

Interviewee: Dan Seligman

Affiliation: Director, Responsible Trade Program, Sierra Club

Interviewer: April Eaton

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Interview Summary:

Dan Seligman, Director of the Sierra Club's Responsible Trade Program in Washington, D.C. says the organization's focus and continued success relies on grassroots organizing tactics. Seligman says the Sierra Club tries to reach as many people as possible through education, the media and the Internet, while reuniting environmental organizations around core trade principles: keep trade clean, green, and fair. Although the Sierra Club didn't interact directly with groups who used civil disobedience tactics during the protests, Seligman sees those groups' roles as creating energy and images, while the Sierra Club formed messages and explanations. The result, says Seligman, was a "powerful synergy" between civil disobedience and sanctioned activities during the WTO protests.



AE	I'm talking with Dan Seligman, the Director of the Responsible Trade Campaign of the Sierra Club in Washington D.C.
DS	It should be Responsible Trade Program. I think they corrected it on the new cards.
AE	The first question I want to ask you is why did national Sierra Club decide to organize to be a part of the WTO protest?
DS	Would you mind just backing up a second? First of all, how much time do you have?
AE	I have an hour.
DS	Okay.
AE	I don't know how much time you have. We can make this short.
DS	I have an hour, as much time as you need. Could you just describe a little bit about what your project is about?

AE

I am helping to complete the WTO History Project that is jointly operated by the Center for Labor Studies and the University of Washington Libraries, both on the campus. The purpose of the project is to create a useable archive of what went on before, during and after the protest last November. We are really trying to collect as many voices as we can, viewpoints, opinions about what happened, why it happened, what worked, didn't work, etc. We are also collecting materials, costumes, videos, flyers, people's notebooks from the time that they were organizing, stickers, anything we can get. The goal of the project is so 50 years later, if someone wants to study this, they can do it. Most of the materials we collect are going to be not only archived in the library, but digitized and available on the Web. So that's what we're up to. And some researchers who are using the material right now are especially interested in the coalition building that went on around the protests and also with individuals' pathways to political involvement in direct action sorts of activities. So I guess in terms of this interview, there are two parts. There is what's up with Sierra Club and the organizational viewpoint of that piece and, also, I would like to ask you some questions just about yourself and how you got to where you are and more your own opinions on various things. Is that cool?

DS

Sure, it sounds like fun.

AE

Just because the Sierra Club has a definite position on trade and has made some very specific recommendations on trade does not necessarily dictate that you choose to send people to Seattle and get involved in those protests. Was there a decision-making process involved there, or was it pretty much taken for granted?

DS

No, there is a decision-making process, but it reflects on, I would argue, a broader strategy of the Sierra Club that goes back a few years. Specifically, I would say the most recent trigger of Seattle in some ways with the Sierra Club were the 1994 elections that put out Republicans to power and Congress and with that a whole series of deregulatory initiatives that Gingrich and his friends advanced. It had a couple of implications. One is that we started to see a parallel between some of the tools that were reflected in the so-called "Contract with America" and the rules that are embodied in international trade agreements, such as the takings provisions of the NAFTA or very similar to what the wise-use movement and Gingrich have advocated in the form of a domestic takings regime. There are just different phases of the same process of deregulation. That's one.

Point two is that we recognize the politics were shifting against us inside the Beltway for a number of factors, not least of which was the rise of corporate money in domestic politics. That's a long-term, secular shift in the underlying politics, the distribution of power in American society reflected inside the Beltway. So the organization, starting in about 1994, made a decision to

return to more grassrootsy organizing, training, empowerment methods as the only real option that we saw to counter the way of industry and the political system. It is kind of our only option if we don't have that much money. So that's kind of the larger context. And, in any case, our trade program has, for at least that long, been making an effort to build a grassroots constituency for what we call responsible trade, which would tweak the trade rules so they cannot be used as anti-environmental instruments. That would be the policy, but the methods we have been using are grassroots education, public education, the media, and trying to train and organize people for action for some time. We view our role in Seattle as, in some ways, a culmination of work that has been going on for six years.

AE So it wasn't really a big shift to decide to put a lot of effort and resources into getting involved in a mass protest, rather than lobbying, or TV ads, or negotiations. Was there a decision that had to be made about resources?

