

Interviewee: Todd Tollefson

Affiliation: Jobs with Justice

Interviewer: Jeremy Simer

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Interview Summary:

Todd Tollefson describes his role as a peacekeeper/marshal with Jobs with Justice during the protests against the WTO. Tollefson explains that Jobs with Justice is a national campaign for workers' rights that works through coalitions of labor, community, religious and other organizations. Tollefson describes pre-WTO peacekeeping training sessions led by the Reverend James Orange, and the attempts of peacekeepers to keep people on downtown Seattle streets safe and organized on November 30th. Tollefson also discusses the role the Internet and the Independent Media Center played in successfully spreading information about the WTO.



JS | What was your involvement with the WTO mobilization?

TT | I was involved as a peacekeeper, although I was known as a marshal. I had to go to peacekeeping training once a couple of weeks before the WTO rallies and then the day of the rallies. We had little meetings beforehand too.

JS | What did those meetings entail?

TT | This Reverend James Orange from Atlanta, Georgia talked about what our role was as far as keeping the march going the direction of the planned route, keeping the people in the route safe, trying to dissuade people from doing crimes – but not being the police, that's their job. And just trying to get everybody home safe. That was what Reverend James repeated over and over is that people want to be safe in our march and that's what our goal is.

JS | Isn't Reverend James an official part of the Labor movement back in Atlanta?

TT | I know he is very strongly involved with the Labor movement, I don't know if he has an official position.

JS | How many people were in those meetings?

TT Well, the first one I went to was down at the Machinists Hall and there was probably between one hundred fifty and two hundred people. And then the one before the day of the march was huge. Probably a thousand people.

JS Do you know how many marshals there were in total?

TT No, but I know there was quite a number, and most of them were machinists – the marshals. But then there were Teamsters and another organization. The Jobs with Justice was what I was involved in. We had a small delegation.

JS How many would that be?

TT Probably thirty.

JS What was the feeling like at that event, especially the morning-of?

TT Well, the morning-of it was really early. It was like “Wow, there’s a lot of people here,” but it wasn’t actually any feeling of power and energy until we got out into the street.

JS Was there anything notable about the meeting before?

TT It was more tactical, it wasn’t so much “really change the world,” it was more like the nuts and bolts of what we had to do.

JS The meetings themselves weren’t exciting?

TT The meetings themselves were unexciting. Other than the sheer number of people being peacekeepers which was really amazing.

JS Can you give me sort of an outline of what happened on November 30?

TT We started out at the stadium where we had our peacekeeper meeting and then we had to head out to downtown and get into our positions by 10:30 in the morning. I was there as the Stadium was filling up. I think it didn’t start until 11:00 or 11:30 really, so when I left there were still people streaming into the stadium and I only saw photos and video afterwards of all that got filled up.

JS So what was your position?

TT We first went down to right outside the Paramount Theater down on Ninth and Pine and we didn’t really have a job at that point. Our job was to wait there until we got a job and then eventually they assigned us to go down to Fourth and Pine and that’s where the big turn in the march was. People coming from the Stadium and then turning down toward what they called Union Way at the time, which was Pine Street.

So that was little bit difficult at times because sometimes the crowds would just come marching forward and see people down on Fourth, so we kept going down Fourth and we had to turn up left and go to Pine. We'd have to answer questions all the time, people would ask, "What's going on up there?" And we'd say "Well, there's people everywhere in the street, but the march is this way, we want you to go this way. If you want to go another direction, you can, but this is the route."

JS Did you ever go into what the percentage of people would ask that question or you were trying to get to go straight?

TT I think I put this in my email to you, probably only about one or two percent of the people would actually ask, "OK, what's up there?" And then when we told them that the route was this way, you can go that way if you really want to, but we suggest that you go this way. Probably less the one percent would actually leave the route and go that way.

JS So one percent of about thirty thousand of the people or something like that

TT ... would ask, and then one percent of those would actually go.

JS Oh, so only one percent of the one percent would actually go...

