

**Interviewee: Richard Feldman**

**Short biography: Director, Worker Center, King County Labor Council, AFL-CIO**

**Interviewer: Miguel Bocanegra**

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MB I am here with Rich Feldman, the Director of the Worker Center, a division of the King County Labor Council, AFL-CIO at the Labor Temple. Can you trace some of the points in the political path that brought you to the protest in the WTO?

RF Well, actually, it started with the first NAFTA negotiations that occurred in Seattle - Carla Hills with the Bush administration had the first negotiations in North America for the NAFTA here. We were a major force in putting together a protest of those negotiations that were held at the top of the Columbia Tower. Behind there I have a picture of a large weather balloon that I flew to the very top of the Columbia Tower that bobbed outside of their windows that spoke of fair trade. So that was in the Bush Administration, maybe 1991 when that happened. So we have been following issues around plant closures, dislocation, those type of issues here at the Worker Center and saw the trade agreements and their impacts and the need for fairness in those trade agreements as an important thing from that period. WTO just happened to be in our backyard. From NAFTA to Fast Track to the GATT Round, there was knowledge of international trade agreements here.

MB So it was kind of on track just being involved with the Fair Trade.

RF Yeah, the Fair Trade coalition work started back with the NAFTA many relationships people like with Beth Burrows, Sally Soriano, were first built as part of that effort. These same people were all part of the effort that happened here around WTO.

MB So how and why did AFL-CIO and you get involved in the WTO?

RF Again, in terms of from our perspective, all the activities that we had done around making the arguments for fair trade and trying to get across to other workers and to the public the problems with trade agreements as they were being constructed, we had a history of that activity. So here at the King County Labor Council, we were already pretty attuned to issues around fair trade and around the problems with these agreements. As soon as it was announced, we fully understood the implications of that for our community and for our Labor Council, and just in terms of the magnitude of this type of meeting; an event that would be once in our lifetime, if that, in the United States, and the opportunity to really both protest the nature of those agreements, and the nature and the problems with the trading system as it had been constructed - this was our opportunity.

The National AFL-CIO, however, is a multi-agenda organization dealing with many things all the time, from big strikes to conventions, to political activity. And so our realization of how important this was and what a major opportunity was not immediately picked up by the National. We had to do a lot of work with the National AFL-CIO to make them see that as well, and Ron Judd was hugely responsible for insuring that the National AFL-CIO got very focused on this and was going to put in an enormous amount of resources necessary to carry out a vision of having many thousands of people on the street protesting the WTO.

So, the timing from the announcement when we learned about the successful bid that Seattle had presented to the actual event was about nine months,. We started immediately on the phones and talking with people back at the National AFL-CIO. But realistically, they didn't really get focused because of intervening activities, elections, etc. until the summer preceding the WTO. We had to work pretty hard, because I think, as I said, the National AFL-CIO has a lot of things going on at the same time in terms of the decision-makers who are going to free up major resources.

MB When you say "we," you mean . . .

RF King County Labor Council. If you are looking at having a 15,000 to 20,000 person march, the reality of the resources and logistics and to be able to get people there requires quite a bit of resources, and we didn't have that capability here. We needed other resources from National AFL-CIO to make that reality. So, like I said, Ron played a huge role in really working that, flying back to D.C. and really pounding on the doors; really shaking people to the importance of this event and the opportunity that was presented. And then John Sweeney, AFL-CIO President, committed to making this a major activity and set a very high goal, at the time, what we thought was just an incredible goal of having 50,000 people in the street. We looked at the timing and the issues around the timing - right after Thanksgiving, it's in November, we get horizontal rain; it's not a great time to turn out people for a march. Seattle is in this somewhat transportation-isolated corner of the country, you have to depend on other cities in the region to be able to pull people. So realistically, how can we get that many people? It seems like a very difficult number to get, having people take off work, having people travel the distances they need to travel. The commitment from National AFL-CIO in terms of resources and logistics made a lot of the work possible.

MB You talked a little bit about having to shake people up and get people involved. What were some of the internal struggles that were going on with the AFL-CIO between should we or shouldn't we protest the WTO? And what were some of the arguments made? What was the internal conflict?

