

**Interviewee: Larry Hansen**

**Affiliation: Former President of the ILWU Local 19**

**Interviewer: Miguel Bocanegra**

**Date of interview: 4 October 2000**

**Interview Summary:**

Larry Hansen, former president of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 19, describes his organization as a “very democratic” and international union. Since the 1940’s and 1950’s, ILWU delegates have been sent to meet with unions from different countries, and Hansen says these international relationships have prompted ILWU members to care deeply about the global conditions of workers. In this interview, Hansen describes how the ILWU mobilized its members for the WTO protests, his excitement at seeing many different kinds of groups coming together against globalization, and the different uprisings Seattle’s protests sparked around the world.

**MB** | I’m here with Larry Hansen. This is Miguel Bocanegra. He was a former President of the ILWU Local 19. Mr. Hansen, is it okay if we tape this phone conversation for use with the WTO project?

**LH** | Yes.

**MB** | All right. I kind of just want to start out just hearing a little bit about yourself, what kind of things you’ve been involved in to get some kind of idea who you are and how you got involved with the ILWU and just talk a little bit about yourself just for the purpose of the interview and so that people know who you are. If you could just give some background.

**LH** | Sure. Basically I was born in the ILWU. My father was a Longshoreman in San Pedro, Port of Los Angeles in California. I started in the waterfront working one night a week in my senior year in high school just to gain extra work when there was extra work on the waterfront. Since then, since 1964, I have worked on the waterfront and went to college. In 1980, I moved to the Seattle area and began to work out of Local 19 in Seattle.

**MB** | How did you become the President of the Local 19?

**LH** | We’re a very democratic Union, and we have yearly elections for several positions. In 1996, I decided to run. Since 1996 I’ve held the position for three out of four years. It’s the only three years that I’ve run. I have a personal belief that after in office for a period of time, one must go back to work to find what reality is.

- MB** How did you first start getting involved with the Union, because not all of... Is ILWU, does everybody that's in the Union have to participate in the meetings, or how did you get involved in first going to the meetings and being active in the Unions?
- LH** Again, we're very democratic of a Union. Everything is done by elections. Everything is done by a majority basis of the Union members, from local bases to area bases to what we call the division within the Longshore division of the ILWU. The ILWU is a somewhat broad Union. It goes from California to Alaska and to Hawaii, and we have different divisions, from warehouse, longshore, watchmen, cannery workers, nurses and many different job opportunities in Hawaii, from hotel workers to farm workers in pineapple and sugar cane.
- MB** So the ILWU was involved in the WTO protests. Can you put the ILWU into context of the WTO protests, why they decided to participate in the November 30<sup>th</sup> march, and maybe some of the history that kind of traces the ILWU's involvement in activism and in the labor movement?
- LH** The ILWU has always been a real international Union. In the 40's and 50's we sent delegates throughout the world every year to meet with federal Unions of different countries in the world, and the majority of these trips were to either Third World or at the time what the United States would call Socialist and Communist countries. We've always been branded as Communists or Socialists. Harry Bridges, our first president, even in the 50's had to go in front of Congress because the government was trying to deport him back to his nationally-born country of Australia. So we've always had very good ties with Longshoremen throughout the world and other workers.
- So it's basically inbred in our Union to care about the conditions of workers throughout the world. And this is one reason we felt it was important to step up and state our opinions to the press and to the world about the treatment of labor throughout the world as different world organizations have been created and now with the WTO basically being a semi-umbrella of these movements of the business world throughout the world into creating a globalization.
- MB** So what were some of the things that the ILWU specifically was concerned with participating in the WTO protest?
- LH** Well, one, I must say that, because of what we do for a living, we load and unload vessels, we are a very part of this worldly globalization because of all the products coming into this country and the products leaving this country come through the docks on the West Coast of the ILWU where our workforce works. So we've always been keen into trying to understand what is taking place in the world theater, because it's important for us and our negotiations every three years.

And we have always been concerned about the plight of workers throughout the world, and that basically set us in the position to want to take part into the WTO meetings once we found out they were going to take place on the West Coast of the United States.

**MB**

So what did you all do to mobilize your membership?

