

Interviewee: Larry Dohrs

Affiliation: Public Education for the Free Burma Coalition

Interviewer: Miguel Bocanegra

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Interview Summary:

Larry Dohrs, director of public education for the Free Burma Coalition, became concerned with WTO issues when the European Union and Japan successfully appealed a Massachusetts law that regulated trade with companies doing business in Burma. It became clear, Dohrs says, that multi-lateral organizations could adversely affect grassroots organizing in the United States, but that coalitions could be effective in fighting agreements such as the MAI. Dohrs describes his work with Global Source Education and the Seattle Host Committee, noting that he was active in both educational and activist activities focusing on free trade vs. fair trade. Dohrs discusses relationships among groups that opposed the WTO, his development of a WTO curriculum package, his confrontation with WTO Director General Michael Moore at a University of Washington event, and his participation in the Labor rally.



MB

This is Miguel Bocanegra. I'm here with Larry Dohrs, Director of Public Education for the Free Burma Coalition. It's October 10, 2000. We're here at Global Source Education. It is about 3:00 p.m. Could you just start talking a little bit about yourself, how you got involved in Global Source Education, maybe some of your background.

LD

Ok. I came to WTO issues particularly through my involvement with the Free Burma Coalition and the Free Burma Movement. And it first popped up when there were appeals against the Massachusetts Burma Law, which was an anti-apartheid style law. There were appeals in the WTO from the European Union and from Japan. It made it clear to those of us, who were working in the Free Burma movement, that we had to pay attention to these multilateral organizations that could affect grassroots organizing that we were doing in the United States.

And around that time, I got on some of the e-mail lists of people working against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI). That was a very powerful coalition that came together and very effective, and it was a success. That was a real strong indicator to me that there was a coalition building that was going to be responding to the WTO. Then when the announcement came that the WTO meeting was going to be here in Seattle, I was definitely one of

the happier people in town, because it seemed to me that it would give an opportunity to bring some of my own issues into the spotlight, try and get more attention on them.

I'm used to working on fairly obscure issues. The Burma issue is not one that is in the mainstream of people's thinking. So it was a very exciting time. Right from the start, I got involved in some of the first organizing meetings that took place down at the Labor Temple. Sally Soriano brought the folks who had passed the Massachusetts Burma Law out here to speak. That gave me an opportunity to talk just a little bit as well to a big crowd, and people were really interested in it. It was very exciting. I did some of the steering committee stuff early on. But because of a family situation at that time, I didn't have time to attend as many of those evening meetings as I wanted to.

But at the same time and, again, that's kind of two tracks of my own participation, we had formed this non-profit organization, the purpose of which is to bring global topics into the K through 12 classroom, Global Source Education. So on the one hand, I was working on the activists' side, trying to organize, trying to connect with the labor movement in particular, because of some specifics of the Burma issue. At the same time, we were in contact with the Host Committee, because they had a budget for educational outreach around the WTO.

So it was really interesting, one week to be in a Host Committee function, and a week later to be in a steering committee meeting or some sort of No to WTO function as well, to feel like I at least had some contact with both sides. It made it interesting, and I didn't feel like there were that many people involved in both sides.

There was a big budget for the education committee, somewhere around \$200,000. The committee was headed by Constance Rice. By the time we got there, it had all been committed to other projects, but we got a commission through kind of a joint venture between the World Affairs Council and the Center for International Business Education at the University of Washington to look at WTO issues and develop a curricular package for the classroom. Their initial goal was to look at the WTO dispute resolution mechanisms.

So they said, well, do you want to do hormone beef in Europe, do you want to do apples in Japan, do you want to do dolphins and tuna, turtle excluder nets, and we said, well, there are going to be debates here, and they're not going to be about apples in Japan, they're going to be about free trade and fair trade. And that's what we want to do. We want to do a package about free trade versus fair trade issues. To their credit, they went along with it. They gave us a good amount of freedom.