RF Well, I think part of it was, and this is more my analysis, that the AFL-CIO, along with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), which is the association of other similar national labor centers, national labor organizations equivalent of the AFL-CIO's across the world, have had a presence at other rounds of the WTO. There was a group of folks at the National AFL-CIO and ICFTU who understood these policies and were looking at how to move the WTO. Their ability to move the WTO was confined mainly to working with U.S. Administration contacts or other trade delegations to influence trade agreement negotiations. So around the issue of inserting labor standards as standards as part of the WTO and converting that type of process to one where you have mass mobilization is a big change. People were used to doing work around WTO in one way. For example, in Singapore, you're not going to have mass mobilization. You're not going to be able to because of the police state type of activity, and that's where the last round of the WTO occurred was in Singapore. So we had people who were normally doing that work who aren't in the same mode of mobilization to achieve an end impact an institution. So that's one element -- the difference between people within AFL-CIO who knew the ins and outs of WTO were not the same people who were out there doing field mobilization and grassroots mobilization work.

MB How was that barrier overcome?

RF I think some of it was overcome by the vision that leadership set, from John Sweeney saying that we need to have 50,000 people on the street, we need to mobilize, we need to impact the WTO. The other was continuing to hammer on the idea that it was a campaign, and see it as a campaign. Again, Ron was pretty key in really shaking people, and coming from the street, coming from a grassroots level and being a really forceful advocate for a strong mobilization. So it was coming from two directions Ron's effort to make it clear to the institution what an opportunity this was. And then leadership from John Sweeney that set the bar high, that influenced, that kind of set things in motion.

MB What was the King County Labor Council and national AFL-CIO, what were they trying to accomplish through the protests?

RF Well, the AFL-CIO as an organization has policies that are approved at its Executive Committee level. And they approved a good set resolutions of what was wrong with the WTO and what needed to be done to fix it. They were very much in a fix-it mode. These policies included things

like, including five core labor standards and the review of labor standards. The five core labor standards: prohibition of child labor, freedom of discrimination in workplace, right to organize, right to collective bargaining, and no disparity in pay between gender or race.

Those are internationally agreed upon core labor standards that need to be part of any trade agreement. And this idea of core labor standards has been adopted at the ICFTU level. So there is a coalescing of international labor organizations around these five core labor standards. From what I understand, that was a big deal to get agreement among the international labor organizations; to have these five core labor standards as part of the trading system.

So that was one element of the change needed at the WTO – core labor standards need to be considered when the WTO admitted a member as well as reviewed them, as well as provided opportunities for sanctions around those issues. And then other things were spelled out by the AFL-CIO to address problems with the WTO like technical assistance to lesser developed countries and greater transparency. There was also a concern that the same investor protections provisions that had been proposed for the MAI would be worked into the WTO; we were against that.

In terms of broader goals, it was about raising these issues within the US and international audiences, the general public and legislators about why core labor standards needed to be part of any kind of trade agreement, and what happens when trade agreements don't have labor standards. So, a common talking point that was used was: you can have enforceable copyright protection under the WTO, but there is no protection for children laboring to make a cassette tape or CD. You could protect the contents of that CD, but you couldn't protect the worker making it.

MB How were the coalitions? Did you all work with any coalitions? Did you develop any coalitions, with NGOs or environmental groups?

RF From the beginning, when the announcement happened, there were folks within the fair trade campaign and the people allied with the Public Citizen that pretty quickly put together a coalition of interested local people to host the protests, and actually met at the Labor Temple fairly frequently, from the initial announcement of the WTO. And, as that coalition activity preceded, there was tension in terms of message versus a hosting role, and some of the message was about stop and shut down the WTO and that needed to be an exclusive message, and there was another effort to look at both an expanded message around issues like debt forgiveness and worker standards - broader issues of globalization and the problems with corporate-managed trade, and using the WTO as a moment to teach about that and not exclusively focusing on “No WTO”. But that was a tension that was in the initial coalition activity, which was eventually resolved with Ron saying, “I don't care what the message is - I don't care what your message is, as long as you come, you're present, you're on the street. The more numbers we have, the more powerful we are, the more effective we are at making change happen.”

So from that initial start, that group that met here, which Sally Soriano was an important part of making happen, that was a big kind of very mixed, wide-ranging group of organizations and individuals who were there. And then there was other coalition activity, as it got closer, there was a regular meeting, kind of a coordinating meeting that I attended, that was hosted by the Citizen's Trade Campaign folks that brought together some of the prime organizers and organizations, including DAN and a very diverse kind of group of organizations that met and just kind of more or less kept each other somewhat up to date on what people were planning. So, we were letting people know how our march was going to be put together and timing of some other events. The Church Council was part of that. So it was more of a check-in type of thing.

