

# **Inside WTO Dissent: The experiences of LELO and CCEJ**

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Between November 30 and December 3, 1999, more than 30,000 people descended upon Seattle to protest the ministerial meetings of the World Trade Organization (WTO), an international institution dealing with the rules of trade between nations. Some were opposed to the WTO's harmful effects on people in developing countries; others saw the WTO as disregarding workers rights, environmental regulations, and lowering labor standards. The only common thread that united some groups was the opposition to the way the global governing body existed in its current state.

Nevertheless, diverse opposition groups united during the months leading up to the massive dissent. To many these were watershed activities. One of the main coalitions formed against the WTO consisted of organized labor, environmental groups, churches, students, and numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs), importantly Public Citizen, a Washington, D.C.-based consumer advocate group—which assumed the name People for Fair Trade/Network Opposed to WTO (PFT/NO2WTO) while organizing the protest activities.

This loosely knit coalition's cooperation and commitment to mobilizing their constituencies and others resulted received much of the credit for the massive turn-out for the large march in downtown Seattle on November 30. Moreover, the coalition dominated the week's activities, planning teach-ins, workshops and daily forums devoted

to discussing the negative effects the WTO had on women, the environment, and workers.

Although the mobilization process brought diverse organizations together, these efforts were not viewed as all inclusive and successful by two important Seattle based grassroots groups, Northwest Labor and Employment Law Offices (LELO), and Community Coalition for Environmental Justice (CCEJ). LELO is a 25-year-old workers' rights organization based in Seattle that strives to "empower workers of color, low income and women workers to assert . . . rights, improve . . . working conditions and gain a voice in ...workplaces, trade unions and communities (LELO, 2000). Founded in 1993 and based in Seattle, CCEJ is "a people of color-led, multiethnic organization addressing environmental health issues that impact low-income people, people of color and indigenous people (Sinde 1: 2000)." These groups are important voices and resources for local communities of color. Leaders of both establishments expressed frustrations with the larger organizing efforts, specifically those lead by People for Fair Trade/Network Opposed to WTO. Each group repeatedly attempted to join the larger planning activity going on in the city, offering their opinions and their contacts with the local community as mobilization resources. However, according to LELO and CCEJ representatives, these efforts were repeatedly ignored by (PFT/NO2WTO), which resulted in their withdrawal from the mainstream coalition and the formation of the LELO-led protest group, the Workers Voices Coalition.

LELO and CCEJ viewed People for Fair Trade/No to WTO as a source of funds and a way to effectively protest and communicate their messages. Both groups were initially anxious to contribute and offer their insight and opinions to the larger coalition.

However, PFT/NO2WTO had its own agenda to pursue—foremost being organizing as many people as possible—whether that was consistent with the beliefs of other coalition members or not. This fact was one of the reasons LELO and CCEJ felt alienated.

Moreover, they were unhappy with the leadership efforts of People for Fair Trade/No to WTO, headed up by Mike Dolan was hierarchical and unpopular with LELO and CCEJ (Bocanegra, Domingo 8/17/00).

### **Scope and Frame of Paper**

I intend to prove that LELO and CCEJ were left out of the organizing effort led by People for Fair Trade/Network Opposed to WTO. I have conducted over twenty interviews with diverse activists and leaders of locally based groups advocating the rights of communities of color. I have also read various accounts of the protest activities in local newsletters, national journals, and newspapers.

The argument presented in this paper is important for the analysis of the Seattle based anti-WTO mobilization. First, It demonstrates key areas where each side—the more moderate FT/NO2WTO and more radical LELO and CCEJ—were not willing to compromise their protest goals, as well as the different agendas of each group. Second, the experiences of LELO and the CCEJ mirror those of many protestors of color I spoke with. The feelings of alienation from the larger citywide or mainstream movement, of constant compromising of their goals and opinions, and of inadequate outreach within communities of color were ubiquitous among the majority of minority activists I talked with (see list below). The information presented in this paper could be used to document a larger contention that there was a marginalization of communities of color from the mainstream protest organizing efforts. For example, Elizabeth Martinez, in her article

*The Racial Dynamics of the WTO Experience: A Perspective from a Woman of Color*, made a strong argument that there was an almost complete absence and lack of participation of people of color at the Seattle protests (Martinez 2000: [http://www.arc.org/C\\_Lines/CLArchive/story3\\_1\\_02.html](http://www.arc.org/C_Lines/CLArchive/story3_1_02.html)).

