

**Interviewer: Margaret Levi**

**Affiliation: Former Harry Bridges Chair and Director, University of Washington Center for Labor Studies**

**Interviewer: Miguel Bocanegra**

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**Interview Summary:**

Margaret Levi, the former Director for the Center for Labor Studies at the University of Washington, describes her lifelong history of activism in this interview. Under Levi, the Center for Labor Studies held a symposium called Labor Rights as Human Rights to raise questions about the WTO and encourage discussion between people with very different viewpoints. While Levi explains that this forum did little to organize undergraduates, the Center for Labor Studies was important as a supporting, rather than a mobilizing, force for students. Levi goes on to discuss the ideological splits between and within unions, the important history of labor activism in Seattle, and her excitement over the revival of conversation between the labor unions and other activists (after their split during the anti-war movement).



**MB**

This is Miguel Bocanegra. I'm here with Margaret Levi, the Ex-Director for the Center for Labor Studies. It's November 21, 2000. We're at the University of Washington. I guess if you could start out with a brief bio of yourself and kind of some significant points that led you and the Center for Labor Studies into participation with the WTO protests.

**ML**

Let me start with what led us into the WTO protests, because that will explain, and then I'll get into the bio as a part of that.

When we heard the WTO was coming to town and that the labor movement in particular was organizing to raise crucial issues about labor standards, that immediately sounded like something we, at the Center, should be behind and be part of. Personally, for me, it was a continuation of a whole series of actions, which started in my childhood.

So, I'll give you my activist bio as opposed to how I became a professor of political science bio. My activist bio really starts when I was a kid growing up in Baltimore and the civil rights movement was in play. It was in the 50's. I guess I started school as a little kid when the schools were still segregated, but by the time I was seven or eight, the schools were integrated.

My mother, who was very active in the League of Women Voters, one of the few organizations in which women could play political leadership roles at that time, would take my sister and me on civil rights demonstrations throughout our childhood. She made us dress up and wear matching outfits the way kids did in those days to my sister's and my infinite and continued embarrassment.

But we looked very well put-together, very middle class. Part of what my mother and her friends were trying to convey was that this was a movement that was supported by the white middle class as well as by those who were immediately affected by the inequities of racial segregation and the lack of civil rights.

So I grew up in a city that was in the process of integrating, integrating not only the schools, but also there were all kind of public institutions which, as a child, I didn't go to, like the Major Theatre, because it wouldn't allow blacks in the doors and it wouldn't even allow blacks to be performers on certain occasions. So it wasn't until I was, I think, in high school before there were places that were very much part of what a middle class Jewish kid would have done that I got to. So thinking about civil rights issues is very much a part of my childhood.

By the time I was in high school, the civil rights movement had taken a somewhat different turn. I was involved in something called the Northern Student Movement (NSM), which was the northern version of SNCC, Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. What it did was to organize tutorial projects in inner cities in the North, Baltimore, although in the border state of Maryland, was by that time integrated.

As a high school student, I organized a group of my friends to help set up the Northern Student Movement's offices up and then to be high school tutors, and I ran one of the sites in the slums of East Baltimore through my senior year in high school. The Northern Student Movement was a very radical project for the times, and it did do some economic justice issues, but it focused primarily on educating the next generation and making sure that people actually had equal opportunities in the schools. There were activist pieces. That was the summer of '63 and we did all go off to the major demonstration for jobs and freedom and justice in Washington, D.C., and heard the Martin Luther King "I have a Dream" speech. That was an incredible part of that summer. And with Danny Schechter's leadership, we mobilized to shut down a chicken factory that was polluting the water and the air of the neighborhood.

By the summer after my senior year in high school, ERAP came to Baltimore. ERAP, which was part of SDS (Students for a Democratic Society). Let's see if I can remember anymore what ERAP stands for – Economic Rights and Action Project. And that was going yet another step beyond. It was really

organized around, and very fundamentally focused on economic justice issues and organizing people to take control of their neighborhoods and their lives and to try to get rules and laws and policies changed.

