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

TS | Well, for years now, LELO has been involved with workers outside the United States, and in the last few years, we've come to understand the importance of this question of trade. And so we've actually, unlike a lot of the groups that came together just around this international stuff or the trade stuff or because of the WTO, we were already doing work around international trade and the relationship between workers in our country and workers abroad for a long time.

In 1997, we had a meeting right here in Washington at Seabeck, over on the peninsula. That meeting was about bringing ordinary workers together to talk about this question of trade and how we related to it, and what it meant for workers in our country and workers abroad. What solidarity would mean, and what the current policies of both our government, the government of the G-7 countries, and the international lending institutions, what their policies represented. So we were 35 workers from 11 countries. That's what the discussion was about, like, how do we join this discussion about something as important as trade that affects our lives.

So when the WTO was announced in Seattle, they were coming to Seattle, we were already ready to engage. We didn't know where we intervened. Our idea was that we should have a parallel meeting to talk about world trade from the perspective of ordinary working people, and counter the other side, which is different from just the massive demonstrations. In fact, some of our criticism of this whole process is about, that is, there were demonstrations, massive demonstrations, and the population in Seattle, for example...

Now, we read some statistics that said that seven percent of the people in Seattle knew about the WTO before November. After it was 70 percent of the people in Seattle knew. But, probably, that less than seven percent knew what our fight was with the WTO, or what we proposed in place of the WTO. That never got articulated before, during or after the WTO. The message was lost, because the idea was not just to demonstrate, but to transform our world.

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

TS | We tried to inform people. In fact, we missed the vote in terms of the street demonstrations. There was a policy, for example, of the group, Public Citizens. At the time they used the crowd building and, again, we didn't see things that way. What we thought was important was to be able to articulate a message as opposed to building a

crowd. A mob is a crowd, so we weren't advocating mob action, but we wanted to kind of send their message.

So that was why we planned our forum as opposed to trying to turn people out just for street demonstrations. But I can tell you that we didn't do a very good job at turning people out.

MG Do you guys have past experience with mass demonstration and civil disobedience?

TS Oh, yes. Our organization was built primarily around civil disobedience. We are now 27 or 28 years old as LELO, but the five years prior to this, we were an active group. We came out of three different groups. One was United Farm Workers; that was basically a Latino group of farm workers. There were cannery workers; they were primarily Filipino workers who worked in the fish canneries in Alaska. And then there was a group of Black workers called the United Construction Workers that I come out of, and we were based here in the city.

None of us had a history of any power. We had a reputation that we were all a bunch of ordinary, no-name workers, and our tactics that were used were direct action, non-violent tactics, so we closed down the construction industry, for example, in this city. We stopped construction projects where there were... In 1969, there were no black workers in the building trade to speak of. In the five mechanical trades in 1959, there were 10 black workers out of an industry that probably had upward of 15,000 to 20,000 workers who were regularly employed in the industry in the city; only ten of those workers were black workers, and probably less than 30 were Latino and Asian workers.

Our tactics were to go onto these construction projects and shut them down. So by the fall of 1969, the industry was basically shut down in this city because we'd go onto these jobs and create havoc with the equipment or whatever. So that was our history.

MG What were you guys trying to accomplish through the protests, and how did that affect your range of tactics?

TS In the WTO?

MG Yes.

TS Well, I kind of talked about it a little bit earlier. We thought it was important. In fact, we supported the non-violence Direct Action group. We had a big fight with the Labor Council and the Sierra Club, because they took the position that they opposed any non-violent, direct action, and we thought that that was how you get the attention of the other side. But we weren't opposed to that. What we wanted to do was have a coherent message to go along with the direct action. That was it.

We thought that actually we should shut down, that the demonstrators should be joined, both DAN and the other folks who were out trying to close down the city and the trade union, we thought they should come together and not have two different groups. One

group was taking a very militant stand, and the other group was obeying the law and going by the rules. So we argued for that.

Well, on one hand, we won the argument amongst the folks who attended the meeting. But the King County Labor Council people had these own private relationships with the Mayor and Chief of Police and so on, so they cut a deal that deserted demonstrations on the final day. So rather than going to the area that was supposedly forbidding our entry, they went another direction and allowed for the kind of division to happen, and isolated the one group that was taking up the civil disobedience. But we supported the other.