I was well in touch with Public Citizen and the points of view that they were representing. We just tried to find effective spokespeople for the different points of view regarding so-called “free trade” or so-called “fair trade”. You've got to use labels sometimes, but we always tended to put them in quotes, because what makes “free trade” really free? What makes “fair trade” really fair? You can dispute those labels. It was kind of these two different world views, and we tried to get voices that were effective that are articulating these different points of view and representing them in the curriculum. For the most part, we were able to do that.

When we got to the editing part, and by this time it was August of 1999, then there were some disagreements and things that were kind of inserted into our piece that we hadn't authored, and we didn't want it there without somebody signing it. There were two things. One was more of a description of what the WTO does from, to me, a pro-WTO point of view. We had extensive selections from Keith Rockwell, the spokesman for the WTO. He came here and did an extended press conference. So we had the WTO defining itself and felt that was adequate, that was a good way of saying this is what the WTO is, and we didn't need a third-party academic view. But that was one of the things.

And another was kind of an exercise that it seemed that the purpose of it was to say that it's easier to connect emotionally when you're against the WTO than it is when you're for the WTO. As I recall, it had to do with, let's say you're a sugar producer in the United States, you get subsidies, and if those subsidies are knocked out by the WTO, you're out of business. You're going to complain like hell, you're going to really raise a stink. On the other hand, if you're a consumer, because of the subsidized-priced sugar, you're paying an extra penny or half a penny for your can of Coke. So when the WTO gets rid of those subsidies, then your Coke is going to be a half-cent or a penny cheaper. Well, you're not going to raise hell, you're not going to celebrate in the streets over a penny that you saved on a can of Coke. So it was illustrating that difference. And again, we didn't author it, we just asked whoever wrote it, sign your work, and they did. And it's still in the curriculum as kind of an added piece in the middle. But all in all, it was pretty good.

Another quick story that I'll tell is that one of the pieces we used was a portion of President Clinton's talk to the ICFTU, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. This was in parallel to his visit to the Geneva WTO Ministerial. In there, he used the phrase "the race to the bottom." So when they were doing the glossary for this whole WTO curriculum, I kept saying, well, obviously, we've got to define "race to the bottom." It never made it into the glossary. Even though the term is used in the curriculum, it's never defined in the glossary. Even though I tried to insist.

I think there is something to be learned from the point of view that when you look at the glossary, you had "comparative advantage" in there, but you didn't have "race to the bottom." When they wouldn't put "race to the bottom," I said, okay, lax environmental laws constitutes comparative advantage. Lax labor laws constitutes comparative advantage. So if you're only going to use comparative advantage, even though you really have to say race to the bottom, because it's in the text with President Clinton saying it. It still didn't make it in there. So I think there was, among economists, people sort of educated in the mainstream of economic theory, a real discomfort with even acknowledging that there is a race to the bottom, that there can be a race to the bottom, and that comparative advantage can have its negative side, as well as its positive side. There is really a difficulty in getting to that.

The other part of it was that we really wanted to create events. One of the real reasons for this organization, for Global Source Education, is to work directly with educators, and bring people with expertise to educators and allow educators to ask their own questions, because they all have their own questions. You can't develop a series of answers preemptively that's going to answer the questions of people as diverse as a bunch of educators who could be a sixth-grade teacher in a city school and a twelfth-grade teacher at a private school in Redmond. They're very, very different people, and their background, maybe they studied economics, maybe they never took an economics class, who knows.

So we were trying to create these forums where teachers could come together with ourselves and with WTO experts, multiple perspectives, critics, supporters, as part of this education committee process. That was another thing that we just weren't able to get off the ground. There wasn't a commitment to actually bringing it to the educators. I think it has more to do with how people look at education than it has to do with how people look at the WTO. People develop curriculum packages all the time and then just stick them somewhere or send them to people, but they don't work through them. Teachers are like the rest of us. They need to be confident in the subject before they go and expose themselves to the risk of presenting it to their class. They want to feel confident. The way to do that as human beings is really to do it face to face.