I was already in SDS when ERAP arrived. I had joined when I was 16 and a high school senior; I was part of the Johns Hopkins University branch. My NSM activities led me there. By the time I was a freshman in college, I was on the National Council, because Bryn Mawr College, where I went, had almost no members in SDS. There were only five of us, so I became a member of the National Council and was at the meeting in December 1964 when I.F. Stone told us about this funny little country called Vietnam that none of us had ever heard of. He told us what the Americans were doing there, and we decided to organize a demonstration against the war, which led to the first demonstration to end the war in Vietnam in the spring of 1965. I helped organize Bryn Mawr and Haverford, and over a third of both campuses appeared at that demonstration.

A lot of what I did during college was anti-war activity. I arrived at Harvard, where I went to grad school, in time for the Harvard strike, which was also about the war. I was an active participant in the Harvard strike, which was in '69, the spring of '69. In fact, I was part of the leadership of a group of people allied with but distinct from SDS. Our emphasis was the issues that had to do with Harvard's expansion into the surrounding community and with issues that were internal to Harvard as well as the anti-war stuff. We were trying to change some of Harvard's practices, not just trying to get Harvard administrators to oppose the war in Vietnam.

I was very involved with a whole series of community action-related projects and internships and things, which I helped to run in the South End of Boston, a black and Hispanic neighborhood which was an area that was being subjected to urban renewal, which was totally destroying existing neighborhoods.

Lots of things changed at that point, I think. One, the nature of the movements slowed down considerably. We moved into a fairly conservative era in terms of who was President and what was going on in the country. I got very involved with my own academic development. I was always politically involved, but it became a much more marginal, part of my life. I was active in the Teaching Fellows Union at Harvard. We had a one-day strike there. I was clearly part of that, and there are stories to tell about that.

By the time I got here, to teach here, in 1974, my political commitments were as strong as they'd ever been, but I'd say my activism had dwindled to very little. There were things I did, subsequently, in the 20+ years between when I arrived at the UW and the founding of the Harry Bridges Chair and the Center for Labor Studies, but you've got my basic activist bio now.

I continued to be involved in things here in Seattle, but I really got seriously involved again when the Bridges Chair and Center for Labor Studies got developed. It became a location that allowed me and others to really find a way to use the skills that we had developed as academics in the service of a larger set of social movement issues. It was also a very interesting time. I was the third Bridges Chair Director of the Center for Labor Studies. The Center was founded in '92, and I became the director in '96, just about the time when John Sweeney was elected the President of the AFL-CIO.

So I became the Director just as the Labor movement's level of activism went up a serious set of notches, and where its commitment to organizing was really revitalized, which is what had always interested me. As you can hear from this activist biography, part of what really drives me are issues of community organizing and organizing around questions of economic and social justice.

I became the Bridges Chair and Director of the Center at a time when the Labor movement was really becoming active and that re-fed my activism and gave me ways to express it. The WTO was a logical outcome of that. Here was a way in which we, as members of the academic community who can know some things about the nature of globalization and the nature of labor law and the kinds of practices that are going on, can use our research capacities to unveil and reveal various kinds of behaviors of governments and corporations and whatever. We could actually put our skills to use in the service of issues of social and economic justice that we cared about deeply.

It was a no-brainer to encourage, to use the Center for Labor Studies, as one of the resources for the labor movement in their efforts to organize people to raise serious questions about the WTO and about Labor movement strategies in relation to the WTO.

**MB** What kind of things did the Center for Labor Studies participate in leading up to the WTO protests and then kind of through the protests?

**ML** There were a couple of different things that we did. One was to hold a forum that we did jointly with the Human Rights Education Research Network (HRERN) that Bruce Kochis directs.

We ran a joint symposium, had speakers who represented various perspectives on sweatshops and on labor standards and on labor rights. All of the speakers were committed to serious change, some believe you can work through organizations like the Fair Labor Action Coalition; others did not. Some of them were from NGOs, some were from the Labor movement, some are extremely left wing, some are more moderate. But all raised important questions about what the WTO was all about and what were the human rights and labor rights issues that were there. We discussed various strategies,

because there, in fact, were a number of possible strategies to take in terms of raising issues with and about the WTO. Should one simply oppose it? Should one try to change it? If one wanted to change it, what was the best way to do that?