DS Some of it, because we recognize, in terms of our program, there was a buildup to Seattle that we think started with the defeat on NAFTA, the WTO in 1993 and 1994. There were a couple periods of lull, but then there were decisions and incidents coming out of the trade rules that got people's attention. That sort of started the re-building, based on that public awareness. Remember the strawberry mom, and Michigan, and the shrimp turtle ruling, and other incidents like this. We were able then to reunite the environmental community around some core trade reform principles, remain united through the Fast Track of '97, which we won, and the Club and the greenies in general had some marginal role in putting that victory over the top. And since the margin was narrow, we feel we played an instrumental role in that victory. Then again the Fast Track victory of '98. So the combination of the public awareness, the growing evidence that what we said about the trade regime was true, and a couple legislative victories were all very encouraging on our side within the organization -- yes, indeed, we couldn't get traction on these difficult large-scale issues, but as well, Clinton was feeling defensive and needing to put some energy into his flagging trade policy, so they decided then to bring the WTO to Seattle. So the convergence of those two trends resulted in what we all saw.

AE How did you get organized?

DS Well, in the sort of small microcosm of the Seattle setting, we actually started organizing as soon as the decision was announced to hold the summit in Seattle. We recognized that, I think it was in January or February of 1999, and that gave us ten months, more or less, to get ready. So we were able to accumulate some extra resources, but those came together, I mean this was a shoestring operation, I don't want to pretend it wasn't. But we were able, in the last few months, to place a field organizer in Seattle. We do have a field office in Seattle, which was an incredibly helpful asset. Those folks, the field

director there, Bill Arthur, was incredibly helpful. And then we had a field organizer there, Kathleen Casey.

AE Then, it was involvement from this level from the very beginning and this office sent resources to assist the local folks in mobilizing. What about joining forces with other groups? Was any of that going on on this level?

DS Yeah. First of all, keep in mind that we have had coalitions, I mean there is this sort of convenient myth out there that this coalition formed in Seattle.

AE Obviously not.

DS But we have been working with the labor movement since Fast Track in 1991, 1992, and on all the subsequent trade campaigns, with increasing coordination and intentionality. But even back as far as '93, the chairman of the Sierra Club, Mike McClosky announced the Sierra Club's opposition to NAFTA in a press conference with Tom Donahue, secretary/treasurer of the AFL-CIO. So these club operations actually go back some time. And you are asking about coalitions.

AE So the coalition is already there.

DS Yeah, it deepened though. Because what happened was we, to the design of the protests, which we view as having both a civil disobedience and a permitted legal component, and we were part of the latter, to be clear, not the former. We are totally coordinated with the local King County Labor Council, Ron Judd, who visited often and talked to them a lot, and they politely asked their opinion about different things from time to time. It was very coordinated and congenial from day one, really. While there was the more, what would you call it, the youth-oriented "direct action" component that was somewhat locally organized in the sense that there were these affinity groups and so on doing local sort of organizing about the civil disobedience. But there was more than local, because there was training that was brought in by expert groups from the outside, like the Global Exchange and Ruckus Society. We didn't really intersect with those folks directly at all, but by Mike Dolan, at Public Citizen, who were colleagues and collaborators, since day one on trade issues. They provided the glue that kept the whole thing together.

AE So your folks and the Ruckus Society, Direct Action Network didn't really, I can see where maybe the Sierra Club would already have a lot of that stuff together, the trained people and the resources for knowing how to go about this.

DS Well, I think there were, you know there are different sorts of organizing schools based on different traditions and institutional capabilities. And I think

that what we do, you might call it message-driven grassroots organizing. What that means is that we view the center of what we do to be communication of a message using grassroots turnout and tactics as devices to communicate that message to a wider target public. And our target audience is not people like us, well actually, it kind of is, because we're middle class members, people, but you know our target audience is to soccer moms and kind of regular folks on the street, people who care about the environment generally. So that, in some ways to us, dictates somewhat different tactics than the direct action folks would use.

AE If you could just put it in a nutshell, what was the message the Sierra Club wanted to get out? Make trade clean, green, and fair?

