

**Interviewee: Vinnie O'Brien (VB)**

**Affiliation: Department of Field Mobilization, AFL-CIO, Washington, D.C**

**Interviewer: Jaelle Dragomir (JD)**

**Date of Interview: November 21, 2000**

**Phone Interview**

JD | I need to ask you if it's okay if we tape record you and is it okay to put what you say onto our web page?

VO | Yes. Yes to both.

JD | Then I will need to send you either an email copy or a snail mail copy that you can verify that yes, we have your permission.

VO | It's [vobrien@afclcio.org](mailto:vobrien@afclcio.org). No hyphen. Just the six letters.

JD | Okay. Is that the one I've been sending you things to?

VO | Yes.

JD | Great. So I think we can get started here. I have a variety of questions. They are sort of pre-made, and I will go along with those, and then we can go off on tangents as necessary.

VO | Sure. Absolutely.

JD | How did you and/or your organization get involved with the WTO mobilizations?

VO | I was assigned – I'm the Assistant Director in the Department of Field Mobilization at the AFL-CIO national headquarters in Washington, D.C. I've done a number of major assignments for President Sweeney and the AFL-CIO, and this clearly was moving up on the radar screen as a chance for the federation to demonstrate peacefully in Seattle where the WTO was meeting, where there was a number of disagreements with the World Trade Organization, a chance to get our side of the story presented to the world press.

JD | In what manner did you go about doing this?

VO | I was assigned on August 1<sup>st</sup> the event. The WTO was going to meet on November 30<sup>th</sup>, so it gave us a good lead time to get in, basically, to set up on parallel tracks. One would be to mobilize working men and women in identified mobilization corridor which I'll call the I-5, which ran from Vancouver to San Francisco, and mobilize all of the central labor councils, the state federations and local unions within that jurisdiction, and also to set up two national desks so those that were outside that corridor could participate and march with the federation.

One was set up in San Francisco and one was set up in Washington, D.C. Their task was to go out and to make presentations, begin the educational process to the

membership on the importance of a large labor turnout in order to get our positions across. Paralleling that was just the nuts and bolts of mobilizing and logistics of an event this size. Dealing with transportation, housing, parking, the parade route which turned into very extensive negotiations with a number of law enforcement agencies that were involved in this, and the King County Labor Council, which I sat in on those negotiations, and starting to pull all this together under one umbrella. Picking a site and beginning to formulate a timetable of when this would begin, what time our march would take place, where the march would go, and how it would return back to that site and get our membership out of the city safely.

JD Did you have much opposition from those sources that are regulated by the government in getting everything in place?

VO Surprisingly not. I thought the dialogue from Day One was extremely fluid, very straightforward. Both entities knew exactly where we were both coming from. It made discussions and problem solving a lot easier. It made some of the real stumbling blocks a lot easier to tackle, find a common, acceptable solution to both parties, and then to move on.

I found that both in the State of Washington and King County, where we have a labor council, that this clearly was a well-entrenched labor community that had great access to all of the avenues that needed to be addressed: transportation, a metro system, the parking, the Seattle Police Department. I felt, and participated in a number of these, as long as the dialogue was as fluid and as straightforward and everything was on the table, it just makes life extremely easy in trying to solve these problems.

As we got closer to November 30<sup>th</sup>, the issues got more complicated, but at that point in time, we had developed such a positive and straightforward dialogue, it really resolved stuff very, very quickly.

JD I'm going to jump ahead just a little bit. Did you feel like any of that dialogue broke down later when the actual protest was happening?

VO Once you start out on November 30<sup>th</sup>, our first staff meeting was, I think, at 4:45 am, we were getting constant reports from the command center of the Seattle Police Department of what was unfolding downtown. There was some discussion about not having a march, but clearly we brought these 40,000 members in to participate in the march by the WTO at the Convention Center, and we just, at that hour, and that was tense. But we were quite clear with them that we intended to step off at around 12:30 and commence with our march through the downtown area.

JD So 40,000 people is a lot of people to bring to a city, and apparently your mobilization efforts were very successful. Can you put a pinpoint on anything that said that this was really good and maybe this didn't work?

VO I think from the initial beginning, as staff followed me in and other staff were being assigned, it was probably late summer you could really begin to feel the energy. The

leadership of the state (inaudible), the leadership of the King County Labor Council with Ron Judd, just permeated in every single direction.