So it wasn't so much strategy about what to do in the street as what to demand of the WTO. It was a symposium called Labor Rights as Human Rights. So that was one of the things we did.

We also hired a student, Webster Walker, who only worked for a brief period of time for us as a student organizer. We wanted to figure out ways to reach the undergraduates in order to alert them to what was going on and to energize them and get them involved to the extent that they felt comfortable being involved and we felt that we weren't undergraduates. What we, as faculty, or we, as graduate students, thought would be worth doing or what appealed to us, or what we heard wasn't the same as what undergraduates heard.

We wanted to ensure that we had some capacity to literally speak to the undergraduates in ways that they could hear. So we kept searching for ways to do that and to enable those students who wanted to organize around the WTO to be able to do so.

I was teaching an introduction to labor studies course that quarter leading up to the WTO. I invited Tico Almeda to come to talk to the class. He was doing student organizing for the AFL-CIO; Kathy Lowenberg was working with him at the time. She is a local, in fact a UW grad; he was from the national office. She was from the King County Labor Council. Tico was one of the founders of United Students Against Sweatshops at Duke, and then came out here to help organize students against the WTO.

I ran a sort of speakers series within my class that people could take for extra credit or for credit, so there were other students who would appear on the days when I had these speakers come who would speak to various issues that the WTO raised, to various issues of labor rights, to the effect of the nature of the changes in the global economy, on the nature of work and rights within the region.

Speakers included Larry Hansen, who was then President of Local 19, ILWU, who came and talked about what was happening internationally in the ports and on the docks and elsewhere. As I said, Tico was one of the speakers. Tyree Scott, President of LELU, came and spoke from his perspective about what was going on. So I had a variety of people come to talk about those issues and to sort of bring them home. What is happening here that then has impact there, or what's happening there that then has impact here.

What else did we do? A group of us went to the demonstration as a cohort. Betsi Beem, then the Assistant Director of the CLS, David Olson, the first Bridges Chair and CLS director, me and a couple of others – I think Jim Gregory was going to join us and then got sick that day, but we had a location and announced it so that we could march together should we so choose, and a bunch of us did. So there was, in fact, a Center for Labor Studies delegation there. And Sasha Turner, the CLS undergraduate assistant, was on the podium as a representative of the Washington Students Against Sweatshops.

**MB**

How successful do you think some of those things were as far as getting undergraduates to participate, because I know it hasn't been a long time since... Even the civil rights movement on this campus, that many students really weren't mobilized around some of the critical issues, like ethnic studies, in the sixties. Its been awhile since we were able to mobilize thousands of students on this campus. I'm wondering how successful, how integral of a part do you think, that these kind of teaching forums and things like that, because there was a lot of people at these forums. How successful do you think that they were in getting people to think about these issues?

**ML**

Actually it was interesting. Our little forum, the one on "Labor Rights as Human Rights," attracted very few people. I think that in terms of what the Center for Labor Studies tried to do in terms of organizing undergraduates, we didn't do very much. We didn't have much impact.

What really had the impact were the students who were out there who really believed intensely about this and managed to organize other students. You know some of them. You are one of them. We were trying to facilitate your and others' efforts, but I'm not sure we totally succeeded in that. I'm not sure we made the connections, totally succeeded in making the connections. We wanted to in terms of the WTO.

I think what we did succeed in doing was to make it clear that the Bridges Chair and CLS are here, and that we are willing to help. We were supportive when the Washington Students Against Sweatshops organized; we were seen as a locus of support. And so I think in the long run we've had a real impact on some of the issues that were being raised around the WTO. Our follow-up forum, which I think you attended, "What Do We Do From Here?" was very well attended by students as well as faculty and staff and local unionists. I think that did have a big effect. I think some real and hard questions got asked. I think some good connections among people got made. I think some coalitions got reinforced.

I think the follow-up forum was very important and very effective. I think if we asked the Washington Students Against Sweatshop, they would see the Center for Labor Studies as having played an important role in helping them. We organized a letter for faculty in support of what they were trying to do in

terms of getting the University to join the WRC and to leave the FLA, so I think we had some influence that way.