So there is an irony, that digital divide curriculum, they did one on the digital divide, and it was available on a web site, which is ironic, because if you're on the wrong side of the digital divide, then you don't have access to this curriculum on the digital divide. That's the way it's going to be in any organizational thing. But it was really, it was too bad, because, again, we're real keen on multiple perspectives. We wanted to bring effective advocates on behalf of the WTO, and effective critics against the WTO. We really wanted to create the learning opportunity that comes when two people look at the same thing and see something completely different. When that's your

starting point, then there's some real exciting education that can take place. Why is it that this person sees it this way, and why is it that that person sees it that way. So that was kind of the experience of Global Source Education.

In the meantime, even within the Free Burma Coalition Movement in the United States - which is a real grassroots movement, it's been around for seven or eight years, a lot of campus-based activities - I was saying, boy, this is a big opportunity. There wasn't a lot of recognition early on within the Free Burma movement that this was going to be an opportunity for us to advance our cause. But eventually, it started coming around.

I was in contact with people from ICFTU and the ILO, because the ILO in particular has done an investigation of the situation in Burma and concluded that there is massive and systematic use of forced labor in Burma. This upcoming November 30 is the deadline for the military regime to end forced labor in Burma, or there will be sanctions put on by the ILO. And that's a real groundbreaking move for the ILO. It's an 80-year-old institution, and they've never used this one article that they're using now in the case of Burma. So I felt there was some potential for us to make alliances with the organized labor movement and, in some ways, try and get the organized labor movement to do our work for us. And they're organized and they have resources, and we're grassroots volunteers, and we don't have any resources, so it's hard for us to do this stuff. So even within my own organization, it was hard to convince people that this was a really important moment. But it got better as the fall went on.

And one thing that happened was that Michael Moore came to the University of Washington, the head of the WTO. He spent the whole day in Seattle. I borrowed somebody's ID or something, I got into the hall there, because it was supposed to be for students and faculty, and I was able to ask him a question. I said, at first, I went to the ILO conclusions that there is forced labor on a massive and systematic scale in Burma. The next thing I said is Burma is a member in good standing of the World Trade Organization. So you've got forced labor and free trade together. And I said, if you can't deal with Burma, how could you deal with Pol Pot's Cambodia, apartheid South Africa, or Hitler's Germany? Right? And the crowd was very anti-WTO, and everybody cheered and so forth, and he was silent for a long time. He's a very professional guy, very good. Eventually, he recovered and talked about the "beggar your neighbor" policies against Germany in the 30s and how that's what caused World War II. He just ended up pretty far away. But he did say, if you're talking about kicking them out, then you wouldn't do it. "We're a consensus organization and you wouldn't get consensus." But that did end up on the front page of the *Seattle P.I.* and so we distributed the article on all the internet having to do with Burma, and as much as we could we were trying to make Burma a central issue in this discussion. And I think in the end we weren't that successful, but that was our goal, that was what we tried to do.

MB

Can you talk a little bit about the Labor rally and how, I know you were holding up a sign at the Labor rally.

LD

Yeah, as the time got closer, and there were some other events. Alexis Herman, the Secretary of the Department of Labor, came and she said some good things. Again, I'm all about getting Burma in there, and it was very interesting. So she said plenty of good words. But as we got closer, then the folks at the Worker Center, like Rich Feldman, wanted to give an opportunity for a Burmese worker to speak, so that was great. Rich is a guy who worked with us when we were promoting the Seattle Burma Law and an all-around good guy.

It is so interesting on so many levels. There was local organizing, there was national organizing, and there was international organizing. There wasn't a lot of coordination. I was astonished at all these things that sort of dropped out of the sky on a national and international level, because I had just been involved with the people who were organizing here in Seattle. And I think it was true at the Labor level as well, is that the national was organizing, and they weren't talking very much with the Seattle area, and the international, I don't know how much they were talking with AFL-CIO, so there were all these sort of non-communicative levels. And they only started to communicate toward the end, is the way that it seemed to me.

