that for the future. They learned a lot about how we do things from the internet, we need to be smarter about how we use it.

But again on the positive note, a lot of people who in the past might have had not enough money to put out fifty flyers or a hundred flyers around town were able to use the internet to communicate their message very rapidly and very efficiently, whether it was school students or direct action people who were traveling up and down the coast. So, that was another plus. And then, a lot of people who were mobile -who were traveling by car or hitch hiking or by bus or whatever from one part of the country to another- could always be reached through email. So, it made coordination between people from very different parts the country possible really efficiently. And there were people who met only on the internet, from India or from Malaysia who would meet on the

streets and say “oh, you’re such and such!” That happened to me a couple times. They established a basis of working through this internet connection. I don’t know if that’s helpful.

**MB**

Yeah, definitely. So, are there any last comments you’d like to make?

**BA**

I think that in spite of the contradictions the office works incredibly well to provide a basis of organizing efforts for all of the various groups that were coming to town. We didn’t do it by ourselves, but we did an amazing amount of work. And all hats of to the all the people - Jeremy Simer, Mike Gotfried and Lydia and myself and Jeremy Madsen and Mike Dolan- for providing a basis for folks to come in to do some amazing work. I guess that’s the last thing I’d say.

**MB**

Thanks a lot, I appreciate taking out your time.

**End of Interview**

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