I think it was important for us to make the commitment to try in the fall of '99, even though I think our ability to do much was pretty limited. But I think it did signal that we're here and that we play that role and that we're glad to play that role. You may have to convince us to provide support, but it's not that hard if your issues are just.

**MB** When you went downtown as part of the delegation, what was your experience the first day? You went down on November 30<sup>th</sup> with the students, is that right?

**ML** No, I didn't walk down with the students. I went independently. I sat with the ILWU delegation and with a couple of people from the University of Washington.

**MB** How was your experience, because there's been stories of splits within Labor, and ILWU actually being kind of, one of the more militant unions within the labor movement advocating for international labor rights. What did you notice as far as being involved, maybe with organized Labor downtown on November 30<sup>th</sup> maybe as far as some of the splits within the organized Labor movement? What did you notice?

**ML** Let me just digress for one second, Miguel, because I think that the other role that we played last fall was letting organized Labor know that they had a presence on campus. I don't meant that we're a yes man for everything that organized Labor asked, but that they have an ally, that there's someone here at the UW, there's a group on campus that really is open to discussing and creating a forum outside of the normal King County Labor Council halls or wherever where people can come and get information, learn and debate, and we've been doing that for awhile, so it wasn't like the WTO was the first time.

The Strikes! conference happened the previous spring of '99. It was one of several events that reinforced what the labor movement as a whole was trying to do and that created an on-going and illuminating conversation between labor activists and academics.

In terms of the splits within the Labor movement, there were serious tensions. There are always and will always be serious tensions The Labor movement is not homogenous in terms of kinds of workers or ideologies. But there were a couple of issues that were going on especially relevant to the WTO.

I think – how do I want to frame this? I think there are unions which, or union memberships who, for very ideological reasons, reasons that I actually share, see that even if they might lose a few jobs or lose a little income in the short

run, that it's much better to support rank-and-file elsewhere... They have a long-term view of the Labor movement and what it means to have economic justice, and it isn't just for their particular pocketbook. It's the whole Labor movement. They'll be better off in the long run, and certainly their children will be better off if the whole labor movement is raised. If you allow some part of the Labor movement or some part of the workforce to be exploited, there will be a race to the bottom, exploitation will lead to everybody being dragged down in a competitive way.

So it's a sophisticated self-interest, if you will, though it's, I think, also very ideologically driven and motivated.

Why are you laughing? You agree? You disagree?

**MB**

No, I think that's interesting that you bring that sophisticated self-interest. I guess I'll talk to you about it later, this rational choice. I don't know if it's appropriate for the tape, but it just made me think of kind of like a broader... I never thought of rational choice in that context, so that's kind of why I was laughing.

**ML**

Well, you think of the ILWU slogan, "An injury to one is an injury to all." I think that summarizes some of what I'm saying here is that they really perceive that we're all stronger if we're all taking care of each other. But it's also a very solidaristic notion, but it's a solidaristic notion that encompasses your brothers and sisters who you've never met and who are living in some foreign country and who in one sense are quite competitive with you, because they're making goods that are lowering the price of labor here, right?

So there are two ways you can treat that. The other response is much more protectionist: We're feeling all these global pressures, let's protect our borders. Let's protect our jobs. Let's protect our incomes, and if that requires rules and regulations, which block goods from being traded, so be it. In this view, the labor standards issue is a manipulative way to block competition from other countries. Or at least so it is often perceived.

So that was one source of conflict that really comes out of that kind of ideology. It leads to, on the one hand, a very protectionist kind of approach, like some of the Teamsters. Not all of the Teamsters. On the other hand, there is a very open border kind of approach, as in the case of many of the ILWU, but not all of the ILWU. There are splits within those unions, as well. It's just you hear the leadership position as the dominant one.

And then there were differences in strategy even within those two large groups, so there were people who wanted to shut everything down. There were people who wanted to engage in non-violent resistance. There were people who wanted to go to jail, and people who opposed civil disobedience



as well as violence. There were people who were willing to find a kind of compromise position in order to build coalitional politics with the environmentalists, with Jubilee 2000. There were others who wanted to take a harder and, often, narrower line.