We had a number of meetings, for an example, with the British Columbia labor movement in Vancouver, what would be called the Vancouver Labor Council. Their response was overwhelmingly positive. It was just something that every rank and file, every local union, every central body realized that this was a great opportunity for the labor movement to come together.

It took a lot of hard work. It was on a Tuesday, which is a workweek, a workday, following Thanksgiving weekend, which had a holiday or two built into it, but with a lot of, just, gut determination at every local and every structural level, as we monitored very, very closely the commitment level. From the very beginning, the numbers just kept rising, and we knew, as you get closer to the 30<sup>th</sup> and, as in anything, people become more and more focused, there was a surge at the end that just put us way over the top.

The early projections of 25,000 were then increased to 30,000, and then 35,000, then 40,000 is where we capped it.

JD So you mentioned the British Columbia Labor Council. Were there any other organizations that you built a coalition with?

VO It was a national one. There was a sporadic card signing as people were coming into Memorial Stadium, and if my memory serves me that there were all 50 states in attendance and eight countries, eight countries outside of the Canadian Labor Council. And this was an effort with that kind of membership surge, people surge, it was very hard to get people to fill out the cards, and it was pouring rain. But that gave us some indication of the breadth of this mobilization, and as I identified the I-5 corridor, and then on the national scene, to have that kind of a response.

JD What do you see as the pros and the cons of working with this coalition kind of work?

VO That's a good question. Maybe I was fortunate enough, or very fortunate, in the WTO Seattle, both with the religious community, with the environmentalists, with the Tibetans, with the Chinese.... Everybody, from my perspective, was on the same page.

There was a whole host of different agendas, but an effort to put together a large demonstration, to convey not only to the ministers of the WTO, but to the world press, that some things have to be looked at; others have to move cautiously. There is human rights. There is environmental rights.

I thought that everything just came together in a very, very positive outpouring. My experience in coalitions and other groups have probably been a little narrower. Usually the religious community is shoulder to shoulder with us, but this one was much broader. Our intent from the beginning was to just to open up dialogue with every one of them, so everyone was talking, from about the first week in August up through the 30<sup>th</sup> of November. That's such a positive factor that everybody knows where everybody

is, what's happening, how they're going to participate. A whole host of them were invited by President Sweeney to speak at Memorial Stadium, which clearly helped in the surge in the numbers that they turned out of their respective memberships.

JD So, is there anything that you could look at and pull out and say this we're going to do again if we have to do some – I'm sure you are going to have to do some worldwide organizational thing against WTO again. Is there anything you'll definitely...?

VO I'd prefer a warmer climate.

JD That would be nice, I agree.

VO Pouring rain, and we did have some, what do they call them, sunspots? Sun breaks; there we go. That's a term I had never heard before. In fact, we even tried to dress for that. I told the staff that we were going to be out there for in excess of 16 hours and to dress accordingly.

I found in my career that I've done a number of these, but clearly this one with what was taking place downtown in order to get 40,000 people through it and back and home safely, which we did... When we did the final sweep about 7:30 that evening, it just elevated me almost to another level of organizing, of logistics and the effort by the staff to pull their own weight just really showed that what was going on on 4<sup>th</sup> and Pike, and we were able to march through that. As I said, get our people down to march and back and home, and every single member that came to participate was on their way home by 7:30 that night. That's a great accomplishment.

JD Is there a sense that since the WTO's programs or policies had been in place and aren't working, was there a sense that this might be a pivotal time to really do something, to really have an impact?

VO Just if you were following this in the press or in today's world, the Internet, knowing that there were going to be several thousand press worldwide in attendance, that clearly was the ongoing thrust that here is our chance to convey some of the legitimate concerns of the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO, the offices, the leadership of these groups that were participating with us, such as the environmental group and the religious group. This was a forum that you just weren't going to see again.

If you take, for an example, I think the meeting two years earlier, as some of the staff told me, was in Singapore, and during the WTO meetings in Singapore that the army was brought out. So, clearly, you can see the enormous contrast that we now had this world press, a chance to clearly focus on this unelected government that meets almost in total secrecy and to focus on it, and to bring to bear our concerns, the concerns of all of those that participated with us. I didn't think that was going to come again in a lifetime.

JD So were you pleased with how the media covered it?

VO I was in the middle of it. I was never sure. Everywhere you looked there were cameras, but in the forum that President Sweeney spoke from that day forth clearly made his leadership and the federation a player in this world scene.

JD So you think people's voices really came through?