### **The Initial Months of Seattle Organizing and the importance of LELO**

During the late winter and early spring of 1999 a group of activists began meeting at Seattle's Labor Temple to discuss appropriate means of protests in reaction to the upcoming World Trade Organization meetings. This group initially included local Socialists, LELO, organized Labor, local NGOs, other Seattle based activists and representatives from a few national groups including the Sierra Club and Public Citizen (or PFT/NO2WTO) (Burton 5/18/00). The early meetings showed great promise; Dick Burton, an activist and professor at Seattle Central Community College, was excited by the diversity of local groups working together, and the skills and knowledge that LELO brought to the coalition (Burton 5/18/00). A year prior to the WTO protest planning LELO held a conference on international workers rights in Seabeck, Washington (Bocanegra, Domingo 8/18/00). They discussed the issue of trade liberalization and saw the WTO meetings as an opportunity to expand and promote their work on labor rights and globalization. Moreover, they brought insight from communities of color and were potentially a powerful tool in organizing them. LELO, along with PFT/NO2WTO, organized labor, and local NGOs originally functioned as an informal steering committee and began the protest planning by organizing events and teach-ins about the WTO (Cabasco 8/15/00).

In mid summer the dynamics of the group changed as PFT/NO2WTO began to assume a leadership role in coalition building; it brought its funding and expertise to the effort to create a larger more formal organization. PFT/NO2WTO had been, until this point, part of the general steering committee, which was based on voluntary participation. In July and August, under the leadership of Mike Dolan, the organization began to hire staff and opened up a downtown office. They took the initiative to be the voice of the coalition, lay out the agenda of the week of November 30 and decided what type of message it would present to the media (Cabasco 8/15/00).

Dolan talked about the shift in PFT/NO2WTO's tactics in an interview following the protests: "The Steering committee, the way I look at it in retrospect, was just a way to get things moving and to have people doing outreach and it was transitional (Dolan, 3/3/00)." "For my purposes I decided to tighten up the operation into a more staff driven, more hierarchical, very unpopular organizing model out here [in Seattle] (Dolan, 3/3/00)."

People for Fair Trade/Network Opposed to WTO took charge of the organizing and coordinating efforts and primarily focused on working with the AFL-CIO, Sierra Club and other groups who had access to significant financial resources. These larger, national groups were primarily concerned with bringing out a lot of people, and creating effective massive demonstrations. In order to do this they had to make sure that their activities and message were moderate so as to not create problems between less radical and extreme coalition partners.

The moderate stance of People for Fair Trade/Network Opposed to WTO dissuaded LELO and CCEJ to continue working with the mainstream coalition

(Bocanegra, Domingo 8/17/00). For example, at a late spring coalition meeting at the Labor Temple coalition members engaged in a heated discussion about what to call the group: “People for Fair Trade” or “No to WTO” (Burton 5/18/00). Tyree Scott, LELO Chair, pushed for the movement to be called “No to WTO,” (Burton 5/18/00). However, other people, such as Rich Feldman of the King County Labor Council, argued that taking an extreme hard-line against the World Trade Organization would alienate more moderate groups, and would not result in a significant amount of attention from mainstream media (Burton 5/18/00). Eventually, they came to a consensus to call the group People for Fair Trade/No to WTO. However, as time went on the more radical message of “No to WTO” was lost (Cabasco 8/15/00). Lydia Cabasco, staff organizer, and the only person of color working for PFFT, relayed the incident of Mike Dolan asking her to take down the sign in front of the office that read “No to WTO (Cabasco 8/15/00).” He told her that the coalition had “secured the left” [the more radical groups who wanted to abolish the WTO] and now had to appeal to the more moderate groups (Cabasco 8/15/00). Therefore, according to Cabasco, the coalition assumed a watered down version of its former stance in order to secure the partnerships of less extreme groups who had more clout.

