

Interviewee: Lydia Cabasco

Affiliation: People for Fair Trade/Network Opposed to WTO

Interviewer: Monica Ghosh

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Interview Summary:

Lydia Cabasco discusses her work as a People for Fair Trade/Network Opposed to WTO staff organizer responsible for mobilizing the student sector and people of color. She says she was inspired to work against the WTO after hearing Ninotchka Rosca, a writer and activist from the Philippines, speak on the IMF, GATT, and the Philippine sex trade. During WTO preparations, Cabasco says it was difficult to gain attention for people of color, especially women from Third World countries. Cabasco describes tensions between anti-WTO groups, including PFT/NO2WTO and the Legal Employment Law Office, her efforts to mobilize minority communities, her march with the student coalition on November 30, actions of police against the protestors, and her arrest.



MG August 15, 2000. I think Jeremy probably asked you some of these questions before, but I'll just start from there.

LC That's fine.

MG How and why did you get involved in WTO mobilization?

LC I got involved, it's kind of long story, but I had been to the Philippines. I had gotten back from the Philippines in January of 1999, and shortly after I got back, March of that same year, I went to a forum in Canada, in Vancouver, put on by the Philippine Women's Center. One of the main speakers at that forum was a woman named Ninotchka Rosca, who is a writer and activist from the Philippines, and she is the founder of GabNet a chapter of Gabriela, which is a national alliance of women organizations based out of the Philippines. She was really linking up a lot of the issues that I had read about in my preparation to go to the Philippines. What I was reading about was pretty much the women's issues there, like IMF structural adjustment policies and all that. She had tied the IMF and GATT, which was the predecessor of the WTO -- the WTO was based on the GATT and that document -- she had tied the GATT into the sex trade, coming out of the Philippines. Hearing that and then hearing how the WTO was related to the GATT, hearing her analysis really kind of prompted me to get involved. I was already starting to be re-

politicized and really start forming my analysis kind of then. That's why I became involved in the WTO. Because I am a Filipino-American, born here.

MG And then you organized with People for Fair Trade.

LC I was a staff organizer for People for Fair Trade.

MG How did you get involved with them?

LC Upon hearing that the WTO was coming that November, I also heard there were these general meetings, which was what People for Fair Trade was doing at that time. It was a steering committee.

MG When was this?

LC These were the monthly meetings at the Labor Temple and the informational meetings.

MG Were they started the summer of 1999?

LC They were probably started in January or February.

MG Of 1999.

LC Yeah. And I got involved in mid-March.

MG Okay, and then you started going to those meetings, and they were put on at the Labor Temple.

LC Right, Labor Temple, by People for Fair Trade, which was then a steering committee. It was not like an organized office. That did not come about until August.

MG So is that how you got hired? You just started going to those meetings and then you got hired on?

LC Yes. What happened is I organized a panel with a woman named Brinani Butto who is also a Brown Collective, and also a woman named Jill Anderson out of Seattle University, I forget which program now and, also, Ace Saturday of the People's Assembly. It was a panel on the WTO, and it actually got press coverage, got a write-up in an article. So it was probably one of the earlier or first events that were WTO related that got press in this area.

MG Okay, and then so initially, was your experience pretty good with the, you were organizing, and your relationship with People for Fair Trade?

LC Good in what way?

MG Was it positive, did you feel like, because, I mean, you stayed with the organization for a while.

LC Because I didn't know who else was organizing at that time. So, it was frustrating then, because even then they weren't addressing people of color. It was still about turtles and beef, I mean, it was about turtles and beef all throughout.

MG Okay, so . . .

LC You look confused.

MG No, I'm just trying to think of how to phrase some of my questions. Can you talk a little bit about your perspective of how people of color were marginalized?

LC Our issues weren't brought up. The way that the WTO was being sponsored for fair trade, even when Public Citizen came in and established that office in August, the storefront on Fourth Avenue, people of color issues were never taken into account. When you have black men being hauled off to jail, or you have environmental justice issues, and then you have people talking about the WTO, and then talking about saving the dolphins and the turtles and beef, that doesn't relate to people of color. People couldn't find a way to connect to those issues. It's about way much more than that, because in the end, why this is so critical, because it affects people of color is because, one, it comes off on our backs. We are at the bottom of the totem pole here. Especially women of color, especially women of color in Third World countries, which brings us back to why I wanted to get involved, because in the sex trade industry, I mean, that is a direct result of structural adjustment and GATT policies and free trade.

