

Interviewee: Alan Rabinowitz
Affiliation: Funder/IATP Volunteer
Interviewer: Jeremy Simer
Date of Interview: March 31, 2000

JS I'm with Alan Rabinowitz on the, what day is it, March 31, 2000, in his Laurelhurst home. I wanted to ask you a bit about the IMC and how you saw that coming together, and then also about a comparison of the political mobilizations of decades past and also how you see the movement against the WTO and that sort of corporate mobilization going. So I wanted to ask you first about sort of the political background, because I think both you and Margaret mentioned to me that you were involved to some degree in organizing in Harvard. Is that correct?

AR In Boston.

JS In Boston?

AR Not at Harvard. She was at Harvard. I was working down in the city of Boston. I'd left taking Ph.D. at MIT and cruising around. So what comparison with what to what? Vietnam organizing?

JS What were you involved in, then?

AR Well, all through the Sixties when we were organizing just about everything. Civil rights and brown lung disease and particularly in the things that were going on in Boston is we were organizing against the highway builders, the state highway department, clashing through in all sorts of places, doing really bad things with urban renewal and with urban development.

And, of course, the BRA (Boston Redevelopment Authority) was the sender of all the urban redevelopment work in Boston, so there was something called the Urban Underground which Margaret was working with. And so I was feeding them information about what was going on, the BRA, but there were a lot of... There is a thing called Urban Action, whatever it was. In any case, Chester Hartman and various people trying to provide TA assistance to groups who were organizing against the highway builders. It was great general fervor, plus all the other stuff.

So when the Vietnam stuff was coming along, that was never really sort of orchestrated or controlled from the top. It just sort of happened, and when there was a happening, and you went down to a rally, you went through 20 tables full of literature from other protest groups, and we sort of – it wasn't exactly a party, but there were some really... Somebody must have done a lot of organizing, because there would be 100,000 people in the Boston Commons with some wonderful speakers and things like that. But it was a mixture of things. It was never a sense of one coordinating stuff.

I remember people back in the early 70's philosophizing about all that, and it was partly a wish not to have it centrally controlled. Sort of let 100 flowers bloom, so it never really tried to coalesce as a movement. I don't know if it was a strength or a weakness, but that's the way it was.

JS That sounds like it had some parallels to what happened here in terms of there were a lot of people talking about not forming a single message against the WTO.

AR Okay. That's a real philosophy of movement organizing. Somebody was saying that the police were really confused by that. They kept trying to find the leaders, to knock off the leaders of the protest against the WTO and they couldn't find them, because there were none, which is sort of great.

JS I recently interviewed someone who was involved in one of your affinity groups, part of the Direct Action Network, and he said he was also at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in '68. He

said he actually ran into Tom Hayden here at the WTO protest, and said, "This all kind of reminds me of '68 in Chicago." And Hayden replied, "Well yeah, except we didn't shut them down then."

AR There was something else there. I knew people who were leaving Cambridge. We were living there then, in Massachusetts, to head off for what was clearly going to be a confrontation. And so Dailey, the mayor, was set up to fight the bastards. So it was set up to be a violent kind of a thing somehow. And a very different tone, I think, from this one.

JS How so? It was less confrontational this time or less...?

AR This was meant to be nonviolent, basically, and who knew? It was clear there was going to be trouble in Chicago, from way back, and there was.

JS At that time there wasn't the widespread message of nonviolence at that?

AR Oh, sure.

JS I mean, it existed, but for that particular action?

AR I'm not – I don't remember who was organizing the protest there and what they were saying and not saying about that. That is probably well documented. But at least there was trouble in the air, in a way that I didn't feel it here. This was not, I mean, this to me started out as a, how do I put it? It was really meant to be an educational maneuver. You work for Public Citizen. Did you go to the organizing meeting in February or March that Mike Dolan called? Were you there?

JS I wasn't there, no.