The structural change in the coalition altered the direction of the organizing efforts. The interests of LELO were marginalized as the ideas of larger, national coalitions began to take top priority. Although LELO continued on with the People for Fair Trade movement they were slowly shut out of the organizing process.

### **Marginalization of LELO and CCEJ from the Coalition Building Effort**

Throughout the summer and into the fall People for Fair Trade/NO2WTO gained momentum as it worked hard to organize protestors and events. They scheduled various activities to take place the week of the ministerial meetings, including the Jubilee 2000 Hands Around the Exhibition Hall, a human chain organized by the Washington Association of Churches, to protest Third World debt; hired organizers to work with student groups; and obtained permits for marches and demonstrations. However, as the group succeeded in its organizing efforts, they simultaneously neglected the interests of LELO and CCEJ and did not utilize their help or assist them in their organizing activities.

Cindy Domingo and Juan Jose Bocanegra, LELO board members, talked of how they repeatedly tried to involve themselves in planning activities but felt that they were overtly shut out (Bocanegra, Domingo 8/18/00). In an August 2000 interview, Domingo discussed her concern that the meetings were attended mainly by white activists, which skewed the agenda in favor of issues important to those communities (Bocanegra, Domingo 8/18/00). She therefore requested money and resources from People for Fair Trade to do outreach and build a presence with local communities of color (Bocanegra, Domingo 8/18/00). Her appeals were either ignored, or false promises of support were given.

They also felt excluded from general planning activities. For example, LELO wanted to address the issues of women and globalization. They were told by People for Fair Trade not to worry about planning events related to this issue; “it was being taking care of,” and someone was already organizing activities addressing women. When they pressed further, requesting information on the events, they were given no information by anyone at PFT/NO2WTO (Bocanegra, Domingo 8/18/00).

The only support that Domingo and Bocanegra were offered was the assistance of People for Fair Trade employee Lydia Cabasco. Unfortunately, Cabasco was already over taxed with the responsibilities organizing both students and local communities of color (Bocanegra, Domingo 8/18/00). The limited help she was able to provide was not enough to meet the event planning needs of LELO.

For her part, Lydia Cabasco felt that there was little or no interest in organizing communities of color from within the coalition—even though it was one of her assignments. According to Cabasco, the mainstream coalition made no effort to address issues important to minorities, which could have facilitated their participation (Cabasco 8/15/00). Cabasco felt that the fact the coalition was mainly white shaped the agenda and the message they conveyed (Cabasco 8/15/00). They spent the majority of their time and efforts raising issues of labor rights and environmental issues relating to endangered species. Overall, she felt that they failed to make connections between global trade policies as they relate to local people (Cabasco 8/15/00).

Kristine Wong, Program Director/Community Organizer for the Community Coalition for Environmental Justice (CCEJ), was also neglected by the mainstream coalition. She learned of the mainstream coalition's plan to devote Monday November 29, 1999 to addressing environmental issues (Wong 7/28/00). She wanted to get involved and, especially, bring the issues of environmental health and justice problems facing local communities of color to the agenda. Wong asked PFT/NO2WTO and the Sierra Club if she could be part of the planning team and repeatedly requested to be added to the email list of individuals organizing that day (Wong 7/28/00). She was told that she would be contacted to help plan activities and never was. When CCEJ attempted



to put on its own events and teach-ins regarding the WTO they could not even reserve local venues in central locations, as most meeting areas were booked by national organizations putting on their own events (Wong 7/28/00). Wong felt that the larger organizing effort was not only exclusive, as it catered to the interests of the moderate larger NGOs, it was also taking away local resources from Seattle based groups, making it more difficult for them to carry out their agenda (Wong 7/28/00).