Ron Judd had other meetings with some of those organizations as well. We had put together for our rally and march a coalition of organizations as well, which included the Sierra Club and Church

Council and several other organizations that were part of the planning for the march, which was intended not just to be a Labor march but a coalition event that included the environment, students, religious, international presence, and obviously Labor. So those meetings happened also on a fairly regular basis. They looked at both content of the presentation before the march and some other aspects around that. And we worked, and actually I wasn't as involved with this, but Rosalinda Aguirre with Jobs With Justice and Reverend Orange from the national AFL-CIO were heavily involved planning for the Hands Around the WTO which was the big focus of Jubilee 2000 group. That's kind of one aspect of prior-to-the-event coalitions. Obviously, during the week, there was more coalition activity that climaxed with the Friday march, which was, to me, one of the most important events, where we all came together as a coalition.

MB What do you mean, came together as a coalition? What coalitions were formed?

RF That Friday march? Well, I think after the week of everything that went on and the imposition of the no protest zone and the . . .

MB What march was this?

RF This was on Friday. It was Labor, Environmental, Religious, Civic, Community and Student Peaceful Rally and March. I've got a statement that was read there, which was a beautiful statement that was put together by religious leaders that talked about the whole week and what was achieved. If you guys don't have it, you need to make sure you have it. This march came about very quickly on Thursday, we were basically reflecting on the week and how it was important that we be able to make a positive statement, to make a statement to reclaim our rights to protest, to reclaim our voices that had been effectively shut down by violence and by the imposition of the zone. The decision-making happened here, downstairs in Hall Eight. There was a group that had been put together, called to sit as a community and as a coalition to think about next steps. And it included, students, religious leaders, it included LELO, it included, I think your dad [Juan Bocanegra] might have been there, I can't remember, at that Thursday morning meeting. And there were different Labor folks, and Ron was running in and out and still dealing with the Mayor's office to get the police to change their tactics. There was discussion about how to respond to everything that had gone on.

MB In the middle of the week.

RF Yeah.

MB You mean the police . . .

RF Here we are on Thursday. All this has gone on. We wanted to get our message out and to reclaim our voices. So a decision, after discussion, was made to have a march the next day.

MB And that coalition was created out of that.

RF Well, it was a coalition in terms of everyone coming together dealing with the events of the week, for example from the students' perspective, obviously having been hit the hardest, and the students that had been doing civil disobedience and not doing civil disobedience, just been sitting around and getting whacked by the cops, they brought anger and disbelief. Then us just seeing what had happened and the wrongness of how protests had been met. And it was because we were in coalition and had the energy and ability that enabled us to quickly put together a march with 5,000 people.

We wanted to go into the no-protest zone on Friday to show we could have protests and that we could have our voices heard. So things happened pretty quickly. There were flyers that went out.

At that time, Thursday, there was another march that had already been pre-planned that went down to Pike Place, flyers were distributed there. We had like a war room set up in our Labor Council conference room. We had people working away dealing with all the aspects of getting sound systems, getting what the program looked like before the march. There were continuing discussions with community and religious leaders.

Once that small group that met on Thursday morning and had coalesced around the decision to march, there were still further discussions that happened throughout Thursday and Thursday evening in terms of message and signs. Things came together incredibly quickly. A wide variety of things happened very quickly, just remarkable how quickly.

I guess in terms of true coalition activities, people took ownership, came together and achieved, in a very short time, something that normally takes months to plan and figure out. And that was because everyone had been working together. And this was also something that was also more locally driven. It wasn't people from D.C. This was something, in terms of the labor movement created some tension, the National AFL-CIO had had their march, the policy people from AFL-CIO were working inside the WTO meeting trying to achieve the goals of National AFL-CIO in terms of some kind of movement on this labor standards issue. We were determined to have this march, and they were very nervous, very, very, very, very nervous -- because if the march on Friday turned violent and we had a repeat and the major sponsorship was by the Labor Council, it would not have looked good. It would have hurt what the National was trying to achieve.

Initially, I was not supportive of it, just because of the risks. And our staff was exhausted. They had already gone through lots, and we were just wasted. I think it was Ron's leadership that convinced us in terms of the sense of rightness of the march and making it understood that this was the right thing to do, we needed to do it, and was really important that we do it. Like I said, things came together quickly. I was responsible for coordinating the activities through Friday, so there were negotiations with police going on, negotiations with DAN in terms of their involvement, there were negotiations with other folks. There were various concerns. For example, we didn't understand and fully have a good sense of the Anarchists and how they were working and whether they were going to intervene in this thing and turn it the wrong way. The religious folks came, and they came in the office at 9:00 on Friday and they sat down at their computer and blasted out this great statement, which they subsequently read, and the march came off at about, I think 11:30.

