

Interviewee: Steve Williamson
Affiliation: King County Labor Council, Executive Secretary
Interviewer: Miguel Bocanegra
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Bio: Steve Williamson started his union involvement first as a union bricklayer and then as a Journeyman Bricklayer in 1982. He became an organizer through organizing workers at the Coors plant. He organized with Local 1199, healthcare workers, in Pennsylvania and then moved to Seattle to work with the Teamsters under Bob Hasegawa. He is currently the Executive Secretary of the King County Labor Council.

MB | Can you trace some of the significant points in the organizing process that you, yourself, or the AFL-CIO/ King County Labor Council were involved in that brought you to the WTO protests?

SW | I didn't have a lot to do with the preparation for the WTO. I was asked by the head of our Local, Bob Hasegawa, to really concentrate on our Local at home, because I think he knew I would have a tendency to want to get involved early on. We had serious stuff we had to do as a Local, so he asked me to concentrate on the Local stuff and not really participate in those early planning meetings. So Bob participated in some of those, but it was clear to me that this was going to be a huge event, but nowhere near what it became.

I guess one of the first signs for me was when our International Union, which is Teamsters International, I was with Teamsters Local 174, has frankly not had a history of a lot of activity with other Unions, has tended to be more insular, started to get involved and started to send us stuff that was echoing the stuff that we were seeing locally – that's what clued me in that this was going to be a big deal, because if they were even reaching into our International Union, and they were trying to reach out to us in a local level, then I began to say, "Ah. This is going to be something big."

What was very attractive was it became clear that we were reaching out to a lot of different organizations and a lot of different issues, and it all boiled down to corporate greed. It tied in everything, whether it was food safety issues or rights of workers here and abroad or issues of faith and retiring the Third World debt, everyone could plug into the WTO and that seemed like a significantly different type of event that I'd ever been involved in before.

Really, my stories are more about what happened once it got underway. I don't have a lot to tell about beforehand.

MB | So I guess since that's your specialty, we'll just go off the bat. How did some of the coalitions work, the ones you were involved with it? Since you weren't involved with some of the initial planning of it, how did some of the coalitions work when you were working with the AFL-CIO and other organizations like DAN and the other organizations that were working in the area? How did these coalitions work?

SW | Well, again, I wasn't involved in those early events. It really wasn't until Day 1, November 30th, that I got involved, so I wasn't involved in the coalition work until later in the week. There's a couple of events that, with DAN, I guess, my first interaction was on Day 1 after we left the stadium. It was November 30th, and we marched down and there was this point in the march where the parade marshals who were machinist members told us to go east, taking us away from what was currently going on downtown. I had heard from some people who had cell phones and were in the stadium that they were gassing people downtown and there were rubber bullets and that kind of stuff.

It was clear that we were not marching toward that; we were being directed to march away from that. I wasn't with my group. I went to take pictures and I was just so taken by the level of and imagination and the diversity of groups that I was snapping pictures like crazy. I was way ahead of my group, so I didn't have a group that I was hanging out with. As I came there, so did a lot of sheet metal workers who had their blue jackets on.

They did a caucus in the street. There must have been a hundred of them or something. It's like, "Do we follow the lead of the marshals who were telling us to go to the East and away from what was clearly the action, or do we proceed forward?" And the marshals are saying, "This is the..." So part of me is saying, "Well, you follow your leadership and let's think about, you know, we act like a Union. So if someone is making decisions, then let's go that way." But this other part of me was saying, "I'm not going to miss out on what's going on down there. It seems like that's where people need to be." That's what these sheet metal workers said. "We're going forward."

So I happily went forward, kind of with them, and we marched down... I don't know - if you remember which street was the main... We were marching - was it Second Avenue, or whatever? Then we came to Pike or whatever. No, it's not Pike; it's further down, further south. There's a jewelry store there with a big clock and such. A dumpster had been tipped over and later was on fire.

MB Right in front of The Gap?

SW I think so. And so I bumped into people. That's when I saw students and DAN activists, people who had already been through the morning's activities and had been confronted by the police, had been gassed, who were veterans of this. I don't know what time it was - four o'clock, three o'clock in the afternoon. I don't know what time it was.

It had been a long day for them. We had marched down from the stadium and a long wait for us, but immediately I already felt like we had this nice rally, we had all of our events, but in some ways I felt like I had missed the real confrontation with what was going on. I enjoyed the march. It was great to bring everyone together and there were some excellent speeches, particularly the woman from India, but it was clear that there was another whole event happening, and I hadn't been a part of that event, and that event involved struggle in the streets.

But I was really taken by the level of discipline that the students and the DAN activists had. I don't know who was who, really, but they already had a collective sense that had been forged in the struggle on the street. I happened to bump into our attorney with a couple of people from his law office who had been there for a while. He was kind of giving me the lay of the land. At some point, most of them left, I think.

Another friend of mine, Hobey Williams; I was his Staff Director at Teamsters Local 174. Hobey was one of our business agents, someone who I supervised; he and I hung out there together. The police were agitated and they were trying to have a free area going east and west to the Convention Center of a couple of blocks width that they were trying to protect.

On the other side, the same street we were on but a couple of blocks away, was another police line and other protesters beyond them. They seemed nervous about us maybe trying to get together or whatever, but people were peaceful. People were hanging out. People were angry about what had happened, it was clear. People had given ground, it seemed, as I understood it.