Tammy Luu, University of Washington student activist, and People for Fair Trade/NO2WTO and LELO volunteer, expressed the same frustration with the mainstream movement. She felt that their use of abstract, distant issues to frame arguments against the WTO did not motivate many communities of colors to participate (Luu 5/15/00). She felt that the larger coalition's discussion of the environmental threats posed by the WTO to dolphins and sea turtles, or the human rights violations occurring in sweat shops abroad were important, but failed to publicize domestic implications of the World Trade Organization's treaties and agreements (Luu 5/15/00). For example, she felt that the improper disposal of toxins and dioxins on Beacon Hill and in other minority communities was an important environmental issue in the U.S. resulting from globalizing legislation. (Luu 5/15/00). The subversion of these issues, which were of importance to local communities of color, from the mainstream movement contributed to the exit of LELO and CCEJ

The grassroots, people of color led groups of Northwest Labor and Employment Law Offices and the Community Coalition for Environmental Justice were marginalized by the organizing activities of the large mainstream coalition. They were shut out from the actual planning of events and were given no opportunity for input. Also, they

received no resources to begin organizing people of color. Kristine Wong's analysis of the marginalization broadens the implications of their alienation, by putting a global spin on the situation:

When I was trying to make my voice heard it didn't matter, I was just a person of color from a . . . local, community based organization. But our role was to represent people from all around the world, who couldn't be there and didn't have the luxury to take time off of school and work [i.e. those in developing countries suffering from environmental health issues do to globalization]. . .,- but no one ever calculated it [our involvement] in that way (Wong 7/28/00).

### **Subsequent Activities of LELO and CCEJ**

In fall of 1999, after months of trying to involve themselves in planning activities, struggling to have their opinions heard, LELO and CCEJ left the mainstream movement as it was clear that there would be no platform for their voices. Cindy Domingo relayed her experience from the last People for Fair Trade/NO2WTO meeting she attended at the Labor Temple. Only three or four of the 100 attendees were people of color. During the meeting everyone broke into groups by neighborhood to discuss how to do outreach to their areas. Almost everyone was from north of the Ship Canal, the more affluent and white-dominated areas, and only one person respectively was from Rainier Valley and Beacon Hill (Bocanegra, Domingo 8/18/00). Therefore, no substantial outreach was going to be done in those areas, where there are large populations of people of color. Given that the mainstream coalition had already demonstrated little interest in doing any local outreach to these areas, there was no possibility in remedying the lack of minority participation.

After LELO stopped attending the PFFT meetings they took the initiative to create another coalition, The Workers' Voices' Coalition (WVC). Cindy Domingo, WVC chair, discussed the motivations for creating the group.

In the months leading up to the WTO, many of us realized that the voices of women, immigrants and people of color were missing from the larger coalition being built citywide and regionally. We also knew unless we brought workers from struggles outside the United State-their voices would not be heard. Thus, as a Coalition we set upon our mission to include our voices in a most substantial way in the broad opposition to the WTO (Luu 2000: 1).

They held their first meeting in late September at LELO's office and invited various local groups they had worked with in the past, and who were also being alienated from the mainstream organizing. These groups included: Committee Against Repression and for Democracy in Mexico, Center for Women and Democracy at the University of Washington, Community Coalition for Environmental Justice, the Independent Media Center, People for Justice in Chile, Seattle Young People's Project, Washington Alliance for Immigrant and Refugee Justice and Welfare Rights Organizing Coalition (Luu 2000: 1). The WVC decided to hold their own conference on December 4, focusing on the issues of women and globalization (Bocanegra, Domingo 8/18/00). They raised over \$15,000 to bring nine international workers to Seattle from Brazil, Canada, Columbia, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Saipan and South Africa, to attend the conference, address the issues, and "relate their personal stories of living and working under the impacts of 'free trade policies (Luu 2000: 1 ) [Give date of article you are citing and page number after a colon. Fix this up throughout]).'" The WVC was also able to get the workers on stage to address the crowd at the November 30 AFL-CIO rally (Luu 2000: 1). The

money for the December 4 event and the workers' trips was obtained via fundraising and donations from the Asia Pacific Task Force, Board of Global Ministries and individual contributions. The money also covered the visitors' transportation, food, lodging and lost wages (Bocanegra, Domingo 8/18/00).