VO Oh, absolutely. I think there were two events going on. One was the anarchists with the destruction, and a very identifiable, peaceful labor march with 40,000 people. Not one was arrested. Nothing was disrupted. They all arrived safely and the staff made sure they all got home safely, and this was both to Amtrak, to buses back over the Canadian border, dozens of buses back to SeaTac and literally thousands of automobiles.

But we worked out all the incoming flow of equipment and the flow out, even while the activity was still going on downtown with the Seattle Police Department.

JD You mentioned earlier about the Internet being the world news now. Did you use the Internet in your activities?

VO No, but it was something you needed to follow every day, which we did. The level of activity on the Internet in dealing with all of these global groups was fascinating to read and to track what they were doing. We operate differently. We're a one-on-one organization, but to see the, say, the lack of leaflets to drum up support, but the effect of the Internet was terribly impressive.

JD Can you expand on that at all?

VO Basically, we would go out to meet with our membership, go to local union meetings, go to central body meetings. We would leaflet worksites. We would do mailings. We would do phone banking. Ours is a more traditional way, and then to watch these other groups, just effectively, with their web pages and their Internet. . . Some of them were groups like Take Back the Street, the names slip me now, and just the way they exchanged back and forth. And a call, an Internet call to Seattle, which you could see.

JD Very fascinating, isn't it?

VO It was, compared to our very disciplined, of going out and talking to membership and working with leadership and then watching this Internet operation, which I hadn't seen at that level, at that intensity. There was just more links once you started into them. You could just keep linking further and further in.

JD Do you think if you should do some sort of thing like this again that you would use the Internet?

VO Yes, I'm a convert of it. Clearly, its audience is out there, and it convinced me that this is absolutely a track that just has great rewards on it. The AFL now has its own web page, its own Internet access with workingfamilies.com and it now has the great capability of reaching out to large numbers of membership.

JD Yes, it certainly does, and all around the world.

VO Yes.

JD That's the fascinating part. So how about the use of students? Did they play any part in the protest at all?

VO Yes, they did. There is, from my recollection, we had two student coordinators working the campuses extensively. I think from recollection it was some in excess of 30 to 35 campuses within that drive radius, obviously, the University of Washington being the largest, and going through the community colleges. Then after a while it started to reach into high schools. I think we even had grammar schools' participation.

Teachers started to call us and ask if they could bring their class down to show them democracy in action and this whole fever pitch that had overtaken Seattle, and so we had a number of, I'm sure it was, middle school teachers that brought their classes.

So it went the whole range of, say, middle school, which is 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, high school and then literally thousands of college students.

JD Wonderful. So in the aftermath of WTO, have you been doing anything else in Seattle here to keep the public awareness about globalization issues...?

VO No, not to my working knowledge. You'd have to talk to Bob Gorman, who is the state director located there in Seattle. I moved on to another assignment, and we just dismantled the effort we put into that in reference to staff and things that make events like that work, and began to dispatch staff back to their bases, back to their homes, and I left and I haven't been back.

JD Let's talk about the kinds of resources that your organization committed to the WTO protest campaign in terms of money and personnel and other kinds of resources.

VO I was the first one in. On November 30<sup>th</sup>, I think there was approximately 65 staff on the ground working together. The final dollar amount, unfortunately, I don't have any working knowledge on. There was other staff that were working the budget line.

The staff were more in my jurisdiction, the commitment of the offices of President Sweeney and the other two offices, the Executive Council, which makes up the AFL-CIO, and the commitment of those general presidents was just overwhelming, just overwhelming.

JD This is going to sound a little strange, I think, but I think they want your reply to it. What do you hope to achieve through protest, and why protest rather than some other means of dealing with WTO?

VO I think, from my perspective, I think it was a perfect forum. As I said earlier, it's a tremendously great union town to me. It deals at all levels. It deals with a whole host of issues and problems. It's politically active. It's very active in the community, and with

an organization like the WTO that prefers, obviously, to meet in places like Singapore, comes to a city like that, is followed by four to five thousand press, I think the protest is the most effective American tool.

It shines tremendous focus on why these people are out there, why did they give up a day's work or a day's pay to participate in a march like this in that kind of weather, and it shows the determination and the energy of the American labor movement. You just don't have that stage that often.

JD That's true.

VO God knows where they're going to meet next. That'll tell us something, when they finally – if they ever meet next. Maybe it's just going to be done by teleconferencing.

JD Yeah, because just plain off of that, I'm assuming you thought it was quite successful, then?