MB What religious folks?

RF Rosalinda Aguirre worked with the participants there, but it was Reverend John Boonstra, Executive Minister, Washington Association of Churches, Rabbi David Fine, Reverend Tom Quigley, President-Director, Church Council of Greater Seattle, Rabbi David Seidenberg, Mike Yarrow, American Friends Service Committee, Alice Woldt, Church Council of Greater Seattle Michael Ramos, Washington Association of Churches. They wrote a beautiful statement. It's beautiful, it makes me weep every time I read the thing. It was on the evening of Hanukkah. For the Friday march we also had this portable sound truck rigged up by Bob Barnes. This Labor Council has been experienced doing a lot of actions. It just all came together incredibly well. It was peaceful, it was nonviolent, and it was ours. It was not anybody else's, it was ours. "Ours" as in this Seattle community's event.

MB So did you see a coalition of local groups?

RF Yeah, well, kind of, it was just both the emotions of that and successfully doing that with all this group of folks. At the end, there was this guy [John Quigley from Venice CA] who had done what he called aerial art at our big rally. He puts the letters on the ground and everybody stands on these letters. Its visible from the air. This time he spelled out "democracy."

It was just very moving , because it was the end and it was exhausting and kind of one more big push. And, by the nature of it, everybody was working together. I think prior to that, my sense was that we had an arms -length relationship with some of the other organizations, like Direct Action Network.

Basically, in preparation for the WTO we were looking at doing our big Tuesday rally and march and figuring out how we were going to do that, and we wanted to make sure that whatever other folks were planning in the morning was going to be cleared up and finished by that time our march came through at 1:30. We were pretty focused on our event and saw that as a huge thing. So that changed over the week and, certainly, on Friday, we were much more together. And we were respectful of the courage that was exhibited by the students and others and what they were able to do and there was a coalescing in terms labor with other folks lead by the steel workers who also got hit hard by the police.

MB So, did you learn anything from organizing the WTO?

RF Well, I think if you to plan a similar type of large event like the Tuesday rally and march you need to deal with the issue of, what would you call, tag-a-longs, or folks that have their own agenda that are attempting to influence and/or hijack a labor-sponsored event. There was an element of that that was part of this, so you've got to plan for that activity.

MB There was an element of people trying to hijack . . .

RF No, just try to move things in a different way or to their specific agenda. So from the folks who broke the windows to the folks who were in terms of our march and rally were trying to change it from a family event to something else - push it into confrontation. We invited kids, people brought their kids, we had seniors there and to a degree, as host of something like that, we were responsible for their physical well-being. We usually have the abilities to fully control the event. For example, when Labor organized the march at Watsonville [CA] in support of strawberry workers and there were 40,000 people, we are the only ones organizing the action and you can deal with safety and other things.

It's a different situation with such a broad-based activity. Probably the important thing is to know that up front and be able to have the ability to think it through and realize that there will be other organizations and other groups that are both going to be working in support and in coalition with you, but there are also going to be others that will be there that are not going to be at all in coalition and supporting, they're gonna be looking at trying to shift things around differently. And that's all the way from the cops to other protesters.

I think the other thing learned would be that, there could have been some learnings from history too. I mean, this is not unusual where message gets caught up in tactics. When you think of some of the stuff during the 60's. Read some of Todd Gitlin's analysis, both in terms of provocation that happens to make pictures and perspectives of an event be about tear gas and not about corporate globalization. There could have been a little bit more of thinking about that history and being able to take some of those lessons and applying them to something like this. But maybe that's something we all have to re-learn every time. And, I think the other lesson has been, in terms of the Friday march, the power that is possible and that feeling that when people do come together, and when they've been through a big struggle, that you need to take that opportunity to really bring people back together. The Friday march, to me, was one of the most significant events. I had responsibilities on the Tuesday march and was just dealing with the massive logistics of that event. I think that Friday march was where the focus was really broader than just kind of tactics, but was about a movement, it felt more like that type of activity. So, I don't know, I mean in terms of full sets of lessons, it was such a huge thing lessons would be difficult to apply to something

else. One lesson is obviously when you have something as choice and opportune, you can go for it and get incredible results. The question is whether we will actually be presented with something like the WTO again in the future.

MB Has this changed organized Labor?

RF Yeah, I think it has definitely changed the national AFL-CIO. It was really good for the National AFL-CIO. It was really good. It was also good for the international labor movement, the ICFTU, it was also very good for that organization, in terms of their activities being really enlivened by the activities in the street and just seeing that massive activity was very good. Yeah, it was very good, it was excellent for Labor. It was really, I think, a major turning point.