MG Was it very apparent that the issues were being ignored?

LC Oh, definitely.

MG Or were they just choosing that to address it? Or why do you think it was being ignored?

LC I think all of the above, because People for Fair Trade was pretty much all white. They could not think beyond their issues. They didn't have a broad analysis that could tie everything together. In terms of the sectors, the sectors, in a way, well there was kind of a cross between labor and environment, but no one was talking about other, it was very limited. It was kind of a narrow scope. And I think people didn't really go beyond their sectors, or go beyond

their sectors enough to realize how people of color were affected. People were talking about environment, they were talking about forest preservation, but they weren't talking about environmental racism.

MG Can you talk a little bit about the organization of People for Fair Trade, like how you guys organized, what exactly was your job, how were decisions made.

LC My job with People for Fair Trade was to mobilize some people, students, students of color, and minorities. I was in charge of people of color, whatever that meant. I was in charge of mobilizing people of color.

MG Did you feel like you were more a token?

LC Oh, definitely. I was definitely a token. Yeah.

MG Then, when you made decisions on organizing the November 30 rally and things like that, how were those decisions made?

LC The separate student rally, or the bigger?

MG The bigger rally.

LC Okay, because you know that the students marched separately on November 30.

MG Right.

LC Right, okay. I was not involved with that process. Pretty much labor had decided that, as far as I know.

MG What was People for Fair Trade's role in the rally?

LC Well, People for Fair Trade in that group, it totally catered to Labor, because Labor was probably going to turn out the most people to mobilize.

MG What did you do to organize people of color and students?

LC In July, we started the NO WTO student outreach committee. That was formed in July. And that came together as a start to come together and try to write a curriculum or speaker's bureau to counter what the Seattle Host Committee, SHO, was doing. Because they were getting a lot of money, and it was going to be Internet-based and use all this technology. So we were going to try and counter that and get into schools before they could. So that's what that student committee came together for, that did a very successful teach-in, that mobilized very successfully. We had at least 4,000 to 5,000

students out on November 30, which Seattle has not seen from students or a student movement in a long time. So there's that. For people of color, I contacted LELO, the Northwest Labor and Employment Law Office, to do outreach. Because when I started on the job, I was not connected. I had not networked, I did not know anyone. By the time this was over with I did. So my first action or my first anything that I did was to contact LELO and just say, I'm from People for Fair Trade and I'm doing outreach to people of color, and can we meet, or is there any way that I can, I pretty much put it to them, that I can support you on what you are doing. Is there any way I can help or be of assistance.

MG But then People for Fair Trade and LELO had poor relations, didn't they?

LC Yes. Well, poor relations in that they told People for Fair Trade, did not, they totally marginalized local organizing, local grassroots organizing.

MG Can you give a concrete example of that? Like specific instances?

LC Well, one, they weren't, again, voicing the issues of these organizations, and the people that these organizations worked with. Two, it's constantly having to bring up people of color issues. Like you had heard from Christine Wong not being involved in a local program, not being contacted or consulted for input or to be part of the local program. None of that happened during the week of.

MG You think it was just because the activists were mainly white and issues relevant to people of color were never brought up?

LC Right.

MG And that just kept getting built, it just kept building like that?

LC Well, yeah, they didn't know how to do outreach to people of color. It never occurred to them to do outreach to people of color in an effective way, or in a way that worked with local organizers, people of color organizers.

MG Did you try to motivate your colleagues?

