

Interviewee: Jeremy Simer

Affiliation: People for Fair Trade, Network Opposed to WTO

Interviewer: Gillian Murphy

Date of interview: April 5, 2000

Interview Summary:

Jeremy Simer of People for Fair Trade/Network Opposed to WTO discusses his work in educating students at the high school and college levels before the WTO protests. Simer also says the group had trouble assimilating out-of-town organizations due to fundamental differences in strategies and ideologies. The organization was split into two camps - those who wanted to abolish the WTO and those that sought reform. PFT/NO2WTO worked closely with the King County Labor Council and the local division of the AFL-CIO. Working on the large Labor march was problematic, Simer says, because many student activists felt that they were being used to pad the march and that they wouldn't be free to exercise their radical views. Simer believes that the effects of the protests were not as important locally as they were globally, partly because the organizations in Seattle to protest the WTO could not continue to work together.



GM Good morning. It's the 5th of April. I'm sitting here in the Pearl Café with Jeremy Simer.

JS Good morning.

GM This morning we're going to talk about Jeremy's involvement in the WTO. You were working with the People for Fair Trade/NO to WTO. What was your role with that organization?

JS My specific responsibilities varied a lot. The People for Fair Trade/NO to WTO, which you know was a name adopted by the local movement of which the office, in fact, was run by Public Citizens/Citizens Trade Campaign. I was hired in August of '99. I think I remember that our first staff meeting was August 18, and that was sort of when we really got started. Before then Sally Soriano and her assistant, Mike Godfried, had been on the payroll, but not for very long. Sally had been working on these issues for years but never paid. She worked very closely with Public Citizen. I don't think she had ever been paid before.

So when I came on, Mike and Sally were the two staff people, and then I was hired at the same time as Lydia Cabasco and a guy named Forrest, who was the computers, MIS guy. Also Jeremy Madsen, who is our main organizer in our office, our lead organizer.

So from then through December, our responsibilities switched on a regular basis for each of us. When I started, I believe, I was put in charge of coordinating with college student organizations and I was supposed to be the intelligence guy, which was really ironic, because I had never really done anything like that before and I didn't do a very good job of it.

GM

What does that mean?

JS

I think the phrase we used was "oppositional research", to sort of keep tabs on what the Seattle Host Organization, the WTO, were doing, because our office was involved in organizing some small protests in the months leading up to the actual Ministerial. We wanted to keep tabs on what was going on. For example, when we found out that Director General Michael Moore was coming to town, then... we just found out, I think, it was two and a half days before he arrived, three days. But because we had already sort of set up the office... Well, I'm kind of getting off the topic here. The point is that I did that research in order that we could have protests or do whatever we needed to do as circumstances came up. Later on, and at the beginning of November, I became the Volunteer Coordinator for within our office and also the events organized by Public Citizen and some other NGOs.

GM

So for a while you worked primarily with student organizations?

JS

At the beginning I was. But then at the same time Lydia Cabasco was in charge of leading the high school curriculum projects. So we were both working closely on student stuff and we both attended all the student organizing meetings.

GM

Was that high schools and college? Universities?

JS

Yeah.

GM

What schools?

JS

We had Monday night meetings of a committee called the Student Outreach and Education Committee, I think it was called. I kept trying to sort of shift it and call it Mobilization, but it was mostly called the Student Outreach Committee. It had been going, I think, for a couple of months when I came in in July or maybe August. When I came in it was Ace Saturday from People's Assembly and me and Lydia and my friend, Cameron Chapman, who I

mentioned, and Devin Therriot-Orr, and his girlfriend, Jenn Carter. And probably some other people that I can't remember. Later on, as it grew, and especially as we established it to be every Monday night and it was meeting at the People for Fair Trade offices... There was usually a strong contingent from the UW and a number of students from Seattle Central. Later on we got some people from Seattle U. involved. There were also some high school students from Nova. There was a guy from Mercer Island High School.

GM How was it that they ended up being there? Had you gone to the schools and talked to student organizations to get a student leader, maybe, to come to the meeting?