AR The sort of feeling you had, there were all these people, from 15 different organizations... Do you have a list of people who were there? Somebody does. I'm sure Mike Dolan does. I have it someplace. Somebody went off with it. Everybody signed up. There were a whole bunch of organizations. About 75 people and maybe 40 organizations.

They all had their own angles and causes and things like that, but they were convinced that the American people didn't understand anything, and probably the delegates didn't either, and so the question was how to organize to get the message across, which is very different from saying we're going to tear them up. You didn't have the feeling that there was necessarily anything being, violence per se. Nobody quite knew how to get the message across, and I think there was a certain amount of resistance to Mike Dolan saying he was going to be in charge. When things got interesting, he'd bring up some intellectual resources and organizing resources from California, because clearly nobody here knew how to organize about anything, and people here didn't like that message too much.

JS See, because I was out of town until summer, and I missed a lot of the organizing from February until July or so. I mean, was Dolan as explicit as that, as saying, "We're going to do it my way, and..." How did that come across?

AR We met in the Labor Temple, and he was pretty much in the middle with his microphone the whole time, stage managing it, and people sort of felt that he was trying to make it his show, among other things, saying that the Public Citizen people in Washington had been preparing for this for a long time, and they were happy to share their knowledge with us.

He was very enthusiastic, excitable guy, and did create a lot of excitement about the possibilities. At the same time, people were saying, "Well, we're not sure we want to do it exactly the way he's going to map it out for us." Then he had to go back to Washington and it was an organizing committee about that time. About that time I had to go away for a month and a half to work for an Indian tribe in Northern Minnesota, so what exactly transpired...

But before that, before I left, I had some talks with some of the labor people. You know Rich Feldman? You've talked to him? At that point, Ron Judd was saying, "Well, we're going to get a 100,000 people into the streets."

JS And when was that?

AR February, early March. February, I guess. You need to get Ron Judd before he disappears. Did you see in the paper he was leaving?

JS No. For where?

AR He's going upstairs to AFL-CIO. He's going to be in charge of 15 western states for them.

JS Can't say that's a surprise.

AR He's not going to Washington. He's living here, and he's not going to Olympia, things like that. I hadn't heard about it. Susan Paynter – I'll show you the article, if you like.

But Ron Judd knew he was going to have a hard time selling that, and he did have a hard time. The AFL-CIO said, "Well, you can't do that, because you don't want to screw up Al Gore," or something like that, some high political thing. They said, "You can have 20,000, 30,000 or 40,000, but not a hundred." So that took some of the wind out of the labor sails; a lot, I think, because those negotiations were still sort of up in the air until about the time you came back.

Before the AFL-CIO decided what they were going to do, and of course, all that time there were people... By the time I came back in May or whenever it was, I think Public Citizen had opened its office. What was the name of the lady who was in charge of the office?

JS Sally Soriano?

AR Yes, she was in full swing. That was the sort of main, visible thing going on, except that... Direct Action Network came from someplace else. Were they out of California, or Washington? They were around, but they weren't homegrown. They were out there doing their thing. There was a group of them that were going to be swinging from skyscrapers and stuff, but this is still sort of in the educational – not fun and games, but clearly, if you climb a skyscraper and hang a banner, you're going to get hauled in by the cops. So you were expecting that kind of reaction, but not necessarily having your life ruined by any means, beaten up into smithereens. It was clearly building up.

It was impossible to think that the cops and the mayor and so and so didn't have full information about it. Anybody who had the slightest interest couldn't help but run across all these faces.

JS It was pretty potent, wasn't it?

AR So when I got involved, I was doing something else, which is all involved. Back in March, I'd been out in Minneapolis, as I said, working in Minnesota. I started talking with the people at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. Do you know them?

JS Yes.

AR Mark Ritchie. They had been doing fabulous stuff, and they really knew the inside and outside of trading stuff and how it was affecting agriculture, chemicals, and foodstuffs. There were a whole series of international conferences, kind of WTO stuff. A lot of the decisions coming out of the WTO were connected with the stuff that they were involved in, crops and bananas and whatever, the biogenetic stuff.