LC Constantly. I was constantly talking about it. It came to the point where . . . we have two names. It was People for Fair Trade and NO WTO, and I used NO WTO, and we had a NO WTO sign on the window, where Dolan said, "I want that taken down." He was like, we've secured the left, we need to secure everyone else in the middle and the mainstream or whatever. And I was like, you have not secured the left. That to me got into issues of marginalization. I said this is a "cracker-ass movement". I said that. And I said you're not doing any outreach to people of color. I remember as it came close to the

Ministerial, like when Michael Moore came to the UW to the HUB auditorium, when Gore was here and, as I recall, they wanted to have more of a labor message out there -- what can we say about labor -- right? And I was like, you need to talk about immigration. That is a labor issue. And they're like, what? And I was like, well, I don't have any specifics. Just because I didn't have any specifics at the time, or I was supposed to have those specifics because I was a person of color? Because, I said, that's why people are immigrating, or even migrating within their own countries. They totally overlooked it, like okay, well, then, next, was pretty much their reaction. So totally glazing over, looking over those issues.

MG When did you start becoming involved with the Workers Voice Coalition?

LC They started meeting in late September/October.

MG What was the Workers Voice Coalition?

LC The Workers Voices Coalition was initiated by LELO, and it was to do the outreach that People for Fair Trade wasn't doing. I was one person, I was the only person of color, only woman of color, only queer of color on that staff. So I was someone in a white institution with no institutional power, so there was only so much that I could do. And if they weren't going to support me or support any people of color organizing, it wasn't going to happen. The Workers Voices Coalition came together to do the outreach to people of color.

MG And that was in October?

LC October, yeah.

MG Then what did you guys do?

LC What we did was there was a forum on October 16, and they brought international workers. They were kind of carrying over the work that, it's important with issues of labor and people of color, that you need to talk to and you need to consult with and form your analysis with your fellow workers, your fellow people across borders. That's a very grassroots approach to it, where People for Fair Trade was not doing that. They weren't trying to talk to people from other countries. They were laying the agenda out for everyone else to come, whether it was relevant to them or not. So LELO brought international workers from Latin America, from the Dominican Republic, from Mexico, from South America, Filipinos from Canada, and they were talking about their work and their experiences, especially related to free trade and neo-liberal policies. That's what they did, is they came to exchange and to action plan. So they were doing outreach. So there's that forum. They mobilized for the march. Then also on December 4, they intentionally did that after the WTO Ministerial. They had a forum on women and globalization

and immigration, because it was significant to have it after the WTO, because it's still an issue afterward. Just because the protesters go home doesn't mean the issues go away. So to carry on that work.

MG Why should have People for Fair Trade felt responsible to address issues to communities of color?

LC Well, because they came and they said, well, this is the line, we're going to say this, and this is the program, we're going to do this. If they're going to lay it out, then people should be involved in that process.

MG When I was talking to a representative from labor, they were saying, well, we couldn't organize people of color, because we were busy organizing labor, which is a valid point.

LC But there are people of color in labor.

MG Well then, they did their best to organize workers of color, right?

LC Why should they do outreach to people of color?

MG Yeah, why was it their responsibility?

LC Well, if they're talking about the WTO, the people of color are especially affected by the WTO. And to not address those issues is to totally comb over probably the biggest population of people that are affected and marginalized by it.

MG So who were they trying to appeal to, do you think, the people you worked for?

LC Who were they trying to appeal to? The mainstream movements.

MG What was your opinion of the activities of people of color during the protest overall?

LC Opinion of activities?

MG What kind of a role do you think they played?

LC I think the role that people of color played is they gave an alternative analysis. They were able to put out their experiences and why the WTO is harmful to them out there. It's just that they do that, rather than someone else do that for them.

MG Do you think they had a presence?

- LC** Definitely. There weren't a whole lot, there was a presence, and if there was media to pick up on it, we would have even had more of a presence or our stories would have been more would have been out there. Probably the biggest delegation of people of color came from the People's Assembly. MEChA mobilized with the UW campus. They had their own contingency within the large student march. There was also the Indigenous Environmental Network that was doing forums throughout that week. There was a delegation from Africa that was here as well.
- MG** So they had a presence. What about the local communities of color? Do you think they had a presence? Because you've talked just about delegations from abroad. What about MEChA?
- LC** MEChA, CCEJ, they mobilized. Some of the youth from WILD mobilized with them. So there were some local people of color within the People's Assembly.
- MG** Do you think overall their message was heard, that what they were trying to say was given equal platform?
- LC** Oh, no, not equally, not by the press or not by anyone planning the mainstream program during WTO. That's why you had all these groups doing their own thing.
- MG** What do you think this means for the long term?
- LC** You have to give me, something specific, in relation to . . .
- MG** Okay, to the future of the movement against the WTO, what do you think the fact that for the most part people of color had organized themselves, like separate, basically, like Workers Voice Coalition. From what I'm getting from you is there was no effort from this mainstream movement to organize people of color. What do you think the outcome is going to be in the future due to the fact that people of color are missing from this mainstream movement?
- LC** Well, what it means is that, because they were missing this movement, it means there's a lot of work, a lot of grassroots organizing that needs to be done among these communities. You have a lot of communities totally left behind. To bring it in relation to, okay, for example, I wrapped up coordinating the organizing to keep McDonald's out of the International District work we did. That issue is directly related to WTO. The fact that I had to start from scratch with the International District around this issue, and I could not pick up the tide or any organizing work or anything, because there wasn't anything done in that district means something. It means that we are starting

