

Interviewee: David Solnit
Affiliation: Art and Revolution/Direct Action Network
Interviewer: Jeremy Simer
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JS I'm talking to David Solnit of Art and Revolution on March 23, 2000 in the Perkengruven Cafe in the U District. Okay, the first question is, how did DAN come together? My understanding is it was a bunch of different puppet and direct action groups that had sort of informal relations before people knew each other and started talking.

DS Network of organizers up and down the West Coast and Art and Revolution groups and Evergreen and Jobs with Justice and some working relationships. San Francisco Art and Revolution put out a call in February calling for mass direct action and large-scale street theatre at the WTO and circulated it widely. Didn't get a lot of response, frankly. Especially from Seattle people who were really...We circulated it widely here.

So in July after our May Day, or in June, after all our May Day organizing was over, we called a conference call and started organizing for, coordinated mobilization for nonviolent direct action and large scale street theatre.

JS How many people were in that first conference call?

DS There was like, eight people from L.A. to ... I'm not sure if we initially had Vancouver, but we had some, at different points, we involved some of the people who were involved in fighting the APEC conference in Vancouver. Not very consistently, but some of those folks were involved. But the core of it was San Francisco, Santa Cruz, a little bit L.A., Portland, a little bit Seattle. Hilary plugged in at some points and not at other points.

JS Who else was on that first call, do you remember?

DS Mostly, I mean the core of it was Portland, Olympia, and the Bay Area, with on and off participation from Seattle. So anyway, we started networking and talked about doing a road show and started doing that kind of, some of that stuff and came up with a plan to initiate focal mass direct action because we saw everyone mobilizing without any particular focal point. And so we thought there was a need to call for a time and place to throw down the gauntlet and so we developed an organizing strategy where we would come up with a loose proposal. Propose it to Global Exchange, negotiate it with them and then Global Exchange, who is much more established and had, whatever, more credibility, than a bunch of Anarchists and street theatre groups, would start approaching

other organizations and networks and so we did that. Took a couple of months. I was gone for part of it. And, Global Exchange wasn't that ready to jump on it and they were a little bit ambivalent about it, but they went for it.

JS What did that first proposal look like to Global Exchange?

DS The first one just... I had talked to them informally and they said, "Okay, bring us a proposal with a budget." So I, came up with a brainstorm proposal with a budget. And uh, then I left town to do street theatre training workshops around the country for a month and a half and they did absolutely nothing with it.

JS When was this then?

DS That was in June, July and I came back in August and I like, sat down with them again and worked it through and came up with, I think, together, our, the Direct Action Network didn't yet have a name.

Global Exchange figured out the best date. And that was a big thing because we knew the Labor march was going to be then. But we just figured if we didn't throw down the gauntlet and challenge the legitimacy of their meeting, the time to do it when they first meet.

So Mike Dolan actually called up the AFL and left a message and said, "If this is a problem that they're planning a direct action of the morning of Tuesday the 30th call us back right away." And they didn't call back. So he said, "Go. Go ahead." And they called back like, a couple of weeks later. They're kind of slow moving.

JS Did Mike Dolan act as an intermediary between DAN folks and the AFL?

DS No, no, just that one call. I mean, maybe informally or something, but no.

JS Did DAN and the AFL have, or you and AFL or, Global Exchange and the AFL and some part of DAN have regular communication?

DS I went to one of the cross-sectoral meetings and talked to what's his name, Rob, the Scottish guy.

JS Bob Gorman?

DS Bob Gorman, yeah. And he was basically humorless and displeased with our existence. Whatever. And that was about the most significant thing that happened at that very dry cross-sectoral meeting of all these different players.

It was like, he got a little bit feisty and said, "Well to be quite frank, we're not really pleased. Blah,

blah, blah.” Though, and we had heard rumors that AFL wasn’t pleased. I talked with Ron Judd personally He didn’t seem bent out of shape.

JS He did not seem bent out of shape?