So then it became obvious that AFL-CIO had its own agenda for the Labor rally and things were being negotiated all the time, and we'd get phone calls and put phone calls in. Eventually it was at least agreed that a Burmese worker would be on stage as part of the rally. As I was saying before, my understanding subsequently is that it was really the work of the Worker Center and of LELO in bringing a diversity of voices on stage. That was essentially done locally. They are local organizations that were doing this outreach on their own. And if they hadn't done it, then the labor rally, by my understanding, would have just been a series of white male leaders of organizations standing up and speaking. And some of them, like the guy from the Steelworkers Union, he was a very effective speaker. But, if you have a pretty diverse group of people in the crowd, and then your presentations are not diverse at all, you're losing an opportunity.

I think AFL-CIO risked losing that opportunity, and their neck was saved, again, by my understanding, by local people here in Seattle who empathized. LELO brought in the South African mine worker and the maquiladora worker and a couple others, which really helped to illustrate that this wasn't just either a straight Union thing or a middle-class white folks thing, that there were all sorts of people around the world who didn't happen to have the resources to come there that day who also felt upset about the rule-making that was

dominating globalization and that the WTO represented who's making the rules.

And it was really important to illustrate that people outside of our community also felt that way. Because otherwise, as Tyree Scott was talking about, how is a Brazilian maid going to come? She can't even get a visa, let alone buy an airline ticket and come to Seattle. How are all these different voices, how's a mine worker from South Africa supposed to show up in Seattle to express himself? So that was a really difficult obstacle, and LELO was real important in at least breaking that down somewhat. The criticism, the spin-meisters said it's a bunch of over-privileged hippie kids who were protesting the WTO, and those sorts of voices from workers from other parts of the world were really important in breaking that down. That's a pretty ignorant perspective, but you could read about it in the *New York Times* was what some pundits believed was represented here was bored hippies.

MB

Could you talk about you being on the stage also?

LD

Yeah. I really felt so lucky, because I was just there assisting Steven Dunn, who is from Burma and was representing Burmese workers that day. And Steve is wheelchair bound, so I was helping him with access and that kind of thing. I had my V.I.P. pass and could be backstage, and there's Jose Bove and there's Vandana Shiva and there's all these people that I'd seen on tv, and to have the opportunity to shake their hand was terrific. And then to be up on the stage was also, to me, a very, very memorable experience. Because I helped Steve up there, and then we both held posters of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the statement that she has on the poster is "Please use your liberty to promote ours." And I thought that was a very legitimate perspective.

In many ways, again, to go back to this incorrect assumption about a bunch of bored hippies, these are people who took their time to try and speak on behalf of the Brazilian maid and the South African miner and the Guatemalan coffee picker, to use our liberty and our opportunity to speak to promote the interests of these other people. So I thought the message was appropriate on the posters there. To our good fortune, there were probably eight or ten people lined up on the stage, and they had positioned us more or less in the middle, and I knew that it was working out so that the camera angles were such that our posters were in lots of camera shots. I had messages on my machine when I got back from people in Washington, D.C. who had seen this. So that was nice to know that we were successful to some extent in getting our visual image out.

MB

I want to bring you back to some of the earlier educational stuff. How did that work out in the end? Did you think it was a successful as with the Host Committee trying to bring these two groups together?

LD

John and I had published an article earlier in the year talking about the whole principle that we have of trying to promote examination of issues from multiple perspectives. I work as an advocate when I work on Free Burma stuff, but it's less useful for us to just go out and advocate, if we don't understand and work through the positions of our opponents. So it's good for everybody to involve yourself in these multiple perspectives.