DS Yeah, we put it on posters, had big banners.

AE I know this is a hard question, but how would you assess the results of the Sierra Club's activities in Seattle?

DS Very good. The upshot was that there was a powerful synergy, I think, between the civil disobedience and the permitted activities. The civil disobedience created a lot of energy and images, but the permitted activity created the message and the explanations. So in some ways it worked as if it were intentionally organized. And I think there was probably more accident to it than anybody would, than maybe meets the eye, although subsequent actions suggest that yes, indeed, it was an accident, like the April protests in Washington here.

AE What aspects would you say were accidents?

DS Direct Action Network really was not aware of what we were doing. And to my mind, they still are not really aware of it. By the same token, we were not part of their organizing. We were vaguely aware of what was going to happen, but had no concept as to what the scale would be, whether they would succeed in their objective. We felt that, I mean, we were completely unclear as to whether we would be drowned out, our presence and message, because it was pretty straightforward demos and so forth, by their presence. So there are a lot of uncertainties, and there was no real effort to balance or hone that coordination. It was just that we had a game plan. We figured our best shot was to do well what we do well. And we did that. And we also did a lot of anticipation stuff too. We did press conferences and a lot of media around the original setup of the summit. We did a lot of media around the selling of the WTO, we had stories in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *L.A. Times* around that. So we, as an organization, got our name in the media and our message in the media starting as early as February on this thing, so that there was an instinct for national media, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and so forth, to look for us once they got there. And that was all very intentional. So we don't think we cut

through simply because of what we did there. We did lots of preparation work, explaining in advance what the summit was about, what were the stakes for environmentalists, well before the summit.

AE Did you learn anything from this experience? Is there anything that stands out to you? Is there something you would never change, or something you would definitely do different the next time?

DS Well, first of all, it was gratifying to see that what we think works, works. To give you a couple quantitative indicators, the only two polls I have seen on follow-up, maybe you have come up with more. I would actually be interested to see if you found any more. But there was a *Business Week* poll, immediately after, that questioned “What did you think of the protesters, pro and con”, and I think it was 52 to 39 percent positive/negative, or something in there, which to me is pretty good.

The second sort of positive indicator for us is that we did a sort of print media search of the week of Seattle trying to identify media hits by organization and found the Sierra Club got about as many actual media mentions as the Direct Action Network, which was surprising to us. Not as many images by a long shot, but in terms of actually being able to explain in print media what was happening, and probably even on TV, although it's harder to compare, we were able to hold our own. What we learned is that what we are doing, in a sense, works. In a way, it is kind of conservative, in the sense that we are going to kind of keep on keeping on.

The second big lesson is that it would help to have more coordination amongst the larger so-called Seattle coalition, which is not really a coalition, we have split in two big pieces. And so, I think it would be of use to have some kind of at least shared opportunity for shared learning about organizing and strategic campaigning methods and this whole concept of message-driven campaigning that we depend on. And it is my view that the sort of energy that is created around these protests is, and this is based in part on subsequent conversation with Ruckus, and in particular is that they kind of, their tactics are driving what their message is, not what they do, and that there may be some desire on their part to start adjusting tactics to actually achieve larger strategic purposes.

AE Is that how you would define the split that you mentioned earlier between tactic-driven organizations and message-driven? Or were you thinking of something else?

DS Yeah, that's probably right. The shutdown was, can and will and has only worked once. And it will never, ever work again.

