

**Interviewee: Regino Martinez (RM)**

**Affiliation: El Centro de la Raza**

**Interviewer: Monica Ghosh (MG)**

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MG | How and why did you get involved in the WTO mobilizations?

RM | How? It was very difficult to not hear and know about it, of course, because of media and the attention that was all of a sudden put on Seattle over the whole WTO thing. Some of the controversies before, even prior to it coming, of course, was how would the system handle it, what was the mayor going to do, that type of thing. So, seeing how it involved workers' rights and that kind of stuff...

We, as an organization, since our inception 27 years ago, have always been for labor and for workers, very pro-workers' rights and that type of thing. I think as a people, not just an organization, but outside of that, plus people of color, we've always been interested in supporting workers' rights and minimizing, or trying to minimize, globalization, free trade, all that kind of stuff that benefits our country a lot, but hurts other countries, developing countries, Third World countries.

Why did I personally get involved? Because it became a moral question. Are we going to let the powers that be, this mysterious, exclusive organization, make laws and run themselves without any intervention from government? Are we going to allow that to happen? That's kind of what I think on it as this is ridiculous. This is wrong. This is immoral. This is vicious. There is an organization that makes trade decisions on a global scale without having to be held accountable or to have to report to anybody about their vicious tactics, not taking into anything into consideration, environmental impact, equality, justice, that whole thing.

So that's what I took on, as a personal thing, is this is wrong. This is going to benefit the powers of the world, and in this case the United States. It's going to benefit them the most, and everybody else is going to shit, basically. So that's why I got involved.

MG | What did you guys do to mobilize your members?

RM | Members is not a good word. Constituents, perhaps, or just a community is another good way to put it. Everything we do, especially when it comes to making major political decisions, we do it by consensus. One person does not just say, the Executive Director or another director doesn't just say, "This is what's going to happen. This is what we're going to do. You are with us or you're not."

We always come together and discuss and dialogue and in some cases debate what's best for the organization and for our community, because I feel that we do represent a large portion of the Latino community in that aspect. So that's what we did first. We came together. We discussed it, what's going to happen in this city, and we cannot be left out basically. So we talked about it, and we decided that it would be a very good thing to mobilize, to get the word out, let people know that this is happening, that we need to be part, we need to have a presence, and we talked with other members, other leaders of the Latino community.

We put flyers together. We did mass faxing, email lists, phone calls, word of mouth stuff, and just let as many people know about it as possible, and then just kind of making sure that we weren't reinventing the wheel, that we were kind of going along the same lines as other people, other organizations or groups within the Latino community, kind of had the same kinds of grounds as far as getting people there. So that's what we did.

MG Did your organization have past experience with massive demonstrations and civil disobedience?

RM In our early days? I obviously was not here. I wasn't born yet, but the organization was founded as a result of.... 1972 was fresh out of their, I would say, right in the middle of the whole civil rights struggle, Vietnam, Nixon, his anti-poverty cutbacks, and that type of thing. So as a result of all that stuff and all the political turmoil and civil disobedience that was going on in those times, even though it was four years ago, more than that since Martin Luther King had been assassinated, there was still a lot of bitterness within communities of color, not just the African Americans, but also the Latino community, because obviously he spoke for everybody who had been oppressed.

So we did have a history, we've had a history of mobilizations and protests, civil disobedience, non-violent direct action type of thing. I've heard stories and I've seen pictures and that kind of stuff about a lot of that stuff that we were involved in in the early days as far as mobilizing people, what they did. In early days, they did a lot of stuff related to Farm Worker issues, mobilizing people to march, to boycott lettuce and grapes because a lot of those industries were not recognizing United Farm Workers as a reputable Labor movement.

Yes, there has been a long history of that; the garbage workers stuff has been kind of an ongoing thing. The Boeing workers, the hospital workers, so yes, we've been involved in a lot of that stuff historically, so yes, again, it fell right along the lines of some of our principles and our goals as, not just a social service organization, but as a civil rights social justice organization, so it went right along with all that stuff.