So they were deciding at that point that they had to have a real presence in Seattle. Actually, it was them that I worked with pretty much thereafter. What they were going to do, and this is probably no.... They took over Town Hall here, which is close to the Convention Center. They were going to use it have a whole series to be a press center, which meant having all sorts of important, unimportant but highly qualified people giving press conferences and trying to get the attention of the delegates and things like that, strictly educational, internal to the WTO and external telling the world really what the issues were and doing the best thing they could.

They teamed up with Real Audio to do streaming so a lot of these press conferences which went on from Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, by Saturday it was over, it went out directly onto the airwaves, whatever the processes were, but pretty high tech. I was pretty impressed.

Then, it seems to me, a whole other stream was going on, and that was the International Globalization Forum. They were working on the teach-in, which they did a fabulous job in promoting and which really kind of set, when it actually happened, set the intellectual environment, it seems to me. A lot of people were absolutely fascinated. A lot of people turned out who thereafter were even more involved. But that incorporated a whole bunch of environmentalist types and this and that.

So far as I know, it was not at all connected to Public Citizen-type people or the Independent Media Center or the International Media Center, which was what Mark Ritchie's group was called or anything else. It was just that other voice. I guess a lot of them connected to some of the marchers in the parade in the march on Tuesday.

JS Did the IFG people were connected to the marchers?

AR I think so, yes, a lot of them, or the other way around. A lot of the groups that were part of that thing were people who were joining the march. So I don't really know much more about all of that stuff.

Another completely opposite – not opposite – different stream of people were the people interested in Jubilee. I marched Monday night. I didn't go to the teach-in, but that was a great march, and actually there was no mention about it in the paper or whatever.

JS It got eclipsed, didn't it?

AR Totally. There was no reason to eclipse it. I was working very hard starting on Sunday at Town Hall. I was working 10, 12, 15 hours a day up there. On Sunday, there were a couple of these barriers, these wire things with a concrete bottom and sort of chain link fence that sort of wandered up in a couple places around... what do you call that park?

JS Freeway Park?

AR Freeway Park. You could see the cops or somebody was sort of getting in preparation, that's fine. Then a little bit more on Monday. I was just absolutely fascinated when I turned up early in the morning on Tuesday where I thought I would work there for a couple of hours and then go over and join the march. In fact, those barricades had been picked up by the direct action people and moved to where they blocked off the access points. There was one right across from Town Hall. I don't know if you know that. If you know where Town Hall is, there's was sort of a back alley and the Convention Center. So we had a lot of action right there, which was different from downtown. It was kind of a standoff.

My understanding is that the direct action people came and nobody was around, and they put up their barricades about six o'clock in the morning. Then about seven the cops came and said, "You can't do that. You can't get rid of them." And they said, "Well, we're not going anyplace. We're just here."

So, in any case, from the steps of Town Hall, you could see eventually a line of cops all dressed up in their little things, and about four feet away a line of protestors who were sort of sacked out there. Nobody

did anything for hours and hours and hours and hours. I would say, probably, late in the morning, the cops every once in a while started peppering people. For a while we were spending a lot of time picking up bodies, helping them with water and stuff, emergency medical stuff.

I never did get to the march; too much activity there. They were bringing up buses, and thises and thats and this is threatening. Of course, later in the afternoon, the curfew started.

JS Not to mention the fact that it would have been difficult physically to get from the Town Hall to the Seattle Center.

AR Oh, to the Seattle Center?

JS For the march.

AR We were never in the march route.

JS Yes. What I'm saying is you said you never actually got to the march. I said it would have been pretty difficult to have gotten to the beginning of it just because of what was in between you.

AR Yes. Right.

JS So the police and the protestors – so the police were peppering people there on sort of the backside in front of Town Hall? Were they not very successful in getting them all out of there?

