

Interviewee: Anne Slater
Affiliation: Seattle Radical Women
Interviewer: Gillian Murphy
Date: Dec. 12, 2000

Interview Summary:

An organizer for Seattle Radical Women, Anne Slater says the group's success relies on grassroots involvement. Radical Women prepared for the WTO protests through a series of coalition meetings with its sister organization, the Freedom Socialist Party. Seattle Radical Women created "A Women's Guide to the WTO," a tool to educate the public about the WTO's effects on women. Slater says the organization believes the WTO's mechanism of global capitalism only benefits the already-wealthy, who have no need for an international enforcement agency. Slater describes Seattle Radical Women's work with other organizations that opposed the WTO, and credits Seattle's democratic tradition with allowing coalition members to work together, despite disagreements. Slater says the WTO protests illustrated the benefits of action and organization, but led to the first declaration of marshal law in the United States in 30 years.



GM	Good morning, I'm Gillian Murphy here with Anne Slater of the Seattle Radical Women, it's December 12 th . We're at the Center for Communication and Civic Engagement. Good Morning.
AS	Good morning.
GM	Tell me a little about your position in the Seattle Radical Women.
AS	I'm the organizer for Seattle Radical Women, which is an elected position, and I'm responsible for those in our organization that are the highest decision making body and then I'm responsible for carrying out those decisions and coordinating a lot of the work we do.
GM	Were you doing that more than a year ago before WTO came to town?
AS	Yes.
GM	How is it that you first became involved in mobilization leading up to that event?

AS

I think we first became involved when we first found out that the WTO was planning on, well, actually that there had been bids put out to have the WTO meet in Seattle. So Radical Women and our sister organization, the Freedom Socialist Party, both were participating in the early community coalition meetings that were happening of activists coming together to say, "This organization is going to meet in Seattle, what do you think as a community our response should be." And our response was, we started studying what was the WTO? Where did it come from and what is it doing now? Our response was we should abolish the WTO. That it was no good for human beings. We also have members that are active in labor unions, so people started bringing resolutions to labor unions for labor involvement and protests against the WTO. So that would be how we started.

GM

When were these early meetings and who attended, do you remember?

AS

The WTO met in December, and I think some of these meetings started happening... I actually couldn't tell you for sure, but I think January and February of that year and they were attended by environmentalists... I don't remember organizations' names, I know the People's Assembly, a lot of local environmentalists, the Church Council... a broad spectrum of groups, not a lot of other feminists groups, which is part of why we decided to try and educate about how the WTO affects women. And then, later on in meetings, closer to the WTO, DAN, the Direct Action Network, started coming and some of the people from Nader's group, Public Citizen, I think it was, started coming, and for us as a feminist organization we really wanted also to reach out to the feminist community and tell people how the WTO was affecting them.

GM

How did you do that? What efforts did you take towards mobilization to reach out to feminist communities in Seattle?

AS

And also people who don't necessarily consider themselves feminist but are interested in how it affects women. A couple different ways, we had a meeting. Our executive committee divided up the world into broad regions to do initial research, specifically what was the WTO proposing for those areas, what were the issues on the table that were going to affect Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Central and South America and brought a report to a meeting that we advertised very widely and publicly, then we did a four-week study guide, A Woman's Guide to the WTO, that was meeting weekly, where people got an opportunity to read not just what we found, but things that other people brought to the meeting that we had, and to look at concretely, besides saying the WTO is bad, but looking at the fact that what they were going to do on agriculture was going to primarily impact women, who were growing food for subsistence or affect the kinds of seeds that the women could use, that they had been using for hundreds of years.

Or the fact that the banana farms in Central and Latin America, that the WTO was trying to basically shut down, were primarily women operated and run. And to bring that kind of information to the table or... in the Middle East where not a lot of the organizations yet belong to the WTO, to belong, what they are having to do is implement IMF austerity measures which include cutting education and a proposal for how to deal with the excessive education budget... this is in a country where women were largely illiterate and were not being encouraged to go to school was to include education in snippets and bits on the radio. We thought this is not good for women worldwide. So, we did it that way.