DS No, he seemed fine with it. And, so anyway. So, Global Exchange and the Direct Action Network network of groups agreed to a basic proposal with a time, a date, guidelines, jail solidarity, and organizational structure. We wanted to nail all that down so we wouldn’t be inviting a whole bunch of groups and trying to figure out where we are from there. And also, for a lot of us, you know, with anarchist and direct action background, we wanted to use it as an organizational model of how to organize mass actions.

A lot of the initiative for initiating the Direct Action Network came at us looking at Reclaim the Streets doing mass organizing around the G8 meeting in Birmingham, England. Which we had done a solidarity action with in Seattle.

JS Was that May 18th?

DS No, that was the year before. It was May of ‘98. It was a global street party with actions in 20, 30 different cities all over the globe. We shut down - right in front of Westlake Center - we shut down that whole block for about two hours with a tripod and a blockade and turned it...

JS May of ‘98?

DS Yeah, turned it into a street party.

JS Oh, I don’t even remember that. I must’ve been out of town.

DS It was at the end of an Art and Revolution convergence. It wasn’t incredible, there was a couple of hundred of us, it wasn’t massively circulated.

JS Oh, okay, I remember, the Art and Revolution convergence up in Camano Island?

DS Yeah.

JS Okay, I remember that now.

DS And the local organizers were a little bit clueless in terms of.... They didn’t really get the global street party thing, they didn’t get the international solidarity thing, so, they didn’t put much focus on it in their literature unfortunately. But, had they, there might have been an anti-globalization movement here.

JS So, what was it instead?

DS They were interested in focusing on consumerism. Anyway. So, Global Exchange and the Direct Action Network, workgroups groups, agreed to proposal, shopped it around. Immediately Ruckus and RAN, Rainforest Action Network, signed on and started circulating it, increased our conference call. I think we included Santa Cruz, a few other cities. Somewhere in there Hilary called a meeting of people that wanted to talk about direct action in Seattle. So a bunch of people in the region came together and talked generally.

JS Just Seattle folks or people from all over?

DS People from B.C. and I think Portland and some places like that. I thought the meeting, the vision of that meeting, was that there would be a decentralized network of people who would organize autonomous actions. And that was somewhat different then. That was different. Erica, I think, was part of that, too. That was different than we wanted, to have a coherent organization or mobilization that would come together around a fixed day action. And so that's ultimately what dominated.

JS You remember when that was?

DS The face-to-face meeting here? It was like, August.

JS And so you're saying the idea of the independent actions dominated that meeting?

DS Well, that was the vision that the Seattle folks who called it, put out. They were on a somewhat different page than those of us who were part of the conference call network. So that face-to-face meeting initiated a series of face-to-face meetings in this area. And eventually in Olympia, the face-to-face meetings agreed to merge with the conference call group. Somewhat awkwardly, but they, we agreed to call them both Direct Action Network and they agreed to all the principals of the action including the guidelines for some reservation around the property destruction. And we started organizing.

JS Who had the reservations about the property destruction?

DS A bunch of, a handful of students from Evergreen. So we started organizing and continued conference calls up until about a month before.

JS What made it awkward from when the face-to-face group merged with the conference call?

DS Just, partly that it had been called by people with a different vision and so, those of us on the conference call were very focused and wanted to do a coherent, unified effort primarily focused on one day. Not that other things, not that it wouldn't be a vehicle for other things to happen, but, we saw that as the role of trying to pull together. We also organized for large scale street theater and wanted to do an Art and Revolution gathering. We also initiated a road show up and down the coast.

JS Were there ever any feelings of there being a Seattle/outside of Seattle split? Like, were there any people around here....?

DS Yeah. There wasn't heavy Seattle involvement. The response from some of the Seattle groups... There wasn't a strong response from the Seattle groups when San Francisco Art and Revolution put out a call for large-scale street theater and direct action in February. We had actually.... Art and Revolution had planned to organize... We had just thought it was going to be in San Diego so we had started talking about mobilizing to San Diego, which was a little bit closer. So we'd get all these people from the Northwest cause we could show them pictures of sunny beaches. But then they switched it to Seattle and so we started planning and we actually sent that letter up to the first board meeting that Mike Dolan chaired, I think, up here.