VO Yes. In the middle of it, it was absolutely an adrenalin that I've never felt in watching the staff. An example would be the machinists that have some 44,000 members at Boeing, unionized members. They gave us a thousand marshals, and they all had to take a day off, and one thousand showed up. These are the examples that I am quickly recalling, and just the commitment that I found in every corner of the community.

We had to expand, not only operating out of the King County Labor Council, but we had to move into the State Fed because we had so many staff, and everybody not only threw open their doors, but took their doors off the hinges for us. That, on a good, average day is extremely disruptive with that many people and that much foot traffic, but that was just the commitment you felt every day when you went in.

JD So I'm assuming that's probably some of those things that were the most important elements of your mobilization?

VO Yes. And it re-energized a very active, very aggressive, very positive labor movement. You couldn't help but feeling that they were re-energized for their agendas within the State of Washington and within King County.

JD On another track here, which organizations or constituencies do you see as vital for anti-globalization campaigns working with you?

VO The religious and the environmental. They stood so tall. There was a reception the night before on November 29<sup>th</sup>. It was held at the newly opened Convention Center down by the baseball field. The religious community took that as their event, and they had this Hands Around the Convention Center in silent prayer, and it absolutely was raining sideways. They turned them out by the thousands and just stood there in silent prayer. It was absolutely moving.

JD That is a wonderful visualization.

VO The environmentalists, I think, which is a very, very strong organization in the Northwest part of the United States, I found, I think was set a goal to turn out 3,000, which is a fascinating number, because theirs is just a volunteer organization. Ours is somewhat more structured. They marched with us.

*End of Side 1*

JD ...black instead of on the white there, and I'll have to rethink my question here. I guess it was, you just talked about the environmentalists and the religious people. Was there new information that came forward by getting together with these people that maybe new insights into how they worked or how they functioned or who they were became more salient during this process?

VO On the environmental, this is probably my most intense exposure in working with them. They were just a delight to work with and wanted to be a full partner on this day. That was just an exciting time. I just, through my career, didn't have that much exposure to them, but dealing with them in person or by phone was extremely, extremely positive.

On the religious end, there have always been an extremely close tie, and it's getting stronger since President Sweeney took over. It was in 1995. It's a whole new aggressive level to bring them in as partners. As an example, not with Seattle, but this past summer they had a seminarian summer, which they use seminarian in organizing throughout the country, and it just shows a new day with the religious community and the impact they have. There is a whole series of publications in the AFL-CIO called *Labor and the Pulpit*, and that is just all in the real positive flow.

JD Let me just echo something back to you. You said Sweeney came-in in '95 and that's when this change happened. Was Sweeney the change? Were the times that changed that the religious sector kind of came into being more of a coalition with you?

VO No, I think it was Sweeney that reached out and you can clearly see the alliances getting stronger at all levels, at the national level, at the community level and at the local level. HARE, which is Hotel and Restaurant Employees, just had a major demonstration in the haven at Yale, and I think there were 90 religious participants from all the different denominations, which is just an amazing number. I think all of this is – they were easy to just lock arms with them in Seattle.

JD It was a very coming together United States in the world.

VO They wanted to participate and invited us to participate with them on the 29<sup>th</sup> at this reception, which I think was \$250,000 a head to get in. But corporate world was happy to write those checks, because you could meet all the ministers, one-on-one, and that's a cheap price to pay when you're trying to cut some sort of an arrangement.

JD Has the AFL-CIO done anything to build coalitions with environmental organizations?



VO Yes. I just think it's ongoing. I've moved on since the WTO. I just participated in several months on Labor 2000, so that you're now dealing with President Sweeney's staff that nurtured that.

Jerry Shay, as an example, is the liaison between the President's office and the religious community, as an example. So there are people that actually work these areas.

JD You're assuming everything is going to last and build?

VO No question.

JD No question.

VO Not to what I saw and felt. That doesn't come easy and it doesn't go away easy.

JD Right. That's very true. Do you see a tension between the movement organizations and local groups and campaigns? Are there any tensions out there between...?

VO I just came off of, again, it seems to be in these blocks... I went into Nevada on August 1<sup>st</sup>. I must do these five months stints, and just got home when you were emailing, and no, there just isn't any tension. I saw some clips today from the *Seattle Times* that, I think, that the fling may be over between the environmentalists and the American labor movement. I'm not sure where the writer was coming from, but I don't see any deterioration. There wasn't any in the community that I just worked. It was nothing I could put my finger on.