So there were all kinds of strategic conflicts about which people got really, really intense. Ron Judd, for example, took a kind of compromise position. He didn't want to close the WTO down, but he objected to much of what the WTO was doing. He wanted to ensure that it included labor rights as part of its mission and that it used trade as a sanctioning device in order to enable countries to raise their labor standards or to punish countries that didn't, and enable the labor movement in other countries.

He nonetheless wanted to build a broad base coalition, and that meant some compromises with other groups. He, therefore, got a lot of attack from all kinds of sides, from the right, from the left, from people with slightly different strategic views. So there were really interesting debates that were going on, some of which were, I thought, silly, but some of which were very substantive debates about what the appropriate strategy is. When should you compromise and when shouldn't you? How important is the coalition? Who should the coalition be with?

There was all that kind of stuff going on, which I'm only beginning to sort out. It's part of what I'm looking forward to from the WTO History Project. It may actually give us enough of a grasp of who the players were and what the issues were, so that as a political scientist, I can step back and say, okay, this is what the real coalitional fights were about. These were where the real lines were.

We're still at the point in this when personalities are taking on too much importance. People like Mike Dolan. Your father is furious at him. It's like a Homeric epic whenever Dolan's name gets mentioned and your father is in the room. We hear this list of negative adjectives that attach to Dolan's name. When Tyree Scott's name gets mentioned in certain circles, you hear another list of adjectives, even among people who really like Tyree but are furious about the position that he took during the WTO. Ron Judd's name provokes the same reaction..

I would like to get beyond that point where we've got this list of adjectives attached to particular names because of their positions and really figure out what these positions were and what the implications of them were and who was lined up with what and why. I think we're not quite there yet. We're still almost too much in the moment, but we're beginning to get enough distance to be able to sort these things out.

**MB**

How did some of this stuff play out in the protests? Like the march? Because I've heard stories from other union folks that say that some folks actually broke away from the big labor march and decided to stick around downtown with the Direct Action folks. Like people like Steve Williamson who ended up being gassed and pepper sprayed and stuff. So I'm just wondering...

**ML**

One of the things about demonstrations as you no doubt know from having been in enough of them yourself by now is that if they're big enough, it's a little bit like a war. You don't really know what's going on. You only know what's going on in the spot where you are, right?

So, we were getting these – I was, I don't know, maybe halfway down in the demonstration, in that huge demonstration, and we were getting reports that we were supposed to go this way and not that way and there was some path we were supposed to take. We got to that juncture and it wasn't at all clear what to do. I mean, not a clue what to do.

So we ended up – as I said, I was with a group of ILWU people, and we ended up taking a left onto, I guess it was, Pine, and ending up right in front of the Paramount Theater where the WTO delegates were trying to go. David Olson at that point got split off from us. We just lost each other, and he ended up going straight ahead and ended up standing next to Tom Hayden, one of the founders of SDS, who is a state legislator from California.

So David was standing next to Tom and got percussion bombed and has lost some of his hearing as a result of that. I think David ended up in a place you weren't supposed to be unless you were going with the Direct Action Network people, and I think we ended up in a place we weren't supposed to be, because I think you were then supposed to take another left onto Ninth or Eighth or something. We didn't - we stayed right there.

You hadn't a clue whether what you were doing was a statement of a position about this issue of staying with the Labor people or staying with the Direct Action Network people. Betsi and I were marching along with the ILWU. We lost David, and we had no idea what we were saying by where we were standing, other than that we were still part of the labor march organized by the AFL-CIO to protest the WTO.

**MB**

Did you notice that, kind of getting back to some of the educational stuff, did you notice that the Internet played a role in the communications and the facilitation of education?

**ML**

Well, it played a role in terms of communication and coordination, but it's been playing that role for a while. And by Internet, I literally mean email in terms of websites and that kind of thing.

Remember, we were here, so it wasn't like we needed to be brought here; we had our location in a sense. We were part of the efforts by the AFL-CIO and its counterpart, the King County Labor Council, to organize a major demonstration to protest the WTO. So my need to turn to the Internet to get information was pretty low.

I was aware of the Direct Action Network and was talking to some of those people, but it wasn't like I was directly involved in that..