JS The first open community meeting?

DS Yeah, we sent a letter up.

JS In February?

DS Yeah.

JS And do you know what the response was to that letter?

DS I think people noted it, nobody really responded. No. Yeah. We wrote it in February and no one really took initiative and so in June, I think Sonia from San Francisco Art and Revolution basically called people, sent a follow up letter and did follow up calls and said, "Okay, we're going to have a meeting. Who's in?"

JS Was that the meeting that happened in San Francisco?

DS That was the first conference call. June or July.

JS I remember at some point there was a face-to-face meeting in San Francisco that I remember that Dolan mentioned. It was like, RAN and Ruckus folks?

DS Yeah, part of our organizational vision was to get... We pulled together our network of local groups so that we could sort of have standing to deal these larger organizations like RAN and Global Exchange which have their own network of local groups. So, our whole concept was, okay, we built a base to now where we can talk to big national groups and we have people in eight communities surrounding Seattle that are ready to mobilize and that are doing it. So our vision was - our network would have representation and we would invite other major organizations to also have representation. And we'd create like a coordinating council where those groups that signed on, that put major resources behind it, could help shape the action. So that the vision was to get a lot of different kinds of networks involved and to try and make it a mass mobilization.

We made a conscious decision that we wanted to not compromise on the direct action but really we wanted to get a lot people to do the action, to have it be a major large-scale action.

JS What role did the Ruckus Society and especially the action camp play in mobilizing?

DS Ruckus Society was generally supportive from the get-go. I mean, they had already been planning on doing stuff around it. They knew they wanted to do direct action stuff, which is what they do. They hadn't been that focused on exactly what. And they organized an action training camp. And that was incredibly helpful. I mean, the organizing was going on and there were meetings and face-to-face meetings so it didn't initiate, but it did bring together a lot of people. And frankly, they didn't have any focal action and so their action camp became a vehicle for us to get all those people who came to their camp on board.

JS On board with the central... ?

DS On board with the N30 action. And over the whatever five or six days, five days, we slowly transformed from having... We had to initially have our meetings during lunch times and not off times. And slowly it became clear that this wasn't the action, this was what everyone was going to go home and work on and prepare for. And so, by the last day, we got them to completely drop their pre-planned agenda and let us take over, and we ran the rest of the day.

JS What day was that? The last day?

DS I don't know.

JS I mean, was it the last day of the camp?

DS Last day of the action camp. It was in September. So, they played a phenomenal role, up through the action and following it and they are remarkable at wrassling a lot of resources and throwing them at

projects that usually go under-funded. And throwing a lot of skills that way, too.

But people hear about those groups. The other major components was, we massively mobilized the Anarchists scene and the radical ecology and Earth First! scenes, as well as a lot of the older Direct Action Network people who were veterans of mass nonviolent direct actions of the 80's and 90's. So all those communities who were experienced direct action people came together and were really the backbone of it. And they complement with Global Exchange. I think had we not gotten the nonprofits of RAN and Global Exchange and Ruckus on board, our numbers would have been much, much smaller.

JS The thing that your structure was, seemed central to the idea of the direct action from at least from whenever I started hearing about it.

DS Was that in the initial proposal?

JS Was that always a given from like, startup of Art and Revolution and the kind of, Direct Action Network group?

DS That was our model and we got Global Exchange to sign on.

JS Do you think that groups like Global Exchange had ever worked with that structure before?

DS No. I don't think they were opposed to it but, I think them and RAN and some of the other groups were more used to a more traditional form of like, the campaigner decides on the action and you get a crew to do the action that the campaigner decides on. And so, in some ways, we were very consciously trying to pull as wide of a sector of the movement as we could into implicitly radical or revolutionary forms of organization and tactics.