**LH**

In Seattle, Local 19 was probably a bit ahead of anybody else because we were in the Port of Seattle, and different events were taking place at least a year in advance to organize the meetings here. We took place on the steering committee of the host city. We were asked by Ron Judd, who at the time was the Secretary/Treasurer of the King County Labor Council, who now, I think, is Director of the Western Regions of the AFL/CIO, and a couple other Union leaders who work on the waterfront or near the waterfront in Seattle, were asked to take part with the Boeings and the Microsofts and the other large corporations in the area to see how it would take place in Seattle come November of last year. So we were sort of in the forefront of what was taking place.

And after we became aware how big this event was going to be, and how important it was, it dawned on us that it would be quite unique – in the beginning we thought this way – if we can get half a million Union people from throughout the world in the streets of Seattle trying to voice our opinions on the conditions of workers outside the United States, and to bring that to the forefront of the leaders in the WTO.

**MB**

So what kind of tactics did you guys use internally to develop a consciousness about the WTO, like educational stuff?

**LH**

Again, we are a democratic Union, starting from the rank and file. I was at that time on our International Executive Board, and we had a meeting, I believe, in the middle of last year, 2000, in Vancouver, Canada. And at that point I made a motion to move the next meeting from San Francisco to Seattle so that the Board members could take part and we could have our meetings in Seattle at the same time as the WTO events were taking place.

With that in mind, we began to work with the AFL-CIO and the different literature that they were starting to put together, and doing research through some of our institutes that we have started into education. With the help of the Harry Bridges Chair at the University of Washington, we were able to filter down to the different Locals information that was passed to the rank and file. And discussions were taking place at monthly local Union meetings.

We began to have an ad hoc committee created from California, Washington, Oregon, Hawaii and Alaska beginning to make arrangements to bring as many

people as we can to Seattle at that time, trying to get arrangements for lodging and airplane arrangements. We went as far as contacting several of the airline unions, pilots and stewardesses, about how we could even charter planes to bring people up from Southern California and Northern California. We also contacted Amtrak to see about logistics about trains coming into the area.

What we tried to do was get people into Seattle and out of Seattle as soon as the events started and soon after they were completed so that the problem of lack of lodging in Seattle would be very limited to the population of the ILWU who attended the rallies.

**MB**

I know that there are different factions within the AFL-CIO, different strategies of different unions that have different political backgrounds. Like you said, the ILWU has been labeled as Socialist, Communist, internationalist perspective. Were there any conflicts internal within the AFL-CIO between the ILWU's agenda and other unions that were going to be part of the national AFL-CIO march on November 30<sup>th</sup>?

**LH**

No, none at all. But I must say that we had just recently, looking at the last, I believe, eight to 10 years, re-entered the AFL-CIO, which we were kicked out many years ago because of our so-called Communistic reflection, and we felt we didn't really need to take part in the AFL-CIO until, like I said, the last eight to 10 years which we re-entered. And that's what made us even more strong of a union to understand the world theater than just the American theater.

One thing I must say is that when we had problems, it would be hard for a construction site worker or a plumber to help us out. Where we needed our help from was Longshoremen in Japan, Longshoremen in Asia, Longshoremen in Europe to respond to our demands, and that's why we basically brought the world a little bit smaller as a Union by having the relationships with these other unions who did the same type of work as we did.

**MB**

The ILWU is noted as having a massive presence during the November 30<sup>th</sup> protest. Can you explain some of what happened? What was your experience, maybe personally, during November 30<sup>th</sup> and maybe what you saw going on that day as you left? Or maybe if you can just explain the rally and coming downtown to where the direct action stuff was going on. What was some of the response from yourself and maybe other people in the ILWU?

**LH**

Our arrangements were to meet that morning at the International Fountain at the Seattle Center, and that's what we did, so that we could all enter at the same time, and we were able to accomplish that and then walk into the stadium. We were together on one wing, sitting at the same place. I felt that was a unique event that took place inside the stadium. It was a lot of energy

and everybody was on the same level and having the same opinions of what they were there for. I thought that was quite unique to have so many people there with in mind the same struggle, the struggle of workers throughout the world.