MG What was your relationship with labor unions?

TS Well, the base of LELO comes out of the labor; it comes out of the trade unions. Because we're workers of color, our voice is a minority voice. The politics that we put forward doesn't always sit well with the leadership in our respective unions, even though we're part of progressive caucuses in our union that are able to get some things done. We're basically playing supportive and sometimes leadership roles in the individual unions that we come out of, but in order to create our own voice or to have a voice where the message can be heard, organizations like ours have to exist. Otherwise, the voice of workers of color as a minority position doesn't see the light of day because the trade unions, in spite of employment and the necessity of them, are not your basic bastions of democracy. You find a very undemocratic process is inside the labor movements.

MG How was your relationship with them during the protests?

TS Off and on, because there was a basic position taken by the leadership, and I'm talking about now primarily the Labor Council as opposed to individual unions, because there wasn't leadership coming from the individual unions; it was coming from the Labor Council.

MG What's the Labor Council?

TS The King County Labor Council is the amalgamation of all the different unions. On some basis of per capita, there are so many representatives who are members of the Labor Council. The Labor Council supposedly directs the direction of the local labor movement. Actually, to explain to you the term "labor movement," we have a much different perception of it than the trade union movement, the leadership.

What has happened from our perspective is that the trade union leadership has appropriated the whole term "labor movement." The labor movement from our perspective is made up of immigrant workers who are not organized into trade unions, workers of color who may or may not be in the trade unions who primarily carry on because of the struggle against discrimination or unemployment, or women who joined organizations that abuses feminist organizations, but oftentimes are striving for equal pay and against sexual discrimination, gender discrimination, and so on.

MG So that's all of LELO?

TS That's the labor movement as opposed to the trade unions who have appropriated the term labor movement as they represent the labor movement. What we say is that across the board, those organizations, so that a women's organization who somebody outside would view as a feminist organization is a part of the labor movement, but the voice has been appropriated by only the trade union leaders. So, those organizations like LELO are able to take back our voice and speak for ourselves. Hence, we raise the slogan, "Speaking for Ourselves."

So, anyways, during the WTO, we would put forward programs like "Stop the WTO," for example. What we would give back in response was that it was possible to reform, that labor had an inside strategy, that no one had articulated what it was. And, in fact, you may or may not know what happened, but John Sweeney's inside strategy was to ask that the WTO put on its agenda the question of worker rights, which was a core labor standards. What he is asking is he is asking the bosses to discuss how they are going to treat us.

We didn't think that was anything, and, in fact, it wasn't anything. But a few weeks before the meeting was to convene, Charlene Barshefsky, the US trade representative, in a meeting with ministers from the developing countries who opposed any upgrading of workers' conditions because it affects their competitive advantage or their ability to attract foreign capital ... Charlene confessed to these ministers who are objecting to Sweeney's wanting the bosses to talk about treating workers better ... Charlene says, "Don't worry about these core labor standards. They don't mean anything." She said it in a public meeting.

So here's John Sweeney sitting here with this empty bag in his lap, trying to sell the rest of labor on that we've got to support the WTO because we're going to get the bosses to talk about correlating the standards, and here is the administration's representative saying out loud in a public meeting that this doesn't mean anything.

So labor's inside strategy, in fact, was a non-strategy. But that strategy then had the effect, though, of moderating the outside strategies. So we were arguing, leading up to and during the process, against the inside strategy calling for the militant outside strategy and the need to articulate what, in fact, working people would think was fair trade.

MG What moment of that week had the greatest impact on you?

TS To me it was a speech given by a Mexican woman at the November 30th rally in the stadium. I don't remember her last name. Her first name was Amparo. We have her name around here someplace. It's probably in the newsletter, yeah.

MG Amparo Reyes?

TS Yes. She talked about not being a very large person physically in statute, but on the stage she sounded like she was 10 feet tall. She stood there in front of 30,000 people and talked about the conditions she was faced with, that she could, in fact, change those conditions. So it was the highlight for me.

MG Did you guys use the Internet in your activities at all?

TS Yes.

MG How?