And so that was my goal all along, was to get a lot of the movement to basically escalate and organize themselves along radical lines that were in complete contradiction to the organization of the WTO and its corporations and governments. And also to put the bodies on the line and actually physically disrupt the damn bastards.

JS So, I'm not sure where to go next. Maybe closer to, do you want to talk about the actual week of the WTO and what happened?

DS Not really.

JS Well, let me think for a second.

DS Yeah, the global street party in May 98, which was the first of these internationally-coordinated anti-globalization actions was initiated by Reclaim the Streets. Thirty cities around the globe had street parties. Reclaim the Streets had begun to work with a new formation called People's Global Action which was a group of folks who came out of the Second Enquentro in Spain that was... Enquentro was an international gathering against liberalism toward humanity that came out of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas. And, that group of people then met again in Geneva and initiated People's Global Action as an international radical network. Came up with a statement of principles calling for civil disobedience and nonviolent direct action. Decentralized autonomous organization and that kind of stuff.

People's Global Action became the vehicle for organizing the second of these internationally-coordinated actions on June 18th. And, it ended up being tens of thousands of people all over the planet simultaneously going to their banking and financial and downtown centers and doing street parties and actions and marches and theatre and all kinds of stuff in 100 cities on every continent around the globe.

And that was the largest coordinated action against corporate globalization in history. Still is. I don't know. So People's Global Action which is a very loose decentralized network was the organizing vehicle for that. And somewhat was the organizing vehicle for calling and putting out the word about November 30th actions. It had actually been a call for N30 actions beyond our initiation of the mass direct action.

JS Before, after or around the same time?

DS I think it came out before we picked our date. And that was a positive factor to do a date on that action. To max on that date. But the people who had initiated that call, I think it was folks out of Eugene, they basically wrote up a long call and circulated it on the Internet but they never did any actual organizing. There was never a single piece of printed literature or anything like that. But People's Global Action met in September, I believe, in India and they endorsed that November 30th call and circulated it. They also endorsed our action, I believe and also, and our road show.

JS Now, when you say "they circulated it," how big of a network do those groups in PGA have?

DS They represent... I don't know. I wasn't at the meeting, but they're predominantly radical grassroots movements in the South or the so-called Third Worlds and so they have people, they have had participation from grassroots movements on every continent. I believe at that movement in India there was Africa, South America, and Asian countries significantly represented.

JS So, apart from the different groups that actually joined the DAN groups what were the relations of Art and Revolution and the other DAN groups with the other people working on WTO, like the AFL and Public Citizen.

DS We were linked up with Hilary and Erica and some of the local people who had gone to a bunch of those meetings and so that was basically the relationship.

JS And how would you characterize it? I mean, was there... how would you characterize the communication between the groups, do you know?

DS Not too existent. I mean, I think, Hilary facilitated some of that communication and got some support from Public Citizen and I think they slowly became aware, but there was never, any strong involvement or dialogue.

I think there was a general view that that wasn't going to be a vehicle for what we were doing. A lot of their lead organizers I think saw it as a different thing that was more radical or more out there and wanted to keep some distance from it. I mean to the point where some of the organizers actively tried to separate us from the Labor thing and force people to choose and tried to place the events in competition with each other to siphon people away from our event towards the Labor march.

Everybody agreed on sort of the lowest common denominator Labor march. But none of those groupings really backed us up on the direct action. Public Citizen, through Mike Dolan, definitely, threw some resources at us, but also kept some distance. We were the bad protesters.

JS In what ways did those groups try to separate them?

DS Well, I think People for Fair Trade, most notably, never included us on any of their public calendars. At one point they tried to separate us, cut us off the web site. And they automatically siphoned people into the Labor march, but they didn't have the guts to advertise a nonviolent direct action.

Conversely, Jobs with Justice in Portland, advertised both events, like this is, these are the things that are going on, you can do one or both or neither. They took a much more intelligent and gutsy approach looking and seeing there's a multi-faceted movement, there's a number of, more than one legitimate way to protest.