TT Probably a couple hundred people at the most, I don't even think that many. There was one large group of maybe twenty people that bolted at once that went through. There were a Greenpeace group that had the big condoms, "safe trade condoms" and then other than that, it was just like couples and pairs and three or four people that would leave.

JS I can't remember if it was a Teamster Local or – I think I remember hearing this, some Teamsters and some Steelworkers left the main route and went to the direct action.

TT Yeah, they may not have went through ours. There was a group of Longshoremens that left the route, there was only about five of them. The large group itself didn't go with them. I know that the route changed too, that initially they were supposed to come as far as Pine, but that the dignitaries were going that day, like Sweeney and all the other leadership of different Unions, they got turned quicker and moved down on Stewart - they turned on and went in front of the Westin Hotel to sit down. We never saw them go by our area so there was a little bit of chaos. They were recommended not to go up to where we were because there were broken windows and stuff. The police said it wasn't a safe zone, even though it was pretty much safe at that point.

JS So you're saying that the dignitaries came up and turned up on Stewart?

TT I believe it was Stewart, I know it was before they got to our corner.

JS And you stayed at Pine the whole time. I'm glad to hear about that because I actually was confused about that until this moment. I remember, because the People for Fair Trade office is right there on Stewart and I remember coming out at a certain moment –I remember I was in the direct action in the morning taking pictures and then I went back to the office and rested for a little longer because I was so worn out and then I came back out and saw the march coming this way and I turned left on Stewart and someone mentioned Fourth and Pine.

TT So when the Dignitaries and such turned, they were the lead of the group there. Well, allegedly – there were so many people marching at the same time that it is hard to say when one started and when one ended. Eventually people behind the dignitaries saw that people were coming as far as Pine and they kept going, so only a certain percentage turned along with the dignitaries and sat down in front of the Westin and the rest continued on to where we were and went up Pine Street.

JS Is that where the sitting down action happened with Sweeney and the others? I saw that in the video, but I wasn't there.

TT I wasn't there either, but I know the plan was to sit down in front of the Westin because that's where President Clinton was supposed to be. I don't even know if he was there.

JS How long were you there in total?

TT Stationed at Pine and Fourth, I was there from probably 11:00 until 3:30. At that point it looked like the march was pretty much ending. So we followed up with the end of the march and followed it around the route and went back to the stadium because that was where I was parked.

JS So did the route go down Sixth Avenue or Fifth?

TT Fifth Avenue, because we went the wrong way down the one way street.

JS What did you take away from this experience?

TT I said that we should have marches like this every week because Seattle was just so fun and alive and there were no cars in downtown. I took away that we could really make a big difference when we unite as to the different organizations and environmentalists, union and community and church, like that. Unfortunately there's going to be some fallout, there's going to be

infighting and whatever, but hopefully the main segment of the groups will be able to stay together and continue on. I know they wanted to march on Microsoft and do a big shutdown there and Labor didn't join them because they didn't think it was tactically the right thing to do at the time. So hopefully the Direct Action Network won't see as Labor as abandoning them, seeing as that is not the struggle at the time.

JS What do you think about on that note, about the upcoming Kaiser Aluminum action in Tacoma? Have you heard about that?

TT I have heard about those and I'm glad to see that there is a lot of solidarity still there. All I've heard is what I've gotten in announcements over email so I don't really know. Is there something going on other than that?

JS Yeah, there is – how about I tell you about it after? Were you involved in any of the mobilizations before the peacekeeping marshal work? Did you go to any of the meetings or any of the other sorts of things in the month leading up to the WTO?

TT Other than like Jobs with Justice meetings, no.

JS What does Jobs with Justice do?

TT They supply peacekeepers and turned out membership, you know provide mailings and phone banking. Rosalinda spoke at many of the different events, teachings and demonstrations.

JS So if you were down at Fourth and Pine for most of the day, did you see any kind of heavy action?

TT No, I never actually did. Only the aftermath of broken windows of course, but I didn't see –

JS You didn't see any of the people breaking windows?