MG What was your relationship with the labor community during the protests?

RM Again, it's been kind of off and on as far as I know. Like I said, we've always been, as an organization and as part of a movement, we've always had an understanding of workers and the right to workers and the right to fair wages and the right to speak about

just your basic constitutional rights. Like I said, we've always played a supportive role in that aspect of the movement, as a Labor movement, but I guess as a formal governing entity or whatever of Labor, historically, they've been, in my personal opinion aside from my ties with the organization, in my personal opinion I feel that organized Labor has had kind of a racist point of view on workers.

A lot of their unions have been very exclusive, and not inclusive. They've been, I feel, like I said, that they've been racist. They want just white people to be part of their union, and people of color have been kind of left out of the picture in some ways. That shows a lot in the early organizing efforts of the United Farm Workers and the other organizations, other unions that came out of that whole struggle. There was a lot battling between the United Farm Workers and the AFL-CIO, which is the one who says, "Okay. Yeah, now you're a union," and that type of thing.

So there's been that, not just us as an organization, but as a people, people of color, Latino people or African American people, Asian people, Native American people historically have struggled with that whole aspect of labor unions and their racist views on rights of workers. So, again, it's not just our organization, but I think the people we've seen that's happened a lot. So, again, our relationship to a degree has been good with Labor, but to another degree, it's not been so good, and it's because of that, because of the way they're operating.

MG How was your relationship, like, during the protests, because you guys participated in the rally?

RM Again, they gave us a formal invitation. The AFL-CIO office called El Centro and asked us to become, to be part of the march, to be part of the rally, and to organize our constituents and our community to be part of it. So, again, and despite any conflicts we've had with them in the past, we felt it necessary and we picked the moral high ground and said, "You know what? We're going to look past our differences, because this goes beyond differences. This goes beyond racial barriers. This goes to justice and equality for people in the world." So that was our take on it was we're not going to sit here and bicker about, "Well, you guys didn't want to do this," or "you did want to do that," or whatever, versus, "Hey. You know what? We're going to participate, because it's the right thing to do."

MG Was it a positive experience?

RM It was a very positive experience just to see so many people in one area coming together for basically the same thing. There was a pretty large Latino contingent at the march, which was a beautiful thing, and not only the Latino community. There was a wonderful Vietnamese contingent. There were people from all over the place. People from Africa. People from different parts of Asia, South America, people from Canada, so it was great to see that.

There were a lot of people there from different areas and different backgrounds culturally, and just to see that they came together for one thing. So, yes, it was a very positive experience, definitely.

MG The question is worded kind of funny, and I'm just realizing it now, but what were the positive aspects of participating through an organization that promotes the people of color, I guess, or promotes their interests, and what advantages do you think you gained?

RM Could you go over the first part of the question?

MG What were the positive aspects of participating through an organization of color?

RM Well, in any movement for justice and positive social change, it's beneficial to the movement to have organization and not just to have an issue, because issues come up everyday. The issue dies out, and the people supporting that issue die with it. But if you have organization, you have a base and you have a way of coming back after that issue and learning from it, from your triumphs as well as your mistakes, and moving on.

So it's always beneficial to partake in any kind of movement with an organization rather than just an individual, and that kind of goes along with the difference between an anarchist and a person who is involved in an organization, because my understanding of anarchy is if the individual and what the individual wants to do and what the individual wants to change, and as the saying goes, there is power in numbers. So it is extremely beneficial, not just to a person, but to a whole entire movement and to a whole entire people to be a part of an organization. That support advocate works with people and advocates for rights and for justice and equality and liberation of riding out of an oppressing way, oppression.

So, again, I feel it was very beneficial to join in and to protest with an organization or as part of an organization, so yes. Is that adequate for the first part of the question?

MG Yeah.. What advantages do you think you gained?

RM Do you mean personally, or as an organization?

MG Both.