The other things we did, we were invited by the Central Area Chamber of Commerce who had been asked by, I am exactly not sure which body, but they had been asked officially to participate in hosting the WTO, and it is primarily a chamber of commerce that is of people of color. In an area that is largely Black, Asian and Chicano, so we came and did a presentation about what the WTO was and they, out of that, decided to turn down the request for their help and not participate. So in those kinds of avenues, a lot of our members are active in labor unions and started to bring resolutions, encouraging their union to officially participate in the demonstrations against the WTO, and then we attended different community coalitions. There were some that were very broad and there were also a lot of other sort of more isolated efforts to oppose the WTO and we tried to help bring people together so that people could work in a coordinated way. And raise the debates and the discussions about what are we going to call for with this? Before the WTO came to town there were wild debates, should it be a call for a fair trade or for abolishing the WTO?

GM Which side did you come down on?

AS We were arguing for abolishing the WTO. We think that it's a mechanism of global capitalism and does no good for most human beings or other living things around the world, except for those that are already rich and wealthy who have enough and don't need an international enforcement agency. What happened is the broad coalition in their title was both Fair Trade/ No WTO and that was out of those debates that happened. And then what happened during the WTO, was I think, everybody took the stand of "No to WTO" and that it should be abolished.

GM Was there tension that you saw during those meetings about the two different stances the organizations took?

AS There was definite disagreement. People were very passionate about the things they thought.

GM It seems unusual for a coalition to hang together when the coalition members have really radically different ideas about the outcome, and yet they were still able to work together towards a common event.

AS I think some of that is that it wasn't expected that people who had different views would no longer be able to say those views. This group was coming together for the common purpose of opposing the WTO. What exactly that meant might be open for discussion. There also is a history in Seattle of coalitions being democratic, being open. having open discussion and debate, which I think a lot of times when coalitions fall apart is when there's a debate that needs to be had and there is someone or some group that doesn't want it to be had and tries to just squelch it.

We've been part of many coalitions in and outside of the WTO where we've had a dissenting view, but as long as we've been able to express it, it gets discussed and decided democratically, we can abide by the majority and that is what happened in these meetings. The other approach that was taken is, there is plenty in the WTO for everybody to protest, so we don't have to compete over who is going to protest and everybody should be getting out and protesting on whatever level or however far they are willing to protest.

GM Which organizations did your organization mostly work closely with?

AS Most closely? That would be a little hard to say, partly because we worked with a lot of different groups. With our organization, our members aren't members on paper only who pay dues once a year. They are all very active, so people were representing Radical Women in a whole variety of different coalitions or groups from campuses, both the UW coalition, the SCC coalition, the Community Coalition, and the People's Assembly. I know, we worked with the People's Assembly in terms, of... the mayor was trying to deny them a march permit and we had been part of the planning meetings for their demonstration and so mobilizing people to call the mayor to not deny a march permit to the organization that actually was also taking an anti-imperialist stand. We have members who are on the King County Labor Council who brought resolutions there, in terms in trying to motivate people to do things.

GM So it really is just a wide array...

AS I am sorry. Yeah. You know I was thinking about this yesterday, when I was thinking about this interview, and I was trying to look through my notes for things, and I thought, God I wish this had happened a year ago then I could remember this stuff. It's like what exact days were these different things on? What day did the mayor declare the police siege, so... I don't know.

GM What do you think were the most effective things about the mobilization movement leading up to November 30th that resulted in however many tens of thousands of people coming out?

AS I think it was a combination of things. I think it was the democracy within the movement. I think, the fact that Labor was pushed by rank-and-file members to take an active role in opposing the WTO, and when the AFL-CIO puts out a national call for trade unionists and union members to come to Seattle, it has an effect. I think the fact that labor took a stand, however weak or strong at different points, I think that had an impact, and I think the fact that all of different groups involved put out the call across the nation and said what we want to have in Seattle is a strong, clear message that the WTO will not go unopposed.

GM Sounds like, from your perspective, this was a bottom-up movement.

AS I think that's what made what happened during the WTO happen. I think there were organizations or individuals and some of the labor bureaucrats who might not have liked for it to be quite so bottom-up, but I think what we saw during the WTO was the effect of when people who cross all different political spectrums... issues that they tend to work on... come together and feel that they have the power to impact something. It is incredible, and it coalesces and moves forward in a way that I don't think we've seen in the United States since the Civil Rights Movement or the Anti-Vietnam Movement.