One significant event that I saw was that one guy really got in the cops' faces, more than other people, but not to the degree where he was doing anything illegal, I don't think. But the cops singled him out, arrested him, put the handcuffs on and took him away from the crowd. What I thought was significant was while there were some voices raised, basically, the people were allowing the cops to surgically do what they needed to do, despite the fact that a lot of history had happened clearly before.

Later when I heard police reports, like they felt like they needed to do this stuff, it wasn't borne out by what I saw. I saw the police able to - if they saw something that they felt was out of line, the rest of the crowd made a distinction and didn't go into this riot situation. What happened was, it was totally precipitated by the police. They said they were going to march on, and you have to move back a block. There was no rationale in my mind. They had their buffer zone. They had established that. Clearly they were going to push us back as far as they could, block by block by block, and that was borne out.

So they told us to leave, and we all sat down. Everyone started putting up these kerchiefs and stuff, and masks. Experienced people had glasses covering their eyes, and they had water and everything. We didn't have anything, but I had my hankie in my pocket.

MB When you said, "We didn't have anything," you and?

SW Me and my buddy and a number of other people didn't have anything. A lot of people, but some people did. I didn't come prepared for gas that day. I came to do my labor march. I don't know what I was thinking, but I wasn't thinking that. I got more prepared as the week went on, but that day I took my hankie, put it around. People said wet it. So you had this whole dynamic of, and I was one of the older people there. I don't consider myself old – whatever. Young people saying, "Hey. Look." They could tell we hadn't been through it. "Wet your hankie. It will help."

So you had this – what happens when you have struggle. People uniting over and coming together over the issues, and people are talking about issues and chanting, etc., and about, just as humans engaging in... "We're going to be attacked by the state here. That's what's going to happen. We're sitting down. We're being peaceful, and the state's going to attack us. So here. If I can help you out..."

So, sure enough, people knew the signs. When the cops load their guns, or whatever they do, and I'm just kind of like, my first time checking this all out. But these people are like veterans with someone who has just come onto the front, and they're telling us what happens. "Here it comes." So we put our heads down, and they go into it.

They started wailing on this guy in front of us. I had my eyes closed. I could hear it happening, but the gas is coming, and my buddy said he looked, and then they nailed him full on in the face, because he looked to see what was happening to this woman. I think they knocked her down and she like fell in his lap or something. I'm not exactly sure what happened.

Then you had little choice. You just had to retreat. Unless you had a gas mask, that was it. So people just got up and we went back. People, at that point, are very angry, and the cops are just this black machine marching down. They were lobbing these concussion grenades and other things over our heads. A couple points were doing it on the other side of where we were, trying to pin us between them and where they were dropping the stuff. It seemed to me like they weren't just trying to chase us back; they were trying to do a pincher's move on us. Anyway, everyone went through this different stuff. This is really just a little vignette of what was going on.

So I hung out there for several hours. We got pushed back a couple blocks. I'm thinking, "Wow. This is really wild on this one street that this is happening. So let's go somewhere." So this was just going to continue to happen. After awhile, it's like, "All right. I've got what's going on here, right? And there's not a lot that I can do right now, so let's go see what else is happening." So we went. It's like, block after block after block, the same stuff was happening.

Then I began to get the scale of what was really going on. It just kind of transforms you. It's one thing to have this big rally, which was great. We had tons of people, and you couldn't even get moving because there were so many people. Then to just see what we really had here. We really had a massive confrontation against the state. People were united on all these different issues. I was a part of watching this happen, and I hadn't really before in my mind realized that this is what we were all actually doing.

I was proud to happen to be, and I felt lucky to be at this place in time when what was clear was an unanticipated coming together of people. It is what we've tried to do in our work is to get people to take on these issues and struggle together, and it was happening. I hadn't been part of that coalition building that you led off with, right? I hadn't been part of making that happen. I would have maybe understood more. It just took me by surprise.

Then when we saw the breadth of it, I was shocked. So then we decided to go up to our Teamster truck. We had just bought a tractor-trailer rig, our Local had, and we had it painted and had a sound system in it. Bob Hasegawa, the head of my Local, was up there. So Hobey and I decided to go visit him and we did. We were describing what had happened, and Bob had, not very far away, really, just a matter of a few blocks, but he had stayed with the truck, which was on the parade route that had hailed people as they came through all day long and playing songs and all that kind of stuff, so he had a different view of it than I did.

We were describing what had just happened and he hadn't had any of that experience. It was just happening all around us, and he wanted to. So we took him back out into the streets, because I felt it was important. He needed to experience it. And he wanted to, clearly.

Like I say, throughout that whole time, everyone was peaceful. I didn't see people instigating. There was a lot of anger, but it was all in reaction to what the cops had done. People were cool.

Later that evening, I happened to see a few people bust a few windows. Remarkably, they were in bare feet. This glass was just falling down. They were just using the crowd to hide behind, and it was like at any other event. If you're at a big ballgame and you're all leaving together, just someone who is not being respectful of property or something. It was in that context. It seemed to be very minor and everyone was committed to and focused on the issues. These people were, too, but they had a different approach to it.

Frankly, I don't begrudge – I'm of the opinion that... Well, I got very nervous at the beginning of that night, but it grew as the week went along and the next day when there was this distinction made between labor and others. The media and other people started to say, "Labor good, everyone else bad." It really, really troubled me. It troubled me because of my experience in the street. I didn't find that. I found students and other people committed to all kinds of causes who came together from around the world. It was amazing to me.