Our article ended by saying the WTO meeting is coming up in November or December, and wouldn't it be wonderful for that to become an opportunity for dialogue and discussion of these multiple points of view. And that didn't happen. And that's one of the reasons that the expression of frustration took place out on the street, because there were no other outlets. There were no other ways to assert points of view that questioned the WTO.

So the fact that we weren't able to get as far as we wanted to in promoting dialogue for the purpose of education, public education and K through 12 education, was a disappointment. But I think that what we're seeing is that there is more receptivity now than there was a year ago. When you go back and think of where we were a year ago, John's always joking that everybody thought WTO was a radio station in Kansas City. We'll never go back to that where people just had no idea. What is globalization? What is WTO? We're quite a bit further along than that, and I think that's pretty exciting.

And it's worth pointing out that Washington Council on International Trade which formed essentially the core of the Host Committee. This summer's program that they put on that was co-hosted by our two senators was on corporate social responsibility. Again, who would have thought that they would do that? Previously, it was pretty much about ways of making corporate profits and not acknowledging some of the other aspects of corporate behavior. I think that the whole issue has created some progress, that the discussions are more sophisticated now, and there's more acknowledgment that you need to listen to diverse voices. But we have a long way to go. We'll just stay at it.

MB

So what do you think the next steps are?

LD

For us, we continue with Global Source Education. Next summer, we will have another program on globalization and social responsibility. We're working to develop more curricular themes around issues of globalization and also issues of corporate social responsibility. I participated in a roundtable that came out of the Washington Council on International Trade meeting on corporate social responsibility. It's very interesting and rewarding to me to see that the corporate community is acknowledging that a necessary part of doing business is to deal with these issues, and the idea of ignoring them and hoping they'll go away is just not an effective strategy. It doesn't work for them.

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LD

And that's good. We're moving in the right direction. But at the same time, it's been very interesting also to see at all of the multilateral organization meetings essentially around the world, there are very strong protests. And that, to my way of thinking, makes holding these meetings very expensive.

And that's the message that gets through, I think, is that if we don't want these meetings to be so damn expensive every time, we've got to deal with the voices that are out on the street. That's kind of how decisions tend to be made is on a cost-benefit analysis. And the costs are higher and higher and higher for holding these meetings. Are they all going to be held in Qatar? Or in Saudi Arabia where, yeah, there will be a beautiful hotel and a beautiful meeting center and there will be no protests. They could do that. But how long does that work? That would just be a quick fix and the pressure, the anger would come out somewhere else. I don't think that's a realistic way of doing it.

I think that we're in a process that's leading to an understanding that we have to deal with these issues. And we're hoping that eventually there's a kind of maturity that both sides of really polarized viewpoints can sit down at the same table and discuss and try and find some areas of common ground and then build on those areas of common ground, your basic conflict resolution techniques, to try and accomplish something. Maybe that's naive, but I'm hopeful that we're moving in that direction.

But it's a long process, and in the meantime, you can believe me, with the Free Burma Coalition, I continue to criticize the WTO at every opportunity that I have, because for them to include this military regime that institutionalizes forced labor in this free trade system just undermines the credibility of that free trade system completely and utterly as far as I'm concerned. To me, that doesn't make me anti-globalization. I just have a real problem with the rule-making body called the WTO.

If that's within the rules, but copying a Disney cassette is against the rules, they'll jump on that, but they won't jump on forced labor, the right of an individual to control his or her own labor, let alone intellectual property, then they have a problem, and they need to get with it and fix that problem. So, again, it's always a little schizophrenic. I'm always wearing two hats and jumping from one to the other. But I do think that come November 30 of this year, it's going to be very interesting, because we are very, very likely to see the first international sanctions because of labor rights issues.

You always have to start somewhere, and I think we're finally going to start somewhere with Burma on November 30, and then it will be a matter of trying

to build on that and steadily broaden and strengthen those standards so that people are operating on as level a playing field as we can manage to develop.

MB

Thanks. Thanks a lot.

LD

Thank you.

End of Interview

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