TS For us, that's how we communicate with the workers in the outside world, both outside and inside the country. So we're working with workers from places like Malawi to Jakarta to Mexico, Santo Domingo, and so on, and so the Internet is a form that we communicate with. So we are in touch with people who are in a similar situation to us. Before it was only the prerogative of the boss, but now we talk to each other. Hence, we raise the slogan, "Speaking for Ourselves to Each Other."

MG What role did people of color play in the protests?

TS Wow. We didn't play much of a role, frankly, and part of it was due to our own vacillation and lack of clarity around standing on the ground. When we started out with the position and we basically took in probably the most developed and the most experienced around these questions from anybody around, but we didn't hold to our position. We vacillated on this question of how we should attack them, too, and how we should take this up.

Instead of building for our forum, we tried to participate in the entire process, and we got marginalized and isolated. The leadership of the trade union movement, of the environmentalists, were not prepared to listen to our perspective and they didn't. But the mistake we made, though, because the folks for the young people – people from DAN – were prepared to listen to our perspective and to support us; we didn't go to them. So that was the error of our work. We didn't recognize the importance and the potential of the participation of the young people in this process. I think we're pretty unanimous in agreeing that was our primary mistake during the mobilization.

MG Are you just speaking for LELO?

TS For LELO, I mean, yes.

MG What about in the overall protests? What you saw, do you think that people of color played a large role, a good role?

TS People of color were there and we had a presence. There was a presence from the different ethnic groups. There were black protesters. There were Latin protesters. There were Asian protesters, and so on. There were constituents from the Native American community, but our voice did not have an equal platform to articulate our perspective. I think, and I'm not suggesting that all the people of color had a perspective that was more developed than somebody else's. I think, though, that we allowed ourselves to be marginalized, that this happens often with people of color, that we get organized for a show as opposed to being able to articulate a position or a perspective.

So the perspective that LELO put forward, for example, was not a perspective from the Black community or the Asian community or Latin community, for example, but a class perspective. We had a perspective that had been raised in the question of international working class as opposed to what trade does to Black people or Asian people or so on.

MG Do you have anything else you'd like to add or say in closing? We've covered a lot of issues.

TS I think that what happened in the end, though, was that we were raising the slogan of globalized wages, and while it didn't come to the fore as a principal slogan, that's what our work is about. So we're continuing this work. We, in fact, this year we're having meetings both in South Africa that will bring workers from the southern African countries, and we're having a meeting in Sao Paolo, and workers will come from South American countries to talk about this.

We have a survey that was put together by workers and intellectuals at the University of Mexico that raises this question of a globalized wage. So, for example, a shoemaker in Italy, a shoemaker in Brazil and a shoemaker in Chicago ought to be making the same amount of wages. Well, people answer us, "That's ridiculous." And so we say in Santo Domingo - well, the worker in Santo Domingo doesn't need that same amount of money as a worker in New York because Whereas people that live in Santo Domingo on the ground, if you're going to walk everywhere you go, and you're going to eat maize at every meal and no electricity and no running water, then it's cheaper to live. But the Ford Motor Company doesn't make a \$2.00 an hour car anyplace in the world, and workers in Santo Domingo aspire to the same, have the same aspirations that a worker in New York has.

So we're making the argument that you have to globalize wages around the world. You have to have the same wages for the same workers who are producing the same thing. We don't think that's a very simple thing, and so we're prepared to struggle with this position. But we think that what happens is that our leadership in the trade union movement, ministers in the government oppose this position, and of course the bosses oppose this position.

So everyone thinks that progress should be based on attracting foreign investment, and foreign investors think there is a profit to be made in exploiting labor in developing worlds. But these workers around the world who have these jobs working for these multinational corporations are not able to consume what they produce. They produce it only for export. And so we say that if you're paying a globalized wage, then workers produce for consumption.

And people then argue that then foreign investors won't invest in those places, but then the national capital then gets invested for domestic production, and it produces a domestic consumption.

And, again, it's not a simple situation. We don't have all the answers, but we're prepared to -- we have joined this discussion. We are raising these questions, and the voice is missing in these discussions, the voice of ordinary working people. Our argument is that any transformation of our society is going to take place with our involvement.

Tape Ends.