What they were trying to do was say that, in some ways, and in some ways this, to me, it was as if this collection of voices, whether it's the state, the media, whoever, were saying, "This labor movement which has been in some ways toothless for a number of years was good, and if there was any meat and potatoes behind this thing, if there was any umpf behind it, we're going to pin that on these other groups that have really gotten militant, as well, and paint labor as good and try to create this divide between these groups." Because I think, frankly, people were nervous that labor was coming together, finally, with other community organizations and other kinds of organizations. I don't think that it's a mistake that people tried to paint that as separate, that there was this distinction.

So I became pretty committed – it pissed me off that there was this distinction being made and that people were buying into that. I heard labor people saying, "Oh, it was those other people who were the window bashers and the thugs and we were good," and all that kind of thing. As I tell more of the story, it came home to roost later on and we had to make some decisions about that. But as this began to emerge, it was very disturbing to me.

My wife is on the cell phone. She's watching TV, thinking that the city is in flames from the police reports, and saying, "What are you doing down there?" She's a Labor activist, as well, and fully part of it. Had spent all day down there.

MB Where was she at?

SW She was at the stadium, did the march, and I'm not sure. I think she made the turn that I didn't make, I think. She may have been down there for a while. I'm not exactly sure. But when she went home and watched it on TV, she was certain that if I'm down there, I'm in danger. I didn't feel like I was in danger. We had an environment of classic concern for one another and safety and camaraderie against this police state that was...

Now, they could have turned up the tactics. Kent State, they shot people with real ammunition. But at this point, after a little bit of this, you get used to it and then it becomes this little game of parrying back and forth. It's not like I wasn't afraid of these people with all this ammunition and all this stuff, but you could see where the terms were right now, and I didn't feel in danger. In fact, I felt compelled to be there because this was a significant event that I may never see in my life again. If there was danger, and this is not like...

I didn't feel dangerous, but even if there had been, this was like a crucial event, and if I'm in danger, so are they. I'm going to stay with these other people. You know what I mean? It's like you had the sense of a communal activity. I'm not going to just run because it's dangerous when everyone, my brothers and sisters are there. Who knows what I would have done. I might have run like crazy like a rabbit if it had been dangerous, but there was a sense it wasn't about that. We made a commitment to each other, all of us on the street. There we were.

Anyway, I ended up going home, and I really struggled with that, but most of the activity had ended.

I wake up the next day, turn on the radio, and I had made a decision. We were trying to negotiate a first contract for a place we had just organized. When we had set the bargaining date months before, or whatever it was before, I knew that it was going to be during this week, but frankly, I didn't realize the events were going to go on all week long. So it was either change the date, but I really felt like we were going to get a first contract, so I was kind of torn with my traditional Labor duties, or go hit the streets, but I felt like if I stayed and engaged in this bargaining, we would get this first contract, which was very important, because workers had been in a struggle for a long time there.

So I was not happy about it, but I went to the bargaining. We got the first contract, which I was happy about. Driving there I hear these reports that signage and communication devices had been confiscated by the police from some of the activists before the events even began, which was one of my first signs that some of these First Amendment rights, like, are being preemptively taken away from people. It concerned me big time. It wasn't reported like this was appalling. It was just like this stuff was really happening here. You read about this stuff that's happening right now really clearly right in front of us. So I went to this bargaining session, did that, came back and drove to our office, I guess, which is across from the Executive Inn. This is the day of the Steelworker march, and Bob Hasegawa had been involved in the Steelworker march and had led that, had taken a militant role in that event. I think he's maybe given you an interview on this stuff.

But a number of us went to the Executive Inn to get dinner. We hadn't eaten, and it was Bob, this other guy, Bob Mollencamp, who had been Assistant to the President under Ron Carey of the Teamsters, someone I had worked with for years, a great Labor leader, someone I really respect. I think Hobey was there with me, and our Director of Organizing, Rob Hickey, had been arrested.

I'm hearing the story about how he was arrested. We're having dinner. The TV is on in the bar, and I can see some of the stuff that's going on and how stuff is moving into Capital Hill, and some nasty stuff is going on in Capital Hill, and more of this stuff about how labor good, everyone else bad. That was like, I was hearing that everywhere. So I called Ron Judd and got him on his cell phone, I think, and said to Ron... Oh, and they had declared the No Protest Zone. The mayor had declared the No Protest Zone, which was just appalling to me, and it kind of shifted terrain all day long. It was like, what is it?

I said to Ron, "We have to take the streets back and declare a whatever you call it, a Peaceful Protest Zone, or whatever it is, we're going to have to do." I said, "They're holding a press conference. We should hold a press conference and say, 'That's it.'" A whole new set of issues had opened up, except the related, which is... Whether we have democratic decision-making or we have this imposed by corporate powers or whoever is making the decisions. You can't just say, "If you've got a suit on, you can walk down the street. Or if you're shopping, you've got a shopping bag with you. If you've got a picket sign, you can't walk the street." No fucking way we're going to stand for that. We have to draw the line.

So we had this intense conversation with Ron. I think he was up to his eyeballs with a lot of stuff. He had been down here, I think it was the same day that he had almost been arrested down here in front of the building. And Rob Hickey was down here trying to find his way around. The cops kept telling him to go here, go here, and then they just arrested him. It's just like, boom, right?