from a point further back than people in mainstream organizing. It means that we need to break things down for communities in an accessible way.

MG Do you think it's going to happen? Do you think there's an effort?

LC Oh, definitely. That's why LELO is around. That's why CCEJ is around. These organizations have been doing this for years. But what it also means is that in terms of, I mean it's not going to come from mainstream media. So what it means in terms of organizing, as an organizer, it means that more and more critically independent media is going to need to be involved with our struggles. And it's going to need to tell our stories, and we are going to need our tellers to tell our stories through independent media, is one thing.

MG What did you do on November 30th? What were your activities on that day?

LC I marched with the students. That was my group. That was my baby, you know. We had started that group, and I was totally behind them along the way. When they decided to march separately and not go to the AFL rally, that caused a lot of dissent with labor. I had Ron Judd calling me saying, what's going on? Are you encouraging these students to do this? And then, too, I also had national students, there was a bi-national student coalition, and national students were thinking that it was going to cause a dissent and divide the student movement. So there were those issues. But, no, the student movement wanted to have their own voice. They wanted to have their own identity. They did not want to be lost. And they also had criticisms of the mainstream organizing, so they did not want to rally with the AFL. And they were doing all this work and they weren't going to get time on the stage, you know.

MG So how did it get to that point where they decided not to march with the massive demonstration going on.

LC Weekly meetings. We met weekly, and that was a growing group that consistently grew and a group that consistently retained itself. The UW already has its own chapter, and that's just something, I'm trying to remember when did we decide we wanted to do our own march and not rally. Probably early on, maybe October-ish, is my guess.

MG And then did you get a lot of criticism from People for Fair Trade, the main office?

LC They were marginalized in a way that I think we were definitely left to fend for ourselves. Dolan was getting everyone else's permits, but then he told the students to get their own. So there are ways he wasn't pulling a string for students. I mean we were totally left out of the tabloid with the schedule for

everything. The student stuff was totally left out of that. We had planned student activities. I had to make our own student calendar.

MG

So it sounds like there was a really hard line.

LC

Yeah. So with both groups I would work with I was totally marginalized, even with students. Students were marginalized. Up until now, that march was beautiful. We totally blanketed Denny. The UW students marched, and then the SCCC students marched. We coordinated our marching times. We marched down Eastlake onto Stewart, and SCCC marched down Denny onto Stewart, and we converged. And it was huge. It was beautiful. We were walking down Denny. At the bottom of Westlake and Denny, we looked back, and we had totally blanketed Denny. It was completely covered, and then more people kept on coming and coming and coming. And the fact that we had MEChA there at the forefront was really powerful.

MG

Do you think there was marginalization going on within the student movement of people of color?

LC

Definitely.

MG

On what levels?

LC

The same thing, too, with issues and trying to concentrate on issues with people of color. It was still very much a sovereignty, environmental, human rights, but a lot of sovereignty, a lot of human rights stuff, but not also going into specifics with people of color issues. The students that really brought up marginalized issues were MEChA.

MG

And they were like a group within a group, they weren't necessarily a part...

LC

They were students, and they marched with students, but they also marched as MEChA within the student march.

MG

And that was important to them to have an identity.