AR Oh, no. They were there for days.

JS About how many protestors were there at that part of the....?

AR I don't know. I've got some photographs. Every hour or so I went out and took some pictures. I don't know as I sent those to Margaret or not...

JS You mentioned being impressed by the high tech aspect of the IATP and the...

AR Oh, yes.

JS Have you ever seen any kind of...? A lot of people have talked about the technology and what happened here. Have you ever seen any protests or social movements that is so plugged in and online?

AR Do you know Eileen Quigley? She's a hot shot at Real Audio, Real Networks. She's the one that instrumented it. She's a nifty woman, and you should talk to her.

Among other things, what we had at the International Media Center... I never did actually get over to the Independent Media Center until... I was going to go over there their last party, but there were too many. Were you there? Hundreds of people sitting on the sidewalk trying to get into it.

JS Which party?

AR Oh, Saturday or Friday night or something they had there.

JS At the end of that week?

AR At the end of the week.

JS No. I don't think I was there.

AR Besides the fact that each of the press conferences was fully instrumented with TV things and things like video cameras that could be fed out immediately, they had a whole bank of about 15 computers all connected to the Internet so that these correspondents could come pick up this's and that's and file their dispatches. That was one of the things that they were giving people.

JS Was that at the International Media Center?

AR International in Town Hall. Downstairs the Public Citizen took over. They had a big place there in the basement, but that was just a place to hold conferences, and it wasn't very well instrumented, not the way it was upstairs.

Were you in the Independent Media Center at all during the week?

JS No.

AR You should talk to Peggy Law, too, this woman who did the International Media Center; the Independent Media Center. You've got all that stuff over there. That was a coalition of three or four groups. I don't know exactly where she worked, but I thought maybe she worked out of Public Citizen.

JS Peggy Law?

AR Yes. She decided that they – what they did was they had a whole series of radio programs. They had six, seven radio stations broadcasting stuff simultaneously. All of those things I think are on tape. She was hopefully going to be able to work with the Independent Media Center, but they didn't have enough facilities that she needed or something. I don't know quite what was going on, but the idea of the Independent Media Center started very late. If you look at that stuff that I sent, it wasn't until October really that Dan Merkel was getting organized.

JS I hadn't met Dan Merkel before all this WTO stuff. I know his primary profession is that he is an attorney, but was he also involved with the media for some time?

AR I just met him in September or something like that at a dinner party. He was looking for funding with people involved. He cooked up the idea, I suppose, not much before that. So I don't know what media experience he has.

JS So you never actually got down to the IMC? It was hard to do everything. I was downtown all week and I never got to the IMC.

AR I had my hands full being helpful at Town Hall. It was a real privilege just to be there, but fun. Did you talk to Bill Awl?

JS Yes. In fact, I worked closely with him. He actually got hired by Public Citizen in the end.

AR Yes. And he was very involved in the relationship between Independent Media Center and Public Citizen and when they got settled and how they got settled and who was who was doing what. So you ought to check with him if you haven't.

JS Do you have any other ideas of people? You've already given me half a dozen really great ideas. Any other suggestions of people I need to talk to?

AR From a media aspect? Well, I think you probably ought to talk to the International Media people. The guy there is Dale Wiehoff, who is a majordomo. Or Mark Ritchie, but Dale W-I-E-H-O-F-F. You probably have their address.

Let me think. Whatever tidbits in the files there.

JS Great. You have really given me some good leads, here. It's great. Apart from the media, that covers pretty much all the questions.

AR There was one other funny aspect of Global Exchange. You ever heard of them?

JS Sure.

AR They were sort of in the middle of things for a long while, but then they dropped out because they couldn't get enough support. They were going to have an international store.

JS Yes, in the Fair Trade Fair.

AR Something like that. That didn't work. But in the meantime, they were talking to all sorts of people all the time. There is one other... Who have you talked to over on the labor side? My feeling is they were quite disconnected from all of this, from all the media. They even were pretty much disconnected from the direct action folks.