So Ron was under a lot of pressure there. We said, "We've got to do some response." He said, "All right. Let's get people together and talk about it." So we agreed to meet the next morning here at the Labor Temple. So then we decided, to get people in this meeting, let's get the right kind of people in this meeting. So we started to organize. It's like, eight or nine o'clock, getting kind of late. We heard there happened to be a Labor Party meeting that evening. So a couple of us went to the Labor Party meeting to tell people, and said, "Come on down to the Teamsters Hall before we go down to the Labor Temple so we can sort of pre-prepare for this meeting, and get some ideas about what we want to do, right?"

Some other people went to another meeting that they heard of. Then another guy I work with, Mike Brandon, and I, he had been locked in the office all day. He and I had been out in the street the day before. We'd bumped into each other that evening when I hooked up with Bob. But he had to work in the office all day Tuesday like I had been at my bargaining. Both of us had kind of missed out on all the activities, and we'd heard one guy got arrested, Bob had led this march with the Steelworkers, they were declaring this No Protest Zone. We felt like we were – I felt like... I'd kind of let people down – I hadn't been part of what I should have been a part of. I think he felt the same way.

We saw what was going on on Capital Hill, so we said, "Let's go see what's going on here." So he and I had our Teamsters jackets on and we just drove to Capital Hill. On the way there, it was KIRO radio that happened to be covering the events, and it was very good coverage. We get there, it was like Pine and Fifteenth, or I don't know what that is right there. Just up from that new QFC or whatever it is. So we get out of the car, walking around, hands in our pockets, got our Teamsters jackets on, and we come up and we see that people are milling around, trying to decide what's going on. Clearly, people are very agitated, very pissed, and it's a mix of students and seniors, seeming to be really people that lived in the neighborhood more than protesters.

We go to this block, and there's these people just milling around at the end of the block, and we could see the cops way down, a block or two away at the end of the street, and people kind of milling through the street not knowing what to do. We go over, and the most remarkable thing. These people said, "Hey. The Teamsters are here. Now let's get together and get a plan." I'm looking around, like, this wasn't Union members. This was people in the streets, and what it was to me, and what I really believe is, when every other kind of social institution was breaking down... You've got the mayor virtually calling martial law, the cops shooting at us and gassing us, the corporations, and I'm not even really talking about the issues here, right? But the corporations convening in our city to bring all their wealth together to create more wealth without regard to environmental concerns, without regard to workers' concerns... This was what the WTO was trying to do was let's just figure out how to use our wealth and leverage yet to create more wealth.

All this is going on, these social institutions are breaking down. Who do you turn to? Well, the Labor Union shows up, and it's like, "Well, in times of trouble, maybe you still turn to the Labor Unions, right?" So I was very proud at that moment, despite our ups and downs in the Labor movement in recent years, that people still found us relevant. I think part of it came from the fact that we struggled in the street with them, and they knew that people in the streets were with them the day before, so we were a relevant organization to look to leadership for.

So Mike Brannon grabbed the megaphone. He starts chanting people up, and we pull people together in a huddle. We said, "We need a plan." So we talked about this. We were just kind of getting the lay of the land, and the cops were down there. They were bashing on people. It had been nasty, and people felt like this was their neighborhood and they couldn't just surrender to the police.

Brian Derdowski, the County Councilman who had just lost his election but was still in office, came up. He saw our crowd, and he'd been on the street for sometime, trying to figure stuff out. He said, "We need

some street leadership here.” He’s been a friend of our Locals, and a friend of Hasegawa, and I said, “Hey, Brian. We’re here from Local 174. We’ll help. What do you want to do?”

He said, “Let’s try and get some order here.” He came up with a plan to try and get people to go to the sidewalks. Don’t leave the streets, but let’s go to the sidewalks, and then we’ll show our discipline to the cops. Then go in and negotiate and ask them to step back. So it’s like, we show discipline and we ask them to get out of our neighborhood.

Well, a bit naïve for a couple of reasons. One, I guess, the police precinct is up there and I think the cops were ultra on guard and felt like they had to establish a perimeter or something. What later happened is we actually got almost everyone off the street. We’re talking a couple hundred people, maybe, onto the sidewalks, filling the sidewalks. There were a few people, ten or so, still kind of taunting the police at the police line, and then you’ve got this police line-up at the end of the block. I think we had two blocks of people lined up on the sidewalks. That’s where I met Judy Nicastro. She was out there on the street, newly elected, trying to figure out what the heck is going on. Looked very concerned.

This guy took his shirt off, his white tee shirt. He had nothing else on, right? He put it on a stick. So there’s Brian Derdowsky holding a stick with a white tee shirt, and me and Mike with our Teamsters jackets, and we go up as a delegation after we got everyone onto the sidewalks, and we walked up to the police to try and negotiate, to get them, “Look. We’ve done our part. We’ve controlled the streets. There’s no threat here.” To get them to back off and leave their end of the block, to do it incrementally, and they fired on us.

I think they fired one of these cork things at us, and repelled us. What seemed to be clear to me at the time was, whoever was calling the shots, it was obvious what we had done. Anyone who was looking could see. We had pulled people off. We had a white flag, for crying out loud. We were coming down as a delegation. Brian is in his full suit with a tie still all knotted up there. Anyone could see that we were coming to talk to them to talk about some terms. Well, someone made the decision that they weren’t going to have that conversation.