JS To a limited degree, I think that the high school curriculum project, which visited schools and gave presentations about WTO and fair trade versus free trade, to a very, very limited degree, I think, that got some people directly involved. More than that, I think, it was more using personal and organizational contacts, especially through the Seattle Young People's Project. They got involved pretty early and both some of the young people who are just sort of rank and file members of SYPP, and also Michael Graham Squire, who I believe is the director or something – I think he's the staff person – they helped out by giving contacts and such.

GM Early on what was your goal?

JS My personal goal or the organizational goal?

GM Both.

JS To be honest, my personal goal in taking this job and working for the Citizens Trade Campaign of Public Citizens was kind of unclear, because I had just come back and I was really excited. I had come back from being out of town for a number of months, and had been hearing from friends over email that the organizing had started. And I realized it was a huge opportunity and I knew I wanted to be involved in it as much as I could.

So for that reason I took this job, because I thought, "Oh, great! I could be a paid organizer," without really understanding exactly what my responsibilities were going to be; or the nature of NGO's or the nature of Public Citizen and such. So my goal was simply to be as involved as I could, and be as effective as I could in mobilizing as many people as I could. At that time I didn't have a clear sense of where I stood on the march versus direct action.

You know what? I remember saying to Devin and Jen that my goal...this is a good question. I remember thinking that my goal was to help bridge the gap between Mike Dolan and the local community. I had this naïve sense that

maybe somehow locally-based organizers could intersect with both existing organizations on the ground and also work with Mike Dolan and use his resources and everything. As it turned out, like everyone else, I was a Dolan lackey and didn't really have any time to go to any other organizational meetings.

GM What happened to that idea? Was it that your organizational responsibilities came in conflict or the reality in this situation clashed?

JS It was kind of a naïve assumption that I would be able to do anything to that degree from the beginning, and the main reasons probably why I stopped seeing myself as playing that role was one, just the amount of work that you had to do, and I didn't really have that much time to interface with other people and organizations, at least not in ways that I initiated personally. I'd go out as a People for Fair Trade representative, sort of on assignment. But then also I just started to realize that Mike Dolan was going to do things the way he wanted to do them. We weren't really consulted that much on how to do stuff.

GM So what were your organizational responsibilities? What was your job? How did you go about achieving them?

JS Like I was saying before, it really varied a lot. For example, another task I didn't mention before was the calendar. You remember; we worked on that together to a degree. I was supposed to collect information on all kinds of events related to what we called 'Fair Trade Events', all the sort of protests and teach-ins and all those events, as well as meet with student organizations and stay in contact with them and do as much as I could to keep them involved. Send them information. Give them suggestions on how to get involved.

GM Did you do a lot of that? Did you get a lot of requests for information?

JS Yes, to a degree. We started getting a lot of phone calls, some from around the country, really, at our office, because we had that 877 number. That brought in calls from all over the place.

GM Right, the toll free number.

JS The toll free number, exactly. But also, it was never so much requested as was made clear that they thought it was helpful that I attended the UW meetings. They met every week and I probably went for four weeks or five or something before they were really off the ground, really going strong. Then I was pulled off the student piece around October or November, something like that.

GM So how did your role shape?

JS Well, then, as needs came up in the campaign... For example, at the beginning, it wasn't really clear, exactly, at least it wasn't made explicit to everybody, what the long-term plan was. Dolan would say, "Okay, you're this, you're this, and you're this," and then would distribute tasks. And that would be our job for a few weeks. And then as things started shaping up, he'd realize that things needed to be changed a bit.

So then it shifted. There was a point, probably in October or November, where Mike said something like, "Okay. We've got to stop the education part at this point. The city already knows about WTO, and most of the people who are going to come out know that it's bad."

GM And when do you think that was?

JS I think it was October or November. I can't remember exactly. Then the focus became more of getting people on the street on November 30, particularly for the big march sponsored by the AFL. And so at that point, and as I'm talking about Dolan, I'm actually meaning that Jeremy Madsen was actually giving most of these orders and suggestions, because he's the one that we interacted with most directly. Then they started saying, "Okay, stop going to the student meetings and do more research and volunteer coordination."

GM How did you go about getting people to attend the march?

JS At every meeting that we attended and every organizational contact we talked with, that was always meant to be the focus.

GM Were you still working primarily with younger organizations, student organizations and the like, or did that change?