- AE** That's a good observation. How did you personally end up here doing this?
- DS** Well, let's see, it's a long story. I was born at a very early age -- I don't know, I guess I was in grad school, going back that far in the late 80s, and Bush and Salinas proposed NAFTA, and I was kind of wondering what I was going to do with my master's degree, which is in international relations and Latin American studies. I thought that would be really fascinating to work on, and I kind of recognized that there was this, what I viewed as kind of corporate-driven foreign policy emerging that my intuitive would need to address fairness questions at some point. So I spent a couple years working at another environmental group, trying to get one of the majors to hire me to work on this, and finally the Sierra Club did.
- AE** Do you see, kind of a follow-up question, any differences the political experiences of, look at three generations, people who were politically, say in the 60s, people like yourself, and then the young activists that we saw in Seattle. In their experiences and their goals and pathways . . .
- DS** That's true. There is a generational divide which also coincides with this tactical divide. I think that the, it's funny, I do feel like an old fart, that the grounding of the youth audience is really within a kind of, in some ways that I don't quite understand, their politics is rooted in an experience of pop culture and music, rage against the machine, and a kind of alienation from things that motivated me that I don't quite understand. I am ultimately motivated in this work by the fact that I come from a small industrial town in the Midwest that I saw kind of paved over and malled as I was in my late teens and when I go back to visit it. I sort of see maybe the kind of homogenized corporate globalized world as sort of disappearing all of those places of community and connection. That may be sort of where I am coming from. But I think the youth generation kind of grew up in the malls. It's a different connection to politics than I'm quite familiar with. So there is some generation shift there.
- AE** And again, your own opinion on whether or not you see tension between national level NGOs, like this one, and the local branches, in terms of defining goals and strategies in an event like this.
- DS** Well, I don't really think the Sierra Club fits into that box very well, because it is both a local and a national organization at the same time. It really is intensely bottom-up driven, and so if you are not speaking to your grassroots and listening to them, you are not getting anywhere in the Sierra Club.
- AE** From what you said earlier, it seemed that wouldn't apply, that there was this unity there right from the start.
- DS** There is variation, local variation, for whatever reason, you know, the Cascade chapter, which is in Washington State, has not really taken off with

these issues in the way that the Oregon chapter below the river there, which is really into the issues. So there are random local differences that shape what you do.

AE

That's interesting. I guess I can see why that might be the case, but not necessarily. So what's next? What do you think the logical next step for the movement will be for making trade clean, green and fair?

DS

It will be really complicated, because what we have here is a movement that has this kind of movement feel to it, just like this energy on lease which has a life and mind of its own, which is in part fueling the interest in Nader, and perhaps will cause some trouble for Al Gore, which is certainly not anything we hope for. But what we would like and need to do is find a way to connect that energy to legislative fights that are coming up. Almost certainly we'll see a renewed effort for Fast Track in 2001. And we would like to see an alternative, so that will be interesting.

By the same token, if we are still in an opposition mode, it is not clear to me that this movement energy can be harnessed to working on the legislative context, because it seems to be anti-political, in a way. But it strikes me that some of the intermediate things we need to do is some training and plant some seeds and see if that works. In part, I think this movement is kind of selecting for certain type of persons by the tactics they have chosen, and I think there may be a wider audience, even in the student world, for engagement on these issues, if different tactics are provided. I think in some sense, we are dealing with a small sub-set of potential activist population.

AE

In order to broaden that out, how do you do that?

DS

Well, we're planning some trainings - not us, but the Sierra Student Coalition, which is the student wing of the Sierra Club and is real well versed in, I think, bridging these worlds. They're young, they're in college, and they also know how to do this other kind of campaign that we're talking about. So we're going to encourage them to get out there and take some leadership in building some of these bridges. That's the main thing we're going to do.

AE

My specific question has to do with how the Internet affects politics and activism. I guess the broader piece of that is do you think the organization's activism in general has changed, say in the last 20 years or so?

DS

Well, I haven't been around that long, so, I think that it helps by speeding things up. It does create alternative paths for information and people to express themselves. There are currents of ideas and perceptions and misperceptions and even manias out there that are able to circulate pretty freely and get an audience, because we have this tool. So I think it does facilitate this kind of movement building. And it does help, I think, break the

monopoly of the big papers, and maybe that's something of a shift in that there was a tendency, I think, for the big papers to be very dismissive on trade issues, certainly through the Fast Track fights in '97 and '98. Ed boards were very dismissive and kind of ignorant in a way, knee-jerk in their approach to the issues. But there is this counterpoint on the Web and list serves of "It ain't so". So it in some ways becomes difficult for the ed boards to maintain their line of thought if there's another channel for expression.

AE So I guess in a nutshell, broadened access to alternative sources of information.

DS It does help, I think.

AE That's all I really have to ask you, but is there anything you want to add just in general about your experience with the WTO protest?

DS I think I covered it pretty well.

End of Interview

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