Some of the people were calling us sell-outs and saying, “Hey. Look. The cops aren’t going to…” And they had been through this all night. We weren’t trying to argue with them. We said, “Let’s try this tactic. It shows discipline and solidarity on our part.” So then when the cops just fired on us, people said, “Yeah. See. We told you that was going to happen, right?”

So then things really began to devolve. Brian kept trying to meet with them. The cops would say something. He’d come back to the group. Nothing really came of it. Then it became clear to me. It’s like one o’clock or something. It’s like, “Well, this is just what we’d seen the day before. I’ve been here. I know what’s going to happen next. They’re going to march on people with the gas and everything.” And sure enough. We had decided to have this meeting tomorrow morning pretty early. It was like, “Well, I’d better get some rest here, because this is not one battle, here. This is a little bit of a war we’re involved in.”

So I left. I turned on the radio that I had been listening to before, and sure enough, like five minutes as I’m driving down the road, I hear, they’ve gassed them and everything else. Then I saw in one of the specials where the TV reporter talks about how he was gassed by the cops, or the cameraman and all that kind of stuff. It was all the same people I saw down there, but it was inevitable. You could see it coming. The cops did not want a resolution. It was clear to me. They wanted to move people out using the gas, using their techniques. They were not just going to let things simmer down or back up and let it calm down, which I’m convinced it would have. Had the cops backed up and we had done this incrementally, I think the whole thing could have de-escalated. But I think they clearly didn’t want that. I have no idea who makes those calls, or whatever, but that’s just my sense of it.

So the next morning was Wednesday. We have this meeting. It’s my first interaction with the coalition. Judd had made his calls to pull people together. Actually, before that, we met at the Teamster Hall, an odd collection of people. We’d called a number of people, friends, political allies, some of the labor party

people came, these French farmers. Someone found them out in the street. They came and showed up. The meeting was translated.

It was one of these moments where things are just happening. They heard about this meeting and they wanted to check it out. So then we came to the meeting here to meet with the coalition that Judd had been working with for months leading up to this. Everyone was of like mind, generally, which is how do we take back the streets and counter-demonstrate? There was much discussion about, do we do it in the basis of – do we stay on the message of the WTO and the same WTO messages, or do we expand and say, “See how the declaration of the No Protest Zone, etc., is an extension of the same things that we’re fighting? Do we use this to kind of make the connection?”

So we had this political discussion about how do we move the message? Well, Judd had worked with these people over months, and people had had these working relationships. I had not, and I was trying to get a sense of who’s in the room and all this stuff. We agreed to do something, but we agreed to meet that evening to firm up what we were going to do. We were going to have that meeting at LELO that evening, or late afternoon, at six or something.

Meanwhile, we came back and lots of plans went into motion. We started making signs... Who’s going to make what? I was working with Michael Woo on... We decided one of the things we wanted to do to differentiate ourselves, because Judd and others in the AFL were clearly worried that all the work that we had done was going to be for naught. Part of the analysis by some AFL leaders was this whole thing of ‘Labor good; everyone else bad,’ was going to be lost if we go back into the streets and nasty stuff happens in the streets – broken windows or whatever, elements that we can’t control, do stuff, it’s going to reflect on us, and the power of our message that we had achieved in Tuesday’s march would be lost.

I didn’t believe that. I felt we had an obligation to go back, that there was no choice. We had been put into this position by what the police and mayor had done. We had to take the streets back, and who else pushes the First Amendment rights more than labor on a consistent basis day after day, pickets, etc.? We can’t just let them take our rights away. It will affect us from here on out.

But people were coming down and saying, “Hey. This is wrong. We need to sit on what we’ve done.” They didn’t say it exactly like that, but, “We achieved something. You’re threatening to throw out everything that we have won in here just because you have the need to get back out there and mix it up one more time,” or however they put it, that this is irresponsible of us, and we shouldn’t do it.

So there was a lot of tension around this. Particularly I was informed by what had happened the previous night, where I saw where we tried to de-escalate with the cops and it didn’t work, and I was angry. I felt like our power was in how we did it before by having lots of members, and there’s lots of people looking for leadership. That’s what I was convinced of. After the first couple of days, people now wanted to get back together, and who better than labor to kind of pull people together. And the WTO was having problems. We started hearing more and more of the internal stuff.

We didn’t know how close we were getting, but you could see it if you watched TV and everything else. If they were having problems, just like any other bargaining situation, turn up the heat. Don’t turn down the heat. So let’s wind this thing up, not with a dénouement, a winding down, but with an event that kind of like takes back the streets and makes it clear that we’re going to make another statement. If labor doesn’t do it, someone else is going to do it, and we should be a part of that.

I felt like, again, because of this characterization of ‘Labor good, everyone else bad,’ we had to undo that. We couldn’t let our coalition partners feel like we accept ‘Labor good, everyone else bad,’ because where does that coalition go from there? If we all work for months together, put this thing together, we get the laurels and then we are just sort of silent about it and let them take the hits, to me that was the longer term work, the coalition, that would be at risk. When people were saying it was irresponsible, I would argue back it was irresponsible not to defend our partners.