RM Well, personally, I gained a knowledge of how stuff works and how civil disobedience, I guess, and direct action can have an effect on both positively and negatively in this thing such as the WTO. It seemed to me that this march and this rally were kind of the beginning and the end of the positive, non-violent direct action of the whole week. I think it was on Tuesday that... The Seattle march was on Tuesday, right?

At the end of the march, it went all to chaos rapidly, and it was painful to see that because it was a positive step forward to combine efforts and energy into this march. Right towards the end of it was when all hell broke loose. So that was, like I said, it was kind of the beginning and the end of the positive force of this whole week.

I learned from that. I learned that a small, little spark just created all this hell. I didn't see anything... I didn't see any...because when the march started, again, it was absolutely peaceful. It was wonderful. People were yelling and screaming and biting and kicking, but in a good way, not in a bad way.

It was just great to see people coming together and there were no cops around. I mean, they were there to guide us and to block the streets off and everything, but there was no, like, riot police or anything crazy like that, so I didn't get to see any of that. I guess in a way I'm happy that I didn't see it, but in a way, I'm kind of disappointed that I didn't hang around to kind of see what the atrocities of the police and how they handled people, and the people themselves.

The Anarchists, I guess, if you want to call it, that were just... They had no program. They had no program, no base, no organization. They were just out there. "Well, let's just go and break a window and let's just go burn up a garbage container or whatever." Of course, the media always clings to the negative, always sensationalizes the negative. Again, that took away from the positive of what people were trying to do, and that was disappointing.

So I learned from that. I learned how, even though I knew already, but I learned even more about how the media plays a crucial role in what people think, and a lot of people, I feel, in our society, take what the media says as fact, and that's not true. In a lot of ways, that is not true. What the media projects is not always the facts, because the media's a business. It's part of our capitalist society. The media wants to sell, sell, sell. Sell the newspaper. Sell the article. Sell their program on tv or whatever.

That's their business. If it's not sensational and if it's not violent and if it's not crazy or controversial, then it doesn't get a lot of play. I learned from that. I guess that's an advantage. I don't know if it's an advantage or disadvantage.

As an organization, we learned how having a base and having a program and having that, just those two items, help a lot. They are very beneficial in these kind of things, in organizing and mobilizing. I feel that we're a reputable organization. We've had our share of disappointments, and we've had our share of victories. I believe we're a controversial organization, because we're not a mainstream organization. We don't sell out to a lot of the structural stuff that our society kind of imposes on us, funding sources, cities, politicians and politics.

We're always questioning that, questioning authority, and the fact that we have an organization. We have a city block that is a liberated area. We've struggled and we've won and we've lost and we've been able to have this area, this property here, for us. We've purchased it and it's ours and it's for the community. It's not for one person or two people. It's for anybody who needs it and has a tie to it.

Again, as a result of all that kind of stuff, it helped us out. It helped us to see all the stuff that's going on and see that we do have... When we talk and when we make a

point, there are people that listen. Of course, there are people that say, "Oh, those guys are crazy communists or whatever." These people say negative things, of course.

Again, that goes along with the whole movement. There's people all over the place who will agree, and there's a whole lot of other people who disagree. You just kind of go with it. If you disagree, well, hey, I'm sorry, and we move on. So we learned a great deal about that.

MG What moment of the rally had the biggest impact on you?

RM The march. The rally itself, the program, was way too long. There was a lot of Labor leaders that spoke and they all pretty much, after awhile, if you hear them talking, they all kind of project pretty much the same message. They may use different words and phrases and all, but they're basically saying the same thing. Labor is the end-all, cure-all to all the ailments of the world. If we have unions in every workforce in the world, everything will be fine and everybody will have a fair wage and everybody will be great, and we'll be able to join hands and sing Christmas carols, whatever. That's what they project. It's good on one side, and it's maybe not so good on another side in my personal opinion.