TT No. It happened before I got there at 11:00. I'm not sure when it all happened. I know that the police started kicking on protesters up on Sixth and University, I believe, around 10:00. Then after that was when there were some broken windows of the Bon Marche and Starbucks and such. When we first went down there, there was none. When we first went down by the Paramount, I didn't see any broken windows. My partner, Beate, was roaming around at the time and she told me that after a few hours that she found a few places where there were broken windows and took video tape of them.

JS What role do you think people of color played in the mobilization?

TT Obviously Reverend Orange is African-American, so that was a good mobilizing part of that. He was a different – what am I trying to say? At least leadership was sensitive to the fact that they needed to have that. The march itself probably was not as representative as it could have been for Seattle even though we have about fifteen percent minority population including African-Americans, Latinos, etc. I'd say the march was probably less than ten percent minority.

I don't know, Labor needs to do a better job of course in building support and the rank and file being activated, not just the white Machinists, we've got hotel/restaurant workers that are people of color too. We've got service industries that are people of color and largely they didn't turn out and Labor just needs to do a better job in putting things together. Why is it important to be out here? What does it have to do with your job at the hotel or wherever you work?

JS In working with JWJ, what did you see or what did you hear this organization say about that being the goal of the march?

TT The goal changed from time to time, before the march it was mostly just to send a message, say that we need to have a seat at the table. Then after the march realizing that the WTO, you know, there's no reforming it, it is not going to be fixable, that is just saying that the "WTO's got to go!"

JS Was that an official sort of an official change?

TT I heard Ron Judd say it, so ...

JS Do you remember when you started hearing that change?

TT I'd say after the police went nuts on Wednesday, there was a big change in seeing what the WTO would do. You know, this organization basically is the reason that the police are doing this, so how can we be involved in an organization like this?

JS When you say Wednesday, do you mean like the Steelworkers march and the marches after that?

TT I wasn't actually down town on Wednesday, but after that like Thursday; there was a rally. Friday there was a rally. At those rallies I saw a big difference. On Friday's rally where Labor and Direct Action Network that got together and violated the "No Protest Zone" and marched through it. The reason being is that we weren't going to put up with it and we weren't going to try to be a partner with WTO. We're saying "It's got to go."

JS What was your motivation for coming up there? Why did you get involved in the WTO protests?

TT Well you know, I've been an activist about 15 years and its just, well right up my line. Because the WTO represents so many different issues and all of them they're on the wrong side of. So, there's no way I couldn't be out there.

JS Was there any particular issues that were most important to you of the whole spectrum?

TT I think the workers' rights is definitely the number one thing for me which is a difficult one because you know - different countries, the Left parties in Labor movements - child labor they don't want to be dictated on U.S. standards. Definitely we need to end child labor, we need to end slave labor, we need to bring up, rather than bring down to the common denominator like NAFTA's trying to do with the wages and working conditions of people around the world.

JS How do you think that balance between improving labor conditions in other countries, but not stepping on toes and other people in other countries who don't want U.S. to be involved?

TT I think the WTO started that by getting coalitions together from people around the world and opening up communication lines and just being able to see what's going on in our country, that we're not just saying, "Oh, it's ok for us, just don't do it here." But it's not ok for us either. I think that surprised a lot of people around the world that there was so much protest against the WTO in the United States where everybody thinks we're all wealthy and doing fine. So having them see that Labor and community and students - all the groups were fighting against it showing them that there is more to us than just we want our overtime and we want this and that, but it's all about global justice.

JS Now, homing in on a specific thing about mobilizations. What role do you see the Internet playing?

TT Having a web page of my own, I found that I got a lot more hits when I put WTO information on my Web page.

JS Is that right?