So it was an interesting discussion. We spent that day doing preparations, when I'd first met Michael Woo from LELO. I had seen him before, but I had never really worked with him before. I really was impressed by his balance and his kind of cool under pressure. Our job was to come up with, because we had come up with this idea, he and I, a couple of people came up with this idea, of let's self-contain ourselves. Like, we'll put a cord and we'll have a rope on either side of our march that says, "Peaceful." Because I was big on trying to make, I really liked the idea of a press conference when I saw the maps. The mayor had this map of "You can't go here." I wanted to put these maps up of, "We do have a right to be here." Just take that on and say, "No. We don't accept that. That's undemocratic. It's unconstitutional. We're not going to accept it."

I wanted in some way to not just have the march, but to explain that this is a march in absolute defiance of that No Protest Zone. So we came up with this Peaceful Protest Zone. We decided to have ropes alongside of us, and carrying these placards. So we take our own zone with us, wherever we go, that's the zone, because we've got a right to go wherever we want to go. But what it also did was it also allayed some of the fears of other people who said, "You're going to go there. Some bomb-thrower is going to throw something in a window, and they're going to blame it on you. No matter what you do, you're going to be blamed for it, and that's what you're risking." And so I said, "I can't control everything. None of us can. But if we set up some way to demonstrate."

So this was a two-pronged approach. One was to get our message across that our zone goes with us, and the other to... Because these other people are friends of mine. I understand where they're coming from, and some of their arguments move me I get. It's like, when you have the advantage, you don't want to just risk everything necessarily. You have to make principal decisions and think about it. But they're right, so let's figure out a way if someone does try and do some other stuff, we've defined ourselves. Now I can't control what everyone does, but at least it should be pretty clear as we're marching down that this is who we are. If someone gets off of that zone and does something, maybe the press will understand that that's what's happening, and it's not us.

So Michael Woo and I kind of worked on that together, and instantly, we had to get these things printed. It's like now. So we called the printer. And then we're calling people, calling people like crazy. "This is what we're going to do. Can you be here? We need marshals." It was a high going through it, just trying to prepare for all that kind of stuff. And again, I had not participated in the coalition work up until then, so I was just kind of caught up in the moment in doing this, and it was all hands on deck. Everyone was coming on board. It was great.

Now, there were elements in the Labor movement who thought we were absolutely nuts. I think Judd took the brunt of it. I didn't have to. They were calling him; they weren't calling me, saying "What are you? Nuts?" He was getting lots of pressure from people saying, "This is a bad idea. You're insane. What are you trying to do?" We worked on it on Thursday.

Oh, I guess it was Wednesday night, at the meeting at LELO, it turned out Judd was talking to the Mayor and had a million things going on. He couldn't go to the meeting at LELO. Jonathan Rosenblum also went from the SUN Center. Some other people came from Labor, and we were meeting the other coalition partners. But I had no track record with these people. I hadn't worked with them at all. I had just met them. I knew some people in the community. I had interacted from time to time, but I had not been doing the months of work leading up to this. Judd wasn't at this meeting. Jonathan had done work on this leading up to there. He got a crucial phone call in the midst of this discussion, and Judd really left it like we've got to...

I forget what some of the issues were. This is the hard part, but there were some tough issues we hadn't wrangled in the morning. A set of events started to happen, and we were working on some assumptions that hadn't really been cleared with the entire group. So we went back that evening, and I think there was some dismay by some people. "Wait. We thought we were making these decisions together." We had done some stuff that maybe the coalition partners felt we should have been working on together, and we hadn't. It is unclear in my mind right now. I can't remember some of this stuff, but I think there are lots of elements to truth in a lot of what we did. There was a need to get moving, because we didn't have

much time. There was also a need, and this was some of the tension, to make sure that we preserve the coalition, and we can't be riding roughshod over people.

I had a big lesson. I learned a big lesson. I made a blunder in the meeting, and I really tried to invoke some authority, like invoking Judd or the Labor movement... I think what I basically said was, "We're not going to do it. Labor is not going to do it under those terms." I knew what I meant by that, and part of what I meant was to just say, "We have our parameters that we can only work in," but it came across to people like I was trying to dictate to them. So Tyree Scott called me on it in the meeting. I didn't know Tyree. I mean, I really didn't know him. But he was just bold, and said, "Hey, look. You can't come in here and say that, and who are you?"

I realized that he was right. The way I had really kind of portrayed the Labor movement to this larger group of community people who had been working on this thing for months, and again I hadn't, was pretty – what's the word? Well, it was pretty arrogant, and wasn't at all sensitive to... This thing had, months and months, people had worked together on this, and I was just kind of trying to run roughshod.

I didn't go into the meeting with that intent. I was caught up in trying to figure out what to do, and I can explain it away in lots of ways, but fundamentally Tyree was right. The meeting went on and we had our discussions and we figured things out. I think there were some rough edges, but we all were committed to making this thing happen. After the meeting, Tyree and I, that's when he and I really got to know each other. We started talking about this stuff, and learning about one another, and I began to learn what it means to work in coalitions. It's a good lesson for me to learn at the expense of some others of what it means to work in coalition, and what is...? There is the expediency in trying to get out there and fight the bosses, and you've got to work as a group, because that's the only power that you have. So how do you do all that in the moment?

It's one thing to do it a month ahead of time, and there's lots of stresses there, but you're not in the moment. But here we are planning for this rally and you've got to figure out that the power really is our group. So I hope I learned that lesson, and will apply it the next time.

It was another really good moment that you can only learn in those moments. I think it helped deepen my relationship with some of the people in the room. Some people may think I was a total jerk from that, but I think some other people, because it engendered some discussion, it has built the relationship.