So I think, had more liberal or more established parts of the movement had the guts to recognize that, they could have been helpful. Retroactively, because we didn't go out and kick their asses, everyone likes us in retrospect. But I think it's important to note that there was not mainstream support for this action.

JS Did you see an immediate shift in the way people treated, and talked about DAN and treated you and others personally after November 30th?

DS There was much broader acceptance of Direct Action Network and legitimization of mass direct action. People saw that we were doing a major amount of mobilizing and organizing too, leading up to it. I think they saw us as a significant force, although I don't think they quite got it and I think we were organizing a lot of sectors that were reaching Anarchists, radical ecology and Earth First! and a lot of people that they weren't. And we were overlapping some and we were also mobilizing a lot of college campuses and sweatshop groups and stuff like that.

Had we had more organizing energy up here and a stronger base in Seattle, we could have done a lot more alliance-building. And I think, had we done that we could have pulled in some Labor like the ILWU maybe.

JS Into the direct action?

DS Yeah, or at least physically supporting it. I mean, there was early on a desire on my part to dialogue with the Labor march about having them have a component of their march that would include direct action or civil disobedience. And that they could march to their thing and have some people split off and do direct action.

And I think the mistake was there wasn't enough time, didn't make direct connection, sort of relied on Mike Dolan to do that, and whatever. That wasn't his job to represent a direct action component, but, so it meant that that never moved forward. And frankly, I don't think they would have taken us seriously. I don't think they did until we shut down the WTO.

JS So was that, do you think that idea was never communicated to anyone in the AFL?

DS I don't know.

JS But they had their sit-down in front of the Westin.

DS And what would you like to say about that Jeremy?

JS I was just kidding David.

DS There was a lot of missed alliance-building opportunities. We could have pulled some Labor in, we could have done more stuff - a lot more local organizing - and we didn't. We really didn't get the word out there incredibly well locally. We got the word out there that the thing was happening, but in terms of actually organizing, getting people to come to trainings and form into affinity groups,

that didn't happen on a huge scale locally.

The one thing we did do is a series of neighborhood processions in the South End, down Rainier Avenue, in the U District co-sponsored with neighborhood or student groups in the U District. And Capitol Hill. And those were key in getting the word out, building momentum and setting a tone. And they really featured the street theatre. Which, I mean, at the beginning we put equal emphasis on street theatre and direct action.

JS Now, a lot of people, you know, the population, the sort of demographic of the protesters is obviously on the young side, right? And a lot of people point that out in terms of direct action. Was there, was that just because, is that primarily because the people are involved in DAN groups are young or was there a specific outreach to student or youth? I think you just mentioned the U District. Was the student component one part of the direct action mobilizing?

DS There wasn't. I mean, the organizing was organic. Each group did what they could. It wasn't like an organization, and organizing plan of constituency outreach or anything like that. People just got the word out however they could. And people in Portland, people in Portland did the most developed organizing in that they actually went and worked with a large group at Reed and at Lewis and Clark and like that.

They were the best-organized city for the direct action anywhere, including Seattle. I think that's basically who's willing to stick their neck out is young people. I mean there were notably a fair number of veterans of mass direct actions. Mass direct action campaigns in the past from the anti-nuclear and Central America and other movements like that. But it was students, Earth First!-ers, Anarchists and young people who really went out there in front. But not exclusively - there were significant numbers of middle aged people.

JS And some old folks too.

DS And a few old folks.

JS What did you expect the scenario to look like on November 30th?

DS You mean what would happen? I thought we would disrupt it, there would be mass arrests probably and no one really knew what would happen. It was a big unknown, but it seemed confident that we would significantly hamper them.

I think we were all surprised when we completely disrupted them and shut them down to the point where they couldn't even have their opening ceremonies and when that happened all day, most of

us thought that we would disrupt them in the morning and the police would start regaining control in the late morning, or, we had no idea like, where we would be at by the time the Labor march got there. People in the scenario group were talking like, as a goal, to try and see who could hold it until the Labor march came. And so the idea that we would actually shut them down from dusk, from dawn till dusk blew us away.