JS No, that really shifted. Once I was taken off the college student coordination part, then I just was a regular staff organizer like everyone. I went to some Jobs with Justice meetings. At the beginning I was helping to a degree with the neighborhood groups, which were mostly coordinated by Mike Godfried. I want to add, thought, that although organizationally speaking our focus was getting people off to the big march, some of us, I know myself and I think Lydia, too, were also pretty excited about Direct action. So we would speak at any opportunity that seemed appropriate. We would say, "Hey, there's the big march at 10 o'clock, but also there's direct action that starts at 7 o'clock."

GM Was that part of the responsibilities of your job or was that...?

JS No.

GM Was that encouraged, discouraged?

JS It was discouraged, actually.

GM What was the official position of the Fair Trade on the direct action?

JS Essentially it was not something that we were officially, explicitly endorsing, but it was something that we were putting on the calendars and putting the information up there about. I just did an interview with Mike Dolan recently and he said on the record that he had... I don't know if it was him personally or if this was the trade campaign or what, but he in some degree donated money to the Direct Action Network. There was a significant degree of collaboration sort of behind the scenes between the organizations, the organizations meaning CTC and DAN.

But for Mike Dolan, in order to keep the support of labor and of the more mainstream organizations, which he saw as being a really important element, he wanted to maintain sort of a position, an appearance, of not being a true radical. Kind of rowdy, kind of radical, but not completely in the DAN camp.

GM And how do you feel about that? Do you think that appearing radical would alienate Labor and would be detrimental to the coalition between, say, environment, consumer groups, and Labor?

JS Possibly. It's hard for me to say, because I didn't interact with labor folks that much. Most of the meetings that involved, at least at the sort of leadership official level, most of the meetings with Labor, in fact, the King County Labor Council and different specific unions, were attended by Mike Dolan and Jeremy Madsen. So I never had a very immediate sense of what their sense was. But it certainly was true that there was a lot of nervousness, from what I can tell, on behalf of the King County Labor Council and especially the national AFL and some of the union internationals. For that reason I do think it was strategic. I do think it worked well. Ultimately, could the Citizens Trade Campaign have taken a more radical stance? In some ways it should have, but in some ways I think Dolan did a good job of sort of playing that, of walking the line and bringing together a lot of people that otherwise might not have been working together.

GM Was there any cooperation between student groups and Labor?

JS To a degree. There was a very large degree of student and Labor participation from student organizations coming from out of town. Kind of ironically, here on the ground most of the student organizers were involved in organizing the rallies at the UW and Seattle Central and the march down to the rally on the 30th, whereas lots of groups coming from around the U.S. and Canada,

including ... Well, you see, I didn't get to go to the student march, so I'm not sure who showed up to this stuff, the student stuff that was organized by the UW and the local students. My understanding is that a lot of the student and youth-based organizations went directly to the stadium in the morning to participate in the AFL stuff, especially like the United Students Against Sweat Shops, and, I think, the Student Environmental Action Coalition, and... I don't really know, because I wasn't there. But that's my understanding.

So there was a strong cooperation there. At the local level it was a little more contentious, because there was a sense among some of the students who were pretty vocal about it that the AFL just wanted to sort of co-opt the students and get them to march in their march and that there wasn't going to be room for the more radical message. There was a lot of sort of AFL bashing. So at the local level, there wasn't that much cooperation.

Although Kathy Lowenberg from the Workers' Center attended lots of the meetings of the student organization; maybe not lots, but near the end she came every week for probably a month or so, and we collaborated on a lot of projects. She did a lot of educational and mobilization outreach herself to lots of high schoolers. So, there was that cooperation. She helped a lot that way.

GM It's generally believed that you can get student activists to believe in anything and to become active on just about any issue. Do you think that students are an important force, or just because of creating numbers?

JS That for me is two very different questions. One, I don't think that's really true. I don't know what you mean about generally believing you can get students to get involved in just about anything, because as a student organizer from recent past, it seemed particularly difficult to get students involved in anything. I think much more than being open to getting involved in anything, that if they believe in anything, there's a lot of cynicism to be dealt with.

GM Where do you think that comes from?

