MB This is Miguel Bocanegra. I’m here with Robin Denburg. It is February 2nd at approximately 1:00 pm. Robin Denberg was the Environment and Trade Campaigner for APEX, Asia Pacific Environmental Exchange. Robin, is it okay if we tape this interview for the purpose of the WTO project?

RD Yes, fine.

MB All right. So, maybe just to start off, can we have a short bio of yourself, like what points led you to participate in the WTO protests at APEX?

RD Sure. My background from undergrad, the University of Ohio, was to study diplomacy, foreign affairs and political science, and for two years, although I didn’t finish the degree, I didn’t finish the thesis, I studied at the Jackson School of International Affairs at the University of Washington, so I had a strong background in international affairs.

I’ve always had a strong interest in environmental policies, and I’ve been an environmental organizer and activist through a variety of volunteer organizations. It was a natural confluence to see my work in international affairs and political science and environmental protection, because they all came together with the WTO. With it also being based in Seattle and getting a job offer to work on the issue, it was something that I jumped at, the opportunity to take the position and that was natural for me to be involved with.

MB So can you talk a little bit about what APEX did to mobilize people for the WTO?

RD Sure. APEX did a lot of work in the media sector, encouraging as many media hits as possible, which examined the fair trade perspective. We did that through doing press releases, talking to media, holding press conferences in which APEX released a number of reports pertaining to different aspects of how the WTO impacts the environment. APEX coordinated large billboard ad campaigns and bus billboard ad campaigns in which we asked the question, “WTO – But what are we trading away?” and then had a picture, for example, of Steelworkers, because their jobs are being traded away, or dolphins, because their lives are being traded away, and coordinated an effort which was sponsored by about 15 other nongovernmental organizations.

MB What was your role? What, specifically, did you do within APEX?

RD Well, everything that I just explained, I had my hand in. I coordinated the press conferences. I worked the media in terms of doing some interviews and encouraging them to write the stories which examined the fair trade side. I helped coordinate some aspects of the advertising campaign, and also did a lot
of educational wraps in which we went to various community groups and other environmental groups and explained what the faults are of the WTO and why you or your organization should take a position opposing it and encouraging people to write their legislators and take to the streets as well.

APEX also did some work lobbying legislators, elected officials, and helped to generate a letter which came out of the state legislature by about 20 or 25 Washington State legislators and also helped to get a resolution passed in the Seattle City Council expressing concerns about the WTO.

Again, I played a role in doing some of the coordination or at the City Council doing some lobbying to that effect.

MB  Did you guys work in coalition with other groups?

RD  Yes, we definitely did. APEX was actually at the fore of helping to bring together the environmental community, or at least the more progressive and moderate elements who came to support our position of fair trade, and also were at the fore of helping to create a cross-sectoral working group in which environmental groups, labor, faith, human rights, and animal rights groups all came together to coordinate activities in the lead-up to the WTO.

MB  Were there any problems with, because I know APEX is a local organization; was there any problems with larger NGOs that came in from outside of Seattle as far as working with them on a coalition basis?

RD  Yes. There definitely was some friction inasmuch as there was a strong, local organizing effort that was underway, and in particular, Public Citizen came in. Granted, they hired mostly local staff, but trying to push things in their direction, sometimes beneficial, sometimes not. But, obviously, it changed the mix of things, and then as we got closer to the WTO event, more and more outside organizations came in. Generally speaking, they brought a lot of good resources, but sometimes they had their own game plan and it took a little while to gel with what was already in place on the ground and the strategies that were already in place on the ground.

MB  Can you talk a little bit succinctly about some of the good points? I know you talked about the resources that they brought in. Could you also talk a little bit about, what were some of the frictions about? Maybe you can’t touch on all of them, but what were some of the frictions between the national NGOs coming in, like the one you just mentioned?

RD  It was more just a question of who was doing what and creating the level of communication. I’m not too good at remembering specific examples of where the conflicts took place, and the conflicts certainly weren’t great, but just a level of, okay, this is… you know. As you do organizing, you come up with different aspects of what to focus on, and sometimes you’ll be going in a certain direction and another group will want to go in a different direction, and you just have to work through what’s the best means to your ends.

So, I would probably say, just creating a level of trust and creating a level of effective communication were probably the major points of conflict as more and more groups came in from, in particular D.C., but also internationally as
MB So how effective do you think the mobilization efforts of APEX and the coalitions that you guys formed were?