**MB**

You didn't have your ...

**ML**

It wasn't like I had to figure out what the Direct Action folks or Anarchists were going to be doing there, so I didn't need the Internet for anything but to just stay in communication with a couple of people I needed information from, and as I said, that I've been doing for years.

It certainly helps. It certainly facilitates that communication. It's nice not to have to track people down on their phones and leave messages. You just get a big message telling you where to be at what time and what to do and 40,000 of you would get it at once.

**MB**

Is there anything else that you'd like to add that you didn't cover?

**ML**

I guess the thing I want to say is something that David Olson and I also said in the piece that we wrote for *Politics and Society*, and I think it's real important to keep this in mind as part of the context: Seattle is the city in which protest has flourished in the past and will flourish again and in particular protest that has been inspired by Labor.

It is the site of the Seattle general strike, one of the only, if not the only, general strike in the United States. It was a major location for the big strikes during the 1930's, which basically shut down the city at that point as well, particularly the maritime strikes and the waterfront strikes.

The WTO events in some ways are part of a continuing, though quite punctuated history of Labor activism in this part of the country. In this case, it was Labor activism joined and sometimes superseded by other kinds of activism as well, and that's the news. I think that the interesting thing is the kinds of coalitions that were developing and the kinds of protest partners that were revealed, and the kinds of ways in which people discovered each other and their common interests. We've been emphasizing the conflicts that existed, and there are real conflicts. I think some of them are quite important conflicts to both exist and to work out or not to work out; to just let be there as conflicts. People have different issues that they think are really important, and all those issues are important in a way, and you've got to have people

struggling on each of those dimensions, and not making trade-offs, right, just for the sake of a coalition.

But I think that one of the things that was also revealed was not only the conflict, but also the coalition potential. People, who came from very different kinds of groups, both in terms of what issues they cared about and how they were organized, discovered each other and all the ways they could learn from each other. There was a lot of learning going on in the months that led up to the WTO and that followed it.

One of the cases that I talk about a little bit, but it's only one of many, it's just an illustration, is the alliance between the Steelworkers and the group of environmentalists from Oregon who were involved in trying to prevent certain trees from being cut down, and their discovery that they were, in fact, fighting the same corporation. This gave them a basis for talking to each other and working together and trying to teach each other about the issues that concerned each of them that seemed to stand in the way of their being partners. It turned out some of those issues couldn't be resolved, but many of them just required learning about each other, learning what was involved, learning why environmentalists are so intense about saving trees, why workers are so concerned that trees not be put before jobs, and how you could, in fact, resolve that issue, because there are ways to resolve that issue. Not always. Not everywhere, but there are ways to resolve it.

I thought there was a lot of that going on, which I would like to understand more about. I think the conflicts within the labor movement were in many ways predictable. They played out in ways that were mostly predictable, occasionally surprising, and we'll learn more about it as a result, I think, of the research that is being done.

But what we know very little about is how people can come to learn ways in which they can, in fact, fight together around a diverse set of issues that seem at first glance to be potentially in conflict with each other. I think that's really exciting, and I think that's the most important thing that came out of the WTO. Now whether it lasts, I don't know. That's another issue, but there was a potential revealed there that I've never quite seen in that form before.

When you think about it... I told you something of my activist biography. When I was involved with the anti-war movement and then in those early days of SDS, one of our first impacts was really... I was on this march in '63 to Washington, the march for jobs and justice and freedom, the one that Martin Luther King spoke at, and it was automobile workers and civil rights people. The unions were there, right? And then you get the anti-war movement and the unions are on the other side. I don't want to imply that they were all a part of the civil rights movement or that all were supporters of the War in

Vietnam. But you did have a group of unions that were very actively in coalition with other non-union groups during the Civil Rights Movement.

By the time you get to the anti-war movement, you're seeing an almost total split between the labor movement and the anti-war activists. They see their issues as at odds with each other, and we have not seen a revival of a possibility of conversation between those two groups until this very recent period, particularly around the WTO. That was very inspiring to me and very exciting to me, and I think that's the real positive consequence of this.

**MB**

Thanks.

**End of Interview**

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