And that only happens from individual grassroots involvement, that can't be dictated from the top, usually when there's dictation from the top, its to stop that, there's fear, someone has a fear that things might get out of control. It might go farther or more militant than they would like. That's the kind of bureaucracy that we're involved in fighting against.

GM What were some of the lessons that you learned about mobilization that you will apply in your future work? Or have applied in your work since?

AS That's an interesting question. We've actually had several evaluation meetings after the WTO. I think some of it is, for us, we learned the importance of having one or two people who actually aren't out in the demonstrations but who are watching the news and international news, because when you're out amidst so many things, it can be hard to even know what's going let alone how you think your organization can most effectively help.

This was definitely the case that you could be at one demonstration and not even know that four blocks away police were tear-gassing people and maybe there was some help needed there. So that was one, which we actually learned early on in the WTO and implemented. The other lesson that I see that has come out of the WTO organizing was... there have been criticisms that the

demonstrations were primarily white and questions about where were the communities of color and I think when you look at DAN... Direct Action Network, which came in shortly before the WTO but tends to appeal basically to more white middle-class students.

If you don't then specifically aren't conscious of that and specifically figure out how are you going to connect these issues to communities of color, and address it which the WTO and globalization certainly does, then you will end up basically leaving those people out. That's a lesson to be learned from this organizing. I think that we've seen the effects of the WTO happen in Seattle over the last year. I think that the SPEEA strike at Boeing, which was the technical/professional engineers. I think in some respects that the graduate students at the University of Washington, although I know that's part of a national movement, I know the Seattle Newspaper Guild out on strike are still reverberations of the WTO and that the people sensing the power we can actually have. Another lesson, always have your vitamins and plenty of warm clothes.

GM Yeah. It was cold when it started raining. Do you have any idea the kind of resources your organization put into mobilization before the WTO, as far as staff members, time, maybe even financial resources earmarked specifically for that?

AS No, we didn't earmark money specifically for it. We never really tracked it that way, because we integrated it into the other community organizing that we were doing. So it wasn't a totally separate thing. We'd bring the WTO organizing to the international women's day committee that we're part of, so actually I don't. I know we put quite a bit of time and money in terms of fliers and the fliers advertising things that people could come learn about the WTO on. We also are pretty much volunteer run, so there's no wage tracking of that, but you can say everyone was pretty fully immersed in WTO activities for definitely a couple months. The ones who would be most active, would be maybe 30 to 40 people.

GM That's a lot. Did you use the Internet at all in your efforts whether it was e-mail or information on the web site?

AS Some of us did. Personally, I'm not the most Internet capable, but yes, for the most part. The Freedom Socialists Party had information on their website. Radical Women still needs to get a web site. I know actually quite a bit of information between people happened on e-mail. I think this is another lesson from this, you can see the ability to organize across continents much easier with the Internet.

Can I go back to the lessons? I have one other that I think is very important. I think the WTO showed that when the people in the United States take action

and organize around something it can have a huge impact around the world. I know some of the delegates from Third World countries said they were inspired because they had never expected to see these kinds of protests against the WTO in Seattle. They were very inspired, and it helped them organize a caucus of Third World countries to oppose some of what the WTO was proposing. And the Cuban delegation that was here said that it was very important that a message was being sent, even here, where it is supposedly the land of the free and the home of the brave, there were people decrying the actions of the WTO and of our own government.

You know there were the solidarity rallies with us in Seattle from people in Mexico calling for us to be released from jail. It gave a lot of heart, because there can be an impression of the United States that everybody loves capitalism and everyone is a Bill Gates or a Paul Allen and it also exposed that is not true. Our largest growing population of homeless is women and children that we have unemployment and poverty and people here are opposed to it. So that's another lesson, is when we do things here it is especially important because it is seen as being... we're acting out in the belly of the beast you could say.

GM

I wanted to go back to talking about coalitions, one question I should have asked. What were some of the strengths and weaknesses of the coalitions you were working with? One of the things you mentioned was the democratic process within them, enabled people with different views to work together and that sounds like it might be a primary strength. What were some of the weaknesses?

AS

That varies from coalition to coalition, but I would say, as we got closer to the WTO, I would say, I think some of the weaknesses were some of the national and international leadership of some of the organizations didn't want them to go as far as they were going and come set the brakes on things or the boundaries on where and what was going on or the issues that were being addressed like Nader's group, Public Citizen, that was for making capitalism gentler... have a kinder, gentler day when companies were little more responsible and didn't necessarily want things to go to an anti-capitalist stand, and I would say some of the labor leadership who did not want a massive movement that would get out of their control and, I think, some parts of the labor movement that took a very anti-China stand, opposing China coming into the WTO is going to solve the economic problems in the United States, which it's not.