LC

Oh, definitely. Because they marched in solidarity with the Zapatistas. They wore their ski masks. We marched with them. I marched with MEChA, and actually the Brown Collective marched with MEChA to support them too. We all wore our Zapatista masks and they were marching, *en totos somos Zapatistas*, we're all Zapatistas in that struggle just for indigenous sovereignty, indigenous rights, but that's also an environmental justice issue, that's also a very broad issue that really encompasses a lot.

MG

A lot of people I've talked to have said that to organize a community of color, you need someone within the community to do the organizing. Do you feel

that that was important to any of the mainstream organizations? When I talked to a representative from MEChA, he said that the person from People for Fair Trade students who was doing outreach to people of color was someone he didn't even know.

LC Who was that you talked to?

MG Miguel.

LC He's talking about me?

MG No, he wasn't talking about you. He was talking about the student who was appointed to do the outreach from People for Fair Trade, I guess. He said there was a student.

LC Did he say who it was?

MG It was someone that he didn't even know, and that MEChA had a liaison they sent to the People for Fair Trade meetings.

LC Okay. Yeah, it is important. I'm trying to think whether, I met Miguel through that student committee through a former teacher of his and a teacher that was involved with that No WTO student outreach committee. So that's how I knew him. But I don't remember who was sent out to do that for him, if it was People for Fair Trade, who that student was he had contact with, unless it was Tami, but he knew Tami. Are you sure it was People for Fair Trade?

MG It was this People for Fair Trade, an affiliate of students, right? There was a student group on campus called that.

LC Oh, that was the student protest.

MG Yeah, I'm talking, not in the huge scheme of things, but just . . .

LC Okay. You're talking about the UW campus.

MG Yeah. UW campus.

LC Okay, that makes a difference. By that time, like the UW students had factioned off, well, not factioned off, but they had their own student group on campus, too, that was coordinating with the student group. We have the No WTO student committee, and then within that the UW students were already meeting on their own campus. Because what was happening is we were meeting Mondays at the People for Fair Trade office, but the UW student group was also meeting to do outreach within their own campus.

MG Oh, and was that their decision to do this?

LC Yeah. And so you had a bunch of really kind of separate groups working together. They did not faction off, I didn't mean that, but they also had their own thing going on on-campus, specifically to campus, but that was still working with the student march. So what happened, someone from that group went and talked to MEChA. That's what happened. That's why I was like, that didn't come from me, that didn't come from the People for Fair Trade office.

MG Okay.

LC Yeah. I heard that happening, that, and then also the Black Student Union, like Huckleberry, talking to some people of color student groups.

MG They were not receptive to it?

LC Probably not, no. And that's where your talking about the marginalization within the student movement. Yeah.

MG What were some of the glaring differences you saw between the student organizing and the overall organizing?

LC Boy. I think as a group, UW students, too, especially really had their logistics and everything laid out. They were very organized. I mean they put out a pamphlet that had everything from the chant leaders to the police liaisons, to the press contacts, everything, to the peace-keepers. They had chants, they had a map on the computer, very organized in that way. In terms of the students, I think also the students that I dealt with in terms of MEChA, I think that they were more radical than the mainstream movement, because there was even this dissent between them. There were a lot of reformists, people wanting to reform, or working with labor to, very kind of traditional mainstream work. This group did not want to rally with labor. They wanted to do their own thing. So I think, even then, they were very independent, they had their own voice, they definitely knew why they were coming together and what they wanted to do. Also, your younger crowd. It wasn't hard to get in touch with students where in terms of, like broader, kind of like the neighborhood organizing that was going on for People for Fair Trade. It was very easy to get the students mobilized. Students were just on top of it. They knew what was going on.

MG So was that a really positive experience for you?

LC Working with students? Yes, it was. It was frustrating, especially with trying to coordinate the march, where we should start from, whether we should take the buses, to meet all in one place. That was really, really frustrating. But,

yes, it was a very positive experience. I mean I loved working with students. I supported them, even with the whole stint with labor and whatever. I was very passionate about that group. That started for me in July, way before school started.

MG

Where did the Brown Collective come from?