The WVC was an organizational tool people of color needed and was one for which activists of color were grateful. For example, Kristine Wong felt that they had a broad definition of what constituted a worker and what issues affected them, ranging from working conditions to environmental health issues (Wong 7/28/00). As a member of the WVC, CCEJ organized a workshop on women workers and environmental health issues for the December 4th conference (Wong 7/28/00). Wong also noted that it was vital to organize local groups, as the WVC was doing, because it was an effective way to do outreach to communities of color (Wong 7/28/00). The mainstream movement mainly attracted those from the white liberal movement and many minorities did not want to deal with the race and class issues that the movement invoked, such as feelings of alienation or an "I'm not one of them" sentiment (Wong 7/28/00). The majority of activists and concerned citizens of color were not participating in the larger meetings, such as those at the Labor Temple, but were involved in local organizations. Therefore LELO's focus on empowering and organizing these groups was a very effective way to involve people locally, one which the mainstream movement did not employ.

Although the WVC gave people of color a concrete voice in the protest, it was still small in comparison to the mainstream coalition. Most of the organizing credit went to the larger organization. For example, the cover of the Spring 2000 edition of Foreign Policy depicts Lori Wallach, director of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch, and inside

is an article titled “Lori’s War: Meet Lori Wallach, Leader of the anti-WTO protests in Seattle.” This article is one of many accounts which gives most of the credit for the “success” of the WTO protests to Public Citizen or the AFL-CIO for their organizing efforts. Yalonda Sinde, CCEJ, stated in her article “The Racial Dynamics of the WTO Experiences: A Perspective from a Woman of Color,” that “people of color were completely ignored [by mainstream media], as white environmental groups took center stage with organized labor. In many ways organized labor and white environmentalists represented the oppressive power structure against which people of color are working (Sinde 1: 2000).” She went on to write “If one were to conceive some sort of opinion about the WTO based on mainstream media coverage, one would come to the false conclusion that women of color and people of color in general, do not care about the WTO (Sinde 1).” Although organizations such as the Workers Voices’ Coalition were created in response to the WTO they were again marginalized by media coverage, and given a significantly smaller platform with state their concerns.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The Northwest Labor and Employment Law Office and the Community Coalition for Environmental Justice chose to withdraw from People for Fair Trade/NO2WTO because their input and ideas were given no serious consideration or merit. Additionally, the fact that they felt that little or no outreach was being done in Seattle based communities of color and minimal attention was being paid to issues important to their groups dissuaded their participation. PFFT was unable to meet all the needs of LELO and CCEJ because they had to cater to the interests of diverse and influential groups in order to garner mass participation. LELO and CCEJ subsequently organized for the

protests under the name of the Workers Voices Coalition and worked hard in a short amount of time to address and promote issues important to their communities, culminating in a December 4 teach-in on the effects of globalization on working women.

### **Minority Participants interviewed by Monica Ghosh**

Sutapa Basu, University of Washington Women's Center, 5/8/00

Alex Bautista, El Centro de la Raza, 4/28/00

Juan Bocanegra, Northwest Labor and Employment Law Office, 8/17/00

Miguel Bocanegra, University of Washington MEChA, 10/23/00

Lydia Cabasco, People for Fair Trade, 8/15/00

Denise Cooper, Brown Collective, 5/22/00

Cindy Domingo, LELO, 8/17/00

Tammy Luu, Workers Voices Coalition/University of Washington Network Opposed to  
WTO/Brown Collective, 5/15/00

Regino Martinez, El Centro de la Raza, 4/28/00

Randy Nunez, University of Washington MEChA, 10/23/00

Ricardo Ortega, NW Labor and Employment Law Office, 5/2/00

Maru Reames, El Centro de la Raza, 4/28/00

Christene Reyes, People's Assembly, 4/24/00

Tyree Scott, NW Labor and Employment Law Office, 5/2/00

Kristine Wong, Community Coalition for Environmental Justice, 7/28/00.

### **Additional interviews cited**

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Simer, WTO History Project, 3/3/00

Dick Burton, Seattle Central Community College, Interview with Jeremy Simer, 5/18/00

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