JS Mostly from the undemocratic nature of lots of our institutions, our cultural and political institutions that make people feel like they can't really get involved, or if they get involved it doesn't really matter. So that sort of set up to your question, I don't really agree with, but the second part of your question; what was the second part of the question? Do they matter, right?

GM Do you think the students are an important force?

JS Yes, absolutely, because I think the students, both generally speaking, figuratively speaking, in general social work, but particularly in this case, did a good job of helping get a more radical message out there.

GM What is the more radical message? You have referred to that several times. What is it?

JS Essentially to boil it down and simplify it, there was a pretty significant split between activists in Seattle, of some who wanted to put forth the message that we need to just stop the WTO and reform it and make it work; the camp that really was behind the concept of fair trade. And there were a lot of other people, including some students and some of the people of color organizations, who would say, “Sorry. There isn’t really any fair trade in the current system and we need to abolish the WTO.” Sort of reformists versus the abolitionists, right? Not all, but a significant number of students, were more interested in taking more “Abolish – No to WTO” stance. And some of them were pushing for involvement in the direct action in particular, and not wanting to just have sort of a team march or whatever. I’m thinking particularly of Ingrid Chapman. She pushed for involvement in the direct action and for the ‘No to WTO’ stance a lot.

GM Were the fair traders who preferred the message of reforming WTO, were their tactics different from direct action?

JS Again, to sort of simplify, because there were so many different people with so many different positions, it’s hard to really group people. There wasn’t really a dichotomy like that. There was really a spectrum of positions. There was some separation between those two general perspectives. Generally speaking, I think that most of the people who were for the more positive were for a fair trade message, and more willing to go along with what the AFL and Public Citizen were putting forth, were choosing the tactics of going and being in the big march. Right? Whereas people preferring the more radical message were tending to get more involved in the direct action, with the exception of the People’s Assembly, which is also a very, very directly anti-WTO. They talk a lot about imperialism and have a very clear line against the WTO and its related institutions. They’ve had their own march, which came up and joined with the big march. I don’t know if they participated much in the direct action.

GM You talked a little bit earlier about other organizations that came to Seattle, those from San Francisco and the East Coast, particularly Washington, D.C., coming to Seattle and working with some of the established grassroots groups here. Were there any problems with that relationship?

JS Certainly. A lot of it I didn’t get to witness first-hand. I think there were conflicts between Mike Dolan and some of the local organizers starting in the spring or maybe early summer, before I got here. From what I’ve heard, and this is actually something I want to get a better handle on in my own research, is that what later became the People for Fair Trade/Network Opposed to

WTO, the general community meetings, started off as being more grassroots, democratic, let's all vote at this meeting what we are going to do in sorts of structure. But then later on, and there was a coordinating committee, but apparently it was self-selected and not very efficient, from what I've heard. There were long talks about things and things weren't really getting done.

But then Public Citizen came in. Mike Dolan opened the office and just started calling the shots, and not necessarily telling organizations what to do, but I don't think he was really listening to organizations about what should be done, either, except for those which he thought were strategic to listen to such as the King County Labor Council.

GM What was his opinion and how was he able to call the shots?

JS Because he had the money.

GM Because he had the money.

JS Yes. There was nothing stopping him from organizing teach-ins and making decisions about what to support and what not to support and how to structure things, because he was a powerful organizer who is very talented, but very set on doing things his way. And so the coordinating committee fell apart at a certain point, and then there stopped being a sort of multi-lateral decision-making structure. There continued to be a more informal committee that met together that started being called the Cross-Sectoral, which was sort of a roundtable of different organizations were involved. But then it wasn't a decision-making body anymore; it was just more sort of a check-in kind of roundtable discussion about, "What are you doing? What are you doing? This is what we're doing," which facilitated to some degree some joint decisions, but not much. It was pretty much a way for people to share information and collaborate, when possible, and stay out of each other's way when possible.

There was more than that though, too. I don't know all the ins and outs of it, but I do know that Phil Bereano from the Washington Biotechnology Action Council, WashBAC, I do know that he and his collaborators were wanting to set up a teach-in on Wednesday, December 1st, dedicated to biotechnology and related issues. But then Public Citizen and its collaborating NGO's in D.C. scheduled that as being the day for.... Each day of the five days of the week had a theme established by Public Citizen and their groups. They called Wednesday "Women, Democracy, Sovereignty and Development."