LC

That came out of a group of young people of color realizing that there weren't a lot of young people of color involved. It kind of started out with Brenda and I saying, let's do a direct action or something with people of color. Who should we contact? Hop, Gail Shannon, and some other people came up, and it was like, well, let's see what we can do. We started meeting together at Four Angels, to figure out, do we want to do a direct action, or what can we do to bring people of color issues to light or to try to get more people of color involved. And that's how that came about. We were meeting at Four Angels every week a few weeks before the WTO to see what we could do. At that time, cause I was People for Fair Trade, I was part of a bi-national student coalition that was meeting over conference calls, I knew of another guy named Colin Rajah from a group in the Bay Area called Just Act that was bringing up 40 or 50 youth of color, people of color. And we really wanted to connect with them and try to take care of them any way that we could, to hook them into local events. Some of them were DJs, some of them were spoken word. One named Marty wanted to DJ, so we tried to put events together or try to find events for him to DJ at, you know, and do that, and use popular forms of resistance, like hip hop or whatever. That's how the Brown Collective came about.

MG

Were you arrested with them?

LC

Yes. And some students too. There was Gavin Webster.

MG

How long were you in jail?

LC

Four days. I was there December 1.

MG

And that's the day you guys all met up on Broadway.

LC

Right. If you want to hear that story, we had marched November 30 to the stadium to join in with the labor march. Another way we were marginalized is that labor knew we were coming and we were marching separately, but yet it wasn't organized enough for us to kind of come in. It was really kind of hectic. But there was no way that we could, as a group, really funnel in to the march. So, some of us had left. It was totally chaotic and took awhile for the march to leave the stadium, so some of us just left, a few of us in the Collective. Also, some of the people from Just Act that had decided to march with students, they decided to march with the People's Assembly. What

happened is we had done that, and it got into evening and we were around downtown and we had gotten tear gassed at Sixth and Pike. It was just really kind of appalling, because we were tear gassed, they were already dispersing, and they kept on tear gassing and tear gassing. They tear gassed and rubber-bulleted us, and we were already dispersing. And we were two or three blocks down, and they tear gassed us and came behind and marched, the riot police would march behind, and tear gassing us, and pushing and pushing us and kept on tear gassing us. It was like, we were already dispersing, what more do you want? It just was, to me, inappropriate and totally overdoing it. So we were really mad, really, really mad that that would happen. I don't know if you've been tear gassed, but it's not pleasant. So we all set up to debrief. The debrief space was at Seattle Central Community College, which was pretty much closed the whole week of, because of the protests, so we had nowhere to debrief. We were all calling each other on our cell phones saying, "we need to debrief". What are we going to do? So it ended up being a few students, like David Hyde and I think Webster and Rice were already in front of U.S. Bank on Broadway, where the ATM machine is. We all met there. There was Nicole and Cece from the Collective, Tami and me, Hop, Summer Thomas from the Collective, Gavin, and Brenda, and Huckleberry. We all got there and said, okay, we've gone from 5,000 students to 10. We are now an affinity group. We were just, it was bullshit what was going on. And then for them to declare a no protest zone, we were like that is totally unconstitutional. How dare they do that to us. And there was a call put out that evening by the Direct Action Network to reconvene at 7:30 at Denny Park. So it was like, okay, we're gonna do it. So we had gotten breathing masks, we had gotten vinegar, we had gotten stuff to get ready for it. And we met early in the morning on Broadway to head down there. So that's how that happened, and then we got arrested the next day at Westlake at eight or nine in the morning.

MG You've covered a lot. Is there anything you want to say in closing? Anything you want to bring up to discuss more?

LC There's one thing, when I was talking about marginalization with the student march, even now there still has been no press, there has been no coverage for that student march. That's the thing I wanted to say. Students need to be credited for that, they need to be recognized for that. The majority of the people who turned out for the WTO -- everyone I went to jail with was an average 20 to 25 years old. A lot of young people turned out. It would not have been a success without young people, for one.

MG Do you feel the emphasis was on the Teamsters and the turtles?

LC Right. Who cares?

MG Is there anything else you want to talk about or discuss?

LC	Boy.
MG	You want specific things.
LC	It's hard to talk about in general. It's easier with pointed questions. If you have anything else you want to ask me, I'll come back to interview some more with you.
MG	Do you have e-mail access?
LC	Yes.
MG	I could e-mail you some questions, if I think of something.

End of Interview

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