MB Is there anything else?

RF Well just, in terms of, I was going to get back into some of the things we were dealing with to organize the big Tuesday march and rally and the scale of that activity which I don't think is well known. For example, we negotiated an agreement with the border patrol to get 45 buses expedited across from Vancouver. Also the AFL-CIO had put in the field, I think at its high point, they had 25 people who were mobilizing all across the West Coast, from San Francisco on up to Vancouver, Canada. There was a train that labor paid for from Portland. And all these buses; it was a big effort. The resources, the money that was spent on putting together the whole rally and march were pretty extraordinary from the National AFL-CIO's perspective.

I think that Labor element and the size of it and the construction sites that were all shut down, that construction workers were able to, through negotiations with their employers, be able to have, basically I think they worked four days, they worked a staggered schedule to be able to do that. All these things that happened, because you had a structure to be able to put in place, to be able to get a large amount of people in. The education efforts that went on, under the central Labor Council, like with Verleene Wilder. There was a systematic process of determining how many numbers are we going to get from this union and from this local to attend. And the effort that was done to really mobilize people wasn't just about handing out flyers. It was very hard-core organizing that was going on. There were major resources put in that turned people out from all across the West Coast.

There was other mobilization activity. We were running TV ads, there were billboards that we had done in coalition with a group of environmental folks that had gone up, there had been pre-WTO, there had been all sorts of media activity that had gone on in terms of editorials and interviews. I debated Michael Moore at the University of Washington.

I think some of the pre-activity, people didn't understand is also around the structure of Labor and how, both in terms of the opportunity when it's clicking really well and how it works. That you can access from one union 100 work sites, instead of having to go to each one of those work sites and try to recruit folks. You have this incredible structure, that when it's cranking and when it's utilized, and when it's oriented appropriately can really do incredible stuff. And the power of that that I think other folks, I'm not sure they understood that. So that's kind of another aspect of the activity.

MB Was there anything about that structure, just because I think that is a really important part of the discussion, the structure that organized Labor was able to provide for the march and the demonstrations that may have not been there in the same context?

RF I think that there are two different structures that were at work, One was the Internet style of organizing that happened was also very effective put together by the students and DAN - Internet style, both in terms of having its webs and spokes and the use of the Internet.

From a labor perspective when you're really being effective, you're going out and hitting the worksites in terms of political activity. The Internet form of organizing I think was very effective here, but I'm not sure it has the institutional base to carry the fight forward. You need some kind of institutional base, and I think maybe some of that has been seen with the follow-on activities. I think, again, that, to me, has always been the beauty of Labor, you have people like me, or people like Judd or Steve Williamson who are able to, day-in and day-out, be focused on the needs of workers who are paid and they don't have to go and do other activities to make their rent. They are able and have that structure that is there to be able to carry forward the work.

So, that is ultimately the major advantage that Labor has - there's a structure. There are obviously problems with that, both in terms of hierarchy and how decisions are made.

MB So are there any last comments?

RF The Internet style of activity is something, another lesson learned, that needs to be picked up on much more strongly. Because that is, I think, a big issue that is out there for Labor is there are other people with other agendas that were communicating with union members that were almost doing disinformation and really disingenuous type of communication to union members in terms of the run-up to the activity. But that is also reality - people get information from the Internet, from email lists, and that needs to be part of the drill.

MB So are you saying that the Internet needs to be emphasized more within Labor?

RF Yes. But I think the other reality is, if you look at effective organizing you have to be able to go the worksite. So for instance the Paycheck Deception Act in California was an initiative that was targeted to de-fund Labor's ability to be active in politics. And, it initially came out with 70 percent support among union members. There was a huge campaign that turned that around, where they eventually defeated the initiative. It was defeated and also caused election of California progressives because of the big labor turnout. But that effort was not done through the Internet. That effort was done through going to jobsites and getting information into people's hands about that issue. So I still think that reality in terms of mobilization within Labor it the most effective when you're going to be is getting to jobsites. Having education as part of it, that's the other part of the model. But we could have used the Internet more.

MB During the WTO.

RF Yeah. There was not enough Internet. There are people who get information, union members and others, who get information from the Internet who could easily have obtained more information from us as things were progressing and plans were happening. That just is definitely a lesson learned, that you need to be active in that arena of communication and not just defer it, or let someone else basically define it.

MB Well, thanks a lot.

RF You're welcome.

End of Interview.