TT Yeah, it tripled. I was only getting 30 before, now I'm getting a hundred or was getting a hundred. So I think definitely people were out there looking for information on the WTO from the Internet because they get a little snippet in the news or get a front page thing or something in the news about it on TV and then it's just like, "Why are people protesting so much when we have such a great economy?" So I think that going into the Internet and getting

different resources, different voices than just the main stream media. The Independent Media Center definitely did a great job and hopefully getting their video daily to different places around the country and different places around the world.

JS Did you use the Internet at all to get information about the WTO?

TT Definitely.

JS What kind of pages did you use?

TT The Indymedia page of course, AFL-CIO page, Public Citizen's page. Since then, I've gotten pictures from different web sites around the country. I think it's a Steelworkers Local that has pictures from the rally that I have posted on my site. It's a follow-up with what's been going on around the world. Like in Davos, I wouldn't have known much about that except for going on the Internet and finding out.

JS So you say the hits on you page tripled – at what point was that?

TT The month of November to the month of December, it tripled.

JS Did you learn anything from the experience that you think you'll apply to your future work as an activist?

TT Well, we should all learn things from every event we have had. Even with all the time and effort put into the peacekeeper training, I found that some peacekeepers were taking the mode of becoming the police rather than peacekeepers saying to the people, "No! You can't go down there." I'd say, "No, they can go down there, but this is what's this way and this is what's that way," and let them make a choice. So in future peacekeeper training, to reinforce the fact that we're not the police, we're not there to tell people what to do. We're there to protect people if they want to be protected and if they want to be and if they want to go do something else they can.

JS So there were some marshals who were trying to get the crowd not to go of the route?

TT Yeah.

JS How many marshals around your area?

TT Were doing that? Two. There was a couple of them that kept doing it and the rest were giving the message which was, "This is what's down there, if you want to go there that's fine, but that's not the way the route goes."

JS What were people's the reactions to those two individuals who were telling people what to do?

TT I think most people went along with it saying, "OK, we'll go this way then." But it's not the right tactic.

JS What was the structure of the marshals? I was talking with Craig Merriweather, he was saying that that there was a bunch of captains and each captain had a group of marshals that they were working with. How many people were in your group?

TT In my group, there were ten. I was not a captain, but I had the radio for a while for some strange reason. In the Machinists groups, I believe there is as many as twenty-five for one captain.

JS So who is the captain of your group?

TT Lynn Barbie, I believe. She was an organizer at 925 Service Employees.

JS Were any other people in you group also Union folks or church people or...

TT Yeah, it was a wide variety, probably half were union members and then the rest would have been activists from different organizations.

JS Do you remember how many teams there were all together?

TT I think there were over ninety teams.

JS Ninety teams, and a captain for each one? And each team had a radio? For communication? Was there sort of central, communications, for example if something was going to shift around...

TT We didn't know about it.

JS No? Not at all?

TT Yeah, the communication you know – they probably did as best job they could because there's probably a lot of people saying things on the radio and trying to figure it all out. You have people marching and screaming all around you. Communication was difficult to keep going on because we didn't know until after the march was over that the dignitaries had turned early and sat down early and whatever. We just never saw and we didn't know what had happened.

JS You wondered about that?

TT

I had wondered. It's so hard to tell when the march started or ended too, because we didn't know when people from the stadium were coming or who. There was pretty much a constant flow of people one way or another. I mean there was a group that came from Pike Place Market that tried to come in from behind us. I went down and invited the group that was further down on Fourth at about University. I saw a group of people in the street. "We have forty thousand people coming this way, if you want to join us, that's great." They said, "Well, you can join us too." I said "Ok, I'll tell them." So we had people coming from every direction joining the march so it was hard to tell when the march started really. So that's why you never knew where the dignitaries were.

JS

That's all of the questions that I have thought of, is there anything else about the protests or the experience that you'd like people to know about?

TT

I want people to know that we can continue doing this sort of thing if we have the unity. I read something the other day, it says, "Let's agree with what we agree on and work out the details on what we don't agree on - Once we're in power, once we've got things going our direction." When we're all fighting each other, we're never going to be able to take on the system and change it the way it should be.

End of Interview

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