JD What do you see the relationship between the national organizations and the grassroots movements?

VO Depending on the outcome of this presidential election, this may be a very, very strong marriage, no matter who wins. One, to defend what we've accomplished if it goes against us, and if Gore takes it, to build on it. We've reached only a plateau with the Clinton administration, and now I think you can advance it with the Gore. If it goes the other way, I just see a very, very close working alliance.

JD Wonderful. Good. So is there anything important that I'm not aware of that you could enlighten us on?

VO No. I've enjoyed this. I hadn't talked that much about it since the 30<sup>th</sup>. I had found it as a very, very important event in my life, and I've done a lot, but I've thanked John Sweeney for the opportunity to participate in that and to see it, and I still see it in, almost in color, now. It's just that real. It was such an event that it's something that I'll never, ever forget. That's not an applicable cliché. It was a turning point.

We are alive. We're strong. We can show the world what we're capable of doing. We can do it effectively. We can do it peacefully in what looked like a sea of chaos and still get our message through. That was a discipline that I came away from that. It's impacted everything I've done since.

JD Oh. How so?

VO That you can go to the membership. You can just lay out what's at stake, whether it's a political campaign or if it's one in reference to the WTO, and you can call on them. You can reach down and you can pull them. Just coming off the political activity in Nevada, they responded, overwhelmingly, when you just lay it out there. The responsibility is ours to do it. We're not going to give it away to anybody. This is our challenge.

JD So there's a bit of a tone in your voice that is very optimistic that our democratic system can actually work?

VO It can survive. It can survive some tough hits and some real body blows with the membership. This voice and this leadership, there's a new bounce to your step.

JD Isn't that wonderful?

VO And just to take you back, and I know I mentioned you'd be able to reach... Just when you looked at it saying this is a Tuesday; it's a workday. How in God's name can we get people out? But then when you went out to talk to them and you saw the responses in their faces, and then as you do in any logistical and mobilization effort, you track it, and the numbers just never stopped climbing, which then just kept energizing every staff that came in and was participating. You can live off that energy.

JD That's right. People are wonderful, aren't they?

VO Exactly. 40,000 people had to give up a day's pay.

JD Yes. That's how important it is.

VO Right. And then to be uncomfortable, meaning being wet and being dry and then being wet, and can smell teargas and cold and all of that and proudly marched through the town.

JD What a wonderful piece of history.

VO I absolutely treasure it.

JD Me, too.

VO Were you there?

JD I was there, definitely. I didn't live in Seattle then, but I came up from Oregon. Actually I came from Hawaii to Oregon to WTO, so I was here, and then after the WTO I went to the Cuban Conference that was here. So I had a wonderful, wonderful time.

VO Yes. It was a great city. It was a great event, and it is something I think of often.

JD Yes, I agree.

VO And those that I'll cross paths with who were there, it's just like old stories. It's all we talk about. "Did you see this? Did you see that? What was your reaction to this?" It has so many side stories to it.

JD That's exactly what we want is all those side stories, so if you're sitting around sometime, give me a call and we'll chat more.

VO Absolutely.

JD Do you happen to have any collected materials, or materials from that that you might be able to send us for archives?

VO Let me check my office. I've got your email and your phone number. I think I've got both.

JD Okay, good.

VO I'll give you a holler. I'm just going in for a couple of hours tomorrow morning and then I'm going to take a few days off, so I will look around and see what's out there.

JD Okay, good. Thank you. We appreciate that. And then we are up on the web.

VO Yes, that's the reason I had my pen out. What was it?

JD It's [www.wtohistory.org](http://www.wtohistory.org).

VO That's great.

JD You'll be able to see some of them that are up there already. We're still working on it, and it's kind of in the infant stage, but it's, I think, will be a wonderful thing to have recorded in history and certainly very important.

VO Is there anything scheduled for this year?

JD There is a celebration on the 30<sup>th</sup>.

VO There is? Great.

JD Yes. Everyone is meeting and getting together at, I think, where it started at last year, I'm not real sure, the Seattle Community College or something? So, yes, people are getting together for remembrance.

VO That's great. It's a real piece of American history, American labor history, and that's great that people are still focused on it.

JD Yes, and hopefully they will continue to do that.

VO | Oh, they will.

JD | I think so, too. Have real lasting effects.

VO | Well, thank you very much. I enjoyed this.

JD | Thank you, Vinnie. I really enjoyed talking with you.

VO | Good night now.