The next is really just the march. We lined up here. We had our marshals. Some Unions were still saying we were nuts and refused to provide marshals because they thought we were just crazy, but the timing couldn't have been better. The WTO was falling on its face. We were there an hour, minutes, before it was kind of like declared dead. We were there, saying, "Bye-bye, WTO. You're out of here. We stood up to you and we won." Even that just kind of evolved as the march went on.

There were a couple of dicey corners, and Judd was working with the cops, and the cops were going to escort us and everything. They wanted the Teamsters to take one of the dicey corners. So I had our business agents and some people... I just kind of deputized them. We took this one corner, Third and Pike or whatever, which was supposedly like the closest to the Convention Center that our route was going to get, and people were concerned that that was where people would try to do stuff. I missed the rally here at the Labor Temple because we had to go and deploy ourselves up to our corner.

It's happening, and it's coming up there. So I get to our corner, and there are like two hundred cops at our corner alone. I'm trying to interact. We wanted to let them know. "We're here. I'm the guy you work with. Who do I work with among you?" It's pretty clear. They had a lot of different bosses among their group there, and it wasn't clear. There wasn't one person on that corner in my mind who was in charge of it. I kept getting this guy, Lieutenant so and so. "Well, he's with the Tukwila..." Whatever. A lot of different jurisdictions there, and a lot of different people.

One cop made the comment to me, “Hey. You just keep them moving, and keep on going, and let those anarchists or whatever fall behind and we’ll take care of them.” This idea of like, they’re mingled in with you, but you just keep on going and when they kind of fall out, we’ll... Like he thought I was somehow complicit with him and he just assumed that I would think that was a good idea, right? Again, it comes from this idea of labor good, other people bad. The cops all saw us as no problem with these Labor people. We’re providing the escort. Again, more of this ‘Labor is good...’

MB Was there any divisions between the strategies that were employed? Because in the beginning of the interview, you talked about feeling left out of some of the stuff that was going on earlier that day, and that Labor did have a rally that was great where they brought international workers in and participated on a different level. Do you think that there were different strategies, and what distinctions were there between Labor and others?

SW Yes, of course. There was a whole discussion on whether or not John Sweeney and other presidents were going to get arrested, and they chose not to, and the students – if that’s what you’re talking about. Is that what you mean?

MB Not specifically. I’m talking more about the strategies of direct action, and whether Sweeney got involved or was it...?

SW Yes. Clearly, the Labor march was going to be a peaceful march, and there were other people who were going to engage in civil disobedience. The cops and everyone else was, I think, saying, “If you have a march, and you march down the street, and then you go home at night and watch it on TV, that’s okay. But if you engage in trying to get handcuffed or standing up to rubber bullets and gas, then that’s a problem.” There were Labor people doing that stuff, but the Labor movement did not make that a part of their agenda.

MB On some level, do you think the police did, on some level, they recognized that there were some distinctions amidst you, the Labor as being militant, as being even actively aggressive towards them in any way?

SW Yes. Right. You’re right. I think some of my wanting to – I wanted my Labor movement to be more militant than it was, and so it was that longing, in many ways... This is like a therapy session, but it’s really accurate. You’ve hit on it. Partly it was issues and the struggle that made me want to get out there on Friday to really take our stand, but even if they hadn’t declared the No Protest Zone, I still would have wanted us to do something, because I felt like we had not been militant enough. There’s no question.

But I guess what disturbed me with this cop’s comment was he was making this assumption that this is who we are, and I didn’t see myself as part of that.

So, anyway, my job was then now I’m a cop, and people even called us cops. Our job was to hold that corner and prevent the crowd from rushing to the Convention Center and people doing that. In order to make this thing happen, this Friday march, the AFL barely allowed Judd to do it, and I don’t even know if they allowed him or if he just did it. I felt like I had a commitment to Judd as my Local Labor leader that if we’re going to do this thing, it’s up to us to keep it peaceful. I felt like I had to give him that commitment, because I felt like he was out there beyond what anyone wanted him to do, and he was insisting that we were going to do it anyway. So my commitment to him was I’m going to do my best to make sure that it isn’t a failure and then he gets blamed.

So we either pushed the limit further than it was before, or he takes this risk and it falls down and then we have no more ability in the future to do this stuff and it becomes a failure and everything else. But it was very awkward, because I didn’t want to be a union cop. But we took that on.

So we get up there, and I didn’t know quite what to expect, but here comes the crowd around the corner. The first people in the crowd are peaceful, happy, doing their thing. It’s a parade more than anything

else, and they go marching by. Then other people start coming through, and there are more militants. So it gets dicey, and people are pushing into... We're holding hands in front of the cops. So we're like the last thing before it would have gotten into people taunting the cops again. I think the cops at that point were pretty on edge. I know that they were afraid. I could see that. It was obvious to me. It had been a long week, and they had been mistreated as workers. Not enough toilets. Not enough food. Not enough sleep. All that stuff. I think if we would have allowed them to interact, it might have been...

I was in Cheyenne, Wyoming one time for Cheyenne Frontier Days, which is like this weeklong riot, rodeo, people literally take over the streets. The streets are blocked off and people are drinking in the streets and all that kind of stuff. I happened to be there when I graduated college one day. I happened to be there also on the last night when the cops, at two o'clock when the bars shut down, and things go back to normal. That was hell, because the cops, at that point, had suffered through letting people do their thing all week long, and that night they were beating people. It was just like, "Move along. You had your party. Now it's our turn." It's like all their frustrations were coming out.