So there were two parallel teach-ins that went on that day, the one promoted by Public Citizen and the one organized by WashBAC and Phil Bereano. I remember hearing some people in our office say, for whatever reason, that Phil Bereano was hard to work with or something and that he wasn't going

...I don't know. Also to a degree I think it was just that Public Citizen wanted to do things the way they wanted to do them.

GM I remember that teach-in was actually one of the very early items on the calendar. It was perhaps the first item I added and it disappeared the week before the WTO.

JS Disappeared from where?

GM The calendar. It was cancelled pretty late in the game.

JS No, it wasn't cancelled.

GM It wasn't?

JS No, it happened.

GM OK. I got that wrong, then.

JS Was it taken off of the web page calendar or the...?

GM I thought that was the one that was cancelled quite late in the game.

JS I don't think so. I think I remember it happening, because I remember on December 1. Yeah, I'm pretty sure it happened.

GM Okay. I was wrong.

JS I don't know. The week was so crazy, but other than the things I saw with my own eyes, I feel like I don't really know anything.

GM You wanted to mention something else with the calendar?

JS The teach-in on biotechnology and the TRIPS agreement – I remember putting that on the calendar that I was developing early on. It was always toned down on the stuff that came out of the Public Citizen office in D.C. For example, there were a couple of pieces of literature that came out that had mini-calendars of the main events that week which may or may not have included the direct action. Probably not. I think it was mostly just the big march and the five teach-ins sponsored by Public Citizen and their groups, and it wasn't even mentioned.

GM Five teach-ins or five days?

JS The five days. And the Wednesday biotechnology one wasn't even mentioned on there, even though the calendar that I had supplied the people in D.C. had

included it. So it was toned down that way and just didn't really... I know that was a point of conflict. I know a number of organizations were really unhappy with the way that the decision-making was going on especially the...

GM

Which ones?

JS

I know LELO was pissed, and I'm not sure exactly why other than I think it just mostly had to do with the fact that Mike Dolan came to town and started calling the shots and wasn't...

GM

Do you think this was the result of Mike Dolan, a very strong personality, or the resources he had behind him?

JS

I don't think there's anything about money and resources that inherently is troublesome. They're dangerous, because if you have resources, then people start getting, depending on how they get allocated, then people feel either left out or included or whatever. But the resources themselves weren't the problem. I think it was the conflict stemmed largely from Dolan seeing the way that he wanted to do things and doing them. It's simply that that's just his operating structure. We're talking about Public Citizen. It's a top down NGO. And they'll collaborate with organizations when it's in their best interest. But they're not interested in sort of sacrificing to some degree what they see as being efficiency and success in reaching their own goals in order to foster a cooperative atmosphere and movement building. They're not interested in movement building. They're interested in events and campaigns. Our office was continually referred to as a campaign office. Mike Dolan and Jeremy Madsen both have a strong background in Democratic Party campaigns, and that's what this was for them.

GM

Do you think there's a different focus among some of the local grassroots organizations?

JS

Well, certainly. I think every organization involved saw November 30 in that week as being important and something to work toward, but not the be all/end all. Public Citizen isn't invested in the Seattle organizing community, and from my perspective didn't really care at all about what happened after November 30 and December 3 or 4 or whatever. They just weren't interested in that. This was a historical moment for them to be as influential as they could be. What happened afterwards didn't matter, and the relationships that might be soured between the people and organizations didn't matter.

GM

What do you think the post - WTO effect is? Do you think it did help build a movement?

JS

At the national and international level, yes. I think that a lot of the world saw for the first time in a long time Americans standing up to what you would call

corporate globalization, what you'd call capitalism, what you'd call a few things. Lots of the world thinks that Americans are proto-facists. They're just complete lazy asses and don't ever do anything, so the fact that we did what we did that week was sort of a shot in the arm to a lot of people. I've seen articles and heard reports of people protesting the UNCTAD meetings in Bangkok. Was it the UN Council on Trade and Development, or something like that? As they were protesting, they were talking about the 'Spirit of Seattle'. They started off being forced to protest three miles away from the conference, and by the end of the week were actually inside the conference talking to the delegates.