A combination of we were very well organized organically, in the sense that we had a master plan so much is that there were strong affinity groups. Affinity groups organized into clusters. There was some good communications and infrastructure and a plan set up that distributed, evenly distributed, responsibility for different areas and was totally decentralized. And also... June 18th was organized through a web site and the Internet. And that they were mostly poor grassroots movements, they didn't have the resources or wherewithal, frankly, to get that level of coordination or spread the word or things like that without Reclaim the Street-hosted web site and the Internet. So that that was really key. And I don't think PGA and June 18th would have happened with out it.

JS I think to some extent that that also applies to the N30 action. Obviously people involved in DAN groups and people who got mobilized for November 30th have a lot more money than the average person in People's Global Action. But do you think the Internet helped reach people that wouldn't have been reached otherwise?

DS Yeah, I mean it helped circulate information. It was key for our conference calls. We would send out agendas and proposals and then talk about them on the phone and like that. It wasn't that essential. I mean, we circulated a lot of calls to action over the Internet. And we had a web site. The web site was fairly important. But a huge amount of the organizing was conventional, face to face, mailing to people on networks and that took a lot of the core of our mobilization was done through that, inserts in the Earth First! Journal, stuff like that.

JS I'm sorry?

DS Inserts in the Earth First! Journal announcements in magazines. And but yeah, it was augmented by the Internet.

JS So we were talking a few minutes ago about the police. What did you...

DS Fuck 'em.

JS Did you expect the kind of violent reaction that came?

DS Not really. I mean, I don't think we knew exactly what to expect. It was a big unknown. I thought

that people who were ordering gas masks were paranoid and romantic. I didn't really expect that.

Partly because the Seattle Police generally have a hands-off policy to demos and we had done one that Sunday and they let us take over Broadway for two hours and have turned, turned the whole damned street into a street party without getting in our face the least bit.

So, it was hard to know what they were going to do. So, I was surprised on the one hand at the tear gas and the pepper spray and the bullets. On the other hand, they weren't very smart, and they didn't have a lot of finesse in terms of clearing space and moving people or dealing with people. They basically were inexperienced and incompetent. A lot of us, if we had been the Chief of Police, we could have done a lot better for their side.

JS Have you ever been in a direct action that has lots and lots of people and lots and lots of cops where the cops were successful in moving protesters around in a way that served their actions without as much violence?

DS Yeah. lots of similar events, like Democratic Conventions in Chicago, 96 in San Francisco in 84, what else? I'm trying to think of urban mass direct actions. I mean most of the other mass direct actions have been at weapons facilities, things like that.

JS So, like, those mass urban direct action, how did the police reaction differ to what happened in Seattle?

DS More physically aggressive and I mean, there weren't the numbers or the determination or the organization to do that scale of direct action in those ones. So that made a big difference. Or a clear target like that.

JS I'm getting to the end of my questions. Is there anything else you think you want people to know about how this happened or why it's important?

DS I guess I think it is for me some of the important things are that... I think a lot of components of the action mark a very clear departure from left politics from that, we were massively innovating the large-scale use of street theatre as an organizing tool and as a tool to assertively and aggressively take space and challenge power, was developed a lot by Art and Revolution and Reclaim the Streets and that was utilized heavily.

This sort of transforming public space into a festival and a celebration and to challenge the use of public space and its domination by automobiles and capital was something that Reclaim the Streets had really led the way of and that we brought it so it, it was definitely, it was a completely, an action

that brought together all of, a lot of the key elements of anti-authoritarian opposition in this country. Anarchists, Earth First!-ers.

There was absolutely no Marxists, Leninist, or Old Left or Old New Left involvement. Those groups were completely not present. So, I mean, there's no influence, very little influence of any liberal or progressive groups. It was almost exclusively radical and radical anti-authoritarian groups. And the structure and the form of organization all that I think is an incredibly positive departure from left traditions, some of which we can learn from, some of which we can leave in the dust bin.

JS Thanks, David.

End of Interview