JS I've asked you a number of questions about media because you had something to say about that. But, in fact, labor is going to be a real important aspect of this research project, especially since they support the Center for Labor Studies.

So far, I've spoken with Rosalinda Aguirre with Jobs With Justice. And I'm planning on interviewing Ron Judd and Rich Feldman and Verlene Wilder.

AR Probably Jonathan....

JS Jonathan Rosenbloom. When I go out to D.C. next week, I'm planning on to hopefully interview someone from the AFL. And maybe some of the international leaders.

AR One union that took advantage of Town Hall was the Steelworkers. They came marching in, and they had had their big meeting there. It went on for five or six hours. Really. Fabulous.

JS What space were they in?

AR Do you know Town Hall? Upstairs there is an 800-seat auditorium. That makes it special.

JS So the International Media you said was in the...

AR I said in the lobby, the foyer part.

JS Oh. It kind of circles around that.

AR Yes. And then upstairs is the meeting room. Its and old Christian Science Church. Then downstairs there was all this other stuff, theatres and stuff. It's a wonderful space.

JS Do you remember what day was it that the Steelworkers met in there. Oh, I can find that out on the calendar.

AR My guess is it was Wednesday, actually.

JS That covers pretty much all the questions I had planned on talking about. Is there anything else that you think, any other anecdotes or little tidbits of information you think we should keep in mind?

AR There is one other group that was doing a lot of stuff that was sort of interesting, and that's the United for a Fair Economy. Do you now those people? Of course, they are not completely unrelated to the Union

City Common Sense and Economics group. They had this whole thing.... They were doing a lot of training of people. Did you connect with that at all?

JS Yes, that was with Lois Canright.

AR Yes. She called me. I still haven't met her. I know all the people from Boston in that group. I did go down and popped in and saw their little digs.

JS Was that at the Musician's Hall?

AR Yes.

JS That was another place I never got to.

AR But apparently they were very busy and had full houses. Who they were training and how that connected to anything, I haven't a clue. Maybe they do.

JS It sounds like – Melissa said they had a pretty good turnout all week; certainly not on the 30th, but the rest of the week they had a pretty good turnout. In fact, she said she had a funny story how...

AR I've never met her. I'm looking forward to it.

JS She's great. She's a friend of mine, and she's a great organizer. She was saying that, I think it was on Friday or something, they had their last teach-in session, and they packed the house. She said, "How many people here are here to learn about what you were just out protesting this week?" and she said almost everyone raised their hands.

AR It is just amazing to me how totally, utterly skewed the mainstream press were. I haven't ever seen in mainstream press even the concept that there might have been a police riot. It was all these terrible people who tried to shut down the WTO. Nothing between opening it up and having somebody listen to somebody and talking about some issues and having a little change of course here and there so you don't screw everything up all the time, either labor or the environment and things like that. Nothing. It's all just sort of absolute terror in the streets kind of stuff, and it's just a shame.

It's so unrelenting. Seriously, it would be interesting to see along the way if you can find anything in the mainstream press...

JS There was one person I know of.

AR Who was that?

JS Kerry Norakami, I think his name is, from the *Post Intelligencer*. It hurts every time I pick up the paper and I see something about riots or any of that, WTO riots. He is the one reporter... He just said something last week where he said something about the massive street demonstrations and the violent police reaction, and he works for the *Post Intelligencer*. It's not coincidence that he was the *PI* reporter that was pepper-sprayed, and I believe maybe even beaten by the police or arrested or something. So to me, that was one person who... I think he had somewhat of a sympathetic perspective to a degree.

AR I think, really, to me it is totally irresponsible. It's really bad.

JS It's shocking. This sort of thing happens with reporting on protests all the time, but this time it...

AR It was so unrelenting. I mean, day after day after day after day after day.

I want to show you some things on my computer.

(End of tape)