Similarly, I've heard at the Montreal Bio-Safety Protocol Meetings in, when was that, December or January or something, similarly there was a very strong sense that Seattle had made a big difference and it was a real shot in the arm. At the national level, as well, I think the A16 actions around the IMF and the World Bank are proving to be round two of the battle that started - at least in the United States - at the WTO ministerial. This kind of struggle has been going on for a long time around the world with a similar perspective and in an understanding of these international institutions. But in the United States, it really started, as far as I can tell, on a large level with the WTO; to a lesser degree with MAI and NAFTA before it.

But at the local level, that's kind of what I was getting at a few minutes ago is that there wasn't - all the organizing that went into the WTO ministerial didn't really produce any kind of local structure that can continue doing similar work. There's like a new Workers' Voices Coalition, but I can't really tell to what degree it's separated from LELO. It seems very closely related to a single organization.

Then there's the so-called coalition, that after five months is still a nameless coalition, the Post-WTO Coalition that meets at the Teamsters' Hall, which hasn't done anything. It's a waste of time. It's organization is very weak.

GM

Who's part of that?

JS

Lots of general citizen activists who were involved in the WTO. No organization is involved officially, because there's no kind of endorsement process. Organizations don't send representatives. It's just people show up from different groups. And similarly, the so-called "cross-sectoral" meeting which I mentioned was meeting before the WTO, which I've helped Lois Canright in organizing a series of meetings to try further that, similarly hasn't had that much success.

GM

So it seems like some of the local involvement has fallen apart a bit?

JS I wouldn't say involvement. I'd say coordination. I think every organization that was involved in the protests is still energized and is still working and talking and thinking about all these issues. From organization to organization, I think everyone learned a lot and was excited by and inspired by what happened here. But in terms of there being a longstanding coalition structure or even really a more informal working relationship, that doesn't really exist that much. I do think that lots of organizations worked together for the first time, and now maybe they'll still talk to each other and give each other phone calls and send each other e-mails, but not that much trust was built, because there was a sense of conflict between local versus national groups, and the people of color organizations and the white liberals.

GM So tomorrow you are off to Washington?

JS Yes.

GM What will you be doing?

JS Working primarily with the Independent Media Center. I'm working generally with the printing. It's going to be writing and editing articles for a newspaper called *Blind Spot* and for the web page. But my job is also, at least in the interim, to coordinate translation of those materials, probably into somewhere between five and a dozen different languages, for distribution on the web.

GM How do you expect the experience in D.C. to compare to Seattle?

JS Oh, God, I don't know. People were making projections about what it was going to be like here in Seattle right and left. It's going to be 50,000 people or 100,000 people, and it's going to be completely peaceful or... No one expected the police violence. Very few people that I know expected the police violence that happened here. And also I don't think anyone, very, very few people expected direct action to be as successful as it was.

I don't really have any expectations going to D.C. other than that the project I'm working with, IMC, at least from this distance just over email and such, doesn't seem as well organized as the one that happened here, but the Mobilization for Global Justice, the coalition that's putting together the protests, does seem to have its shit together. There are just too many factors, too many variables for me to feel like I can make any kind of prediction at all, any sense of basis in reality. I think it has the potential for being wildly successful because of the number of people that are showing up. At the same time, the cops are ready for us, and they've been studying for months.

GM Years.

JS Yes, years, absolutely. It's D.C. And they know what they're doing, unlike the Seattle Police Department and King County Sheriffs, etc. So it's the nation's Capital, they know what they're doing. It is going to be a very different scenario, but what to actually expect? I don't know.

GM I don't have any further questions at this stage. What else would you like to add?

JS There are lots, but I don't have any coming to me right now. Like I said before is that I'm working similarly on this WTO History Project, and I'm always getting all these ideas and facts and statements from lots of people and not really recording my own ideas as much as I'd like. So I know they're in there, but that's all I can think of right now.

GM We might have to get back to them at another time when you've organized your thoughts.

JS Okay.

GM Thank you very much, Jeremy. I think we're done.

End of Interview

WTO History Project
University of Washington
wtohist@u.washington.edu