So, yes, the rally, itself, was good. Like I said, it was good to see all these people coming together for one cause, a large amount of people which is beautiful, wonderful. I felt like a part of the bigger thing, which was just an absolutely amazing experience just to see that. And again, to see a lot of my people there, a lot of Latino people there, coming together and joining in an effort. As I said, there were farm workers, unions, student groups, community organizations, and some of them even supporting organizations in Mexico and stuff like that, so there were people here representing the Zaptista movement, which was wonderful, because, again, that has something to do with Labor as well.

But the march, itself, was more of a positive feeling for me. Again, you're walking down a road and a street in the city, and there's thousands of people around you, and you're basically all there for the same thing. So that was a pretty wonderful experience, to feel the energy. There was a very positive, strong energy in the group. I felt that, so that was probably the best feeling for me.

MG Did you guys use the Internet a lot in your activities to organize?

RM Not a whole lot. We sent emails out. Obviously, there was email flying all over the place that was related to WTO, but I think we used the traditional way of information, just word of mouth, flyers, phone calls, that type of stuff. So we didn't really use the Internet a whole lot.

We have a website, but I don't think we posted anything on our website. But, no, so I don't think we used the Internet a whole lot.

MG What role did you think that the people of color played in the general protest on November 30<sup>th</sup>?

RM I think we played a key role. Again, I think free trade and globalization hurts people of color more than it hurts anybody, because people of color come from developing countries or Third World countries or whatever you want to call it. Latin America, obviously, is a lot of Latino people. Africa, Asia, those type of places that are greatly affected. The Middle East. Those are the areas that are affected the most by globalization and free trade and all that kind of stuff.

Basically, I feel that these protests were for those people, not for the European aspect or the United States aspect, because it benefits those two the most rather than... It doesn't benefit Mexico. It doesn't benefit Nicaragua. It doesn't benefit Zimbabwe. It doesn't benefit Egypt. It benefits the United States and the other powers in Europe.

So, yes, I think it was a key element in the whole protest were people of color, because they are representing their motherland.

MG What issues did you identify with most, and how did it relate to the WTO?

RM Again, I identified with the fact that the World Trade Organization does not look at the needs of the people of color in countries.

Sorry, what was the question again? I lost my train of thought.

MG What issues did you identify most with, and how did it relate to the WTO?

RM I identified with the issues of our people and the oppressive, imperialistic, fascist way of our government. I know that they say that the United States government does not have anything to do with WTO. The WTO is a separate organization, and blah blah blah blah. Just like they say that the UN is the United Nations, but who plays a key role in it? United States. Where are the meetings held? In the United States. Who doesn't pay their dues? United States.

So it's like, come on now. We know that anything that has to do with trade and mass production and all that kind of stuff is the United States. I mean, come on now. Let's be real about it. So, again, I identified with the fact that another move by the government, the US, to kind of like divert their accountability and say, "Well, it's the WTO. It's the World Trade Organization. It's not the United States." Well, come on, now. That's a load of crap.

So I identified with that, with the fact that there are entities, the powers that be, that are oppressing nations, developing nations, and the people of color, and it tied in with what's going on and protesting it and exercising my right to protest, to show that I don't agree with what they're doing.

MG That's everything.

RM One of the most disappointing things of the rally itself, the Labor rally of the AFL-CIO, was that there was no mention of the struggle for farm worker justice. There was no direct link made to farm workers and how they are one of the largest working forces in

the United States, because the agriculture industry is all over. Obviously, here in Washington and Oregon, and on the East Coast as well, a large industry over there with the farm labor organizing committee, and there was no mention of farm workers and how they are some of the lowest paid and most oppressed labor forces.

But, yet, the Labor movement talks about justice for workers, justice, right pay, equal pay, dah dah dah dah dah. But there was no mention made to farm workers, and that was upsetting, because they did mention agriculture as being a key element in our economic status in the country, but they did not talk about the farm workers.

I feel it's because the majority of farm workers are of Mexican descent or of Latino descent, and again it shows how the Labor movement historically has been racist and has been very exclusive in who they want to give rights to. So that was a very disappointing thing of the march, or of the Labor rally.

*End of Interview*