

Interviewees: Miguel Bocanegra (MB), Randy Nunez (RN)

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Interview Summary:

In this interview, Miguel Bocanegra and Randy Nunez explain their decision to organize MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan) around the WTO after meeting with Lydia Cabasco at the WTO headquarters. Bocanegra describes the similarities between NAFTA and the WTO and details how MEChA used the image of the Zapatistas fighting against globalization in Southern Mexico to mobilize Chicano and Mexican students at the University of Washington. Bocanegra comments on the important role that organized labor played in the protests by providing momentum and support for direct action. Bocanegra also discusses the general lack of outreach to people of color and the fact that MEChA was the only visible student group of color involved in the protests.



MG How and why did you guys get involved in WTO globalization?

MB Well, there are different ways that I got involved. I heard about it through the central organizer, Lydia Cabasco, downtown. She was organizing through the WTO headquarters, and we had a few meetings with her in the summer. And she was trying to organize people of color in the Seattle area. We had a few meetings with her, but then what happened is that we decided to organize. I had met Randy, and I knew he was coming over to the University of Washington, and we had talked on the phone a couple of times during the summer trying to coordinate some stuff, because he's the National Chair - he was the Regional Chair at the time. So, we were coordinating stuff, and we ended up organizing MEChA at the University of Washington and then on the region around the WTO. So we originally got involved through the WTO headquarters downtown. I don't know exactly who's running it, Lydia Cabasco, and then organizing people within MEChA, to organize ourselves.

MG Is that kind of the same reason . . .

RN Right.

MG You were the Regional Chair?

RN Right. I became familiar with the idea of the demonstrations at the beginning of the summer. At the time, there were national student organizations trying to develop some kind of alliance where it brings in a lot of national progressive student organizations that were trying to develop alliances. At the same time, there were organizations talking about the demonstrations and trying to encourage our group to be part of the demonstrations. I was relaying that information to our region and trying to develop basically actions for the WTO. So we had a lot of information just basically being relayed and work that people were already doing.

MG What did you guys do to mobilize people?

MB On a regional level, we organized people around the issue of NAFTA and the Zapatistas. Since NAFTA had been passed in 1994 under the guise of neo-liberal economic policy, the concepts of free trade, the WTO represented this same passing of NAFTA -- not just between the North American continent, but in the world. So we tried to relate the specific relations between Mexico and the WTO free trade, and we did that through the image of the Zapatistas, which is the national liberation army going on in Southern Mexico. So we used their image as a way to organize a rallying point with Chicano and Mexican students here.

MG So you were primarily trying to mobilize Chicano and Mexican students.

MB Yes.

MG Did you guys have any past experience with civil disobedience or mass demonstration?

RN Well, myself, of course, not at that scale and not to the point where it got violent and bad with cops. I've been in demonstrations in smaller margins, but not at that scale. I think most people weren't expecting it to be that size.

MB I'd never participated in any direct action stuff like that, or anything that was met with such strong force by the police. I've been in protests that were a lot bigger than that, demonstrations and rallies that were bigger than the WTO, but I've never been in a rally that was actually forceful and made the demands and the direct action that the students and then labor took alone.

MG Did you guys work with anyone in order to globalize or to plan your participation in the protest?

MB We were working kind of autonomously. What happened is that one of the MEChA members, Teresa Mosqueda was going to meetings with the WTO student group here on campus, and she was relaying information to us about what was going on. But we were working pretty much autonomously, so

during the actual rally, we had our own peacekeepers and our own kind of structure outside of what the students were doing themselves. But we looked like a group within a group.

MG So did you guys march with the students downtown?

MB Yes.

MG And then you guys participated in the rally and then the march downtown?

MB Yes.

MG Did you guys have a relationship with organized Labor?

MB Not organized Labor. I have ties with LELO and stuff like that, but I don't have any relationship with organized Labor.

MG What was your opinion of how they organized and what their situation was?

MB I thought it was really good. I thought they provided a really strong background for the people that were participating in direct action. What they ended up doing was providing a momentum and a community to support the direct action people. Even though Labor didn't take a direct kind of stance, they didn't come out and plan direct actions themselves, I think them being there provided momentum for the rallies and stuff. I think it freaked out the police to see so many people, even though for the amount of people that were there, most of them were not participating in direct action. It really provided momentum for the people who were participating in direct action. It provided kind of an audience and participants, and the police were overwhelmed just in numbers.

MG What were the rest of your activities through the week? You guys were representatives of MEChA for the entire week basically. Did you participate every day?

MB As a group we went once, on the 30th.

MG Did you guys participate in any more protests or go downtown?

MB As individuals, yeah, I went to the Labor rally that was later that week, I think it was on a Friday. I went to that. That was intense. But that was the only thing.