RD Well, I think they were extremely effective. I think we – I know that we generated a lot of really good media hits just based on the reports that APEX released and the advertising campaign that we launched and various other efforts to encourage journalists to include our perspective in their writing. Obviously, we were facing a media which was, you generally have a free trade bias and not very knowledgeable about the fair trade perspective when they started writing, and by the end, I think that they at least understood our perspective and represented it to some degree, some more so than others.

The coalition, I think, while there were ups and downs, it was very effective in allowing a level of coordination so that the environmental community knew what the labor community was doing and then the labor community would then go back and work out the details, but at least there was some level of coordination and that was exhibited during the week of the WTO when you had one day which was focused on labor, one day which was focused on the environment, one day which was focused on agriculture. If you hadn’t had that, the dialogue and the trust established beforehand, you could have had a hodgepodge of seminars and teach-ins and rallies going on at the same time. So I think it was really effective in that respect.

I think it was also effective in terms of creating good relationships between communities that hadn’t normally worked together. In particular for me, working with the faith-based and labor communities was, especially the faith-based community, was a new thing for me, so I think that was effective as well.

MB So you mentioned that the media did shift its perspective somewhat because of the work that APEX did, and some of the other groups?

RD Right.

MB So do you really think that they were able to expose some of this stuff? And since the WTO, how do you think the perceptions have changed about what’s going on with free trade and the liberal expansion, the liberal globalization?

RD Could you just repeat that question one more time? Could you say it again just so I hear it again?

MB How do you think the work that APEX and the other organizations around the mobilizing during the WTO that kind of changed the perception of the media, because you said it did change the perceptions of the media, and you were able to get some of the perspectives, the critical perspectives into the media? You said that?

RD Right.

MB How do you think that has affected how people are looking at globalization now, the liberal globalization?
I think it affects it by… The main weapon that we have as a fair trade movement is education, and by bringing stories forward of how, specifically, how does the WTO impact the injured species act, how does the WTO affect our forests, how does it affect various other aspects, both environmentally and in other sectors of civil society, it educates the public as to, first of all, what is this previously unknown organization? It educates people as to how much power it has, and it educates people as to what its impact is.

By having that education out there, it starts to change people’s perspective, whereas beforehand people saw the WTO as, “Yeah, there’s this big entity out there and I don’t know too much about it and maybe it’s good; maybe it’s bad. I don’t know.” Instead, they started to go, “Oh. Sea turtles are being affected. That’s not a good thing. How does it have that much power?” and it takes people to start down that path of, first of all, knowing about this organization, and then if they desire further informing themselves about it, as many, many people did after getting an initial sense of what the WTO is all about.

Do you think you learned anything from the campaign which applied to later organizing campaigns, or things that are going on right now?

Well, definitely. I mean, I learned the power of coalitions and to look beyond natural constituencies. As I previously mentioned, working with the faith-based community is a community I had never, ever even considered working with, and didn’t even know that there was a group called Earth Ministry, which is based in Seattle, which is an environmental/faith-based group, and now I think about contacting faith-based organizations if it is an issue which would pertain to them.

On the campaign I am currently working on, which is for a group called Sane Transit, which is working to get a better mass transit system than the light rail system being currently proposed, and recently I reached out to the labor community, realizing that they might not have the same exact perspective as my organization or any of the organizations I’m working for, but that it’s important to create a dialogue with other constituencies and other areas in civil society and to try to build as broad based a coalition as possible, because there is strength in numbers, and the broader your message… As long as you have a singular message underneath the main message, the broader it is and the broader the representation of groups, the more credibility you have and the more power you can have and the more influence you can have.

And additionally, I learned a lot of new tactics. I need to learn more, but I had never before considered non-violent direct action as an effective tactic, for example, and now I see that it does have a role in the toolbox of activists. Activists need to have as large a toolbox as possible as we go up against the impact on corporate globalization, because we have a very powerful enemy that we’re fighting, and we need to utilize as many tactics and resources as we possibly can.

For sure. Is there anything else that you’d like to add that wasn’t covered in the interview?
RD I don’t know. If you have any specific questions, I’d be happy to answer them. Not anything in general that comes to mind.

MB Well, that’s basically it, so thanks a lot.

RD Sure. Happy to.

*End of Interview*