Our position was to be passive. We wanted this to be a show of Union strength, of Union's opinions, and not to be put into a commercial media presentation by seeing Union members, especially the ILWU, rioting in the streets. We felt that it was important that our positions were being heard and not anything else other than that.

**MB**

So did you guys have any formal relationships with any grassroots organizations?

**LH**

Oh, yes. Even locally speaking we began to meet with a lot of different organizations other than unions to try to get this whole thing together, and the Green parties and environmentalists and students. I think this was very unique of a situation that finally so-called leftist people and students and union people came together. As history always went and looking at the Vietnam War, individuals who were against the war, basically, had problems with Union people whenever they tried to put organized rallies against the war together. This was quite different. It was quite unique to have all these different bodies of people coming together with the same point against globalization because of concerns of people and the environment.

We've always been very strong in elements of the environment, especially in Seattle. We, in the 80's, stopped the federal government from consideration of bringing high level nuclear waste into the Seattle area, and that was probably one of the first times I saw different organizations join together, but this was quite unique at the level that we were at on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November of last year.

**MB**

Did you learn anything from organizing around the WTO that you'll apply to the future?

**LH**

Well, one, I think it was, a few months later we had another rally, and I think that was positive. And I'm concerned that more aren't taking place. The thing that I felt I learned the most was that we had strength, and that in some ways we should join together on a periodic basis and do things, not just for this, but other, even domestic problems that rise on people in this country or throughout the world, which we're not doing. We seem to, all unions, have gone back into their little place and continue the struggles that they have with the employers that they work with.

**MB**

How do you think that's going to happen?

- LH** I guess there will have to be a crisis of some type. It will be a worldwide crisis. Even today, for an example, I read in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, a periodical owned by Dow Jones out of Hong Kong, stating that once China becomes a full member of the WTO, they will lose 40 million jobs, but in exchange for that they will gain in their gross production level by two percent more per year. I think this is going to happen throughout the world, and I think workers will unite at a higher level.
- And with communication, with technology, which has been a tool of globalization, as the general populous of the world begins to use it on a daily basis, will turn on globalization and it will be a tool used to slow it down so that globalization will take the concerns of people and the environment in hand when they make their decisions.
- MB** So what do you think are the next steps for maybe the unions to organize against the WTO and these issues of globalization?
- LH** Because of, again, how it seems like unions have gone back to where they were at, I look forward for the ILWU to continue its relationship with workers in the world and try to learn from their problems and have them understand our problems and try to create networks throughout the world.
- MB** You talked about this earlier, and I'm sure you used the Internet to be involved. I know you talked about organizing workers in Japan and organizing people in other states in this country. Did you use the Internet at all to organize around the WTO? How did you do that if you did and how it affected the politics?
- LH** We have our official website and we have individuals who have created websites and chat rooms and communication levels of passing information, and all these were used. I think we're very primitive, still, in our ability to use it. I think as our workers become older and the majority of us come from a generation of common use of different technologies, we'll see a broader band of communication coming through the Internet and what technologies come in the future. But, again, I think most of our work was done in different means of traditional communication means – letters and posters and communiqués and just getting people involved by just speaking at meetings and elevating the awareness of our rank and file to the concern and the problem that will be confronting us if globalization goes to a direction that will harm the strength of workers.
- MB** Is there anything else that you'd like to add?
- LH** Well, again, I think you asked the question of what did I learn the most. Again, it's the power of just people. I thought it was very unique having students throughout the area and the United States and somewhat the world,

and workers and individuals who had other concerns, environmental concerns and political and labor prisoners throughout the world, and following up from the WTO meeting in Seattle, the different uprisings that have taken place – the one in Bangkok the first of the year, the one in Australia prior to the beginning of the Olympics, and the one in Prague just last week in dealing with the World Bank and the situation that is taking place even today, as we speak, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of October in Amsterdam in dealing with the President of the World Bank going to give a talk, and basically the uprisings and the people wanting to show that there are different opinions out there being brought to the media and being at least listened to, that there are other opinions, and what the corporate and global scene is trying to push at us.

**MB**

Well, great. Thanks a lot. I'm going to go ahead and turn off the recorder now.

**End of Interview**

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