RN Our group had a chance to get different delegates to come speak over here on campus and so they kind of provided an alternative, a different perspective

with what was going on and a critique. That was something that we tried to pay attention to.

MG And that's when you said you guys acted autonomously? You chose to organize just yourselves, just your group, as opposed to working more directly with other people?

MB Well, we didn't have a choice. It wasn't like people were coming to our meetings and asking to organize us or helping to organize us. We were not part of the NO to WTO. We were not directly excluded, but I remember asking somebody, "Is there anybody with an organization that's going to be...?"

MG Is that NO to WTO...?

MB NO to WTO student organizing, is this the only student group on campus that was organizing that. When I went up to them and asked them if they were going to have people that were going to be doing outreach to people of color, they said, yeah, we have somebody. And the person that they had I'd never even seen before. I'd never seen them at any I-200 stuff that was happening the year before. Not trying to discredit them or anything, but there simply wasn't anybody within the organization who could or was doing any work with us.

So what ended up happening is that Teresa was our liaison person, and she was going to their meetings and relating information to us that we could organize ourselves. Because the peacekeepers and stuff like that, they didn't really organize the peacekeepers or issues like that to control the student rally.

Luckily, the students were not involved in chaotic action. But there were people in the student group who were drinking and stuff like that downtown. So it would have been nice to have some peacekeepers to take care of stuff like that. We were acting autonomously. Not necessarily because we were seeing ourselves in opposition to what they were doing, but simply because there was no formal relationship.

MG Did you feel it was, I don't want to say their fault, but in their part, they didn't open an invitation of...

MB No, it wasn't their fault. They were doing good work. I think it's just the reality of the situation is that in order to organize a community, you have to be part of that community. I'm not going to ask somebody from Redmond to come and organize a Chicano community in Eastern Washington. That's ridiculous. So we took it upon ourselves to organize our own community.

MG Do you have any comments about anything? Were you here at the time when this was going on?

RN Yeah, yeah, at the beginning of the fall. And that is something that we had talked about with that student alliance that we were trying to develop, how do we bring people of color. That's something that we, even within our own group, we kind of struggled with. And the best way for us was basically teaching ourselves, training ourselves. We had some people in the community come in and help develop some kinds of training and structure our part of the march. But I think what worked for us was that once we adopted these methods we were teaching each other how to do it, and the idea of self-determination really mobilized our group, rather than being incorporated into a much broader group. We would have really fallen in the background, and it wouldn't have had much significance.

MB Yeah, we organized, with like the Third Eye Movement came up from San Francisco. We met with them during the week, the day before the 30th actually. And Gail Shannon, who had done a bunch of campaigns here in Seattle, she worked a lot on I-200, Anti-200 stuff, and you know she's doing stuff on the health care initiative right now. But she helped us organize our group as a whole as far as strategically. There were people that didn't come in from the community. But we didn't really have a whole lot of conversations with the NO to WTO students directly, aside from the liaison person, Teresa.

MG And you said that they didn't... a liaison person didn't come to meetings?

MB No, I mean, the liaison person was somebody in MEChA, it wasn't somebody from their group. And she happened to know some people that were working with the WTO student group, and then she ended up getting involved with MEChA. So she was really strategic helping people, helping us know what was going on and stuff like that. We went to one of their meetings.

MG What was your opinion of the participation of people of color in general?

MB Well, the participation of people of color was somewhat nonexistent. If MEChA is the only student organization of color that's organizing on campus, that's kind of sad.

MG You were the only students of color group organizing on campus?

MB Oh yeah. The BSU, First Nations, I mean none of these organizations. I'm not blaming them for not organizing, but there was no structured organizing that was going on. We were the only visible group of color in the student group.

MG So why do you think that is?

MB

I think a lot of it has to do with organization. I think a lot of it has to do with Mexicanos and Chicanos right now at this particular point in time. The links were really easy to make, because this kind of work has been going on in our community since 1994 and before that around globalization. So when a lot of white people started talking about globalization and free trade and stuff like that, it was an old issue for us. It was something we had been talking about since 1994, and the Zapatistas had been fighting and dying for in Mexico since '94.

So it wasn't like an issue that we had a hard time making connections with. But I think the connections with other communities of color was a little bit more difficult. Particularly with African-Americans, I didn't see a whole lot of mobilizing on a large scale for people to come out and participate. I think that has a lot to do with just building connections with what's going on with globalization, de-industrialization of the urban centers, un-unionized labor, and service sector economies, McDonalds, why are people of color working in these areas?

Those connections were not being made and there was very little organizing going on in those communities. I don't know of anybody who was working with the BSU and it was really hard. It's hard for students if those connections are not there laid out for you. It's kind of hard to develop those links if there's no leadership within the community coming in and helping you out. That is kind of what happened. It seemed like, from my perspective, that's kind of what happened.