I felt in some ways that this Friday could have been a similar kind of a thing. Anyway, I was committed to Judd and to the rest of us, that we had made a pact that we were going to hold this corner and do our best to not let it become.... I said to people, if people were going to do something later on, and come back down... In fact, there was a whole jail thing going on because people were in jail and the sit-in and all that activity. You get to know people. It's amazing. As many people as there are throughout the week, you also start to recognize each other and certain people, and you don't forget certain people and certain moments when you're in that struggle.

People are mixing it up and people are wailing at the crowd and wailing at the police, and people are saying, "You're just like the police," to us and stuff. So we employed two strategies. One, we linked arms and kept a line of our own. And the other was, several of us went into the crowd and talked to people. I did that with some other people, and said, "Look. I'm going back with you, down to the jail, after we get back when this march raps up, and we can do whatever we want to do individually, but we made a pact together that this was going to be a peaceful march."

Now some people said, "I wasn't part of that," because it was coalition leaders and different people. When we'd set out the terms, part of what I'd understood was there was a setting of the terms of the march kind of at the beginning before everyone left. I said, "Look. We've got to act in coalition, and that's our power, is to act in coalition, act together. This is an event. It's going to be a peaceful event. We take back the streets. Let's do that as a group, and then if you want to go and do your own thing later on, you should do it. But you shouldn't do it, like, trying to use the cover of some other group or to camouflage as some other group. You should take that on yourself."

We struggled with people right there. Some people went, "Let's go. Let's march. Forget these people. Blast through." So other people were just kind of watching that to see what's going to happen, and should we? Shouldn't we? There were some dicey moments there. But it was a mix of holding the line, and it was union people doing it, kind of the respect for that with really struggling with people and saying, "I will go with you. Let's go down to the jail, this event. We can think about our strategies later on, but this march was really meant to be a march, a peaceful march, to take the streets back. Let's hold to that." So that was very interesting, too. All this is kind of emerging as I'm going along. This is not a script that we had laid out. It's just kind of like this is what made sense to me at the time, given what we'd gone through. You rewind it now and look back and think all these different things.

So that's what we did. As it was winding up, we're hearing more and more signals that the WTO is just falling flat on its face. Instead of just the chants that were just like the road chants, other chants developed about, "Nah nah nah nah, nah nah nah nah, hey, hey, good-bye," like, "You're out of here. We beat you." People stuck together and the power of people in the streets can make a difference. I lived it. I didn't have to watch the footage of the Civil Rights Movement I missed. I had long hair but was too young during the Vietnam anti-war protests... My brother was in it but I wasn't. I was here for this one, and I was proud to be a part of that. It was just fabulous, kind of marching back to reconvene here.

Everyone spelled out democracy on the street with their bodies right in front of the... We had our Teamster truck, was the soundstage, just for a second.

When we were struggling with people in that moment, people wanting to rush and trying to figure out, this was not with strangers. Some people were strangers, but other people were people I'd seen on the first day when we had been gassed together. Other people would have been on Capital Hill together. Other people had been at different places, and we started to have this street recognition of one another.

It was fabulous to have that. This guy who did the democracy thing came to this coalition meeting, he like me had not been involved in this stuff before. He came from nowhere, and he said, "Hey. I've got this idea." He's like in this theatre thing, and everyone thought he was with someone. He came into this meeting on his own and made it happen. Just the sure will of his own. Then we did it. It capped off the end of it.

My regrets are that Labor didn't take a more militant stance. The hard thing was how do you stage arrest? This was part of the tension. Don't just get ignored. I think certain people could have gotten arrested and it would have been a big deal. There were decisions made. I don't know what all was going on, right? Clinton is in town. Madeline Albright is in her hotel, but at some point we did build bridges with others in the community and with youth.

There's an organizing campaign that involves young people that I was working on with some people yesterday and I can't really talk about it now, but it's very exciting to me, because it involves some of the same people that were on the streets. I said the people, and I'm sure much of this is what you've heard before, but stop people on the streets. You get gassed, whatever, and you're regrouping, and I said to these students and young people, I said, "I just want to say to you as a representative of this group, I – forty-three, forty-two at the time - totally underestimated and just kind of blew off this generation."

Again, in kind of an arrogant way, just felt that this younger generation was not hip to any of this stuff, and did not care about building justice. I knew there was some environmental work, and I read about some of this stuff, but I really didn't know that people were just going to stick it out and get gassed with me in the streets. I never would have imagined that. I was just apologizing to people and saying, "Look. I've learned a lot from this, and we've got to continue to build."

So, to bring it all home, the only other significant thing I have to say, if any of this is significant, is that the fact that I'm sitting here today in the Labor Temple as Ron Judd's successor has a fair amount to do with my activity in the WTO, which was very marginal. I did not do all the prep work. I didn't do the heavy lifting leading for the months that many people did. I was active at the time when we had to make some decisions about what are we going to do? Are we just going to let it fly, or are we going to let it get back in there again?

People played way more important roles than I did and way more active roles and way more roles that contributed a lot more, but it is significant that somebody who played a role is the person who succeeded Judd. It could have been someone else who played a role in the WTO as well, and I didn't play a big one. Other people played bigger ones, but it's not a coincidence in my mind. What it means to me is, people want to build continuing coalitions...

End of Interview.