GM

How'd these ideas play out in the coalitions?

AS

Some of them played out a little bit more in the streets, some of them would be statements of "We are, we aren't going to do that," when the members got active, the labor union members were wanting to get active with the

environmentalists and visa versa and go beyond China and a lot of the people who were active with Nader's group were seeing this is an important thing to stop what global capitalism is doing. I think that would be a strength and a weakness.

Also, is the issue of direct action. When there is going to be a direct action, when a direct action is being organized, people need to have the option when they are going to a demonstration to know if they are going to participate in the direct action or not, and not unwillingly or unwittingly get swept up in it, and I'm not talking about when the police just came down and cracked heads on people, but DAN can tend to keep when the direct action or what it is going to be fairly closed-mouthed, and not always provide leadership in the demonstration, of saying "O.K. we're going to sit down here now and if you don't want to be arrested, you should go over to the side." And part of why I think that is important is that when you're looking at, again, of how to get communities of color involved... here I live in South Seattle, a lot of the Black community, everyone lives with cops around, the idea of having a policeman come up and handcuff and arrest you is not an unusual or thrilling thing. And when you look in the wake of I-200 which abolished affirmative action and discrimination that happens... some people that get arrested may lose their job, and so they need to know that if they come out their not going to get into a situation where they're not going to lose their job without having the choice to say, "No, I don't want to." So that's a weakness.

GM

Do you think there needs to be a broader range of tactics available?

AS

A broader range of tactics and making it clear to the people who are there what tactics are going to be used and if you don't like these, don't stay and if you do, stay, so people know what's going on. The other weakness, I would say, is that during the week of the WTO... there was less communication between the members of coalitions than there had been before hand, partly things were moving quick, you'd come home and you see on the news there's been gassing on Capitol Hill and you're off to there. In the future, maybe looking at how there could be more coalescing in the middle of things like this.

GM

I've actually made it through my list of questions. Is there anything that I didn't ask, that you think is important and would like to talk about?

AS

Two things, one is the importance that, I think, can get overshadowed by what happened throughout the whole week of WTO and the police martial law declarations is that during this week, Cuba, for the first time, sent a delegation to somewhere in the United States besides New York or Washington D.C. and there was real broad community coalitions that came together to prepare for at one point, it looked like Fidel Castro may be coming to Seattle, to prepare for the Cuban delegation, and we were very active in all of that from being ready

when it looked like Castro was going to speak at the University of Washington to both be involved in the organizational aspects from organizing security, community aspects of security to calling a demonstration here on campus to... also during the week, there was a huge effort that was put into driving around the delegates from Cuba and representatives that were here and giving them a chance and community groups a chance to meet with each other. Some of them had funny stories of walking through the mass demonstrations saying, "I'm from Cuba." People would say, "Let me escort you, let them in." Because I think Cuba, although it's a member of the WTO it does provide a voice within the WTO speaking out and opposing the WTO's policies, and it was a real opportunity for us here in Seattle to learn from that.

The other point, which I am sure you have in many of the others, is the seriousness of the responses of the police. Essentially, martial law was declared for the first time in 30 years in the United States, and, I think, it was a real exposure of what Democratic Party politicians will do when push comes to shove. Most of them were siding with big business as opposed to the people in the streets.

End of Side 1

GM

Back up just a second, you said they tried to pin the blame.

AS

...pin the blame for the demonstrations on outside agitators, when the fact is one this was a World Trade Organization meeting of heads of state, or representatives from around the globe, so who is outside of the globe. But the second is, there were plenty of home grown agitators. I think we saw that the police were the ones that sparked the violence that happened. A broken window is nothing compared to the lives of windows in maquiladoras in Central and Latin America. I think that's an issue that we still have to follow up with, I know that we are part of...there is a broad... CAN, Community Action Network, has a broad call for complaints and suits against the police department that some of our members are part of, for people whose rights were violated during the WTO. I think that's incumbent on us here to still deal with and do.

GM

Well, that sounds good, thank you, Anne.

AS

Thank you.

End of Interview