MG

And that's just for the University community?

MB

I didn't see anything going on. There were individuals who came out. Larry Gossett came out against the WTO and has been ostracized basically from the King County Council ever since he did that. There are individuals who came out against the WTO. But, you know, the Black churches, I don't remember any organizing going on. Maybe there were and I wasn't there. But I didn't see, even when I was at the WTO, I didn't see large groups of people of color. There were Native American drummers at times. But I didn't see those links being made between the people situation and what the organization itself was representing and functioned as.

MG

What moments of that week had the greatest affect on you?

MB

I think the 30th, just because I think it woke a lot of people up as to what was going on. MEChA wasn't prepared or organized enough to participate in direct action. We were not facilitated to do it. We didn't want to do it, because there are a lot of people in the organization itself who are residents of this country who are not even citizens. I don't feel comfortable putting people's citizenship in this country on the line for a protest. I think what was

most important about the 30th was that people really did put their bodies on the line and their lives on the line for something that they felt was really important to get international press coverage. And that's something that really hasn't happened in a long time, and it sparked a new resurgence of direct action in people saying, you know what, we're not going to work within the confines of your box, we're not going to march around the block and just do a spectacle while you carry on business. We're not going to allow you to carry on business. And shutting down the meetings that morning was a clear sign of that. I thought that was really provocative, really inspirational, that people were willing to do that.

MG And the Direct Action Network was mainly behind all the direct action.

MB That's my understanding, that DAN was the one organizing the direct action stuff.

MG Did you think that was more effective as opposed to labor's strategy of mass protest?

MB I don't think it's a matter of which one was more effective. Ideally, I think it worked both in conjunction. I think that was one of the effective strategies of the WTO is that there was an element of direct action, and at the same time there was labor that was putting in some momentum. Because, what happened in D.C., they just basically shut down the headquarters and arrested people, so there was very little success there.

If Labor had come out, as they did during the WTO, there might have been a different consequence. At least, there would have been an applied pressure from masses of people, which may not have been participating in direct action, but would have been supporting those who were. I'm sure Labor if it chose to, could have probably taken over the Trade Center. But I don't think that they were at the stage where they really wanted to commit to that.

MG Did you guys use the Internet in your organizing activities?

MB Yeah.

MG How so?

MB Well, organizing as a region, we organized MEChA, we got people from Washington State University, Yakima Valley Community College, Central Washington University. We were all part of the same organization, we just basically used the Internet to get people here, coordinate when we were going to meet, what time we were going to meet, what we were going to wear. Because we decided to dress up like Zapatistas. We ended up looking like Anarchists, kind of, but that's what the Zapatistas look like; they have masks.

Even though we were representing not necessarily Anarchism, but more Zapatistas. We coordinated all that stuff on the Internet. I don't remember making any phone calls at all.

MG

What benefits were there through participating in an organization that represented people of color?

MB

I think the benefits are that afterwards, for example, somebody from UCLA just wrote me an e-mail. They're getting ready for the Democratic National Convention to protest, and they're using a video that we made, a Chicano name, Jesus Velasquez out at Bellevue Community College, they're using a video that he made of footage from the WTO and MEChA's participation in it, and he edited to a Rage Against the Machine song. They want that so they can do outreach down there in L.A. So I'm going to be sending them that.

I think it's important to participate in these things, because then you can go back to organizations, and since MEChA is a national organization, it might be able to spark participation that direct action can incite and create change on some level. I think the organization itself, being able to do things as an organization provides a platform so that it's not just an isolated incident, but people come back and are able to work with each other over and over again.

Not just like this is a one-time thing, we're going to protest and then we're all going to go home. It's more about, we're going to protest, and then we're going to construct something also. We're going to not allow the WTO to get its business done, and then we're going to provide alternatives for that. Only under an organization can that really happen. Because that's what's kind of happened after the WTO, is that there are all these meetings, well what are we going to do? What are we going to do? It's like, well, what were you doing before? I mean, we were organizing the community. What were you doing? That's the only reason you can organize people, if you were organizing the community before, and you have to have a structure in which to do that. You can't just go in there as individuals and say, well, let's organize. You have to have some kind of platform, some kind of agenda that people can be provided as an alternative to what people are already doing.

MG

What role did you perceive was played by MEChA?

MB

From my perspective, it seemed like they took a lot of the direct action stuff. As their colleague, it was their duty to participate in the direct action stuff. Like when we got to downtown, we reached the line where we entered the No Protest zone. The student march which was marching with labor, and one of the students who had a megaphone and said okay, if you cross this line, you're going to be creating direct action. Do you want to do that? And everybody was saying, yeah. So the students just ran, basically they started running, and they ran toward where the police barricaded, the police lines. Then about two

minutes after that, they started shooting tear gas. I thought the students were...

Tape Ends

End of Interview

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